

INTERVIEW OF JEAN HURST MITCHELL

Oral History Project of the WestSiders

June 14, 2005

Interview Conducted by: Louis Jones

* * * * *

Q First of all thank you for taking time out of your schedule to come speak to us about the West Side. How did your parents meet and how did they get to the West Side and to Detroit?

A Well, my dad was from Romeo, Michigan. My mother was from Dresden, Ontario, and she came down to Detroit to find a job. And I think she was working here in Detroit when she met my dad. A friend introduced my dad to my mother. They got married and they bought their house on 25th Street, just off of McGraw. I have two older sisters. Dolores is the oldest, Ila and then me, and we were all born in the house on 25th Street. Even though some people say the west side stops at West Grand Boulevard, we say it does not; it continues on through almost to Grand River.

Q What kind of work did your mother do here in Detroit?

A Mother was basically a housewife. Eventually, she became a licensed practical nurse. Daddy had started working at Ford's, but that's when things were kind of hard, during the beginning or somewhere around the Depression. He said he could not support his family on two days a week. He left Ford and he joined the police department.

Q Did he talk about what it was like working at Ford at all?

A No. I don't think he talked much about Ford, because I really don't know how long he was there. But he was with the Detroit Police Department for 25 years. And he had to walk a beat for 20 years. He had a partner, James Leigh who lived with his family on 24th Street almost right in front of us; they were partners for a long time. They first put them out in a Polish neighborhood but they walked the beat and they got to meet the homeowners and they didn't have any problems at all. Daddy would tell us a few things about what happened with Prohibition, when they would go upstairs in some apartment place or house and find a still upstairs, and how they would use axes to crash it, and then all of that moonshine would rundown the stairways and all over the house. Even though he had passed the detective test and sergeant test, it was a long time before he would get his promotion. He didn't get the promotion until 20 years after walking the beat. He didn't ride around in a car like the young officers do now. Times were a lot different then. The last five years he was a plainclothes detective, and he worked out of 1300 Beaubien for his last five years. His partner, Jimmy Leigh, became a uniformed sergeant just about the same time. There were changes in the police department, and the City, and so they finally got their promotions.

Q How did he come to join the police force in the first place?

A Like I said because he first worked at Ford. When he first came to Detroit from Romeo, Michigan, everybody went to Ford's I guess. So he worked there, but things started getting kind of bad and he only worked two days a week.

He couldn't afford his house, and to feed his wife and daughter on that. So that is when he left Ford and joined the police department.

Q Was there something about the police department as opposed to some other occupation he could have pursued?

A I have no idea.

Q What was it like being a police officer?

A He did not have a hard time. Like I said he was in a Polish neighborhood, but they got along fine. So they got to know all of the neighborhood, and the people, and the kids; there were no problems. But you know, as they were just kind of strolling along, the kids gave them nicknames. They called them "moke and poke" because they were just walking around the neighborhood and making sure things were okay. I asked daddy one time if he ever had to shoot his gun and he said, "no." He said he only drew his gun twice in 25 years; but never had to shoot it. So things are a lot different these days.

Q I am guessing there may have been some discrimination on the police force?

A Right.

Q Did he talk about that at all?

A No, he just said he had passed the test. And I think Mr. Leigh had passed also. It was discrimination that took him so long to secure his promotion. I think he passed so high, that they really couldn't get around him and things I think were changing at that time too.

Q What was it like being the daughter of a police officer, especially since so many people worked at Ford or a factory? It must have been a little bit different?

A In a lot of ways no, except the boys would come by and they would sit on the porch for a half a minute or something and then take-off. Everybody knew that daddy was a police officer. So they were very respectful when they came in the neighborhood. But, other than that, no. Daddy showed us where his gun was, but he never locked it up. He said, "that's my gun, do not touch it." We never touched it in all of those years. But it was right in the dresser drawer. We got teased a lot because our father was a police officer. The young teenagers respected him very much and my mother, too. When we were young we had some young boys that lived across the street. They would come over and my mother would teach us all how to crochet with cord. The boys were sitting on the porch with crochet needles, learning to crochet. So we had a lot of fun, and we really didn't realize there was any particular difference then if daddy had worked in an office.

Q What kind of things did your family do together?

A Not much. Daddy was a sports fan, and he loved to play cards. He would take us down to the Santa Parade while mother was home cooking Thanksgiving dinner. He would take us down to Hudson's and we would go to Toyland and all of that, but mother was home cooking. I remember when I was little he took me to the Olympia. There was a fight because daddy liked all sports. And he took me there and I can remember I was so young that I was holding on to his little finger walking around. And of course, being a child, I had to go to the bathroom. So he walked over there, got a lady and asked her if she would take me in.

But I can just remember being, you know, up near the top of the Olympia and looking down and seeing the boxing ring.

At that point, I really didn't know what was going on. But daddy liked all sports, and he loved cards. He taught me how to count with cards before I ever went to school. We would sit up and play cards. He taught me tonk and fish and all kinds of games, and even whist. I remember one day a couple came over to the house to play cards. My mother didn't play. Daddy got out the good cards, and I got up from the table and started to leave. I said "I am not allowed to play with the new cards." Daddy said, "okay, you can be my partner." And so I played whist. I had been playing since I was 5 or 6 because he taught me. He taught all of us how to play cards. Many evenings, especially Fridays, my sisters and I would be playing poker with my dad, using wooden matchsticks. We didn't use money or anything. But we would play poker, and then it would get kind of late and mother would go to bed. Then she would holler in later on, "it is late, go to bed." So daddy had this little saying, I don't know where it came from, since I was the youngest and my sister Ila was the middle one and always kind of slow. Dolores liked to eat but just a snack or something. So daddy had this little verse, and it would say:

To bed, to bed said Sleepy Head.

Let's tarry awhile said Slow.

Put on the pot said Greedy Gut, let's eatm

before we go.

And that was just a little joke we had in the family.

Q That bonded you guys together?

A Oh, yes.

Q Yes.

A Oh, yes, and daddy would come out and watch us play sports. Ila and Delores went to Northwestern so they played basketball and field hockey. And he would go out and support them. When I started work at Edison, I started a basketball team and he would come out. He would always come out and support us. Mother was usually home cooking, or washing or something. But daddy would always come out and support us, no matter what kind of sport we were into.

Q Now, I imagine you would go to the theatre?

A Yes, I can remember mother and daddy, probably at different times taking us to the Rogers on Warren, I guess. Geez, it has been a long time, but they would take us to the movies. And when I got a little older the neighborhood kids and I would walk to the Granada. So those were the two movie theatres that we would frequent.

Q Was there a midnight show?

A Yes. I can remember the Rogers, yes. That's when they would take us to the Rogers.

Q I understand that you would go ice skating in Canada?

A No, we went to Northwestern to skate.

Q Oh.

A Northwestern had an ice pond. My sister Ila was extremely good on her racers. And I had racers and I was

good for five minutes and after that I was ice skating on my ankles so I didn't do that too much. Ila was very good, though. Dee Dee, my sister Dolores, didn't ice skate too much either.

Q I understand that you spent time with your grandmother in Dresden, Ontario, Canada?

A Yes, almost every summer, we would go up and spend the summer on the farm. That was something, because when we first went there, there was no inside water. There was no inside lights, you know. We didn't have electric lights or everything. We had to go out to the well and pump and get the water and carry it to the house. That was my job since I was the littlest. We had to gather eggs. My aunt showed us how to wring a chicken's neck by snapping the head off. But don't let the animal rights people hear that. On Sunday we would have chicken.

We had more fun when it was thrashing time. We had four farm horses and they would hook them up to the wagon and go back to the field and they would load the wheat or whatever on to the wagon and bring it back and put it in the barn. So we would ride on the wagon and just have a lot of fun and then sometimes we would even just put the bridels on the work horses and put the gunny sacks over their backs and get on them and ride them. It is a wonder we didn't get killed. These horses were not trained, but they must have known we were kids. We didn't have any problem. We would ride the horses, and it was great.

My grandmother had pigs and she would call them when it was time to eat. She would call them with soui and they would come. She would feed them. We would have to gather the eggs. Ila and I were laughing the other day when

we were talking about that, because Delores didn't like getting the eggs. So she would have a long stick and she would make the chicken get off the nest so she could get the eggs. We all did the little chores. Grandma had a garden and so we would go out and pick the carrots or tomatoes or whatever was in the garden.

Q Did you have chores in your home on the West Side?

A Yes. One sister would wash dishes all week and then the next week it was the other one and like that. But, both of my sisters got married when I was 14. I wasn't doing a lot, too much before then, except wash dishes and ironing. In fact, I got very good at ironing. Mother taught me and I would iron some of daddy's white shirts. It would take me 25 minutes, but when I got through there wasn't a wrinkle in it. But that's a long time. My mother, being a nurse, had the white cotton uniforms, and it would take me 45 minutes to iron one of her uniforms but there wouldn't be a wrinkle in it when I finished. That is just the way it was. We had little chores back now and then, but it would usually be weekly.

Q Did your mother talk about what it was like being a nurse?

A Yes, she would talk about it. She would work sometimes on holidays or weekends, and we would fuss. "Well, we want you with us; what about your family?" She would go in and work midnights sometimes so people with young kids could be home.

Q Where did she work?

A Women's Hospital.

Q I understanding that you would go swimming at

Brewster Center or at Kronk Recreation Center. Tell us about that?

A Well, it was Ila who would take me. Mother sort of had Ila take me with her whenever she would go some place. So we went to Kronk's and swam. We swam there a lot. And we also went over to Brewster and swam. I remember I got Ila in trouble because mother and daddy had gone and she was supposed to be watching me and I wanted to go swimming over at Brewster. Ila didn't want to take me. I was determined to go so when Ila left to go in another room, I took off. I took off with my swimming stuff and I got on the Grand Belt line, which was a street car line. When I got on the streetcar, luckily a cousin was the conductor. I might have been 11 or something. I said I want to go to Brewster, so she told me how to get there. I went on and went swimming. When mother and daddy came home, it was like, "where is Jean?" Ila didn't know. She said, well, she wanted to go swimming. Mother told Ila to go over there and get her. So they made Ila come and get me.

Q Did you get in trouble for that?

A A little bit.

Q Okay.

A A little bit, yes.

Q Now, speaking about Brewster, this is on the East Side, right?

A Yes.

Q Was that common for parents to allow their children to

go to the East Side?

A No.

Q Okay.

A But I guess Ila knew some of the people. I think one of the guys was a life guard, and I think he went to Northwestern or something. And so I think she knew a few people who went there. But normally, no, because we had so many things on the West Side. We would go to Kronk, but for some reason at this point a few times we went to Brewster and went swimming. So it was no problem at that point.

Q Did you notice much of a difference in terms of how it was over there on the East Side as opposed to the West Side where you grew up?

A No, I didn't notice anything, all I knew was I was going swimming.

Q What other kind of values or routines did your family have? You mentioned the chores. I suspect that you had to do chores before you went out to play?

A Yes.

Q Was there anything else that were kind of expectations that your parents would have of you growing up?

A Of course, we had to do homework. Homework came first, yes. But other than that, basically it was homework and chores and then we could go out and play.

Q Speaking of homework, tell us about McGraw. What

was that experience like going to McGraw?

A It was okay. But it was the first time I had ever seen an African-American, Black, woman of color, whatever term you want. Irene Graves was my first teacher of color at McGraw and it was a good experience. I mean, I thought I learned a lot. The time I used to get in trouble was talking too much in class. But, other than that, I thought it was a good experience for me.

Q Was it a special thing in your mind to have a black teacher?

A It was nice. But I was there to learn and so she was teaching as well as anybody else. So it wasn't a big thing because at that point I didn't realize that we didn't have a lot of teachers of color. I didn't realize it, so I just enjoyed her. She was tremendous and just a wonderful teacher.

Q What was tremendous about her? What do you remember about her?

A So thorough and her diction was so perfect. And she was just being thorough.

Q You left McGraw and went to McMichael?

A Right.

Q Were there any special experiences that you had at McMichael?

A That is where I learned how to swim and to play the violin. We learned the proper techniques for swimming and everything. But that was sort of nondescript also, just making it through trying to make it to high school. Because I

don't remember any teachers that I had at McMichael; I don't remember any, so, none stood out.

Q Now you had a somewhat different high school experience, because so many people went to Northwestern and, and a few went to Cass. But I haven't heard of so many people going to Commerce. How did you even learn about Commerce; how did you come to go there?

A My dad and I were talking about where I was going to go to high school. Since Ila and Dolores had both gone to Northwestern and took the college prep course, they really weren't prepared for any kind of job opportunity even though they had attended Wayne State for a year or so. At that time all of the schools were advertising and so we heard of Commerce. That's when daddy and I were talking and I was saying, "gee whiz." I didn't want to go to Northwestern and follow in my sister's footsteps. They were both captains of the basketball team. And you just don't want to follow your sisters too much. So I decided if I went to Commerce and I took the business course, then when I came out I would be qualified to be a secretary, typist, and I could qualify for a job. So that is sort of why I decided I would go to Commerce instead of going to Northwestern.

Q What was your experience like at Commerce?

A Well, you know, the first year it was interesting learning shorthand and the typing and bookkeeping, and we even had a biology course. So it was really interesting.

In the start of the second semester, two ladies from Detroit Edison came to the school and they were interviewing students because they wanted two students of color to integrate the Detroit Edison Service Building. As it turned

out, I was one of the two they chose. For the next two years, I worked four hours a day, and I went to school four hours a day. I did that until I graduated in June 1952 and I had a typist job waiting for me. Earlier, Detroit Edison hired two women of color to integrate their general offices. One of the ladies, she would be off and wouldn't call in. She would stay around with the elevator operators who were ladies of color, and she didn't circulate with the office people, which was what they wanted. After a while, when she had been off so many times and wouldn't call in, they fired her. Then they asked me to take the steno test and, even though I only had a couple of years seniority, I somehow managed to replace her in the general offices. I had no problem with the office people.

Q What is your sense as to why they wanted to integrate and why two black women?

A Well, times were sort of changing. And this was, I think, 1950. So, they were starting to intergrate in a lot of areas, and I think they figured it was about time that they hired someone. It was just the time. They were already late, so I guess rather than be too late they finally started to integrate.

Q Do you know the name Snow Grigsby at all, does that name mean anything to you?

A No, not at the moment.

Q We will move on. Did you experience any discrimination there?

A Just the first day, the first day it was Emily, the other student's name was Emily. We were in the ladies room and a little Caucasian lady came in and she looked at us and she

said, "oh, you two are in the wrong room." And we said, "what do you mean?" She said, "oh the elevator operators' room is around the corner." We said "oh, we are not elevator operators. We work in the office." So she turned very red and then ran out of there and that was the only incident in all the years that I was there.

Q Commerce High School, was it located near you?

A No.

Q Okay. How did you get to school?

A I took the bus because it is down at Cass and Grand River. If the Grand Belt was coming down McGraw, I would get on that or else walk up to Grand River and just take the Grand River bus downtown. So it wasn't a big deal. Plus, I could do some of my homework on the bus. So it wasn't difficult to get there at all.

Q Were either of your parents members of social clubs where they would get together and do things?

A No. Mother used to take me to church, St. Stephen A.M.E. when Reverend Howell was there. I was very young. I kept going. I went to Junior Church under Reverend Huggins and I kept going and. I joined the choir under Reverend Charles Spivey. The choir was sort of our social club. We would get together and go horseback riding. We went roller skating. We would do a lot of things together. And it was just a great group, and sometimes we would sing for services and funerals. It was a great choir. We would go roller skating together and it was just a great bunch of young people. Mother and daddy didn't join any organizations that I can think of, no.

Q Did both of your parents go to church as well?

A No. Daddy stayed home. He didn't go. And sometimes we didn't go. Daddy was kind of devilish at times, and sometimes we would like to learn how to dance and so we would wait until mother went to church and we would roll up the rugs and turn the radio on and they would teach me how to dance. Oh, wow.

Q Was that an important experience, listening to the radio?

A Yes, it was just having fun with my sisters. You know, we used to have a lot of fun. As kids we thought we were getting away with something. It was just fun.

Q What kind of music did you dance or listen to?

A All that was popular at that point, all different kinds. They had beautiful songs back then. And they had songs that you could sort of jitterbug to. It was all kinds of songs. We would listen to the pretty ones and sort of dance to the others.

Q Do you remember any particular song?

A No, not right at the moment.

Q What about Joe Louis, did you hear the fights on the radio?

A Yes. Daddy was into all of the fights, all of the sports, yes. He would listen to that. We would listen to all of the ball games. I caught pneumonia when I was about 11. So I had to stay in bed. At that point we even had a family doctor, a Caucasian. He had his office out on Military. He

came to the house because I couldn't breathe. "Listen," he said, "she has lobar pneumonia." I don't think there were over ten cases in the whole United States that year. But he came to the house and said I had to have shots like every 24 hours. So that is what my mother did. Then they let me up for my birthday. This was around Easter and my birthday was May 1st and I cried and cried until they let me out of bed. I was only about 10 or 11 and I was really having fits not getting out of bed. They let me up and then I had a relapse and then mother had to give me a shot every four hours around the clock. So I would wake her up and then cry. But thank goodness, I made it. But those were the days where doctors actually made house calls. It was Dr. Sherwood, I can still remember his name. He was a great family doctor.

Q Tell us about your neighbors and the relationship your family had with the neighbors next door and on the block?

A The family next door had a daughter who was older than I am, more my sister's age. The whole time I was home sick, an older man who regularly visited that family sent me a card everyday. I knew who he was; we spoke and all of that. But when he found out I was sick, the uncle sent a get well card everyday. So, the neighbors were just great. We knew everybody and you would speak to them and sometimes maybe sit on the porch or something like that; but not in and out of the house for coffee and stuff like that.

Q One of the things I have been told about the West Side was that it was very safe and people didn't fear that some one might break into a home or something like that?

A Yes, as I remember we slept upstairs. It was a small

house. And in the summer sometimes it was very hot and we would say, "can we take the mattress down and put it in the middle of the living room floor, because it is too hot up here?" We would holler and holler, "it is too hot upstairs." So sometimes they would let us bring the mattress or feather tick downstairs, put it in the middle of the living room floor and we would sleep there that night because we did not have air conditioning. We did you know, have fans, but when it got real hot, it really didn't help that much. But we would have the front door open with just the screen locked, and the same with the back; that was it. So I think we did feel a lot safer in those days.

Q I guess having a father as a police officer didn't hurt?

A I am sure that helped a whole lot. Some of the guys would tell us how they felt back then just coming over and sitting on the porch. I am sure that helped quite a bit, that everybody knew daddy was a police officer.

Q Now, I realize you were pretty young when the Depression was in full swing but, is there anything about the Depression that you remember?

A The only real thing that I can remember, mother and daddy saved green stamps and I guess, with these green stamps they used to paste in books or something. I remember the green stamps. And I remember the white oleo, with the little yellow button in there with flavor, or coloring, that you would squeeze and knead the bag and the oleo would turn yellow like butter. That was always fun to me.

But other than that, I think I do remember again when I was young, very young, we went up to Canada to visit my

grandmother. It was at that point they decided to get butter.

And so they had two pounds of butter. And I was so young I was wearing a snowsuit with leggings and all of that. And so they put one pound of butter in each leg of my leggings to come back through customs. But that was really the only thing I can remember. We were very fortunate in that daddy was working. So we never really had it hard like some people may have had. I can't really say that much about it. By the time I came along, it was sort of ending. We were blessed that daddy was working and we had a house. We had enough food, so we were all blessed.

Q Tell me about World War II.

A We did have one cousin who was in World War II. He was a Marine, and he came by in his dress uniform. I remember he was so handsome. As far as the war was concerned, daddy didn't talk much about it. Of course, we didn't talk much about it. He knew it was going on and everything, but it seemed so far away.

Q Did you notice that your lives had changed much as a result of the war?

A Not that I can think of.

Q Right in the middle of World War II, the 1943 riot, there again you may have been pretty young then, but do you recall anything about that moment?

A No, I just remember hearing about it, reading about it and everything. But as far as in our little neighborhood, there was nothing. It is just what you heard. I don't really remember if daddy had to work, like two shifts or something like that, no. But I read, of course, a lot about it since and am aware of it, but I can't really say that it really affected us.

When the end of the war was announced, the kids on the block got their mother's sauce pan tops and ran up the streets banging them together in celebration.

Q Tell me about the Nacirema Club?

A Oh, yes. We were in the choir and we decided to have a dance. And that's where my first date was; we went to the Nacirema Club. It was the choir and everything, and we had our semiformal dance at the Nacirema Club. I think other people I knew were married there. So I went there for weddings and a lot of different activities that they had.

Q It would be on special occasions, I take it?

A Yes.

Q If you could tell us about what it is about the West Side that is open so many people going on to do bigger and better things, so to speak?

A Well, I don't know. I guess it was we had the opportunity to go to school, to learn, and I think that people sort of applied themselves and wanted to improve their conditions and wanted to contribute to the community. And I think people on the East Side could or would or maybe did the same. They had the same opportunities to go to school and do things. But I just don't think there was any difference, just some people on the West Side, really applied themselves and really wanted to contribute. We did have a lot of people who were successful because they worked at it.

Q I have heard the term the West Side is the best side.

Is that a common expression?

A Yes, because we lived there, yes. We are not going to say any other side is better than where we lived.

Q There was a sense of pride growing up on the West Side?

A Well, yes, because the West Side was the best side because that is where we lived.

Q You didn't work at Detroit Edison for your whole career, right?

A No, I worked there until I married in 1956. My husband had gone to Cass. That is where I met him and when he graduated he went straight into the Officers' Cadette Training for the Air Force. So he was a First Lieutenant when we married, and he was stationed in Austin, Texas. We married and we headed for Texas. It was in 1956, and at that point I had to resign anyhow because Detroit Edison did not employ married women at that time. Those were the good old days where they didn't even employ married women.

Q How did that make you feel, that you would have to resign?

A Well, it didn't bother me so much because I knew I was leaving town. Eventually they changed it, and they would hire married women. If you became pregnant, however, you had to leave in the fourth month, so they just kept changing little-by-little-by-little. At least they changed.

Q And it is my understanding that you went to work at the UAW in a number of capacities. How did you come to

work for the UAW?

A My husband was a navigator on a B-52 and we lived in this little community that was three miles from Austin and three miles from Lackland Air Force Base. It was just a little community of military people and professionals during the Korean Conflict. So, of course, they had the B-52s in the air all of the time. He was always off to Iceland or Greenland or confined to the base or somewhere because of the 24-hour thing we had going during the Korean Conflict and they all sort of expected to stay in the Air Force and make it a career. In '57 the Air Force decided to cutback and they cut the pilots and navigators. So I decided I better go back home and get a job. I came back to Detroit, somewhere around Thanksgiving and one of my girl friends said, "Go out to the UAW; they are hiring." I said "What is the UAW?" Then I found out it was the union. I went out and I passed the typing test, but I hadn't used my shorthand in a long time.

The manager said, "Why don't you go home and practice your shorthand and come back." This was odd because I wasn't related to anyone and no one had sent in a recommendation for me. I came back and took the test again and was hired. I worked there a total of almost one month short of thirty-six years. The first year I was in the Clerical Center. They sent me all over to different departments whenever someone was off or they were short. My first assignment was to the Chrysler Department and the first staff person I worked with was John Conyers, Sr. I worked in a lot of departments there and in fact I worked in the Washington Legislative Office and that's where I met Victor Reuther. He was the most gracious person I have ever met in my life.

Q What was so gracious about him?

A It was his demeanor. It was almost at the point that when they introduced me to him, it was like he was thanking me for coming to work. I was doing him a favor by coming to work there. And he was so glad to have me. He didn't even know me. He just had that gracious way about him. I think you would find a lot of people will say the same thing. He was the most gracious person you ever met. Then I came back. My husband and I had separated and that was sort of an opportunity to see if we could get back together so I was there for a while. That didn't work. They had an opening in the Fair Practices Anti-Discrimination Department. I transferred back to Detroit. I ended up in that department with Bill Oliver. I was his secretary. I worked all over in most of the departments there.

Q What do you remember about John Conyers, Sr.?

A He was a very nice person, but I did have to write most of his letters for him. He didn't make too many waves. Many of the guys came in to the International from the factory so they did need help with the correspondence and things. I would write his letters, and he would check them.

Q What about Bill Oliver, I understand that he was more than just with the Fair Employment, I think vice-president of NAACP as well around that time?

A I don't know all of the work he did with the various organizations like the Urban League or the NAACP.

Q What do you think they could do that they weren't doing?

A Push more for equality in all areas.

Q One of their functions was to see what kind of racial

problems might have been taking place in the plants and Solidarity House?

A Not at Solidarity House. He was in the Chrysler Department, so, basically he would handle Chrysler plants and the locals. But to me, I just didn't think they worked hard enough. In fact, I don't think the UAW worked hard enough to educate their own workers, much less the public. And I think it is still true today. So many people did not understand the importance of unions, and the sacrifices that those who were there before us made so that when you walked in the door and you get a job, you also get certain benefits. Well, the people who worked there before you gave up things to get those benefits. So just because you walked in the door, you are not entitled to them. Other people worked very hard and very long and gave up things for you to get those benefits. I think too many people don't understand that. They will say "oh unions this or unions that," and they don't realize that if there were no unions they probably wouldn't be getting the salaries and the benefits they are getting. It is the union that makes companies pay their workers a pretty good wage and everything, to get some benefits to keep them from joining the union. I think labor itself has just not done enough to educate its own members and the public. You didn't ask for a speech did you?

Q Going back for a moment, growing up on the West Side, one of the things I hear about is Milford Street as a bustling kind of street. Describe what Milford Street would have been like on a busy Saturday afternoon?

A I didn't live that close. I lived three or four blocks away from that Milford Street area. On 25th where I lived, right near the corner we had a barber shop where my dad

went to get his hair cut. There was the cleaners. On the corner was Beverly's Drug Store and a lot of people came there for the sodas and stuff. And then you went around to McGraw to the alley and there was Rucker's Ice Cream Parlor. It was like hand packed ice cream and people came from a long ways for the ice cream. So we sort of had our own little area there; and we didn't go that much over to Milford Street. We had some stores over there that we didn't have, and we went over there. But me, not so much.

Q Was the ice cream parlor a popular place where people hung ou?

A Ruckers had tables and chairs where you could sit and eat your ice cream sodas or sundaes or something. It was hand packed. So, yes, they met more in Ruckers than they did Beverly's. That was good in that they were all minority-owned businesses and so it was great. I think we did have a Chinese laundry around the corner for the shirts and things. We had so many things right in our neighborhood.

Q Were there leaders of the neighborhood so to speak that you looked up to: pastors or deacons or business owners?

A No.

Q Okay.

A I think at one point we did have a block club, and I think my mother was pretty instrumental in getting that going, but other than that, no, just the neighbors.

Q What did the block club do?

A This is a long time ago. We might try to get a stop

sign at the end of the street or if there was any problems with a house or some neighbors or something, traffic. I guess it has been a long time. And I think they did take up dues and if someone died in the area, they would give flowers or something. It has been so long and I haven't really thought about it. But I know they did have a block club and I think my mother was treasurer. They really didn't have a whole lot of big problems.

Q I understand that they sometimes would insure there would be lighting on the street and the alleys were paved?

A Or cleanup or something like that. There again, that was a long time ago.

Q One of the things I hear about the West Side and it might be a repetitive question that I asked in another kind of way, but people described it as a village in the way that we use that the term now. It takes a village--

A --to raise a child.

Q Yes.

Q Is that a meaningful term as it relates to the west side as far as your experiences were concerned?

A It wasn't the type of place they used to talk about where someone else in the neighborhood would give you a whipping and when you got home your mother and dad would whip you if you did something wrong. It wasn't quite that much, but the neighbors did look out for the kids and you knew them all, and you spoke to them all, and like I said before they sort of looked out for the kids. But it was not quite where one of them felt like they would whip somebody else's child. If you did anything wrong, the teachers usually

contacted the parents, especially for talking too much in class or something like that.

Q Did that happen to you at all where the teachers would call or send a note home?

A It was on my report card. I might have As in everything else, and an E in self control, because I would be talking to some of the other students or whatever. That only happened once.

Q Okay. Well thank you very much, Miss Mitchell. I hope it wasn't too painful.

A No.

Q We derived some good insight into what the community was like and how you grew up in it. We appreciate you taking the time out and sharing that with us.

A Thank you.