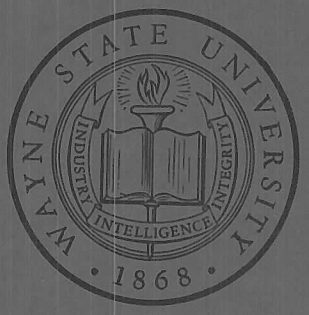
Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs

ORAL INTERVIEW

BIRNEY W. SMITH

JIM KEENEY and ROBERTA
McBRIDE, INTERVIEWERS
JUNE 15, 1969



Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

TRANSCRIPTION

OF

INTERVIEW WITH BIRNEY W. SMITH

DATE: June 15, 1969

INTERVIEWERS: Mr. Jim Keeney and Roberta McBride are interviewing Bernie Smith in his home in Brighton Gardens.

M: Mr. Smith has told us in conversation that he came to Detroit in the year 1898 from Bay City, Michigan. We're asking him to tell us his experiences, particularly as they would relate to the changing pattern of black and white relationships. And, Mr. Keeney is going to ask him particular questions as we go along in reference to his own field of interest. We'll go back to the year 1898, Mr. Smith.

S: Well, as far as the relationships were concerned, there was no difficulty in the relationship. In Bay City I lived in what we called a very substantial neighborhood; professional and business people lived there. And, right at that time, the substantial businessmen lived right in the same neighborhood and my friendships with the children there were very pleasant. I had no feeling of any difference in people. And, when I came to Detroit, that was more or less the pattern when I went to high school here. And, in Detroit, for instance, in our graduating class there was just one colored girl and myself in the graduating class of Central High School. I graduated from high school in January, 1904. So, the neighborhood relationship was very good. The neighbors were friendly and there was perfect harmony as far as the neighborhood was concerned where we lived. There was a combination of mostly Germans, some Jewish merchants and storekeepers. But, there was a predominance of German families there.

K: What street was this on?

S: This was on what was know as St. Antoine street, which it is now, by the

way; it was just an ordinary neighborhood of nice cottages and well-kept homes, and a very friendly atmosphere in the neighborhood, no friction whatsoever.

M: Were you free to live anywhere in the city, if you would have cared to?

S: Yes. As far as I could remember back, we lived on Antoine. Then, we finally... My father bought a house on Brush right back of what is now Grace Hospital. And...

M: What was your father's profession?

S: He was in the coal business. He went into the coal business; he didn't have a profession. He had a coal yard here. He came down and bought in a business when we moved from Bay City. In Bay City he had had several different jobs: railroading and he had charge of an office building there at one time. And, he also conducted a barber shop down in the business district of Bay City. So, his contacts were very pleasant, all the businessmen down there. When he came to Detroit, he came to Detroit to go into the coal business. He had an opportunity to buy a coal yard here. And, he conducted a coal business at the corner of what is Brady and St. Antoine street across from the Lincoln School. And, there began a coal famine and he... And he was really crowded out of the business.

M: Have anything to do with race at the time?

S: No, no, no. There wasn't any. Race didn't enter into this program at all. The difficulty in race started from... The difficulties in race relations started when they were importing colored people from the South for factory work, that's when the difficulty in the area began. However, about 1916 when the Urban League was established, it started before that,

but they felt the impact of it here when the Urban League was established in, I think 1916, with Forrester Washington.

K: Before we get to 1916, Forrester Washington mentions that in the 1890's there was a movement among the wealthy whites to no longer have Negro domestics but have just white domestics.

S: In the 1890's?

K: In the 1890's.

S: That I don't know about.

K: And a group of men, prominent Negroes in the town, got together a committee, pre-dating the Urban League in a way, trying to get industries to hire Negroes. The only break, he maintains, that they got was from the Detroit Streetcar-Railroad. That is, they started hiring some Negroes at this time.

S: Motormen?

K: Yes. He maintains this in a very short history he wrote for the study he did; that was in the 90's... He couples this incident with the time when, I've forgotten the man's name, but Ben Pelham's brother-in-law wasn't served in a restauraunt downtown...

S: Will Ferguson...

K: Yes, that's it. And, this is the time when there seemed to be a beginning of segregation. There was an attempt in the state legislature also to outlaw miscegenation. This apparently was defeated. But...

S: Well, now you have some information that I don't have. I never knew about it. I do remember the Will Ferguson case when he sued, I think, J. L. Hudson, wasn't it?

K: Geis' restaurant, wasn't it? G-E-I-S.

S: G-Geis' restaurant. I remember the incident.

K: You do?

S: Yes. But, that wasn't into it before the 1890's. You were talking about in a... At the turn of the century.

K: All right, about 1900.

S: Yes, you're in the early 1900's. But, I never knew about that movement of not hiring colored people as domestics. Where did that movement start, among white people?

K: Among white people... And, I checked--looked up other sources. For instance, DuBois, W. E. B. DuBois did a study of Philadelphia and he maintains that this movement had occured also in Philadelphia to some extent. I just wondered what people thought of it.

M: Now, what employment did you look to when you came out of high school?

S: Well, I just sort of jobbed around until I... I took the civil service examination, went into the post office in 1907.

M: Now, could you have chosen among a number of other jobs? Were there plenty of employment opportunities?

S: Well, of course, back in those days, railroading... You take the people that had comfortable homes here, were either working in hotels as waiters or railroads, and janitor jobs and that sort of work, and some of them, one or two political jobs. I think, there was a case of a deputy sheriff and there were police officers and the street railway, the Detroit United Railway, where they had motormen and some conductors and, more or less, that type of work. But, totally friendly attitude. I don't remember

this stuff you're bringing up about people refusing to hire colored domestics. I wish I could have read some of that stuff, about that. Of course, I knew Forrester Washington when he first came here. Then, I was one of the first members of the Urban League Board. I served on that first board with Forrester Washington before John Dancy came here. But, I know in John Dancy's survey of that period, it seems to indicate that there was a great problem here. And, he came to settle it. But, the big problem was the influx of Southern colored people. Previous to that time, we had no friction here in Detroit. We went about our business and the neighbors had a friendly attitude. What created the problem was this industrial revolution.

K: What about the poor Negroes in Detroit? I get a picture, generally from what you say and what other people have said, that the middle class Negro didn't have any problems really as to where he wanted to live.

S: They didn't. They bought places wherever they wanted to live. It stretched, say from, well quite a number down around Macomb Street and Monroe Avenue and down through that area and clear up around Canfield. It was quite a stretch there, good homes there on Canfield and St. Antoine. It was what you'd call a very nice medium class, middle class homes because there were so many home owners. And, men working on the railroad and in the hotels; all the hotels were manned by colored waiters. And, they had barber shops downtown. And, in the city, they used to have barber shops, all colored barbers down on Griswold street and in the Hammond Building down there. They had opportunities and they were eventually crowded out of that. That was their field at one time.

K: Yes. This... What about trades like the building trades? You would feel there was no crowding out until after 1916?

S: Well, they weren't in the building trades much.

K: Much?

S: No. They had no recognition as a union then. Even in the foundries, now, they were used as strike breakers. There was a group us as strike breakers in the foundries.

K: This was before 1916 that you said that there was use of Negroes as strike breakers?

S: As strike breakers, yes.

K: And, these were the people that lived in what they use to call "Black Bottoms?"

S: Well, they lived down there, yes. They called it "Black Bottom," but I don't know if that really described it.

M: Now, Ford had his Highland Park plant by then, didn't he? Was he employing Negroes in the foundries there?

S: Yes. He had the Highland Park plant. I can't just date that. During...

K: About 1912.

S: Yes, During that period, because I was carring mail. And, I recall that when this $5 a day business came out, I was a mail carrier at the time.

K: Did you know Mayor Smith?

S: John Smith?

K: John Smith.

S: I just knew him as a mayor; I didn't know him intimately. I had contacted him at political meetings and like that. But, I wasn't an intimate friend.

K: He was a postmaster, wasn't he, at one time?

S: Yes, he was a postmaster at one time. There were certain limitations even in the civil service. I had to take two examinations before I got in there.

K: Why?

S: Because it was a sort of political thing and they would only appoint one colored person a year in their examinations.

M: That was just kind of an understood policy?

S: That was an understood policy.

K: Now, did Smith introduce that policy?

S: No. That was even before he went in there.

K: Because there's some talk of the fact that he helped Negroes get into the post office or had done more than any other white politican.

S: Now, I don't know.

K: And, this is where the source of his always having, when he ran for mayor, always being able to bet on the Negro vote. This...

S: I don't know whether Homer Warren was postmaster when I went in there and that was before Smith. And, he was the one that saw that I got appointed. And, I took the second examination. But, there was a distinct understanding that they would appoint only one colored a year. I mean, from each examination list because I headed the list for several months. And, then when they eliminated that list and set up a new list, then I got the job.

M: And, you had to be fairly active and well known in Republican politics, I presume to be appointed?

S: Yes, Republican politics somewhat dominated the politics here. Colored Democrats were an oddity.

K: Sort of like Vermont where I come from.

S: Yes.

K: Was Dr. Ames active at this time?

S: Dr. Ames was very active in politics. Yes.

K: When.. Was he active back in 1907 or did he come later in the 1900's?

S: No, he came here earlier that that. Dr. Ames came here in the... He came here back in the 1890's because he lived across from us when we came here.

K: Yes. He was born in 1864 in New Orleans. That's how... So, it would stand to reason...

S: He attended Lincoln University and then the Medical school.

K: Howard, wasn't it?

S: I guess Howard. Yes. But, he was very active in politics. He was a protege of Dr. Keifer who was head of the medical society, medics. And, Dr. Ames was a very active man, a very brillant man, a good speaker and very active in politics.

K: He was in the Legislature, I understand.

S: Yes.

M: Now, you're asking about poor Negroes; I'm sure there must have been some, just as there must have been poor whites.

S: Well, I don't remember them as slum dwellers. Now, that might have existed. But, there were naturally poor anything, white and colored in places. But, I don't know that they created a problem that I can recall.

K: Well, Forrester Washington wrote that they had quite a problem among themselves that they called them the "submerged tenth." Of course, I'd like to get into this, what you said just a minute ago about John Dancy feeling that there was a problem here. But, the problem really came when he came, although he wasn't the one that brought it.

S: It was during that period...

K: Yes.

S: When the first World War--well, you could say the problem started from the first World War in 1914. And the influx was the big problem. That was the problem that came up; they were organizing the Urban League to meet this problem.

K: Now, do you feel that the immigrants came before, about 1907 as a lot of the people say, when the plants really started blossoming? There were a number of Polish moved in, Hugarians, Greeks. Is this before the Negro people from the South came?

S: Yes.

K: Now there... But, there was no particular problem as far as the community was concerned until Negro migration occurred.

S: Yes, that's when the problem started because they were so easily identified and one thing or another.

K: Who were some of the people on the Urban League who were interested? How did you get interested in the development of the Urban League?

S: Well, I... It was peculiar that when Eugene Kinkle Jones came here to organize the Urban League, he met with quite a bit of opposition. The

old-timers felt that they didn't need an outsider to come in and run their business. Well, I happened to be pretty active back in those days and I knew Kinkle Jones. I knew him before this period. So, I told him I would get together a group of young people and organize a board for him, which we did. Among those people were, well, the editor of the paper here, William Kent...

K: What was the name of that paper?

S: I'm trying to think what the name was. Detroit some... It was a newspaper. He was editor of the paper, anyhow. And, then there were two young lawyers. In fact, there were 3 lawyers: my brother Will and Henry Lewis and Rowlette were partners.

K: Cecil Rowlette?

S: Cecil Rowlette, Henry Lewis and then there was another young fellow. Well, anyhow, they organized the first board with Mr. Jones. And, it started from there. That's where it started from. But, there was oppostiion to him coming here by the people who you thought might realize what was coming on and back him up.

K: They felt that he would bring...

S: They thought that he was creating a problem of some kind rather then meeting a problem.

K: Yes. Did... Do you remember Fred Butzel?

S: Yes, very well.

K: Well, he was active with the Urban League.

S: Well, yes, he came in later on. Of course, the main thing was to get substantial backing. And Butzel was interested in that sort of social work.

K: Yes, he was active in the American Citizenship Program.

S: Yes, he was and Henry Stevens. When the board was formed of course, they were the backbone of the board because they were the only ones who had any access to money.

K: Money, yes.

S: Yes. So, they were the whole board, you might say.

K: Kenneth Moore? When did he come, was that much later?

S: Kenneth Moore, yes. I think he came a little later on because he was active in there. And, then theree was a Mrs. O'Brien, a very wealthy woman, who came into it.

K: How did the churches react to this? I'm thinking of...

S: At first they were... They didn't give... They hardly gave Kinkle Jones a hearing. They said they would give him a few minutes just to present his subject, but he was quite discouraged with his first attempt here because I think they told him they'd give him five minutes. And, after it got going, and it looked like it was going to be something, then they all jumped in on the band wagon. And...

K: Was it Father Massey that was here then?

S: Father Massey, I don't know him.

K: Father Daniels, I mean.

S: No, he didn't come here until 1921.

K: Was Rev. Bradby here?

S: Bradby was here, yes.

K: And, he was then head of the Second Baptist Church?

S: Oh, yes, he was head of the Second Baptist Church.

K: And, he didn't support it too much?

S: No. As it was told to us by Mr. Jones, they just simply gave him a slight hearing. But, they later on became the "big-shots" after it got going. After he had proved out something. What is the Bishop's name now? He was head of the...

K: Charles Smith?

S: No, he was...

K: There wasn't... Did you know Bishop Charles Smith?

S: Yes, I know the Bishop's name.

K: A.M.E.?

S: That was way before then.

K: I have some names here, I was going to ask you if you knew the lumber baron, John Cole; he had a lumber business in town.

S: John Cole?

K: Yes. These could go way back.

S: I don't know...

K: Lomax Cook?

S: Well, yes, now you're going way back. Lomax Cook used to own property down there on, what do you call it down there where the City County Building is?

K: Oh...

S: And, there's a lot of peoperty owned down through there by the Cooks and the Carters. There was a Carter family...

K: Alfred Thomas?

S: Alfred Thomas, oh, he was a late immigrant; he came from the South. Dr. Alfred Thomas?

K: Yes. The Johnsons? The two Dr. Johnsons, Albert Johnson and William Johnson?

S: Yes. They were old-timers; Bert Johnson was a physician and Will Johnson was a vet. Then, there was H. Peyton Johnson, a doctor too at that time.

K: Alfred Thomas, Alfred J. Thomas, is the name I was thinking of. I don't know... He was considered one of the 40 families that were supposed to be...

S: Millionaires?

K: Well, of great wealth among the Negro families.

S: Well, Alfred Thomas, his father, he's dead now, the son, Alfred Thomas. But, his father came here from out of Alabama, the coal mining district down there. They say he created a fortune out of gyping the... Now, don't quote me because I can't authenticate that.

M: No, you said, "they say so" and that put you in the clear anyway.

S: The point is that they say he left a lot between the sons because he had either gyped (I don't know whether it was the steel companies or the men who worked in there). You know how doctors do during examinations. They came here with a trunk full of money and that's what I was told.

K: Did you know Elijah McCoy?

S: Very well.

K: Would you mind telling us a little bit about him? Yes--the real McCoy.

S: He's a real character.

K: Was he?

S: Yes. He had the most wicked tongue of any man I've ever known. He was the inventor. But, very loud talking, very gruff. But, he had a wife

who was an angel. I think she was the first colored woman in one of these women's clubs...

M: The National Association of Women's clubs?

S: Association, yes. She was a member there, well respected and she was a very refined woman. But, old man McCoy was rough as pig iron. If you didn't agree with him, he was liable to call you most anything. He'd call you a dumb so-and-so and things like that, and he was very, very rough. Other men... I enjoyed his company after I got to know him. I knew him very well, both he and his wife. His wife was a friend of my mother, a very close acquaintance. But, he was quite a man. Of course, he got gyped out of all his...

K: That's what they say; they took him for every penny.

S: Yes, it was this lubricating company. Well, it was easy for those men to take him. He didn't have money to promote his stuff, naturally. But, they put him in the factory, I understand he was so rough when he got in there because it was his idea. But they just couldn't keep him in there... He...

K: He was independent.

S: Very independent, very independent. He'd call anybody any name that he chose to call him. He was one of those kinds of men. He had a beard down to here. Very dignified as far as his looks and manners were concerned. But, don't cross him up.

K: Well, everybody talked about him. And...

S: I know that. He was quite a character.

K: Dancy was impressed by him.

S: Yes.

K; Do you know John T. Gillian? There's no reason, really, but he wrote a column for a short time, or told somebody who wrote it up in the Tribune and he apparently came to Detroit in 1880 and this is the source I had--an old historian.

S: Gillian came here in 1880?

K: 1880 from Ontario.

S: Oh, yes.

K: And, he told about the bicyling, everyone had bicyles, and how much they were. And, then he talked about the dances. He was quite a dancer, Gillian was. And he...

S: I don't recall that name. My grandfather came, I think, to Michigan in 1868 or something like that.

M: Well, you're an old Michigan family then, aren't you?

S: Oh, yes.

M: 1868.

S: He was... He came to Bay City. In fact, there were several in that family who went to Bay City, some parts of them went to farming. One uncle was quite a noted farmer up there in what's now Essexville. And, he made himself very well to do out there, in farming small fruits and one thing or another. My grandfather was a janitor of a high school up there for, oh I guess twenty-five or thirty years. Then he left and went to Maryland. His son moved on to Maryland. He went down there. So, we've been around in Michigan for quite some time.

M: More than a century.

K: You talked about Mr. Jones coming here and people feeling, well here's

an outsider coming in... You remember in the Sweet Case, which was a fews years later, but not too much later, when White came and Darrow and the NAACP came in. And, it seemed that from that point on, there is a feeling in the community often times, that the NAACP was coming in and taking over. Cecil Rowlette in an interview, a few years ago, told the interviewer that he felt that the community could have won that case without the help of Darrow, without the help of the NAACP and he represented (or he implied, anyway) a resentment of the NAACP coming in. Did you feel that there were other people in the community who would go along with that?

S: Well, I don't know. That's a point that has never been called to my attention. I mean, the resentment toward the NAACP.

K: Well, Father Daniels, when the union, the UAW, started to organize, remember, Father Daniels was very upset about this. And, in one of his remarks, which was quoted in the Tribune, he attacked the NAACP for supporting the union. And, he said the NAACP had not paid the lawyers, the Negro lawyers in the case, which was later refuted. But, that's another point where you see this sort of development; at least it continues on, this feeling that the NAACP was more of a national organization.

S: I never heard that brought out. But, you know the peculiar thing about it was that I had built a home out on Pennsylvania Avenue. I built a home out there in 1910. There was no opposition whatsoever. And, this rising up against... It shows the attitude, the change of attitude. Now, when I went out there in 1910 and bought a lot and built a home, we lived out there until 1920. And, here comes Sweet in

practically the same neighborhood several years afterward. Now, when was that, in the...?

K: 1926, 1925.

S: You see what I mean then. That change of attitude and that prejudice, that development, you might say, was over night. I met no opposition whatever. Nobody molested me. I had nice neighbors. Built it from the ground up, good neighbors right up until time I left there. So, you see there has been so many funny changes, developments. Now, this real estate business, this prejudice was essentially a move on the part of real estate developers. They used that as a slogan. B. E. Taylor, when he developed all out Grand River: "Out of the smoke zone into the Ozone." And, they made, what you might call, poor whites think they were becoming aristocrats because they would go out where no Negro could buy. And, I think that had a great deal to do with the crash of the banks here in Detroit because they were putting money out in this farm land and one thing or another and when the crash came, boom!

K: The west side seemed to have a lot more trouble than the east side anyway. Although the Sweet Case is the most celebrated, there's the Turner Case...

S: But, that's where most of the prejudice was. It was prejudice. But out here, no Negroes can buy out here near Grand River and Lark. They...

K: Tireman and...

S: All out there when they were developing, all out Grand River.

K: Yes. Did you know Dr. Turner?

S: Oh, yes, very well.

M: I've heard Ed Swan say that if the police had taken a firm stand in the Turner Case, they could have just turned around the start of this movement and race relations would have been good. He thought that that was more crucial than the Sweet Case.

S: Well, probably so because the police were very poor in giving him protection that they should have given him.

K: Did you find... Talking about that for a minute, as I understand, the west side was starting in about 1919. It grew up to be a community of the better homes.

S: Over in that area.

K: And how much police protection...? You see, there's an old argument that was always used that the reason that a lot of whites... Whites use this arguement, they'd say, "we have nothing against Negroes," but when Negroes move in, then what happens is that they don't get the city protection... They don't get the garbage collection emptied, the lightening is gone. You know, they just don't keep up the place. It's the city that does it. Now, this... Do you find that this was true on the west side, say?

S: Well, I couldn't say if it was true. I lived on the west side for a short period.

K: Where was that? When?

S: I lived on Vinewood Avenue.

M: Was that where you moved to after the Pennsylvania address?

S: Yes. I stayed on Pennsylvania till 1920. And...

K: Why did you sell, if it isn't too personal?

S: It was a real estate deal. That's when I took over this property out here and that's the only reason. I had no other reason. It was a very foolish move, it turned out to be, I mean, financially, because I was trying to develop something that the people I was talking to didn't understand. You know what I mean?

M: You tried to start a little center out here, you mean, that..

S: Well, this colony here...

M: Yes, were you one of the first ones here then?

S: Oh, yes. Yes. I took this over. There was prejudice in recreation and you couldn't go here and there, you know in these places. And, I thought that they would take very eagerly to this. And, I found out...

K: And, they didn't?

S: And, I found out they weren't even thinking along these lines because...

K: Is Green Pastures near here?

S: Yes.

K: The Green Pastures Camp is near here?

S: No, it's down toward Jackson.

K: I see. Well, then you...

S: Green Pastures was a gift though.

K: Yes. Who? Was that Stevens?

S: No, Cousins.

K: Cousins.

S: It came from Jim Cousins. Green Pastures Camp was turned over to the Urban League.

K: Yes.

S: You know, that was their gift.

K: In later years that was John Dancy's project.

S: Yes, that was a gift.

K: Do you remember the starting of the 8-mile community?

S: Yes.

K: That was Stevens' land?

S: No, that was Heinman's? I can't remember the people at the time.

K: Do you remember how it started?

S: Well, they were just starting a community out there selling property. I took on some lots out there but let them go.

K: A few of them went.

S: You see, you were dealing with ones who weren't thinking along the lines of people who lived here. I mean, they had no... People came out of the plantation and tenant farmers and their whole life, their culture was different. You see, where the big mistake is made as far as colored people were concerned, they think you're a homogenous group. And, you aren't. We're just as different as...

M: As whites are different from each other.

S: What did you say?

M: I said just as different as whites are different from each other.

S: Yes. Or as any foreigner is to an American. But, there is much difference in the culture of people who were tenant farmers down South than people who were raised up here.

K: This is the same problem that these people at Inkster had too.

S: Yes. Yes.

K: Did you know how that developed, how that started?

S: Well, I think John Dancy takes some credit for that business.

K: Yes, he does. I don't know the details. He never did give the details.

S: I'll agree, John didn't give all the details. John, excuse the expression: "built up John." He covered up a lot of the real facts, promoting himself.

K: Do you think he promoted himself for the sake of the League?

S: No.

K: For the sake of the League more than for himself though?

S: That's a moot question.

K: Well, it is a moot question.

S: I know he got rid of me after he got his feet on the ground.

M: Oh, he eased you off the board?

S: He just eased me off without any question. And, from that day on he never asked me why I was off or would I like to get back on. I think he and I thought along different lines.

K: Would you mind describing how different? Again, I don't want to get personal, but I'm interested in this...

S: Well, you're recording me now.

K: Yes, well...

M: Would you rather we stopped it for a minute?

K: We can cut it off.

RECORDER GOES OFF!!!

S: When he [Forrester Washington] first came here...

K: Now did...

S: When he first took over...

K: Kinkle-Jones sent him here.

S: That's right.

K: In 1916. And, did you meet him? You were the one to meet him then, weren't you?

S: Yes. Yes.

K: Was he a young man then?

S: Yes, he was a young, very active man. He married a Detroit girl.

K: Oh, he did. He married while he was here?

S: Yes.

K: What had he done before he had come here?

S: I don't know. He was educated down East and he took his work, well, in one of these New England schools. I forget which, but he was very outspoken and very frank. And, we enjoyed a very good friendship for a while. He wasn't here too long before he took over for the Associated Charities, you know.

K: Yes. Here in town?

S: Yes. But, he recommended John Dancy...

K: Let me get this straight. Now, the Urban League came first, then he went to the Associated Charities. And, when he was with the Associated Charities, is when he did that study in the 1920's.

S: That's true, yes.

K: And, when he left...

S: When did he leave?

K: He left about two years after he had been...

S: I forget when he left. I mean, it's rather vague.

K: And he was the one that brought Dancy here?

S: Yes. Dancy claims that Henry Stevens came down there and saw him. I don't know. But, he was recommended by Forrester Washington to take his place.

K: Do you think that the Urban League became too much of a hiring center? Did they try to attract and bring in Negro labor for white, for the big companies?

S: Yes, they had a great deal to with it. In fact, John Dancy, when he was down in New York with the Urban League there, I think he went South to get labor.

K: He maintained that he did something there in the tobacco fields of Connecticut.

S: I think he went South to import labor up here.

M: You were so active with the Urban League. Then, when you were eased off the board, where did your energies go after that?

S: Doing what?

M: Where did you turn to do your community work?

S: Well, that's pretty hard to say. I was interested in the church, the Episcopal Church. And, in later years, I went into the Juvenile Court as a probation officer. And, I had a period of business after I quit the post office. I left the post office in 1920 and went into the real estate business. That's when I developed this place. And...

M: Were you and Snow Grigsby quite good friends?

S: Oh, yes, I knew him very well...

M: I wondered if he worked with you.

S: But we didn't have too intimate relationship. We weren't interested in the same things.

M: I see. You didn't work in that Civic Rights Association of Snow's?

S: No. But, I went into the Court in 1929 just at the time of things closing down. And, I worked in Social Work.

K: Well, you must have had to work with Dancy some. He was in the House of Correction?

S: No, I didn't have anything to do with anything...

K: Anything to with Dancy.

S: John and I--we went on as friends as though nothing ever happened. And, I felt that if he could act that way, I could too. I never questioned him. So...

M: So, you never talked it over ever?

S: Never questioned him one way or the other. He didn't approach me and I didn't approach him. And, I know the only time was when we had this camp out there; I use to go out there because my two sons were counselors out there.

K: Green Pastures?

S: Green Pastures, yes. And, I showed interest in those kinds of things. But, I never did question him. I just thought I understood what he was doing and why he was doing it. And...

K: You knew Dr. Lloyd Bailer?

S: Yes. I'll tell you the reason I say that now. Don't record this.

RECORDER GOES OFF

K: The Depression?

S: What do you mean?

K: Well...

S: It was a terrible thing then...

K: Terrible thing, yes.

M: Did you continue in real estate during that period?

S: That's when I got out of it. I had this on my hands and this has proved to be a white elephant.

M: It would be, with the Depression especially, wouldn't it?

S: Yes, and because I couldn't convince people that this was the thing to do. And, this... You can't convince them to this day that they are about fifty years behind in their thinking. Besides I say that... I guess they'd hang me if I made public statement of that. But, I think that on the whole...

K: I was going to ask a couple questions about politics and also if you remembered the Garveyites?

S: Yes.

K: Were they pretty active in the community?

S: They were for a time around here, quite active, yes.

K: Did you know William Sherrill?

S: Yes, I knew him.

K: He was quite active in Miami.

S: He was active and the other man was quite active. I can't think of his name; he's dead, too.

M: Did they have an appeal for the well to do Negroes or only for the ones down the line a ways?

S: The appeal seemed to be mostly for those with the West Indian background.

M: I see.

S: They predominated in the movement.

K: Along that line, I'll ask you if you remember a group called the Good Citizenship League?

S: No, I don't recall that.

K: Oh, it was no league. It was sort of a group that gave John Dancy a pretty hard time.

S: That's all I remember. I didn't know about that...

K: I don't know any... There isn't much, except in these letters of the Urban League. And, also the Detroit Saturday Night had an article on these, what they called trouble-makers. They were asking for integration.

S: Who were asking?

K: This Good Citizenship League and was attacking Dancy for not promoting it enough.

S: I don't know about that movement.

K: Do you remember the Muslims?

S: I know of them. Just know of them, that's all.

K: Yes, they sort of came about this time in the 30's. The Republican party began to lose steam in the 30's. Do you remember some of the leading Democrats who were coming along at this time?

S: In the 30's? I think Charles Diggs was probably the leader then.

K: Do you remember Joe Coles as a leader at this time?

S: Joe Coles, yes.

M: Harold Bledsoe?

M: Who?

M: Harold Bledsoe?

S: Harold Bledsoe, yes. And, I switched to the Democratic party in 1932, myself.

M: Oh, then you were one of the first ones, weren't you? That was the year, wasn't it, when the first Negro started...

S: Yes. Well, I was in the Court. I went into the Court in 1929, under a Republican judge. And, then Judge Healy came in as a Democrat. That was before it became non-partisan. And, naturally Judge Healy retained me and I was somewhat disgusted with the Republican Party because they never were fair. They never did the right thing.

M: On race, or on many things?

S: Well, there was so much crookedness in the Republican Party on the whole. And, they never did anything as far as race was concerned. They never gave the recognition that they should have given them. But, I was really registered as a Democrat after Judge Healy retained me because there were so many people who wanted to get me out of there. And, in spite of that, Judge Healy did retain me. I had a pretty good record there as a probation officer and I know the psychiatric clinic. The head of that clinic, Dr. _____ (I can't think of his name now) told Judge Healy he should retain me because they...

K: This wasn't Selling, was it?

S: Who?

K: This wasn't Dr. Selling who later...

S: No, I can't think of his name now, a very fine doctor.

K: Did you know Alfred Cassey?

S: Yes, very well.

K: You knew Alfred?

S: I did know him very well.

K: He wrote very interesting columns from time to time.

S: Yes, in the Tribune.

K: And, they're worthwhile reading if you want to understand the period. He was a Republican, I gather?

S: I think he was, yes.

K: But, apparently liberal in many respects.

S: Well, I'm really non-partisan.

K: A real Detroiter then...

S: What?

K: A real Detroiter then.

S: I identify naturally with the Democratic Party because Judge Healy was there. And, I worked under him until he died. I was there when he came in and I stayed there until he passed out. And, I certainly was loyal to my employer. I didn't have to be after the civil service put him there, but I liked Judge Healy. He was really a humanitarian. He wasn't what you'd call a brilliant man, but he was a humanitarian.

K: There's been a lot of talk about ministers being quite tied to certain industrialists and if you knew certain ministers, you could get a job in the factory. Did you find this true? You were a member of St. Matthew's?

S: Yes...

K: Would this be true in St. Matthew's?

S: What did you say?

K: Would this be true in St. Matthew's? You could go to Father Daniels, you could get a job?

S: Yes, he had influence there. There's no question about that. But, there was no racket like some people would like to think there was. And, Ford never gave St. Matthew's church one dime!

M: Did he offer it?

S: What?

M: Did he offer it? I've been told that he offered it freely to so many churches...

S: Offered what?

M: Money freely. But...

S: No, Henry Ford didn't offer money to anybody!

M: He didn't?

S: No. He came there to a service, then he put a ten dollar bill on the plate. But, Father Daniels was, well, he was talked about in many ways. But, Father Daniels wouldn't take a nickel from anybody for anybody's influence. He was that type of man. Oh, no, there was nothing personal about it. But, Father Daniels knew (what's his name that use to be head of the production there?)

M: Harry Bennett?

K: Harry Bennet?

S: Oh, no, Bennett was a crook. Charles...

K: Sorenson...

S: Charles Sorenson happened to be a Dane. Father Daniels came from the Virgin Islands, which was Danish, and they struck up a friendship. It was just a personal friendship. And, they could trust Father Daniels, you see. And, he made recommendations and they called him in for consultation on different things, industrial things. And, they would take his word for it, for these things. And, he could recommend people out there. But, they tried to make out that it was some sort of a pay-off or something. People were jealous. But, it wasn't.

M: Did you keep your real estate business? After you went into the court, did you keep your hand in real estate?

S: No, I quit realty. I had this... This was a white elephant on my hands. And there were times when I was going to let it go, then I couldn't because of two or three families who had put their trust in me. But, it was sort of a white elephant. I just paid out the taxes. But, it was sort of a pig-headed thing on my part because there were some who said I was crazy for doing this and I'd never be a success. And, I said well, I was like Churchill, blood, sweat, and tears. I said they would never live to say I told you so. So, I hung on to it. Now, I've ended up; I've spent forty odd years promoting this and my profit is this home. And, I'm happy in it.

M: So, it was almost worthwhile after all.

S: It was worthwhile. I feel very good about it.

M: It's very pleasant here.

S: I have a nice place. I'm retired comfortably.

K: When did you retire?

S: 1952.

K: 1952.

S: From the court. And, at the rate that they retired you at that time, it's been shrinking ever since.

M: No escalator clause?

S: What?

M: No escalator clause in your retirement payment?

S: No, no. It's fortunate that I have been able to weather through, but I'm getting down to where the margin is pretty thin.

K: Did you think that the second World War was... The problems in the second World War were similar somewhat to those of the first in terms of Negroes coming in?

S: Oh, yes, I think so. World War I was a disgrace as far as the feelings between the races were concerned. I tried to get into the first World War, but when the boys came back and told me what insults and one thing or another that they had to undergo, I'm glad I didn't because I was of a peculiar temperament and I never would have returned from the first World War.

K: I'd like to ask a couple of questions about this problem later on of segregation in terms of housing, that of course erupted primarily into the riot of Sojourner Truth. Do you remember the slum clearance which led to the Brewster Project?

S: Slum clearance?

K: Yes. In other words, the pattern of segregation in public housing seems

to begin with the Bewster Project.

S: Yes.

K: Was there any fight put up by Negroes in this period against this?

S: I don't know if there was any specific fight. There was this... They said that they cleared out Brewster and established slums in other sections, that was the general comment.

K: Yes, there was a feeling in... The Tribune writes that...

S: They didn't make proper provisions...

K: Yes, and there was some resentment toward this.

S: Yes.

K: During the Depression were churches able to... How did they respond to the problem they had? They had such a tremendous problem on their hands, it seems...

S: Well, I don't know. What do you mean, how did they feel?

K: Well, it...

S: It was nothing that they could do about it.

K: Do you remember Willie Mosley?

S: Name sounds familiar.

K: When he died, they maintained that he was the richest man, richest Negro in Michigan.

S: Mosley?

K: Willie Mosely. He was a numbers man.

S: Oh.

K: He'd owned cabs, taxi cabs.

S: I do very vaguely remember such a name.

K: He apparently helped the Tribune out during the Depression. But, he gave out a lot of Christmas baskets and stuff. And, I was wondering if the churches did this or what.

S: Well, the churches did, I guess for the most part, do that much. But, the churches were in pretty bad shape themselves. I know St. Matthew's was really in a tight position at that time.

M: I've read of the Nat Turner Clubs and the unemployed groups. Did you have any contacts with any of those groups?

S: No.

K: This is the period when the Communists began to get their start in the Negro community--hunger marches, and stuff like that.

S: Well, I'm disgusted with this whole move, all these movements now. I really am. I don't think we're getting any place. They started with a plea of integration and, now it's the reversal of the movement. Now it's...

K: Now, segregation.

S: Segregation. I can't... It doesn't make sense to me. You can't have both successfully. And, I think that the way it started out, I think with a little common sense, we would have been a long way ahead if we hadn't... I think some of these movements, I think that the leaders just have larceny in their hearts. I don't think that they are conscientious about it. I don't think they mean any good. How can they mean any good? They certainly can't give anything better to America, I mean, to anybody. They have nothing to give. I don't care where they show. If they make the most of this opportunity here, I think that we will get some place. And,

I think it was on its way until all this "tom foolery" started out.

K: When do you think that the "tom foolery" began? I mean what date?

S: Oh, these guys getting up and talking about setting aside five states; and the Africa movement, now all of a sudden, they're become Africans. I think all of that is "tommy rot." Now, the movement, I think that these... Some of these movements awakened America to the fact that they have been wrong and that they were on the wrong road. And, there are too many people now who realize that they have made a mistake and want to correct it; and they can't correct it over night. You don't make a revolution and then all of a sudden we go and become perfect. But, you can work toward that end. I think all of these movements are just stupid. In my book, I'd be called an "Uncle Tom" by those people.

K: You think that...

S: But, I think it's a matter of common sense.

M: I have a feeling that you were not the "Uncle Tom" type though at all, isn't that right?

S: Well, no I'm not. I'm not of the "Uncle Tom" type and I've never felt like an "Uncle Tom." I don't think a man is an "Uncle Tom" because he does certain types of work. I've done all types of work, but I never felt that I was an "Uncle Tom" any more than a white man doing the same work I was doing is an "Uncle Tom." I don't think that is the thing that stamps you. I think it's your attitude.

K: How did you feel toward the unions when they came in? Or, how did you feel toward Father Daniels' position? And, did he talk to his parishioners about this and then decide?

S: Well, I think today he would have a different point of view. I'm sure of

that. Father Daniels was a brilliant man. But, as it looked at that time, he probably was right in his thinking. He was with the Ford Motor Company, he felt that the Ford Motor Company was doing great things, and he was on their side. But, I don't think today, under the present hiring, if he was seeing the development now, I think he would be with the unions.

K: Well, I'm sure he genuinely felt that this was a terrible thing that was going on.

S: The press pictured it as such. Yes, I think that the press pictured it as such.

K: Well, did people within his own church disagree with him? I mean...

S: To a certain extent, yes, because one of the men who was in the employment office was a member of the church.

M: Oh, employment office out at Ford's? Willis Ward?

S: No, it was before Willis Ward.

K: Don Marshall?

S: Don Marshall. Yes.

K: He was a Sunday School teacher.

S: He was a Sunday School teacher. But, he proved to be... He didn't prove out there at the last, toward the last.

K: People feel that he was very close to Harry Bennett.

S: Well, I think that toward the last, Father Daniels began to realize that Don Marshall--he was rather bitter toward him just before he died. And, I understand that he called Don almost to his death bed and told him how he had betrayed him. But, Father Daniels, he was 100% pure as a man.

K: Was he close to Rev. Bradby?

S: They were. Yes, but they didn't agree on many things. He looked on

Bradby as an opportunist. That's the way he looked at Bradby.

M: Was that a correct assessment?

S: What?

M: Was that a correct assessment, would you say?

S: Yes, I would say that, because I knew Bradby over the years and I think Bradby was an opportunist.

K: What about Rev. Peck? He was a fairly prominent man in the city?

S: I think he was a good man. I think Rev. Peck at heart was a good man. He wasn't what I'd call a strong man, but he was a good man... He was a good leader.

K: He was quite involved in the Businessmen's Association, wasn't he?

S: Yes, he had a great deal to do with that.

K: Were you a member of that organization?

S: No, I wasn't even aware of it.

M: You aren't any relations to... Let's see there was a Bennie Smith with the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, I think.

S: What?

M: A Bennie Smith... That, I think, was a railroad union, a black railroad union.

S: I don't know about that...

M: You don't know him...

END OF TAPE