

INTERVIEW OF CORNELIUS PITTS

Oral History Project of the WestSiders

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Interview Conducted by: Louis Jones

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Q Mr. Pitts, first of all thanks for taking time out of your schedule to speak with us.

A Listen, thank you for inviting me and you are welcome.

Q Okay. Just to get right into this, tell me about your parents: where are they from and how did they get to Detroit?

A By train. My dad was born in Isney, Alabama, which is sort of like a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama. He has been deceased about twenty-six years. My mother is from Crawfordville, Georgia. She just celebrated the 101st birthday in July. I think my parents came to Detroit in the 20s. My dad came first and I think it was the lure of the Ford Motor Company that brought him here. I think he met my mother here who had come to visit and/or to live with her sister who had migrated from Crawfordville, Georgia, earlier.

That is how they met. I think that they both lived on the Lower East Side, in the Black Bottom area. Following their marriage, I think that they moved closer to the then children's Hospital area, then ultimately to the West Side. I think that is sort of the history as I gather it from

conversations with my sister and my mother and other individuals.

Q Do you have a sense of why they chose the West Side as opposed to remaining on the East Side?

A I really don't know why they moved to the West Side

Q Okay. You said it was the lure of the Ford Motor Company?

A I am quite certain that the Ford Motor Company played a major part in it.

Q Mr. Pitts, going back to Ford and the lure of getting here to Detroit, your father worked for Ford?

A For approximately 40 years or so.

Q Did he talk about his work with Ford? What kind of work did he do?

A Yes, he did talk about it, principally of how he didn't want us to work in the factory. I guess he was a laborer. That is the first thing, because they had categories. They had laborers and they had skilled tradesmen and apprentices and things of that nature. I am not sure if he ever worked in the foundry. I think he always worked in the production area or construction or the putting together or assembling of the automobile. As a matter of fact, Ford had a plant out there called the Assembly Building, along with other buildings. They had a Steel Building, Rolling Mill Building; I have forgotten some of the others. Having been exposed to it personally I recall those particular buildings as well.

Q Was that at the Rouge Plant?

A Oh, yes, Rouge.

Q For 40 some odd years, I mean that is a long time?

A It is. I have been practicing law almost 40 years now.

It doesn't seem like that. Of course, to the individual involved, time doesn't pass that fast. On reflection, I guess it does pass fast. He worked there and that was his principal job. As I recall as a youth, the factories were always laying off during the summer. They called it the changeover period. Whenever the changeover took place, periodically my dad was working temporarily at Awrey Bakeries. I don't know if you are familiar with that part of the West Side. You have heard of the Bluebird? You never heard of the Bluebird, oh, my gosh.

Q Oh, yes I have. I thought you said something else.

A The Bluebird was between Beechwood and Whitewood on Tireman. The Awrey Bakery was between, I think around Begole and maybe Whitewood. Awrey Bakery was a competitor of Sanders. Awrey Bakery had a huge building over there, took up almost half, if not all of the block.

My dad worked in there washing pots and pans and things of that nature, particularly during the summer. If that was not available, there was always welfare. So between the Ford Motor Company, the welfare, and Awrey's, well there are a few odd jobs as well.

My dad always liked to clean carpeting and rugs. My dad was like a handyman type of guy. He was always working and never seeking a handout. I can recall again when the plant was not working, my dad going over in what we

considered the Jewish area which was around LaSalle, Philadelphia, Euclid, Dexter, Dexter going probably as far back as maybe from the Boulevard down to Davison, and covering the areas of Dexter, Linwood, 12th, 14th, in that same residential area. We would wash walls, paint, and things like that. I guess he couldn't wait for us to get old enough so we could supplement the welfare, and/or Awrey's by helping him to wash the walls. I never was a good painter, but I could wash walls. I would take wallpaper off. The decorating, that is what it amounted to, and then he would clean carpeting. So that would give me and my older brothers some exposure to how other people lived.

Q What was it about being a laborer that made him realize that he didn't want his children to get into that field?

A I am not too sure. It was as much my dad as it was my mother. My mother had just the opposite view. My dad looked upon it as a job, and the job was sort of like the panacea. My mother looked upon it as a dirty, old, common laborer type of position. She wanted her kids, like most mothers, to do better in getting that education, which was an integral part of preparing yourself for a larger role.

Q How did she let you and your siblings know that?

A By encouraging us to do well in school and periodically, seeing an image or a picture of a prominent African-American--we called them Negroes at that particular time--someone like Ralph Bunche. I was always interested in Athletics and I guess Jackie Robinson broke in to the big leagues simultaneously with my getting out of high school. I always wanted to be a basketball or baseball player. My mother was always encouraging us to go to school and get an education and I fell for that, not immediately but

eventually. I succumbed to the obvious that your mother is always right and decided to go back to school.

Q Not a bad thing to fall for.

A No, no.

Q Was your father a member of the UAW?

A Yes, as a matter of fact, I was a member of the UAW. At that particular time the UAW did not have the acceptability that it is accorded now. I think a lot of that particular attitude stemmed from the formation of the union. I am not too sure my dad was that active in the formation of it, but he was a union member and, of course, when you went into the plant, as I guess all of us boys did, certainly down to my age. I had two older brothers and they went there also. It is so automatic that you became a union member. I would go to a union meeting periodically. There was a guy out there named Carl Stellato. I can't remember the other presidents of the Local 600. That is the union that they belonged to.

Q What do you remember about those union meetings?

A A lot of contention.

Q Over what kind of issues?

A I guess really it was the working conditions, and I don't remember the racial factor coming up at all. I guess that was a period of time where it was better to be seen than heard. You sort of went along with the program, so to speak. My dad was not that aggressive, not that he was passive, but he was not an activist. I think many of his generation were not really that active and that's why you have to give a lot of credit to those individuals who were

strong enough and I guess A type of personality wise, who were willing to run that risk and to speak out. My mother was one who seemed to be one who wanted to go along with the tide, so to speak, and trust in the Lord and things would change. Ultimately they will, you know, but my mother and dad were very religious, particularly my mother. She was a strong believer and had tremendous faith in her beliefs, well as my dad who ultimately became a pastor. It was my mother who was the strength, I think.

Q Speaking of your faith, Apostolic Church of God, tell me something about the tenets of that denomination as you understood it growing up as a child?

A Well, when we were growing up at that particular time we were considered as those old "holy rollers." It is called sanctified. There is a similarity between our particular faith and the Church of God in Christ. The faith in our particular church stemmed from a church that began over here on Clinton Street. I don't know if you ever heard of the Clinton Bethlehem Temple. It used to be in this area, where the expressway is. They formed a big church and it is based upon a concept that you have to be born again and that re-birth comes as a result of a repentance of your sins and a baptism which is a complete emersion of the body into the water, and when you arise you speak in tongues as God gives utterance. That is taken from, if I am not mistaken, from Acts, the 2nd chapter, 38th verse, if I am not mistaken.

You receive what is known as the gift of the Holy Ghost. And, of course, you have variations of that particular concept. Even in the Baptist Church you are baptized. I think even in the Catholic Church, you are baptized, so to speak. But the significance in our belief is it is taken from that particular scripture where you must be born again, stemming from the idea that a man cannot enter into the

gates of heaven unless he humbles himself and is reborn. You have to come as a child. Various biblical verses allude ultimately to this baptism and it is in the name of Jesus Christ. That is what the scripture says.

There are other references in the bible where people are baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. That is what makes for the religious conflicts, among other things. But in this particular scripture, in Acts, Paul alludes to the death, burial and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. You have to be baptized in the name of that person who brought that particular salvation or concept or religion to the earth. It was that immaculate conception that brought in Jesus, who tried to convince the Jews that he was their Savior. They rejected him and then it became available for the Gentiles. I am not a minister and I don't want to get into preaching or a sermon like interview but the bottom line is that we were raised in that particular faith and I still have strong beliefs about it, although I am not saved at this particular point. I am probably one of the biggest hypocrites, but it has never escaped me, and I still believe in it strongly.

Q The nature of your family's involvement in the church, you mentioned before your father was assistant pastor and became a pastor, what other things were you involved in the church, you and your family?

A Well, when we were growing up in the '30s and '40s aside from our family, the church and the school was probably the center of your world. My dad joined the church probably before I was born and I can remember an early stage back in the '40s going to our first little storefront. I did go to a storefront. It was on Milford between Woodrow and Beechwood. If you have talked to other West Siders, they

have talked extensively about Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church. Our little church was within maybe a nine iron from Tabernacle, but it was a storefront. As a matter of fact, you might have heard the name of Simmons Shades on the West Side, on Milford. Simmons Shades, I think, subsequently succeeded to the storefront that we were in.

Ultimately, we moved to an abandoned theater on the corner of Woodrow and Milford. The address was 6117 Woodrow.

I remember so vividly going to that little storefront, first, and then ultimately going to this bigger church, which as I said before, had been a theater. It had been abandoned on Woodrow, right there at Milford. In our particular faith and beliefs, it was church almost every day. One night might be young peoples' meeting night; another night it might be saints meeting; another night it might be testifying and testimonial meeting, and things of that nature. It was every night at 7:00, you go to church. On Sunday you go all day. You get up at 8:00 or 9:00 for Sunday school. The kids might not have to come back in the evening but you started off with Sunday school around 9:45 or 10:00 and you had your break at noon. Services were ended and then you had preaching and then the alter call and testimony about things that the church members had need for and how they had been rewarded or benefited because of their beliefs. It was an every day thing almost except Saturday.

Saturday, we had to go down and perhaps cleanup the church. As a matter of fact, one of the prominent families in our particular church was the Miles'. I don't know if you have ever heard that name mentioned. Levi Miles was our pastor. My dad was his assistant pastor. The Miles family and the Pitts family were extremely close and there were other members in that area from Woodrow to Epworth. I don't know if you you have heard of those streets. That was

my world or our world until you got a little older and then you went in to the other world and the temptations and the life that you had been shielded from became the temptations of the earth. But from Warren to Tireman, from Woodrow to Epworth was my little world until I started going to high school.

Q Kids would would be going to the movies, the Beechwood and the Grenada on Sundays?

A Yes, I didn't go.

Q Why not?

A Our religion was such that our parents didn't want us exposed to the world. In retrospect I am inclined to think that what they were trying to do was protect us from the temptations of the world, not that indeed that in and of itself was the most effective way of doing it. It would seem to me that the temptations, if your faith is strong enough, that you can attend these things, and not yield. But by the same token, it is probably better not to have the exposure to test yourself on the temptation part.

So my dad was a very strong and firm believer. We didn't go to movie shows legitimately. Every now and then somebody in the family would sneak out and go. I had a brother who went all of the time. He is not with us any longer. His name was Horace. You may have heard of him in talking to other people. I think of my brother, Horace, and I become very emotional. I think he was the tightest with me and my family. He probably would be called a rascal by the old folks, but he was nothing more than a juvenile delinquent. It was just that way. Probably the brightest of all of the ten kids that my mother had; it was not recognized

at that particular time. He just had a fantastic mechanical ingenuity that was just sort of genetically innately there. He could look at something mechanical, and it is all over with; he could do it. He could bust your lock in a minute. Used to have skeleton keys to go into doors; he would take some wire and go there. It was just interesting. He was a heck of a guy.

Q Sounds like you miss him a lot?

A Yes. I still miss him. He would go down to the Paradise Theater. I knew nothing about these things, but my brother would go down there at 10, 11, 12 years at age. Come home, get a whipping, next Saturday do the same thing, that type of thing.

As a matter of fact, he was my vehicle that exposed me to working on the boats. He was always into something. One summer apparently between escapades with juvenile court, he got a job working on the Greater Detroit or the Western States. There used to be a series of boats that went from Detroit to Cleveland, Detroit to Buffalo, Mackinaw Island. They were pleasure cruisers. I think they were setup for the executives of the Big Three to take those business cruises for their staff and talk about business, among other things. In that one year that I worked, in the summer, I decided that it was nothing but a floating hotel, and just a legitimization of their social activities. I worked on the boats under his name and using his Coast Guard identification. I had never been in a big kitchen in my life. As a matter of fact, I had never seen a big dining room. I got on the boat without any experience whatsoever, but that is what it takes. I met a guy by the name of Kenny Hilton. I don't know if his name has ever come up.

Q An attorney?

A Kenny Hilton was the captain of the dining room. I think there was another guy who was a maitre d', I can't think of his name. Kenny recognized that I was not my brother but never said a word about it. To this day, we see each other every now and then and talk about those days on the boats.

Kenny was quite a role model, if that is what you wanted to do. But I subsequently learned that he was one of many young guys from the South while attending college, used the boats, as the railroad car porters, as a means for supplementing and gaining income to continue their education.

Q What was it about him that made him a role model?

A He just seemed to be so smooth. Kenny never seemed to reflect or show his anger or his temperament. He probably would be an ideal poker player. He impressed me even at that time and even now. I probably consider him, as we would say in the ghetto, slick, you know, but just a professional slick. He was, as I later learned, in the process of going to law school. It never came up because I wasn't really interested in law at that time. I was only 16 when I started on the boats. I think you had to be 21 or something like that. My brother had put his age up. He was a year or two older than me. You are constantly observing things as you are working and as you are evolving.

When the season ended, all the waiters got together and they sang the fraternity song. I didn't know what it was. I have since learned it was the Q song. I don't think it was a Kappa song, and I know it was not an Alpha type of song, but it was a fraternal song. It was just amazing for me to sit there and watch those guys, you know, resemble the

Harvard Glee Club or whatever that small group of Harvard songsters are called. These black guys standing around down in the berths, singing those songs. I thought about it.

But I still wasn't impressed with going to school at that point. I was really not that interested in college.

Q You came from a big family. How were your parents able to manage so many children? What was their trick, their key?

A Tell you what, if I could answer that one, probably I wouldn't be sitting here now. I don't know; I don't know how they divorced their minds from all of the activities of all of the functions that the kids may be involved with, except really through the grace of God. Not to show any favoritism to any of the kids, again our parents, particularly my mother, was adamant about us getting an education, particularly the high school education and getting good grades in school. I don't recall my dad ever coming to a function, where academically we were involved in school. Every now and then my mother would come; she always came late. It seemed like the teachers would always recognize that my mother was coming late. Because if it was not one thing involving a family member, it was another. Somehow she always seemed to make it to one or two of the functions, either a graduation or some type of performance. I really don't know with a household such as we had how they were able to maintain it. I think because I can't answer that, my religious beliefs would lead me to believe it was their faith, and that is something that even to this day, I yearn to have.

Q What kind of things were you involved with in school? I understand that you were a pretty active student.

A As I said earlier, I was interested or at least my family

was one where an education was emphasized along with religion. I was also very athletic. My dad had at one time been a catcher, never turned pro. I guess in the South he had played a lot of baseball. Kronk Recreational Center is up on McGraw and Junction. That brings back some memories. But right across from Kronk used to be a huge athletic field, maybe with four or five baseball diamonds, pro baseball size. Kronk was the indoor recreational facility. I was up there almost every day after school let out. In the summer I was a bat boy. They had amateur baseball programs, particularly for the white community; as a matter of fact, it was strictly white. They had Class A, Class B, Class C, and Class D. At the time I was growing up, you were not allowed to play in those amateur programs, but they didn't mind you being the bat boy and chasing the balls and that type of thing. I would go up there along with a couple of my classmates. Every now and then they would discard a glove to you or a baseball.

I never did play baseball for Northwestern, which is the high school I graduated from. I concentrated on basketball. In the winter I would go over to Kronk. Again it was the recreational leagues, no black or African-American players or teams involved in the recreational system. I would go up there in the evening after 7:00 or 8:00 and they generally had games Wednesdays and Fridays or maybe Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays. We would go and watch them. On Saturday it was open house and that is when the blacks had the gym. I learned how to play, going up there watching them and going up on Saturdays and perhaps during the week. If the teams didn't play we would have the floor. At that particular time one of my favorite classmates, not a classmate, he was a little older than me and who I loved to play with, and sometimes against, was a guy named Philander Booker. I don't know if you have ever run across

his name. He lived on Colfax. When I was born, my family lived on Whitewood. I don't recall if I was born in a hospital or at home. But since my younger sister the beginning of the second five was born at home, I assumed that I was born at home, too.

Then we moved from Whitewood when I was two or three years old to an address on Colfax: 6426. And I can remember playing holes around the house, I mean around the dirt on the outside. I don't know if you know what holes are. You dig a little hole and you take marbles and you span your hand that is where you could go from the hole and you are trying to get into the other hole. The accuracy was based upon getting into the hole with the minimum amount of shots by shooting the marble. The holes were built sort of like a golf course, as I think about it. That is really what it seemed to be about, because the holes are built along the contours of the land. You would have to go slowly up a hill or fast and run the risk of falling back. So a lot of the kids gathered around our particular house because we had dirt in between the two houses, where other people may have had grass. We played hole there.

This guy Philander Booker lived in the next block on Colfax. As I remember him now, I idolized him as being a basketball player. He was a foot taller than I was at that time. He likewise was a slick brother, so to speak. But we played ball in the street. We played football in the street and we played baseball in the alley. We had concrete alleys, but they were all cracked up. There was a man, we called him a sheeny man who came through the alley every week and he would ask for tin pans and rubbish and even paper.

At that time, my parents were still renting. My parents didn't buy a house until I was nine or ten years old. We moved to

6050 Epworth. We were two doors away from the Conyers'.

As a matter of fact, Nathan Conyers and I went to grammar school together, McMichael Intermediate School and ultimately Northwestern. So we went along together at that particular time. The Conyers' lived at 6040 Epworth and we lived at 6050.

I think my dad was buying that house; if it wasn't then we ultimately moved over on LaSalle. My sisters and brothers who were older than me helped my dad make the down payment on the house. It was a huge house on LaSalle, which was like a mansion in comparison with what we were familiar with. I was only familiar with a house that had three bedrooms, one for the parents, one for the boys and one for the girls, no carpeting just rugs, dusting underneath the beds and things like that. But it was a good life. It was a good life because you didn't know there was anything better. If you were poor, which we were, but other people were poor too, so you were not deprived. It was just something to think about as you reflect upon it, never having any money to buy lunch in school. When I went to Northwestern, I don't think I ever bought lunch. I always took a sandwich or something like that. I tried to avoid taking it rolled up in paper. I always took a bag. People may laugh about it, but you build up your strength as a result of it.

My dad never had a car until we lived on Epworth. This was during the war. He had one of those buggies, you know, like a '28, '29 Buick or Ford. You had to crank it up. My rascal brother, Horace, always stole the car. He would go out and get in the car, and he was always the one who was spearheading the things.

It was a fun time on reflection, although it wasn't fun at that particular juncture, you know. You would look and see what

other people had. I didn't see that other people had that much. It was just interesting. I was a paperboy over there.

Clyde Cleveland was one of my classmates. I don't know if you ever heard of him. He was a councilman here in Detroit. I used to deliver papers. Before I started delivering papers, I worked at a grocery store, during the Second World War. I was 9 or 10 years of age. They would give you positions like a stock boy or something like that. I wasn't large enough to pick up those cases of beer and the other things, but I swept up the store. I can remember it was a neighborhood store owned by Jews. And it was called Nate's on Vancourt and Cobb. I remember sweeping that store out just like I remember sitting here, every day or every night from 9 or 10 years of age until I got a paper route.

I got a paper route and it was like an advancement. Once I had the paper route--I was then at Northwestern--I stopped working at that point to play ball. And then my last year or two of high school in the summer I worked as a Western Union carrier. You heard of those guys that deliver telegrams. I used to ride my bike from the West Side all the way downtown and all the way out to Grosse Pointe and all the way to 8 Mile and Southfield delivering those telegrams. It was just fun, you know, plus it was a way of being independent, so to speak, and earning your own money.

Q Did you use your money for your own leisure and recreation or did you have to supplement the household at all?

A The money I made while at the grocery store and up to the time I got out of high school as a Western Union carrier, it was really mine. It really wasn't that much either, but the day I started working at the factory, when I came back from

off the boats, my dad said "you got to start paying rent" or something like that. Prior to the time I would give my mother money just because I guess that is the way we were raised. You just give it up. It wasn't demanded or required. Once you started working at the plant, you were making some money and you paid for some food, and that is how my sisters again were able to help my dad to get a down payment for the house on LaSalle.

Q How did the hardships of those kind of jobs prepare you for life later on?

A You know we really, I didn't look upon those particular tasks as either being demeaning or hard. It was really an escape, and you get paid for it as well. If the guy is a professional ball player now, they are doing what they like and they are getting paid for it. I was riding my bike and why not get paid for it? That is something that you didn't mind doing. I was working at a grocery store and the guy would give us meat. I remember taking home meat, and butter and bacon on the weekend when other people were not able to get it. So it wasn't looked upon as a "task" in that particular manner. But it exposed you to how other people lived, and whetted your appetite and your desires as to what you might want to achieve and accomplish. I always wanted a house where there was a bed and one closet so that you could hang up your clothes.

I always wanted to buy short sleeve shirts for the summer. At the time we were growing up, I think the men would wear the same shirt but with different collars. It was the exposure that I think I gained from those efforts and not the envy or the jealousy of other people who may have had these things.

You just tell yourself one day I will get one. You have heard of the Cadillac Motor Car Company that used to be on

Scotten? Frequently those executives drove to and from work from other parts of the city; they had to drive down Scotten or Epworth or they would drive down Beechwood. Again going from the southern part of the city, the Cadillac Motor Car Company being over on Scotten and maybe Michigan which is south of where we were living and then they would go north up towards Woodward Avenue. You sit on your porch and see one of the hogs, if I can use that expression, driving back and forth. "That is my car there." Someone else would say, "no, that is mine; I will get that."

I never got one then but today I have two or three Cadillacs.

I have the old Cadillacs that I looked at. I have collected two or three of them. I have got one now that you probably have to spend the cost of a little house to get. I don't even drive it. I don't show it. I have got a couple of cars. But again, it was that deprivation, so to speak, not that it was a burden but simply the denial and catching the streetcar every day or walking to Northwestern in zero degree temperatures made you desire to have those particular things. It was only one way as far as I was concerned to get it, and that was to get a job or get some education to get a job to get some money. I think of it now as an impetus, so to speak, or as a motivating type of thing.

Q What do you remember about World War II?

A I remember going to Sampson; working at the little grocery store and having a wagon collecting papers for paper drives. I remember also going up to Northwestern watching the basketball games. I was always interested in watching athletic endeavors, particularly basketball and baseball. I remember Joe Louis fighting. Whenever he won, we would run out of the house and run up and down the street. My rascal brother might go hustle some papers.

There was an extra that came out and he was more enterprising than all of us and absolutely fearless. That is why he is probably not with us now. I remember that.

I remember the W.P.A. [Works Progress Administration]. My parents never shopped at the national or the name stores. They always shopped on credit. I didn't know what it was about at that time. I never saw the paper or anything.

It is just the facsimile of what you have now. You still have Krogers and a few A & Ps, but you have some little stores and the gasoline stations. Frequently certain parts of the neighborhood had little Jewish grocery stores until blacks came in and opened up a store. The first one that I knew that opened up a store was a guy named Cole, near Sampson, Vancourt and Cobb.

Again with reference to the war, I remember the paper drives, the rationing and Joe Lewis fighting during that particular period of time. I remember the riot that came up, although my parents tried to shield us from that. I think it was in '43 or something like that. I was 11 or 12 at that time and because we didn't have transportation we were sort of landlocked when that happened during the summer. You couldn't ride the streetcar to go up and down Joy Road or Clairmount or Epworth. We heard something happened over towards Belle Isle or down in this area. It was like a different world. Again, you know, we really got our news through the radio. I don't even think we subscribed to the paper, although we were paper boys. My brother handled the *Free Press*. Those were interesting times. I delivered the *News* and the *Times*. At one time I delivered the *Free Press* late at night and the *News* earlier in the afternoon.

Q Switching gears a little bit. How did you choose law as a profession and criminal law in particular?

A I decided to go to law school after getting a degree, a bachelor's in '59, and not being able to find a job, I had thought, with that degree, I would be accepted into the College of Education, but they didn't accept me. I was very disappointed. During that same year if not a subsequent year, after I returned from the Korean Conflict, and went back to Wayne but I had to build up my average again. When I graduated from Northwestern I had a pretty decent high school career scholastically. I didn't have to apply or take exams or anything to get into Wayne. I was admitted based upon my high school accomplishment. But I goofed off as was typical of me to a certain extent. My average fell from an A down to a D or so, and I got drafted. I went into the service, came back and I saw a member of my high school graduating class who had continued on having not gone into the service and they were going to Wayne.

So I decided, even while in the Army, that I was going to go back to school. After I got my degree I think it was at that time I either saw-- we had a judge here whose name was Robert Gragg. We called him Bobby. Bobby Gragg had gone to Northern High School and he was in law school. I think Nathan Conyers was in law school simultaneously with this guy. But Nathan and I, as I said, grew up together. And I said to myself, "if these cats can do that, I know that I can do it, because I am not too sure that they had anything more intellectually than I had. As a matter of fact, I felt I had a little more on the ball than they had academically and yet and still they had chosen a professional life and were well on the way to achieving it.

I was trying to decide whether I was going to do that or go to medical school. I would have preferred to go to medical school, but it takes so long and my objective was to make some money and to make it legitimately, although I had been

tempted by the streets to a great extent. I used to hustle: sometimes legitimately and sometimes questionably as opposed to illegitimately. I decided to go to law school because it would be quicker and I just made an application at Wayne. I learned then that you had to take the LSAT. I think I went over it in June or July and the LSAT test was coming up at that point. They admitted me without the results. The rest is history. Once I got into Wayne, it was all over, as I said. I won one of the books given to the best student the first year. I mean I was ready to go to school. I took the Bar Exam in '64. I missed that communist threat that was coming down from Washington... That Senator from Wisconsin, I can't think of his name right now--

Q McCarthy?

A Yes, McCarthy. There was a McCarthy period and people who had union contacts, my dad, myself were always under suspicion as being questionable. I got a phone call before I went up to Ann Arbor. I had never been to Ann Arbor in my life. I didn't know what that school was like. I got a phone call talking about the bar from some lady who obviously was white, by her voice. I was scared to death. I didn't want to talk to her because I didn't want to blow that exam as a result of political concepts or beliefs. I went to Ann Arbor and I saw the school, and I said, "my gosh, it is a quad up there for students." I had never seen anything as beautiful at that time in my life, for education. I said "how come you can't do everything you want to do if you have this type of facility or this type of institution to feed you." I took that bar, and I got a pretty decent score, never had to take it again obviously and came out here and I really wasn't interested in law. Again it was to make some money, legitimately.

Within a month or two people started coming in or calling me regarding traffic tickets or a prostitution case or somebody got arrested. Again, it is interesting that none of these calls came from the people I grew up with, friends or people that I knew. They were all strangers. I started taking assignments from Recorders Court for indigent defendants that had to have a court-appointed attorney. I would do that. I was just hustling and low and behold the riots came again, the Civil Disturbance in '67, I think it was. I got involved with getting some guys out of jail, going up to Jackson and trying to get Writs and things of that nature. I didn't have time to do anything else. Although I wanted to be a negligence lawyer, but you have to wait so long for those things to pay off, and you never knew if you were going to be successful. They also require money to handle and service the case for expertise and a variety of things. I needed cash money immediately. I had gotten married, and I had a son that you just met.

So I took these criminal cases and low and behold that money started coming in. I started handling some rather serious cases and, ultimately, I think I hit it when I started getting the publicity. I think it was Leon Jenkins, one of the local judges who got accused of a crime; maybe it was not him. I got Buddy Battle and he was indicted by the federal government and usually when the feds indict you, it is almost a done deal. Well, he was acquitted. He was found not guilty. Ultimately, Leon Jenkins, a Judge who referred Buddy Battle to me who got into some difficulty; he was acquitted also. I was on a roll, not that I did anything individually or personally. I had that religious background, and I think it is really not me but the Lord that is within me, and because of my parents' belief, I think I was blessed. That is what it boils down to.

Q Yes, evidently. This might be the last question.

What is it about the West Side, growing up on the West Side that has resulted in so many prominent people coming out of that community and becoming successful, such as yourself, John Conyers, Damon Keith, Elliott Hall, and many others? What is it about growing up there?

A It is probably the village concept. I can remember I cursed out Carl Conyers, John's brother, who is now deceased. Carl Conyers grabbed me by the shoulder or the neck and took me to my house, told my daddy and made him whip me. You just identified with each other, and you supported each other. We all had aspirations and ambitions, that were indeed reinforced by your parents and/or your neighbors always telling you to go to school. Even now I will tell a kid and try to help those to a certain extent, those who are able to further their education. There is nothing like it in the world.

Q Thank you.

A Thank you.