INTERVIEW OF FELIX SELDON

Oral History Project of the WestSiders

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Interview Conducted by: Louis Jones

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Q Thank you for taking time out of your schedule to talk with us about your experiences on the West Side.

To begin, can you tell us a little bit about your parents, where they were from and how they got to Detroit?

A My father, Tyler Seldon, was born in Texarkana, Arkansas. He worked as a blacksmith. He graduated from Tuskegee where he attended several courses taught by George Washington Carver. After graduating from Tuskegee, he went to Chickasaw, Alabama.

My mother, Melanie, was born in Newton, Alabama where I now have a farm. The farm that I own is the farm on which my mother was conceived. My father met and married my mother in Chickasaw. They relocated to Detroit in 1922. The big thing that brought them to Detroit was the Ford Motor Company with the enticement of earning $5.00 a day working in the factory. They came to Detroit and bought our home on 28th Street. The whole family of 8 children was raised in that home. We still own that home. I was born in the front bedroom or our 28th Street home. Most of the family was born there also.

Q You said that your father worked at Ford. What kind of work did he do?

A He was a millwright. He worked about 37 years, mostly midnights at Ford. He loved his work and, of course, retired from Ford. Then he lived about 12 years after retiring. He passed back in 1974.

Q Exactly what is a millwright?

A When a machine breaks down, the millwright repairs the equipment. They are also responsible for assembling new industrial equipment such as pumps, valves and presses related to the assembly line. The millwright will practically work around the clock during the changover. It is one of the skilled trades that require special classes to learn blueprinting and other technical knowledge. I think the knowledge that my father gained from his education at Tuskegee helped him in learning this trade.

Q So often when I hear about blacks working at Ford Motor, you hear about them working in the foundry. Was that unusual for a black man to have a skilled job like that at Ford?

A My father started out in the foundry and gradually worked up to millwright. I remember immediately after the war, he began to study blueprints. Ford wanted him to increase his skills. He became a millwright gang leader. The union made it possible for Black men to get into better jobs within the factory.

While at the University of Detroit I had a summer job at Ford. I worked there for nine days. My father thought it was the worst thing that could happen, to quit my job working for Ford Motor Company. I was working midnights. I couldn't stay awake. I got a job as a forester with the city. Every summer I always had a job with the city. The fellows that

went to the Ford Motor Company as summer interns, lost their job so I was very fortunate.

Q Did your father talk about any hardships he had working at Ford, as far as relationships with whites or other folks more generally?

A He never really talked much about his job. He apparently got along pretty good. He never brought problems home. Many times he would come home and stay up all day. I wondered how he could do that. Apparently, when a millwright is not called upon to work or to fix a broken piece of machinery, the men could rest.

Q Your mother, what did she do?

A My mother was a homemaker. Well, at one time in Alabama she taught school for a few years. She had an 8th grade education. That level of training was sufficient to qualify her as a teacher. She joined the missionary society of Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church. She traveled a great deal as a missionary. Upon her death, I didn't know this until recently, when my sister told me this story. My mother would always room with Mother King -- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s mother – when attending various National Baptist conventions. When my mother passed, Mother King was sick and was unable to come to Detroit to attend the funeral. Daddy King came in her place. Daddy King was one of several ministers sitting with Reverend McNeil. I don't remember what he had to say. She died in 1952, a few years before the Civil Rights Movement developed in Montgomery. **There were so many people at that funeral from all over the country. The funeral lasted about three and a half hours. It was a long funeral.**

Q So she traveled all over the country or was it around Detroit?

A Yes, she traveled all over the country as a missionary. I don't know how she did it raising eight children, but she did. She wasn't on payroll or on staff. This is something she did voluntarily. We were proud of her for that.

Q Did she talk about what she did as a missionary?

A Well, the missionaries basically worked with families and individuals needing spiritual help. She also helped other churches establish missionary societies. Of course, back in those days, parents didn't much talking to their children. Children were to be seen and not heard. These things we hear were passed on from our relatives. But she was quite prominent in the missionary society.

My mother also established the first block club in Detroit there on 28th Street. Our street club served as a guide for other block clubs.

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Q What kind of things did she do with the block club,?

A She was president of the block club. She helped to organize 28th Street, between McGraw and Cobb, and got the people together. Then they started having these meetings: coming to my house, the Clavon's house next door, Mr. Hood's house up there. It was a club to keep the neighborhood from going down. Back in that time I guess money was made available through the government to keep some of these homes up. People could actually get together and they had to petition to get the money for the homes. It was a very close-knit neighborhood. As you

know, the whole West Side was like a family; you knew everybody. That block and the other blocks would look at 28th Street and they would start to form their block clubs and now it is very prominent throughout the whole area right now.

Q How did she get the idea to even form a block club?

A She was an organizer. She was just a leader. I don't know why she did it. She was in the missionary society. She was always president of the missionary group, and a lot of the leadership stuff kind of got to us. That is how I became a military person I guess and a leader.

Q I understand that the alleys were not necessarily paved before, and there were not a lot of lights on the street as we see today. It is my understanding that the block club had something to do with that?

A Oh, yes. Back in those days, the junk men would come down the alleys with their horse and buggies. The garbage was in concrete containers. You put your garbage in there and, of course, the maggots and the flies and everything was on the trash. They had barrels back in those days. But it smelled just awful. The block club would get with the city to make them clean up the alleys. That was one of the big things, was to clean up the alleys and to encourage the people in the block to keep their grass cut and paper picked up. And, of course, in those neighborhoods because the mothers didn't work, there were many, many, many kids there. The kids were being raised by mothers and fathers. The father worked, the mother stayed home which made it really nice because mothers were always there cooking dinner. Sundays you would go to church; it was just something that you always did. You knew everybody. It

was a good time.

Q One of the things I have learned about the times were the number of clubs that were around. Everybody was a member of some kind of club. There was the Leisure Hour Club, does that sound familiar at all?

A I am not familiar with that one.

I know the Nacirema Club, of course. The churches had a lot of influence on what went on in the neighborhood. Like Tabernacle: every deacon in Tabernacle had a certain number of members he was responsible for. There was a deacon…I don't remember his name right now, but he stayed right down the street from us. Anything that went on in that block, your family would talk to that deacon, if you were a member of Tabernacle. He would come to the house and sit around and have prayer and kind of get things halfway straightened out. The churches had a great influence on what went on in the neighborhoods, too.

Q Do you recall any particular thing that the deacon would have come to your house about?

A It could have been one of the boys not behaving himself, getting into trouble. Back in those days, it was very prevalent that children would raid the cherry and apple trees down the alley. We would watch those apple trees as much as the owner did. Sometimes you would get caught so you would certainly get a spanking or a whipping. Then the deacon would sit down and tell us, “you shouldn't do this. This is the way it should be done. The Lord doesn't like this,” and everybody just kind of perked up and understood. Next year, you did the same thing all over again.

Q Now, was your father a member of the UAW and, if so,

did he talk about it?

A He was a member of the UAW. The person in our neighborhood who was prominent was Mr. Clavon next door. He was always a big man in the UAW. In fact, Walter Reuther would come into the neighborhood and he would go to Mr. Clavon's house. My father would go over there because my father really wasn't in the leadership of the UAW. Clevand Clavon was.

Q Did your father talk about those meetings at all?

A I don't remember him talking about them. I remember how the assembly lines would run them ragged until the union came in and slowed those lines down. The unions had a great influence on the salaries of the people. Down South things were segregated. Detroit wasn't much better. In the unions, apparently the people had a common mission and, therefore, you could always count on the union man whether he was black or white to come to your aid and come to your assistance. That was one of the reasons why my father got to where he got, because of the unions.

Q What kind of things did your father do with his leisure time? Did he have any hobbies or people he spent time with or places that he went?

A My father didn't have many hobbies. He was dedicated to Ford's, although he would come home and do work around the house. He loved to garden. He would provide the gardens all around Ford Motor Company. Every Ford employee could get a garden plot. That is how I got to know about flowers and growing things, through my father. He would always take the family out there and we would work in the garden. The following year he would bring in the

vegetables and things like this. He loved to work around the house and water his grass and listen to the ballgames in the summertime. Wintertime, it was keeping the furnace operating down in the basement. We had one of these big coal furnaces. The following year you would get about five tons of coal out in front of your house. You get wheelbarrows and dump them into the coal chutes down in the basement. The father's responsibility was keeping the fire growing. At night they would bank the fire. In the mornings, shake it out, and put more coal in the furnace. He would love to do that.

Q Tell us about when you were growing up as a child. Did you have any jobs to do around the house or outside of the house?

A Every child had a responsibility. And my responsibility was washing the dishes after dinner. I remember many times I did not want to wash dishes after dinner, but I certainly did it. Then the other brothers had various responsibilities. The girls had their responsibility for cooking and washing the clothes and cleaning up the house and things like this. Everybody had a responsibility and it was your job, and you did it. That was a requirement.

I guess one of the things I used to enjoy doing around Christmas time was coming down the alleys and getting the Christmas trees that people had thrown out after Christmas. I would get big piles of Christmas trees and drag them down the alley. I would bring them home and my father would cut them up and put them in the furnace. Thinking back now, I don't know if that was such a good idea because it would go up the chimney you know and they saw the fire or something. Back in those days we would love to see and smell that fire.

Q I understand that you worked for your godfather, a Mr. Simpson?

A Mr. Simpson owned Simpson Battery Electric on Milford Avenue. Mr. Simpson opened that shop up; he was a Cass Tech graduate. He opened an electrical battery company. He worked outside for I guess from the early 30s to when he passed away in '50. I would go up there and work with him on picking the batteries in and out of the vehicles and changing the generators. I have done it many, many times in the snow. You would have to clean the snow off, and somebody would drive in the vehicle. You would get underneath it, put the battery in or change the starter. I worked with my godfather for many, many years. When he passed away, he left me with the business. I was a university student. I had to make a decision whether I wanted to continue with the battery electric business outside in the open or continue my college education. I decided I would go and continue with my education at college.

Q So you sold the business?

A I sold the business, yes.

Q How did you and your family meet Mr. Simpson and his family?

A The Simpsons were my godparents. His name was Felix. I was named after him. My sister's name was Edna Lucille. She was named after Mrs. Simpson. Mrs. Simpson’s parents were from Belgium. Mr. Simpson was from Indianapolis. Of course they were a black and white couple. They practically raised us. We were eight kids next door. They had no children. They adopted us completely. Many times when our dog would be taken to

the dog pound, Mrs. Simpson would get it out. Many times we would break their windows, but they never said a word. They would just get the windows fixed. Mr. Simpson would be in the backyard raising his flowers. So around my house right now I have a lot of flowers based on working with him. He was a tremendous role model. I never heard him swear or say an unkind word to me. Mrs. Simpson was like another mother to me. I would eat at home and go over there and eat with him when he came in from the shop.

Q Was this a white couple?

A Mrs. Simpson was white. Mr. Simpson was a very, very dark man. He was black.

Q An interracial couple would be unusual back in those days, right?

A I tell you if you have ever seen a love situation, that was a love situation. He worshipped her and she worshipped him. What a couple. They both ran a shop up on Milford. Everybody knew them. Her sisters would come once in a blue moon to come and visit them. They kind of disassociated themselves from Mrs. Simpson. She didn't seem to mind because she had our family and other families in the neighborhood. We never thought anything about it.

Q What was the nature of race relations in that community back then?

A On our street there were the McKissics and a lot of other Polish families. We were raised up together. We had our little ins and outs; it wasn't a racial thing. It was mainly kids. My brother was telling me a story about McKissic boys. They were two rough guys. When they grew up, they became priests in the Catholic Church.

Down the street there was a white family. We never thought about race at that time. It was mainly just kids and families. I remember the McKissics could come to our house and eat. I am not making it pie in the sky, but it was just not a whole lot of conflict until they had another migration from the South. They came to the area and then a lot of the whites began moving out, and I remember experiencing things out at River Rouge that I never experienced before. That was then and now is now.

Q What kind of things did you experience at River Rouge then?

A I guess we are talking early 40s, just before the race riot that happened in 43. Down below Warren Avenue there were a lot of white families living down there; Many of them were Polish. The people there had conflict and pressing for jobs. Rather than taking it out on the enemy, we took it out on ourselves. There were times I guess when you couldn't go up on West Grand Boulevard. I remember going down to the General Motors Building and walking up West Grand Boulevard. They didn't want us there and would fight you. I remember when I was going to Northwestern High School, we couldn't go to the Lee Plaza Hotel over there right next to Northwestern High School. We had formed an interracial bowling league at Northwestern and we couldn't go across the street on Grand River.

Q Mr. Seldon, you were talking about how things began to change in River Rouge?

A Yes, we began to notice it in the 40s. I remember one time being out to River Rouge and being on the swing set. There was a gentleman with a heavy southern accent. He wanted us to get off of the swings and let his kid swing. Mr.

Clavon happened to be with us. He told him, “man, you are not in the South anymore. You can't do this like you did down there.” They were getting ready to go to fisticuffs. The fellow backed down. Of course, there at the Granada Theatre over there on Warren Avenue, blacks had to go upstairs in the balcony. Because the kids got in the balcony and began to throw popcorn and stuff downstairs, they changed that rule and let us sit down there together.

Then you couldn't go to eat downtown at Stouffer's. There were certain places downtown that you couldn't go and eat. This was Michigan. But things gradually changed. They had to change. Blacks were getting more money and the population was changing and they had to begin letting us kids do what we wanted to do. Finally, at the dime store around Northwestern High School, you were able to eat there. You might have a little a bit of segregation in Michigan, but it has changed.

Q How do you feel about that. I mean not being allowed to go different places and have different types of experiences?

A I did spend a great time in the South. My grandmother was down in Bessemer, Alabama. I would go there every summer. So I knew about the racial policies. I would go on the train from here to Cincinnati, all mixed up. Get into Cincinnati and then catch the segregated coach where they separate you and send you on going down South, across the Mason-Dixon Line. I remember one time my brother and I were going down there with the help of Children’s Aid. We went into the white coach area going to Cincinnati with its nice seats and air conditioning. We sat down. A white couple turned around and asked, “are you sure you should be in here sonny.” “We got a ticket to Bessemer, Alabama.”

The conductor came in and said, “you boys can't be up here.” He took us back to the cattle cars where the blacks would ride the trains down through the South. So I knew those coaches were not air conditioned, and you would go through the mountains, through those tunnels and the coaches would fill up with smoke. You were always behind the engines. They always put your coaches behind the engines. It was very uncomfortable and very inconvenient. Guys would come through there with sandwiches and things like this. Normally we would pack a basket. Mother would pack sandwiches and chicken and things like this. And to this day, I don't know how my mother could pack baloney sandwiches and chicken and things like this in those baskets with the mayonnaise on them. No one ever got sick from that salmonella or anything like that even though the trip took 24 hours. We would have those soggy sandwiches with something to drink. You would ride down and then you got to the South; you knew your place down there. You were to get to the back of the line.

My grandmother many times would be standing next in line some place and they would ignore her and go right to the white person. Of course, you would stand to one side of the counter. When they got finished over there working with the whites, they would come over there. That was very Un-American, but that is the way the situation was down there. Now the little town that I bought my property in down there, they want to make me mayor. It is only three hundred blacks. How things have changed.

Q Were you cautioned before you went down South?

A We knew. It is something that you learn and something that it takes you forever to get over; you feel like the inferiority is ingrained in you. I don't know how the people

down there stood it. As I get older, I figure they were able to tolerate it through either dipping snuff or chewing tobacco. It was kind of a semi-mellow state that they stayed in down there. In the 50s when I went down there, the kids were coming out of high school and out of colleges. They knew about this stuff and they were challenging it. Nothing happened, of course, until after the Montgomery situation with Rosa Parks in 1955.

Q Going back a little bit now to Milford Street: Describe what Milford Street might look like on a busy Saturday afternoon?

A Well, you had the five and ten cent store up there. We loved to go on Milford. We would come down the street to Mr. Campbell's Drug Store where we got ice cream soda. Campbell's didn't have a juke box, but right down the street there was another ice cream parlor and they had a juke box and you could sit around and they would serve you sandwiches and everything like that. St. Cyprian's was right across the street. St. Cyprian's Father Dade was always keeping the kids busy around the area. Then you go down a little farther to Skippy's, across the street from the gas station. Skippy was a big numbers man. Everybody knew that. The mafia would come in there and the big guys would come in there. The police would often arrest Skippy and take him away in handcuffs for everyone to see. That was kind of exciting, but they would take him down and twenty minutes later he was back out there. Then down the street there were barber shops and shoe stores. Milford was a very active street. Then they had Swan's Drug Store. And then Hawkins, the people had the drug store on Woodward and Milford. It was a very busy place. There was a lot going on Milford Avenue.

Q Milford Street, again, as I understand it there were black-owned businesses?

A Oh, yes, virtually all of them were black-owned businesses. Of course, you had the Nacriema Club there on 30th and Milford, where all of the social gatherings would take place. We would dress up and go there. There was Dave's Fish Store, right next to Mrs. Simpson's. Dave was Jewish. He always had these black guys working for him. I remember they would cuss him out and they would quit and then come back the next day and Dave would hire them. He was a great guy. We loved old Dave and his family. We would see old Dave until around the 60s or 70s. I don't know what happened to him. There were a few white businesses there, but basically they were all black-owned.

Q You mentioned the Nacriema Club. Do you recall a specific event that you went to?

A You would go to the Nacriema Club for different parties, birthday parties, and different big events. I remember a fellow by the name of Major somebody. He led it for years and years; it was always creme de la crème…the place to go on very important occasions if you lived in that area.

Then you had on McGraw and Warren these saloons. Even at that time a kid could go to the saloon. It was a microbrewery down there. There were pool rooms down on McGraw; I remember that. Kay's Drug Store was the place to go to buy your candies. Then there was the Beechwood Theater and the Granada Theater. The Beechwood was like going to slum gulley; kids would throw popcorn on the floor and rats would run around. They always had the cowboys movies over there. You could go from the

Beechwood to the Granada, which was a little upscale. Then they had these midnight shows. We would go on Saturday afternoon with our sandwiches and stuff. They would always have three movies and then a chapter. You would see these three shows or two shows over and over again until the midnight movie kicked in, which would be around midnight. Then you leave about 2:30 in the morning. There would be crowds of people going back towards 28th Street, and 30th. You never thought about anybody bothering you; it was something that you just did. You always knew who the bad guys were, the kids that got into trouble. If there was a bad person in the neighborhood, you always just knew that. Everybody was just like family.

Q That is one thing I hear about the West Side, people would leave their doors open.

A Oh, yes, you never even thought about anybody breaking in your place or coming in there. You knew everybody in the neighborhood. If there was somebody from outside of the neighborhood, they were spotted. They were watched.

I slept on my front porch many a night. The doors would be left open. You could sit out on the front porches when it was hot; there was no air conditioning. You would sit out there until things cooled down. We would holler across the street, back and forth, walking up and down the street.

One thing about 28th Street when I was a boy, this would always get me. As you would walk from my house to Milford Avenue, you would see people on the front porches. You would say “hello,” as you would walk from house to house. “Hello, hello, hello.” When you left Campbell's

coming back down, you would always say, “hello.” So maybe 20 times you would say “hello” to the same people. When you would come back, you could not ignore them; you would just greet everybody. Sometimes you walked on the other side of the street and greet them on the other side.

Q You talked about Tabernacle before and your mother being a missionary. As I understand it, you were very active in Tabernacle yourself.

A As a busy youngster, I would go to Sunday school every Sunday. I was in the clubs over there at Tabernacle. I really wasn't that active there. I graduated from high school when I was 16. Tabernacle had a great influence on me: Reverend McNeil, Reverend Sampson and Reverend Pittman. Reverend Pittman was a dynamic leader around that era. Unfortunately, he was killed up there on Woodrow and Milford one night and his death changed the dynamics of that area. Reverend McNeil came in and was a fine leader. People would come from far and near to hear Rev. McNeil preach. He was tremendouos man.

Q Can you recall a particular sermon that appealed to you or a feeling that you got from him?

A The one sermon that always stood out in my mind. We were getting ready to build that community center next door. We were trying to raise money for the people around the area to donate to that building. He preached a sermon, which always stood out in my mind; it was a sermon about the eagle: “The eagle would fly over the water and scoop down and pick up the fish and take the fish away.” He says, “one eagle came down and got a big fish, and couldn't pull that fish, couldn't get the fish out of the water.” He was telling everybody you know that sometimes you have to let

go. He was asking for funding. “Sometimes you can't hold on to it forever.” The people then said, “let's let go of some of this money and donate it to the church.” That was one sermon that stood out for me.

Q Concerning Reverend Pittman, what kind of man was he?

A I was pretty young when he was preaching. I don't remember many of his sermons. He was a moralist. He was all for the children. He always made us feel like we were really special. He was an organizer. He had that church organized. He had those deacons organized.

Q How did he make the kids feel so special?

A He would always say nice things to you. He would come and visit. I remember back in those days, people would put the minister on a pedestal. I remember when Reverend McNeil came in and we had a square dance. Reverend McNeil, of all people, got up there and square danced. A lot of those ladies just thought this was the worst thing in the world for him to square dance.

One time there was a banquet. Everybody had to stop and wait and watch the minister pick up his chicken. “Would he cut it or pick it up.” He was a boy from the South. He picked up his chicken and started eating it. There were a lot of little things.

Q Sounds like they had a great deal of respect for him?

A Oh, yes; no question about it.

Q The schools that you went to…I know you went to Wingert and Northwestern.

A Yes.

Q Can you tell us a little bit more about it?

A Well, in Wingert, I often tell my kids, up until the 4th grade, I couldn't read. I was not a reader. We had five groups and I would always be in the fifth group. I would go to Sunday school and kids would be reading all over the place. Here I was in the 4th grade, I couldn't read. One day, the principal, Mr. Stall, came into the classroom and wanted the kids to read to him from the different groups. She picked out everybody and she got to the fifth group and there I sat. She called, “Felix.” So I got the little paragraph that she wanted; I went home and came back the next Thursday and I read to him. As he was walking out the door, he turned around and patted me on the head and said, “Felix, you are a good reader.” From then on, I went from the fifth group to the first group, double-promoted, graduated from high school at 16; secured my bachelor's, my master's, working on my doctorate. Just that one incident turned me on.

Q Sounded like a lot of important encouragement?

A A lot of encouragement at Wingert. The teachers were great. You could never say anything bad about Wingert. They were really nice teachers. There were some teachers where you feared getting into their classroom. But once you got in there, you understood and you learned.

Q Do you remember any particular teacher?

A Mrs. Parsons was one. She was a disciplinarian. She was there at Wingert; we thought she was there and the building was built around her. She stayed there forever. Mrs. Parson was one that stood out with me.

Q Do you remember any particular incident within your contact with Mrs. Parsons that you remember and can tell us now?

A Mrs. Parsons made me a leader in the class. She was very strict on the different assignments she gave. She would always pick me for the tough assignments and to be the leader in front of the other kids. If we needed some extra tutoring, she would put me in charge of that. But I dreaded going into Mrs. Parsons class. Then I got in there and I found out she was just wonderful. Mrs. Marion was the same way.

Q It was an integrated school, right?

A Oh, yes, we had that group that was across the street over there; I guess it was an orphanage. These were German boys and girls. They would march them across the street to Wingert. And we didn't realize the plight of those kids; they were just like us; they were just kids. I remember one kid named Raymond Sambro. I always wondered what ever happened to Raymond. He was my best buddy. He became my best friend. It was integrated; they were no smarter than we were; we were on the same level, really.

Q Did you socialize with them outside of school?

A No, no, we did not. They went into that orphanage, and they stayed there. They played on the grounds. We played at school. We were interrelated at school, but after school, I went back to 28th Street and they went back to the orphanage. They didn't mix too much with the other kids.

Q Tell us about Northwestern, what kind of school was that and what kind of environment was it?

A Going to McMichael, that was the transition. It was a middle school. I was like most kids. At Wingert you had great structure. At McMichael, you had a lot of this freedom that kids experience today. I survived McMichael and I went into Northwestern; when I graduated, I became the president of my graduating class. I was in different clubs at Northwestern. I went to Northwestern. I would see these kids out there marching in their weapons and their uniforms. I said, “this will never happen to me. I will never do that.” When I got to the University of Detroit, the sergeant came up to me and said, “wouldn't you like to be commissioned one day?” I said, “I don't know.” He said, “why don't you join the ROTC Program.” I joined it. I had four years of ROTC at the University of Detroit. I was commissioned as a second lieutenant and came back as a professor of military science about ten years later and took it over.

But Northwestern, the ROTC program stood out in my mind. I loved the gym program, Spanish, the different clubs and the camaraderie; you formed some real tight relationships over there.

Q Now, you mentioned the clubs at Northwestern. What kind of clubs were you affiliated with there?

A I was in the singing group over there at Northwestern; the Spanish Club. I guess that was really about it. I always wanted to work on the paper, the *Colt*, but I never did that. Of course, I always worked and went to school so that there was not a lot of time. I wanted to play football one time, and I went out for the football team, but I never made the team. I was working at C.F. Smith at the time.

Q What was it about Northwestern that allowed you or inspired you to form these bonds with your classmates?

A Well, we all grew up together. Most of us came through Sampson or Wingert. We got into McMichael together and we suffered there and continued our bonding and our friendships.

Q You say that you suffered at McMichael.

A Well, you know, it is a transition. Adolescence is a time of stress. What is it? high elation, low depression. You get in there and things are so much different. I remember coasting through the halls of McMichael. I guess it is a one year growing up time period. Then you got to Northwestern. Things were a little different and you were more mature.

Q Tell us about the Boy Scouts; were you active with them early-on?

A No, I was never active with the Boy Scouts. We had one little Cub Scout pack that was formed there at St. Cyprians. I went about three weeks, and the Cub leader never showed up again.

When I was professor of military science at the University of Detroit, Joe Weikoff called me down and asked me if I would work with the Boy Scouts in the City of Detroit. I said that I would be glad to. So he said, “we will make you a district chairman.” It will not take much time; just a few hours. I was district chairman of the Springwells District. It took lots of time and lots of work. I learned about the Boy Scouts and I have a lot of respect for those volunteers, the boys and the principles that they instill in the boys.

Q What kind of values would you bring from the West Side growing up on the West Side to the Boy Scouts in your experience with the Boy Scouts?

A Basically the camaraderie, the know how, and the interaction of men. Of course, I had been in the military for fifteen years before I took over the district. I knew the leadership skills that they should adhere to, the morals and things like that. Then there was the business of going out on these maneuvers and the business of campouts, working with the cookouts, working with the parents, working with volunteers, keeping the volunteers in line and keeping them busy, then, identifying leaders in the program. It was very challenging. It was very rewarding. I would say that in the Boy Scouts was a wonderful program.

Q Backing up just a little bit, when you think of Joe Louis, what do you think about him?

A Joe Louis was an idol, of course. Joe Louis saved my life down in Alabama, one time. My brother was there. Whenever you go into a different area, kids want to challenge you. Two little boys were going to challenge me. So these guys were going to challenge me; they were going to jump on me. My brother said, “you know he is from Detroit. Joe Louis is from Detroit.” I thought, “boy you saved my life.” Joe Louis was a hero. He gave us a lot of self-esteem. We had a lot of pride because of Joe Louis. We loved to hear him fight. I tell you that separation business, and that segregation business has a great effect on a kid as he is growing up. It took me years to get over it; it really did. You had to work through that. These kids don't have that problem.

Q What kind of effect did it take on you?

A A feeling of inadequacy and inferiority just because of skin color. When I got into the University of Detroit, there were 9,000 students at the Six Mile Campus and only 25

blacks. When one black left, they put another black in there. Getting into the program was kind of rough. Everybody knew each other. You got into those classes, and you would say, “I can do this kind of work.” Then when you excel, they start to look at you and say, “well, this guy is all right.” They couldn't believe when I got to my senior year. They said, “Felix, you are not from Detroit, are you?” “Yes, this is my home.”

Q So what did it take for you to get over segregation and its ill effects?

A It really took years. You begin to realize that there is nothing any different. You are not any different than anybody else. All you need to do is to put your brainpower to work and realize that you are as good as anyone else. You felt that there is nothing that you cannot do. If you come out in the top of the class, I am looking around and I see of these white faces in here, but I can excell, too. It wasn't because they picked me out, that I was so great. Once you get in there you are just like anybody else. The inferiority gradually leaves you over the years. It takes time; it takes years.

Q Was there anything about growing up and seeing black business owners that allowed you or pushed you to reflect on those days and helped you to pass the whole feeling of inferiority.

A I understand what you are saying. No, I realized that the businessmen were a great inspiration of those neighborhoods. The business of America is business. In order to make some money in America, you have got to go into business. These people were business people. They would work with us young kids and they would train us in the atmosphere of business, to want to excel, to become

business people.

Mr. Campbell of Campbell's Drug Store was one of my big inspirations. He had that drug store there and my godfather, Mr. Simpson, with his business. Business makes this country go around. It was very inspirational.

Q When you were at Northwestern, were you a part of the Recreational League?

A No, I was not.

Q World War II: what do you recall about World War II and growing up on the West Side?

A I remember when World War II broke out on a Sunday afternoon, and I was on crutches. I was out in front of the house and my mother came out of the house crying. My brother was about 17 years old. She was telling us that World War II had started. I was so young. I guess I was about 12 years old when it happened. I realized that my brother would be going to war. During the war, my mother worked at the USO and I was reading about it all the time. I remember that my father and my cousin would sit around all of the time and talk about Mussolini and Hitler, and what was going on in the war. Except for my oldest brother going into the Army, my other brothers went into the Merchant Marines. They traveled all around the country in the Merchant Marines Corps. I remember one time they were in New York and they were about to ship out. They only had openings for cooks on that ship. I said to myself, "those poor people, those guys can't cook, can't even boil water." But they were cooks going to Africa. The war years were really interesting years, yes.

Q The Depression before that, what was that like?

A We were all poor in that neighborhood. We didn't know. The Goodfellows would come at Christmas time and we would all get the same shoes. We would all go down and get the shoes. We would all look forward to the Goodfellow boxes. My father worked at Ford Motor Company, so we always had plenty to eat.

I remember going over to Hartford Memorial Baptist Church over there on Hartford and Cobb. On Wednesday, they would always have bread: welfare bread. Then you would always look forward to the doughnuts and stuff. I would go and stock up,and my brothers would stock up. Our house would be loaded with bread and rolls and things like that on that day.

That was one of the nice things that Hartford did for us. I would walk down the street during that time and everyone would know who was cooking chitterlings, that very aromatic food. Of course, you didn't eat high on the hog, but you always had plenty to eat, and a place to stay and clothes to wear.

Q I am curious what kind of music did you listen to in the home?

A I told you that my mother was a very religious person, so religious music would be playing. We loved the music from the downtown, different places. We listened to all different music. I remember one time my sister was dating Nat King Cole. She came home one day; he came to the house and sat on the piano and played the piano and sang. I said, “God, he doesn't sound good at all.” My other sister wanted to know if she would become his wife. My sister said, “no, I don't think he is as handsome as he might be.” She said the same thing about Martin Luther King, Jr. He

wasn't fast enough for her. That was my sister, Edna.

Q How did she come to meet Nat King Cole? I thought he was from Chicago?

A Well, Nat would come to Detroit. He would come around. He came to the house one time, I know. He met my sister, and they dated for a while there. I remember that my sister was at one of the conventions with Mother King. They had tried to hook her up with Martin Luther, Jr. She met him and was talking to him. Apparently he was a very studious young man. He wasn't fast enough for her, so that didn't work out.

Q You mentioned before you had many siblings growing up.

A Yes.

Q What was that like with so many siblings and how were your parents able to raise so many folks?

A It was tight. We had two downstairs bedrooms and an open area upstairs. In the wintertime you would run up the back steps and it would be three to a bed. Many times, I would be at the foot of the bed and these two guys would be up front and their bare feet would be in my face.

Of course, you took a bath once a week whether you needed it or not on Saturday night. I don't know how those teachers ever stood us. You changed underwear once a week. Most of the kids would take a bath on Saturday night, put on their church clothes on, on Sunday, and wear the same underwear all week and change on the weekend. That was kind of an interesting situation. At the university, we were talking about child care and they were talking about the kids

changing towels every day. We changed a towel once a week whether we needed to or not. You used the same bath towel.

Q The neighborhood has changed over the years. Why did your family move from the West Side?

A We always stayed on the West Side. We never moved.

My mother passed away in '52. My father passed in '74. My sister lived on 28th Street until she recently passed. I still own property on 28th Street.

Q You remain there through your property?

A Oh, yes, yes.

Q The neighborhood did change, particularly in the 50s, it began to change?

A It did; yes. The initial homeowners were passing away or they were moving away. They were bringing in other people. Of course, during the war, people were taking their homes and turning them from one single home into two families. People were going up the backsteps, and getting renters in there. Then gradually a lot of the property over there is rental property, rather than homeowner properties and that changed the dynamics of the neighborhood.

Q How were renters different from the homeowners?

A Because they depend upon the owner to maintain the properties. Many, many renters, if you have a three bedroom property, a woman would move in there with her children and she would raise her family right there, never

move. If it is two bedroom, she may raise one or two kids and stay there. If it is one bedroom, they are in and out all of the time. Some renters are very conscious of their environment and they want to keep it looking very beautiful. Others could care less. That keeps the landlord very busy trying to care for the properties.

Q This might be the last question. What do you tell your children about the West Side?

A I tell them the good things because I have such great memories of the West Side. One of the good things that is happening is that the WestSiders are keeping the dynamics of the old West Side up front. We have the videotapes, the books and things like this. I have very fond memories. I tell them that it was a great place to live and a number of very influential people came out of the West Side.

Q Many people call it a village.

A Yes, it was.

Q How was that?

A It was because everyone looked out for everybody else. If you did something, the mothers and fathers knew you did something and reported it to your family or they would chastise you themselves. It was one great big family. You knew kids from the block and all over the neighborhood. We all knew each other practically, and knew the mothers and fathers. It was wonderful.

Q That is the end of the interview. Thank you.

A Thank you.

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