

Cass Corridor Oral History Project

Detroit, MI

UP002659\_McClain

**Dr. William Martin McClain**

Interviewed by

Daniel McCarthy

December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015

Detroit, Michigan

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Library and Information Science

Kim Schroeder, Instructor

Fall 2015

## Subject Terms:

### **Important Names:**

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Bidigare, Fred  
Canfield West-Wayne Preservation Association  
Canfield West vs. Detroit  
Central Detroit Baptist Church  
Cockrel, Kenneth  
Croxford, Beulah Groehn  
McClain, William Martin 1938-  
West Canfield Historic District  
Willis Show Bar

### **Important Subjects:**

Cass Corridor (Detroit, Michigan)  
Detroit (Michigan)  
Historic Preservation  
Urban Renewal

## Brief Biography

Dr. William Martin McClain was born in 1938 in Georgetown, Texas and attended Rice University in Houston, Texas for his undergraduate degree. Following graduate school at Cambridge University he attended Cambridge on a National Science Foundation Fellowship. He then taught at the University of California, Berkley before moving to Detroit, Michigan following a job offer in the Wayne State University Chemistry Department in 1973. He became active in the West Canfield Historic District as an association member following the purchase of a Victorian era home on West Canfield Street. He was President of the Association during a conflict between the Association and the City of Detroit over the building of new housing projects near the historic district. He retired in 2007.

## Interviewer

Daniel McCarthy

## Abstract

Dr. McClain discusses moving to Detroit in 1973, his perceptions of the city, his experiences living in the Cass Corridor for 42 years, his involvement in the West Canfield Historic District, taking care of a Victorian home, and the politics of Detroit in which he was involved in through the West Canfield Historic District Association.

## Restrictions

None

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Transcription

Cass Corridor Oral History Project

Walter P. Reuther Library

Wayne State University

Detroit, MI

Transcript of interview conducted December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 with:

Dr. William Martin McClain, Detroit, Michigan

By: Daniel McCarthy

[00:00]

McCarthy: Just got my phone on for a backup. This is Dan McCarthy, it is December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015. I'm here interviewing Dr. William Martin McClain and let's get started with talking to you about when you first came to the area. You originally went to Berkley?

McClain: I-yes. After graduate school I went to Cambridge, England on a National Science Foundation Scholarship or Fellowship and I stayed almost two years in Cambridge. From there I went straight to Berkley California. I-In those days you could get a job by just writing a letter (laughs) and so, without ever being interviewed at Berkley I appeared there as a young faculty member. [01:00] And-uh-I started teaching right away in physical chemistry and in-of course we all rotated in to the freshmen program, so they had plenty of professors at Berkley. (laughs) People were actually-felt honored to be asked to teach the freshman. It-it gave them something to do other than research. So-uh-yes I spent a number of years at Berkley and-about seven years. And I did not get tenure there so I was-out on the job market just at a time when the job market was beginning to dry up. I had-you know I was born in 1938 which means that as I approached college age-uh-we had the Sputnik event and everyone was afraid we were going to fall behind the Russians. [02:00] And so-uh-people who wanted to major in science got many-perks in those days. Things that just don't exist anymore and I don't know how I would've ever had my education without some of them. I was a National Carbide Scholar at Rice University. And of course in those days Rice was called Rice Institute and it had no tuition whatsoever.

McCarthy: Wow.

McClain: Tuition was free. (laughs) Just like-uh-just like they want to make it now. Only of course it was on the basis of a-of a-great deal of endowment basically from oil-soaked land in East Texas that Rice owned. And-so I go through my whole undergraduate training at Rice without ever paying a penny of tuition. Just some fees and of course the housing. [03:00] But Union Carbide paid that for me. So basically I got a free college education, and then I went to Cornell University for graduate school. And there again I had a-position as a teaching assistant that paid my way. So-uh-I never really accumulated any debt or any-I mean it was charmed-it was a charmed life in those days. But the charm sort of came to an end about the time I had to leave Berkley. There was-there were no jobs to speak of. Around the country. I wrote fifty or a hundred letters and got very few replies and-um-but I had one good friend here. His name was Ed Lem, he was in the Chemistry Department at Wayne State. And it turned out that one of their faculty members, here, had been murdered. [04:00]

McCarthy: Oh wow.

McClain: Yes he was (laughs)-uh-his name was Livingston. And he was a physical chemistry professor. So-it was-it was a very nasty street crime in his neighborhood that-that killed him. So they-Wayne State was looking for a new physical chemistry professor. Ed Lem knew me and-uh-I was invited to come here for an interview and-So I ended up at Wayne State in 19-I think it was 1973. But you can check that from my CV which-

McCarthy: Yeah you sent me.

McClain: Which you have, uh-huh.

McCarthy: Um, did uh-was it a difficult choice to come here?

McClain: What?

McCarthy: Was it a difficult choice to come to Detroit after that?

McClain: Oh, no not at all. It was the only job offer I had (laughs). It was-and it turned out to be really a very, very fortunate and good choice. I've-uh-Wayne State supported me quite well here and I have no complaints about the department or anything. [05:00] It was not Berkley, but it was not-uh-not bad either.

McCarthy: Did you have any notions of Detroit before you moved here?

McClain: I had been here a few-once before at least when I was just passing through in my car and I remember already Detroit was beginning to decline a little bit. And-uh-this was-this must've been in the late 60's I guess. I remember seeing grass growing in the streets in certain places. But I also remember also visiting the Art Institute and being, you know, extremely impressed with it. I was just a guy in a car with all of his possessions in the backseat travelling through the country. I think I was going home after-after being in Ithaca for a while. I was probably going home for a Thanksgiving vacation or something like that. [06:00] I stopped in

Detroit and so I had some knowledge of what Detroit was. It was-uh-you know, a huge city but people were predicting it would decline (laughs) so. Little did they know. (laughs)

McCarthy: So, did you have any thoughts about the murder that happened before you moved here?

McClain: Well-I-thought I would try to avoid that. (laughs) Yea it-uh-Livingston had gotten into a neighborhood feud with some kids that were very-aggressive. They stole his TV set four or five times. Finally he bolted the TV set to the floor so they couldn't lit it. And when they had-discovered that they came to his door, rang the doorbell, and he answered the door and somebody thrust a knife into him. [07:00]

McCarthy: Oh wow.

McClain: Just-as he opened the door. So I-I thought it was a good idea to not get into neighborhood feuds. (laughs)

McCarthy: Yeah (laughs)

McClain: Yeah.

McCarthy: Did you move right to the Cass Corridor, when you moved here?

McClain: No. We lived in Pleasant Ridge for a year. We lived-uh-John Oliver was on sabbatical and we lived in his house.

McCarthy: Alright.

McClain: Professor John Oliver. Later Dean.

McCarthy: And-uh-was it during that time you were looking for houses?

McClain: Yes. We-we knew we didn't want to stay in Pleasant Ridge and I also knew that I would prefer to walk to work. So we were quite amazed to find the West Canfield Historic District which was-in-not in good shape but it had some activity. [08:00] There was a lady who was sort of the sparkplug of the-the-uh-Historic District. Her name was Beulah Groehn G-R-O-E-H-N. And-she was very-she was on the phone all day long every day. Talking to city council, or the police, or the fire department, or the lighting department, or-whomever needed to work on Canfield Street. And through her activity Canfield really began to look pretty attractive. As-at least as a-as a future possibility. And I'm pleased to say that everything that she was trying to work for has pretty much come to pass. It's-uh-just in the last few years, you know, we've had this amazing renaissance of entrepreneurial investment in the neighborhood. [09:00] But the first real investment in this part of town was really at Canfield Street. They were-we were not the only people who bought a house, and had enough money to take a house that was basically scheduled for the bulldozer and-uh-put it back into livable condition. So we-we bought the house for-an incredible house and property for an incredibly low price. The whole-from this large block with three buildings on it we paid \$25,000. And-uh-we sort of bought-with my father's help-we just bought out the land contracts and owned it outright. Which was-I think-really good advice from my father, who was a lawyer who didn't like land contracts at all. (laughs) [10:00] So we did own the property outright and we put-uh-what we thought was an enormous amount of money back into it maybe-probably another \$25,000. (laughs) Getting the house livable and putting in new windows, making it heatable again basically. It was-the way we found it was not heatable and there were-yes-the first time I saw this house, there was a small river of water running down the front stairs from the radiator that had frozen and broken upstairs.

McCarthy: Oh wow.

McClain: And I don't know why I didn't turn around and walk out but-I guess it was because we saw some beautiful wood and we liked the design of the house. And it looked if we fixed that radiator we wouldn't (laughs) we wouldn't have the river down-the trickle of water down the-stairs anymore. And so all of that came to pass. [11:00] We-we-fixed that radiator the very first thing of course, and then the roof, and then the windows, and made it livable. At least for us. We-we had-uh-we had a dog and two young daughters and the dog wouldn't come in the house

unless we built a fire. (laughs) He knew it was cold in there-yea so. Within a year or two we were living reasonably comfortable in that-comfortably in that-house.

McCarthy: How long had it been abandoned before you bought it? Do you know?

McClain: At least a year. The-When we bought it, it had been a kind of a flop house for vagrants, basically. We moved out about twelve mattresses that were on the floor, and three pool tables. (laughs) [12:00]

McCarthy: Oh wow! (laughs) Sounds like it must've been a lot of work.

McClain: So it was-it was-uh-and a whole bunch of folding chairs because the house had been used as-um-as a church. It had belonged to the Central Detroit Baptist Church. And the house became the minister's house and they held-it has large rooms downstairs. At first the just had enough folding chairs that they held their services downstairs, but it soon outgrew that. And they built a third structure behind the house. A church. However it looks like a concrete block warehouse. It doesn't have a steeple or anything like that. The one thing it had was a-a pool in the middle of the front floor. Of the front of it. Where you could fill it with water and do full-dip immersion Baptist baptisms. [13:00] (laughs) And that-then that was-there was, you know, a piece of-there was some kind of covering for that which-so you didn't see it when it wasn't in use. But when we saw it, it was half-filled with water. Most disgusting stuff in it, floating around, you know. So that was one of the things we had to do was pump it out and get it dry.

McCarthy: Did you keep the out-building up?

McClain: Yes, we did. For a time. It was in fairly good shape, it was in much better shape than the house when we first bought it. And then aside from the church, which was in the middle of the backyard, the very back of the backyard there was a carriage house of historic-of historic style. Which had originally been the carriage house for the people who lived in the front house there. [14:00] So it had room-it was a stable for at least two horses-originally. When we saw it, it had been totally gutted and so-actually we have not done anything with the carriage house. And now it's badly in need of-of rescue itself. But we will probably do that at some point in the next two or three years, but. It-it's a nice space and it could eventually be a rentable back-building. A

little backhouse for somebody. Garage below and a second-floor apartment above. So-If you put money into it you could make it into a probably profitable rental unit. Especially with all the new stuff around here.

McCarthy: Yea.

McClain: We've had several offers for it lately and-but we're just not interested in selling-dividing the property and selling it off. [15:00]

McCarthy: Yea. How would you characterize Cass Corridor when you first moved in?

McClain: Oh it was rough. We didn't really know this until we had already bought the house, but there was a red-light district right around the corner from Canfield Street (laughs) on Third Avenue. Yes. There were several bars that were hooker bars for sure. And then others where-uh-people-hookers had staked out various corners that they called their own and that they worked for traffic that came by. It was not uncommon to see large trucks parked around the corner on-uh-not on Cass but on Third Avenue with their motors running and all locked up. The truck drivers knew about this district all across the country and-they would come leave their motors running so it wouldn't show-wouldn't show that they had turned the car off-turned the truck off. [16:00] But they would go in for a quick one in either Anderson's Gardens or the Willis Show Bar or someplace like that. And of course Mrs. Groehn was a very upstanding lady. (laughs) And did not at all approve of-of these uses, and in fact they were quite dangerous and quite bad for- for Canfield Street. There was a lot of gunfire down there. The first year that we live in our house there were actually three murders on the sidewalk in front of our house.

McCarthy: Wow.

McClain: It-they were all connected with the underworld of these prostitute things. Somehow we kind of didn't feel threatened by it because we weren't pimps. [17:00] (laughs) And we weren't-we weren't trying to run some sort of scam over there. But the pimps did kill each other and-uh-so we-The first year that we lived there, there were three occasions in the evening when we-all the new neighbors, quite-quite a cohesive group in those days, would come out after a murder and wash the blood off the sidewalk and talk to the police about what we'd seen, and all that sort

of thing. It was-but there were actually three on that sidewalk in that-in the first year. After that it got a lot better and eventually Mrs. Groehn's constant pressure finally induced this guy to give up. The guy who owned Anderson's Gardens. [18:00] So one Christmas day he called up from Florida where he lived, to the Glorious Freedom Mission and he told them that he was donating Anderson's Gardens to the Glorious Freedom Mission and they could use it for whatever they wanted. And in fact they made a Sunday school out of it! (laughs)

McCarthy: (laughs) That's a 180!

McClain: Yea 180! (laughs) So after he gave up there was an official Wayne County Prosecutor padlock on the other one, the Willis Show Bar. And it lasted a year and they never really recovered from that they-so between Anderson's Gardens being donated as a Sunday school and the Willis Show Bar being padlocked and sort of declining to almost to nothing the prostitute problem was over actually. [19:00]

McCarthy: Yea?

McClain: And-I won't say that all the prostitutes suddenly disappeared but they moved away from this area, they went farther down the street or in fact they went out to Eight Mile Road. And so the situation eased up quite a lot. It was-it was not just individual prostitutes either. It was quite organized. They were-they were on a rotating schedule that took them to one city after another, under the care of these people who were doing human trafficking actually. So when it came time for the prostitutes to come to work a great big limousine would pull up from somewhere in the suburbs and all the girls would get out and go to work. And then they would go back again in the evening. So they-they didn't-they weren't really free. They were not able to escape, many of them. And of course there was the constant threat of violence to them. [20:00] One was murdered and-um-this was after we had already started a nursery school for some of our children and some of the other Wayne State children over in the-the nursery school met over in the project across the freeway. Not the Brewster but-I'm sorry I'm blocking on the name of it right not. It'll come to me. The first floor of one of those huge apartment buildings had been changed into a nursery school. It was run partly by Wayne State University and partly by the city and it had faculty from the Wayne State School of Education. So many of the young faculty members in the Chemistry Department. There were in fact five families that had young children. [21:00] We made use of that thing so we-our children could walk, with escort, down the block, across the freeway bridge and into the Brewster-into the project there, where they would go to

nursery school. And my wife would come back in the afternoon and pick them up and walk them home again. So it was all really pretty convenient.

McCarthy: Yea.

McClain: But the reason I got started on this was because of the murder. One winter-at the end of the winter the snow and ice was beginning to melt and the parking lot at the nursery school wasn't draining properly. It was actually ankle-deep in water. And-uh-so one of our mothers was actually the wife of the general council for Detroit. [22:00] She had some pull with the city and with this ankle-deep water she-and many-many other people, but also she, complained about it and on her complaint they acted. (laughs) They sent out a crew to find out what was blocking the drain. And so they're-digging away there, trying to open the drain and-a little bit later they're reeling back in horror because what they found blocking the drain was the body of a prostitute who had been murdered and stuffed in that drain sometime during the winter. And um-so the parking lot was cleared and all was, well-now I won't say all was well again but-uh-that was the kind of thing that could happen in those days around here. It did happen. [23:00] Another time-uh-there was a child who was murdered and thrown into the dumpster behind-in the alley behind our house.

McCarthy: Wow.

McClain: The first thing we know about it is that our children came to us and said, "Mommy! Mommy! Can I go see the body in the alley?" (laughs) And I was, you know horrified. In fact there was a child that had been-not a-or perhaps a young adolescent-anyway a small person-had been murdered and put into a black garbage bag and was in the dumpster in the alley with feet sticking out. I remember seeing vividly, it was-uh-just amazing. And it was a person who had disappeared at the Stone Pool, last known-in those days we had a neighborhood swimming pool called the Stone Pool. [24:00] And she-I think as I recall, she was abducted or went missing from the Stone Pool and then was found a few days later with her feet sticking out of this garbage bag.

McCarthy: Wow.

McClain: Yea, so. It was rough. Yea.

McCarthy: When did you get involved in the West Canfield Historic District?

McClain: When we bought the house. And it-or even before because we were lobbied rather heavily by Mrs. Groehn (laughs) to buy this house which-uh-actually didn't belong to her but to a friend of hers named Margo-something-I'll have to look that up. Anyways she was the Owner of Record of our house. She didn't own it outright but she had a land contract on it. And she had put some of her money into it to keep it from being bulldozed. [25:00]

McCarthy: OK.

McClain: So it-because it was scheduled for demolition and Beulah got these houses. You know, she really saved them from the bulldozer. There were lots of beautiful houses being torn down in Detroit they didn't-they didn't really think anything of tearing down a house with beautiful woodwork. One of the land managers of the City of Detroit was famous for saying, "There's no property in Detroit which is worth-there's no-there's no building in Detroit that is worth more than the land under it cleared. With one exception" And that exception is the DIA. (laughs) Other than that, he said every piece of land in Detroit was worth more cleared than with anything on it.

McCarthy: Wow.

McClain: Yea that was the city. [26:00]

McCarthy: That's a grim outlook. (laughs)

McClain: That was the city's attitude for renewable in those days.

McCarthy: Was it already an official Historic District when you moved in?

McClain: Yes.

McCarthy: Ok.

McClain: Mrs. Groehn had created that, yea.

McCarthy: I-I was reading a few of her papers at the Reuther before this and had saw that you had become President of the Association.

McClain: Yes, at one point I think everybody in-everybody on the block has served as president. My turn came about 1975, I guess. We were just starting a big landscape project. Canfield Street had been a widened street. It was one of the main cross streets in Detroit until the freeways were built. The freeways cut Canfield Street in two, and it suddenly became nothing because there was no bridge at the end of Canfield Street. [27:00] All the-all the traffic moved up to Forrest or somewhere up there. Or maybe down to Mack or something. Anyway, the-um-what were we talking about?

McCarthy: Um you becoming President of the-

McClain: Oh yes, right, right, right. It was the street was one hundred feet wide-um-with four lanes on it. And there was no reason for that anymore because it was really not a very well-trafficked street at all. So Mrs. Groehn had a-plans drawn up by some friendly architects who were interested in doing this kind of thing. Fred Bidigare was his name, I should mention it. He put a lot of time in on this project and made the basic design for it. [28:00] The design was to make the street narrow again so that it would be the original width that it was when the houses were first built. And that-which meant there were two rows of trees on either side of the street and a big, broad sidewalk going all the way down the middle-down the middle of each side. In the front of each side I should say. And-um-then there was also a plan to bring in the cobblestones that had been paving Atwater Street, downtown, which had been dug up by the members of West Canfield Society-Association-at the time that the RenCen was built. [29:00] Atwater Street-So all these paving stones that are now on Canfield were originally under the RenCen.

McCarthy: Oh wow!

McClain: Or right under where the RenCen is now. And-uh-Ford Motor Company gave us some machinery and some trucks, and with the labor from West Canfield-this is before I lived there-with labor from West Canfield these-this great pile of granite paving stones was loaded onto these trucks and carried to Fort Wayne where it was-they gave us the land to-uh-store these paving bricks temporarily so they said. (laughs) it turned out to be about ten years while we rounded up the money to install them on Canfield Street. [30:00] And eventually that did happen, and I happened to be president of the Association at the time that all that stuff was going on. So we had-we had about a million dollars of federal grant money that was eventually spent on Canfield Street to create the streetscape we now have. It didn't all come at once. It started out like with \$300,000 and everybody knew that wasn't going to be enough, but never mind. We would just-when we ran out of money the plan was we would go to the city council and ask them for another block grant, and so forth and so on. Well, so-In the end I had to be the spokesman for this and I was the one who went down and sat with the city council and told them about all the cost overruns and how much money we thought it would now cost, and could they find the money, and so forth and so on. [31:00] That-uh-Mrs. Grohen knew all the city council members personally and had a good friend on the council, by the way. Her name-she was a Wayne State professor, Maryann Mahaffey. And Mrs. Mahaffey was always there to-uh-try and put things forwards for us and she did a very excellent job.

McCarthy: Were you interested in historic preservation before you moved here?

McClain: Not particularly, no. We-Where we were, there really wasn't much historic preservation. (laughs) We were in California, everything was reasonably new.

McCarthy: Interesting. I saw a lot about Canfield West versus Detroit, about a court case with that. [32:00]

McClain: Canfield West and?

McCarthy: Detroit about a projects going up?

McClain: Oh! Yes. There-We were very influential in-in improving the design of the public housing that was going up adjacent to Canfield Street. Because we are a historic district we had the legal right to review any plans for anything that was going to be put up near us. At one point, the Citizen's District Council voted to put up a new-um-fifteen or twenty-story high-rise at the end of our street which would be-which would've been just the exactly the same design as the ones that were across the street, across the freeway. [33:00] These were already beginning to deteriorate so badly that-um-that actually many of them were demolished. There-you know, these huge collapses with dynamite and everything. These-they were already being torn down across the freeway from us, and now the Citizen's District Council wanted to build a new one right at the end of Canfield Street. So we used our right of review to object to this. And we didn't just object we also, again got our friendly architect Fred Bidigare and his associates to draw up a plan for-for another type of city housing which was down at the end of the block. And eventually this plan, although it was-not under-not under our name for it. [34:00] Because, of course, they wouldn't ever admit that they'd taken advice from us on anything. But the Citizen's District Council was quite hostile to us, as a matter of fact. They were-um-they considered us to be gentrifiers and interlopers and they didn't like the idea that blacks were going to lose political control of the city. They were very proud of the fact that they had elected Coleman Young. And there's lots to say about that too, but-um-Anyway there was a lot of pushback to any kind of political moves that we wanted to make. But eventually reason won out in this case, and they agreed to not build a high-rise-another high-rise-at the end of the block. But instead to have low-rise buildings that actually would look compatible with the historic district. [35:00] And my wife's uncle, Irving Bluestone, was at that time vice-president of the United Auto Workers for-and he was in charge of General Motors. So he was really a big guy in the city. He also sat on the Michigan Housing Commission. And he was the one who actually got the housing commission to increase the amount of money that they were allotting to this new Citizen's District Council project. They increased the money by enough so that they were able to buy some more attractive features of this-of this building. They had nice overhanging eaves, and good doors, and you know a few things that made it-it wasn't huge-but it made it look a lot better than it would have otherwise. [36:00] And we've been living reasonably compatibility with this public housing down there. It's-there's always been the occasional dope house down there, or something like that. But management is pretty good about cracking down when they find out about it. So it has not-it has not been a bad arrangement at all. We live-we live quite happily with them.

McCarthy: Is there any animosity towards the gentrification that continued after that?

McClain: Uh, yes it did. I may be going back a little before the-um-the actual construction of the Harmey Place-whatever it's called, I forget now. [37:00] One of the times I had to appear before the city council there was a council member named Kenny Cockrel who is-he has a son named Kenny Cockrel who may be on the council now, or recently, but he was very different from his son. He was-um-he was in the Black Panthers. And was extreme-he had the ability to just talk you into a mush of nothing. His-his mouth would just keep going, and keep going, and keep going. He was one of those people who could-you know you see it on television all the time now.

McCarthy: Yea.

McClain: But in those-well I don't know, he was the first person I ever knew in person who could just keep talking and run you down until you couldn't answer anything more. [38:00] And he was hostile to us. So-uh-when I appeared before the city council to ask for more money, he started questioning me and he-he asked, "Had we ever put any of our own money in to this project?" And I answered "Yes". Not only the houses, which were-was all private investment, but also we had commissioned the casting of a-of a horse fountain which was to be installed on the block in front of-actually in front of Mrs. Grohen's house is where it ended up. But it was a wonderful piece of work. We collaborated with the Detroit Historical Museum and found a model in the museum of a cast iron horse fountain. [39:00] It was missing its bowl on the top, but otherwise it was a very nice piece of work. And we commissioned the Wayne State Sculpture Department, or foundry. In those days, Wayne State had a sculpture foundry.

McCarthy: Oh Wow!

McClain: Where they could do bronze castings. They couldn't do iron castings, but they did bronze castings.

McCarthy: That's really cool!

McClain: And so we had a replica of this iron horse fountain made, in bronze, and the guy who did the casting also created a bowl for it that went very well with it. So he-he created the bowl, and put it on, and we had this-uh-very beautiful bronze horse fountain. We asked the city water-the city to hook it up to the water so that it would run continuously. [40:00] And it did. It had a-it

didn't use much water. It was about-like a drinking fountain, but the water ran continuously and the bowl-kept the bowl filled with fresh water, then went down the drain at one of the sides. And in those days, the Detroit Police Department actually had horse-mounted officers. And the stable was somewhere up here near the New Center, but the horses worked downtown mostly. So every day there were horses that came by, and they soon found out about our horse fountain. And the horses liked to go there and take a drink, and the officers often let them. And so for a few years we had, really a working horse fountain that served a purpose. [41:00] Eventually the water got disconnected. I-it was-it wasn't intentional but we just let it happen because there was some new construction or something that had to be done, and the water dried up. So the horse fountain is still there and it's used now as a flower pot. But it was-it was, for quite a few years, a working horse fountain that actually horses came and drank out of.

McCarthy: You were saying the council was asking you about your private investments?

McClain: Yes, well they were-they were asking us if we had put any private investment into it. So I answered "Yes, we've-we've put up this horse fountain." And that was not the end of it. Um, he was-uh-he was very abusive to me. [42:00] I-well I-I can't even remember exactly what it was that made me so angry with him but, he was-he was calling us gentrifiers and he was accusing us of throwing old black grandmothers out in the snow, and all the usual things that came up that were really totally groundless. I don't think there was a single house on Canfield Street that was-that had anyone living in it when it was bought by the 'so-called' gentrifiers, the people who live there now. They had all been abandoned. So we were not responsible for throwing anybody out. This whole thing came up again and again. And so-After this happened I had a friend who was a patent lawyer here in town, and he reminded-or he told me about something that had happened that he remembered. [43:00] That-uh-had disappeared from public view. It was an incident that occurred on the night of-on election night the first time Kenny Cockrel ever stood for election in this city. He was still a Black Panther at that time. And it happened at a place called the Decanter Bar down on Cass Avenue. It was-everybody was drinking and having a time there on election night, you know waiting for the results and everything. For some reason, Kenny Cockrel stood up in the back of the bar and he had a pistol. And he fired several shots into the ceiling, and of course everybody hit the floor. [44:00] And then he took his gun he lowered it, and he fired one shot level, across the bar from the back to the front. I'm sure he thought he was firing at a solid wall. But he wasn't. He was firing at a window that had been painted black, and his shot went all the way across the bar, through the window, across the sidewalk, across the street, and it just happened that on the other side of the street there was a man walking along carrying a baby in his arms. And this shot hit the baby.

McCarthy: Wow.

McClain: Uh, it was fully reported in the Detroit Free Press the next day, along with election results and all that sort of the stuff. And of course Cockrel wasn't elected at that time. [45:00] But nevertheless he had, with his Panther-inspired shooting, he had actually shot a baby. So-uh-I went into the archives and I looked up this article to make sure it was there, and it was. I got a copy of it and the next time-So the city was holding open hearings on-lighting, or something like that, and I went to this open hearing loaded for bear. I had this article in my pocket. And so when it came time for my three minutes-little speech, I stood up and I-I told the story of how Kenny Cockrel had shot the baby on election night. No one on the city council was aware of this, at the time I told the story. [46:00] I remember Erma Henderson hunching over with her jaw dropped, and her mouth wide open (laughs) listening to this story. Because Kenny Cockrel had been dominating the city council with his motor mouth. He was able to get-he would turn on them just as he would turn on anybody. And so-um-after I had finished this story, which I somehow hooked in with the lighting problem (laughs), it was time for him to talk. And for the first time in anybody's memory, he was speechless. He really didn't like this. So he-all he said was, "Mr. McClain, I have never been convicted of any crime." And I said to him, "Well I'm sure you haven't." [47:00] I said, "After all, evasion of the law is your specialty." And everybody knew what I was talking about because he had gotten a number of famous criminals off from their convictions. He was-that was his basic thing that he could do. I said "I'm sure you weren't convicted. That what you can do for your clients, I'm sure you can also do for yourself." (laughs) But I-I did say "Evasion of the law is your specialty." Well, it took him a while to react, but after this meeting broke up, there was a little barrier-a little fence between the city council and the public. And one of the recorders from the Free Press went up to this little barrier and started asking him questions about it. [48:00] And he was so enraged that he climbed up on the fence and was about to come down on that officer-on that reporter when the security men for the city council grabbed him, and carried him bodily-not on his feet, but carried him-back behind the scenes and got him to calm down.

McCarthy: Wow!

McClain: He was-and then-yea. So that was the end of that day. He wanted to renew the debate. He-uh-he was-after a short time I received an invitation from somebody on his side to come and debate him about this matter. I wanted to do it, but Beulah and my other people-on Canfield Street-said, "Are you crazy? You don't walk into a lion's den, you know, when he's prepared for what-you know you're going to say." So-I never-we dropped it at that. [49:00] It was-at least the city council knew that he had this dark secret in his past and they all heard it. He didn't last long

after that. He was- I won't say this contributed to his death but he did-he was so-such a hyper, type-A person that it was only about a year or two before he died of a heart attack. And his wife, who was a reasonably good person, and his son sort of carried on the Cockrel name and hardly anybody remembers what Kenny-what the old Kenny Cockrel was. They remember the new Kenny Cockrel, who was a very different person. And-uh-but nevertheless that was-that was what Canfield Street did to the Black Panthers (laughs) in those days.

McCarthy: Were you involved with any other preservation organizations in the city?

McClain: No, not really.

McCarthy: OK.

McClain: No, we just-just where we lived.

McCarthy: [50:00] Because I saw some other things about like the Concerned Citizens of Cass Corridor, and other groups like that.

McClain: Well, there was that, yes. We cooperated with them. Many of our members went to their meetings and reported back to us what they were doing, and-uh-yes, I went a number of times to that. But-yes I had forgotten about that. Concerned Citizens of the Cass Corridor, right. Yea. It was basically an organization that tried to keep the police informed of what was going on. And the police were reasonably helpful in those days.

McCarthy: How would you contrast the Cass Corridor of the 1970s versus today?

McClain: Well. It was possible to see a bright future in the old days because of its location. [51:00] And because there was a lot of real estate which-a lot of big buildings I should say. Which were not going to be torn down. And in fact, very slowly all of that did come true. People want to live here now because it is close to the downtown, because there's-uh-these big building

have now been changed into enterprises of various kinds. Lots of new restaurants, lots of-even some manufacturing, some sales from-for big organizations. So, yes I think it was possible to see it, but it sure did take a long time from the-the mid-70s to, I would say early 2000s for all of that to come true.

McCarthy: What do you think of the new Midtown moniker on the area? [52:00]

McClain: Oh, well-uh-yes it's the thought police will arrest you if you refer to it as the Cass Corridor anymore (laughs) so I-I'm happy. Cass Corridor, I guess, was a-what you saw a pejorative term, it became a pejorative term. Because it had been so far down, and so it's I think it's a good public relations thing to call it Midtown. So I cooperate.

McCarthy: Yea. (laughs) Is there anything else you wanted to touch on?

McClain: Um, well it's just that you learn a lot by taking on an old house. [53:00] We had to learn how to do ornamental plastering, for instance, which is not easy. But a lot of ornamental plaster in our house was in terrible shape and in those days we had the energy and the time-I don't know where we go it-to learn to do some of that over. So that although our plastering was not nearly as good as the professionals that had done the original, it was good enough that it didn't stand out horribly. And so as we gradually repainted and took the old green paint off of everything. Yes the Central Baptist Church that owned our house before us had painted everything green. Including the mahogany woodwork.

McCarthy: Oh wow.

McClain: SO it-uh-One of the few nice things our house gave us was that when we started taking this paint off there was-there was not plaster underneath, there was mahogany (laughs)

McCarthy: (laughs) Perfect!

McClain: And it was (laughs) so we managed to make it back to the way it was about 1913 I guess. [54:00] The house was built in 1879, and it was a very plain house, nothing fancy about it at all. About 1913 some new people took it over and they are the ones who installed the mahogany woodwork and made it look nice, and the nice fireplaces, and the stuff like that. So we've-we don't try to sell our house or we don't try to represent it as a Victorian house, it's really not anymore. As a Victorian house it was very plain, but it's an Edwardian house I think you would have to say now. The interior is Edwardian rather than Victorian.

McCarthy: Ok. Well thank you for coming down and talking with me about this.

McClain: Yea, well.

McCarthy: It's been very interesting.

McClain: Yes, well it's been an interesting life (laughs) Yes.

[55:04]