Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs

ORAL INTERVIEW

BEULAH WHITBY

JIM KEENEY and ROBERTA McBRIDE, INTERVIEWERS
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TRANSCRIPTION OF WHITBY TAPE

INTERVIEWERS: Jim Keeney and Roberta McBride

INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Beulah Whitby

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INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Beulah Whitby

M: We're at Mrs. Whitby's home here in Detroit. We have explained what it is that we're trying to do. Jim is writing his dissertation and I'm from the Labor History Archives where we're very much interested in securing more material on all kinds of social movements, particularly the civil rights movement. We know of no one who could tell us more and be more helpful to us than Mrs. Whitby. So, we are here to ask her about herself and her connection with our city of Detroit. Are we going to begin in the traditional fashion and ask Mrs. Whitby when she came to Detroit? Tell us of the events of your life from there on, Mrs. Whitby.

W: Well, I came to Detroit in 1924 after graduating from Oberlin College in Ohio. And, I came as the Executive, Assistant Executive Secretary, for the Lucy Thurman Branch of the YWCA which was the segregated branch of the YWCA in Detroit. I majored in sociology at Oberlin College and I think my subsequent interest in social work and my practice of social work goes all the way back to my relationship with my father who graduated from the Yale University Divinity School and went to Virginia, which was his native state. He established what they call the Institutional Church, which really was a program of work with deprived people on a day by day basis, rather than putting the entire emphasis on worship, you know, on Sunday. He established the first Institutional Church in the South anywhere. And, I was very interested in his work. I used to go with him sometimes on visits to homes and discuss with him many of the problems of people. And, I think perhaps my interest in people and in

social issues might be traced back to my relationship with my father.

K: You say you came here in 1924. Where did you live when you first came here?

W: I worked at the YWCA and I lived right there. I was right out of school.

K: Yes.

W: And, that was on St. Aubin Street.

K: How big a Y was that?

W: Well, it was... I don't remember, really, the numbers. But, it was a very active organization. Now, there were people who made the charge that this was a middle-class movement, you know, even among Negroes; and that there was some question as to whether there was real concern, you know, for lower socio-economic levels of people. But, I must say to their credit that this was during the time that there was considerable migration from the South. And, one of the jobs that I had to do for the YWCA was to meet the trains that came in and try to help people. And, frequently the Y used their gymnasium just to house a person temporarily in emergency housing. This was a residence for girls who worked.

K: How many beds did you have there? I mean, just off hand, an estimate.

W: Well, I would say with the 3 or 4 floors that perhaps there were 30 or 40.

M: Would most of the people who came in just be coming North, and not know where they would live, or what they would do--but who just wanted to get away?

W: That's right. And, I remember very well a woman with about six children

who wasn't sure that her husband was in Detroit. He didn't put an address on the note. But, he had said something about going to Detroit. But, we later found him in Cleveland, Ohio. And, the address that she had couldn't have been in Detroit because it went up into large numbers, like 186th Street or something like that. We didn't have numbers like that. These were people who were illiterate to a large extent, but seeking a better life and hoping for their children, and up-rooting themselves in order to get started on a better way of life.

K: Who were some of the people that were back of the YMCA and YWCA at that time?

W: Well, Mrs. A. L. Turner, whose husband was a physician, and later when he tried to move on Spokane, he had difficulty. He didn't do as Dr. Sweet, you know, continue to live there. He left; he sold his home and he moved back on Warren Avenue where he'd have no dissent.

K: Did he ever move again?

W: He never moved again.

K: He never moved again! I know I looked up to see if he had. I couldn't find where he had.

W: But, at that time there was a great cleavage among Negroes, between the old Detroiter and the new-comer. And, most of the leaders in this YWCA were older Detroiters.

M: They weren't very anxious to see this boom in migration then of people who weren't of their class and level?

W: Well, there was in-migration both ways, too. There was in-migration of middle-class, of professional persons, you know, whose patients and clients came and they followed them. I can't exactly say that they were not

interested. I'm sure, you know, they agreed to work with the Traveler's Aid Society and to have a staff member of their own helping with the problems. To that extent, I think that they were very interested. However, I don't know that many of them would have wanted to do what I was doing.

M: The direct contact you mean that you were having?

W: That's right.

K: Was Bernie Smith part...? Was he connected with the Y then?

W: Yes, and, I think, his wife was a Board member.

K: We talked to him this summer about his relationship with the Urban League.

W: Yes.

K: And, I imagine you had, even in 1924, relationship with the Urban League since they were meeting in the same building at the time?

W: Oh, yes, that's right. In fact...

M: How did you divide responsibility?

W: Well, we met; you know the Traveler's Aid, really was the coordinator of all efforts and we would meet and take certain assignments. Now, mine was at the Michigan Central Railroad station. But, then others may have been assigned to bus stations or... There wasn't much air travel in those days, but the railroad stations were heavily used. The over-all coordinator, which was the Traveler's Aid Society, would make the schedules, you know, and coordinate the efforts of all organizations.

K: Did you try to set up courses at all at the Y for some of these people that came in? I know Dancy felt that one of the problems was the many

women who came up. Men could get jobs. But, the women found it more difficult to get jobs. And, he believed in setting up domestic training, along that kind of work. Did you have any?

W: I myself did not set up any. But, the YWCA had some training courses and there was some cooperation with the Urban League. And, I think that the Urban League carried that more as a program responsibility than the Y did.

M: Did you receive funds from the general Y budget to do this kind of activity or did that have to be raised by this particular branch?

W: No, no. We were a red-feather agency and so our operating deficit was supplied by the community chest.

K: Let's move on a little bit. Well, one other question: did you find that there was less in-migration into the city after 1925, after the Sweet Case?

W: I don't think so.

K: Because it has been suggested by some people that...the plants were conscious. Ford, who was the largest Negro employer, cut down on their hiring Negroes after the summer of 1925. I guess they had more fights between the police and the Negro community than they did in any other city. You had the Dr. Turner case and the Dr. Sweet case and then there was trouble when an undertaker tried to move in over on the west side in Detroit. But, there's a feeling that there was fewer people trying to move in after that. You didn't find that true where you lived?

W: I didn't feel that that was true. I think that there was continued trouble from 1920 on to certainly through 1940 as we continued to grow.

I think that if you just look at the census figure, you will see that there was a great influx, a great migration that was steady.

K: When did the Depression start for Negroes in Detroit? Did it start earlier, in other words than the rest? Did they start laying off earlier than probably...

W: I think yes. I think that the Negro did feel the Depression sooner and longer. I was at the Alfred District of the Department of Public Welfare at that time and...

K: About what time did you go to the Alfred District? Was that 1931?

W: Yes, 1931. I went there in 1931 as a staff member. And, I made visits in homes and that sort of thing. And, it was in 1941 that I became the administrative supervisor for that district. That was in 1941 and even then this was the largest district in the city of Detroit and I think they had about 13 district offices in Detroit. And this was the largest one, and it was almost entirely Negro.

K: Now, this was set up by the Mayor in 1931, wasn't it?

W: No, no. No, this is a city department and it became a city department back in 1918, by order.

K: Under the new charter?

W: Yes, that's right. And...

K: But, it really became activated to a large extent under Murphy?

W: Well, there was... That's right. There was a very determined effort on the part of the Mayor to try to do something to meet the economic condition of many Negroes. And, he did establish a volunteer organization. I think that Mrs. Josephine Goman was the director of that. But, you see,

the difference is that the Department of Public Welfare was a public agency. Whereas this effort that Mrs. Goman headed, was a volunteer, private effort, you see. And, I think that some monies were raised and some financing, you know, by large donors for that program.

K: Was there a lot of private, or what you might call traditional doling out? Do you remember Willie Mosley and his Christmas baskets?

W: No, I don't remember.

K: Willie Mosley was apparently in the numbers business.

W: Oh, yes.

K: And, he had bailed out the Tribune during the Depression. He got quite a lot of coverage in the Tribune. He was shot by somebody later on in the 1930's, but he was known for his Christmas baskets which was an individual type tradition.

W: Well, yes, I think they did things like that. And then later this was taken over by the Goodfellows; they worked through the Department of Public Welfare. For instance, the Department of Welfare furnished the names of people who would get the baskets.

K: Oh, I see, neediest cases. I'll tell you a story: by 1930, I think this was in the '30s, it was decided by the Council to fire all people who were not American citizens. And, then the plants took this up. They were sort of reverting back to the 1914, '15, '16 period of Americanization. There's always been in the Detroit area, it seems, when things got tough, conservatives who think it would be good to leave the Negro dissatified so that he could go home--his home, according to these people, being in Mississippi or somewhere else.

Did you find any efforts on the part of certain politians or certain other enemies at the beginning to the Depression which parallels this attitude toward foreign people?

W: Well, I know that they started cutting off relief rolls for single people. And, this, you know, really worked quite a hardship to just indiscriminately cut off all single people. Whereas, single people have to eat and... But, that was one of the ways, I think, of controlling it.

K: Did this occur under Mayor Murphy or afterward?

W: I think it was later.

K: Later. Was there a decided difference between Murphy and Cousins and Reading?

W: Yes.

K: Reading, of course, was supposed to be pro-Negro. That was the pitch on certain of his issues. He wasn't that; people didn't find him extraordinarily generous.

W: Well, of course, I don't think any of them, you know, had the real feeling and democratic practices as did Judge Murphy, Mayor Murphy. And, I really think that he was a sincere person.

K: What about Mayor Smith? He was supposed to have been brought from the lower east side and he knew problems more than other people; he knew certain things.

W: I don't seem to remember him. I don't know whether that was before...

K: Well, he was Mayor, of course, during the period... He was Mayor when the Sweet Case took place.

W: Oh, yes.

K: Then he played a part...tried to become Mayor several times during the '30s. He was always in some type of election.

W: Yes, I know the name, but I don't have an impression of either his leadership or his efforts against Negroes.

M: Did labor begin to have any...well, it didn't really put in its appearance and give evidence it was going to be a powerful force until a little later than this, did it?

W: Labor, I think, was having its great troubles at that time.

M: That's right.

W: And, they were very engulfed with the discrimination against them. And, they faced real discrimination and hardships during the sit-in. But, at that time, I think that the liberal Negro leadership emerged: Horace White, Reverend Dade. And, they were very active.

K: Did you find that Snow Grigsby played a very important role in getting, at least in awakening the community to what they were missing out on as far as city jobs and that kind of thing?

W: Yes. Yes, I do think he played a great role in just that--in stimulating people and defining the issues. He was always, you know, getting together some figures to show what the situation is.

K: He was in the other Y, the YMCA. He told us about his trying to get a room there way back when he first came. I guess it was the downtown Y he was trying to get a room in.

W: Do you mean...? You know then both Y's were very segregated. You don't mean...

K: Well, do you think there was a Negro Y when he first came? A YMCA? Then they built one and I guess the YWCA must have come. That must have

been a new building practically when you came in?

W: Yes. When I first came to Detroit, they were located on St. Aubin. And, then when the Y had a big building program, the Northern branch was built and the Fisher YMCA was built. Then Lucy Thurman was in that same expansion period... And, they built a new building. I lived in Detroit, first of all, right at the YWCA on St. Aubin. And, it wasn't long before they built the new building.

K: Did you find that a lot of the labor, Negro labor, in the 1920's and then down through the 1930's, was on a daily basis? They talked...

W: You mean employment on a daily...

K: Yes.

W: I don't know about that. I know that there were certain people who had great influence in getting jobs. Mr. Dancy was one of them and Rev. Bradby, of the Second Baptist Church which was (and, I suppose it still is) the largest...and Father Daniels...

W: Yes. Well...

K: Apparently Father Daniels and Rev. Bradby had more pull with Ford than John Dancy did.

W: Yes, that's right. But, I really have a feeling that segregation was just at that time an accepted practice and that it wasn't challenged. People got into the pattern of a sub-community within a larger community just unconsciously. It was just what was done and as people came in larger numbers, I think they preferred, many of them, the security of living near people whom they knew; it was almost like a foreign born group, like we have in Hamtramck. They got a certain

security out of being around people who spoke the same language and other cultural factors as the same religion and certain cultural practices which they brought with them and perpetuated, you see, in the new world. Well, in a way, I think that they segregated sub-communities, that is, the Negro community. It just happened without an awareness that this would become, you know, the problem that it is today.

K: Do you think that the Relief Program in the 30's and the housing program that began in the 1930's...these two programs anyway began to show the Negro community the problems of a segregated society?

W: Yes, I think that they awakened the city to an awareness to the problems. Horace White, for instance, was one who began to challenge this segregated pattern in housing. He was on the Housing Commission and began to, you know, challenge having Brewster and Sojourner Truth and then all the others strictly segregated.

K: Yes. Raymond Hatcher in 1943 had as one of his first jobs to find out how many cities had integrated housing so they would have something to fall back on when they presented the issue.

W: He was with the Urban League, then, right?

K: He came to the Urban League and lasted a couple of years and then took over at the 8-Mile Housing Project after that. Do you think that there were signs of segregation and racism in the Relief Program as it was?

W: Definitely. Now, when I was a case worker, they had segregated loads. If a white family lived on a street, then I couldn't visit that family. There would be two workers on the same district which was very wasteful--

administratively expensive. And, it definitely was segregated. They had no Negro supervisors at first.

M: Are you then one of the very first that broke that pattern?

W: I was the first administrative supervisor, yes. And, I was with Snow Grigsby's wife who became a supervisor, too. But, I used to supervise students for the University of Michigan's School of Social Work. It was located here in Detroit first, you know. And, so, the "field work" as they called it, you know, for students at the University of Michigan asked my agency if I could take students. Well, they didn't segregate. They would send any student to whom they wanted to give an experience in public assistance. And, then they needed supervisors and they didn't have many trained people during the Depression; they took anybody who had been a shoe salesman or had any kind of experience. So, they needed trained people very badly. But, then they began to say, "Well, if she can supervise for the Univerity of Michigan, maybe she can supervise for us."

M: So, that was really how the pattern was broken in the Social Welfare Department?

W: That's right. That's right. And, it was really through the University of Michigan School of Social Work. And through an individual, Eleanor Cranefield... I don't remember her now, but she was an instructor. And, she was the one who deliberately (and I know it was deliberately) broke this pattern by sending white students to me for supervision. And this just showed that it could be done. It showed the agency people. And, I think that there were people who were liberal people but fell un-

consciously into the pattern of segregation because it was what was done.

K: Did the Urban League begin to lose its influence in the cities around this time? I think it was the coming of the Depression...

W: Yes, I think so. And, as this liberal leadership, you know, emerged, then the Urban League, became just a social agency and was supported by the Community Chest. Well, just because of that situation there will be interested large manufacturers who gave gifts but didn't want to see the Urban League taking this liberal stand on picketing with the workers. And, so I think that as the labor unions began to be stronger and to challenge segregation, and to be very outspoken on some basic issues, that this is when the Urban League began to lose its influence.

K: Also, it seemed to be able to get jobs for people, but it didn't seem to be able to do much in terms of helping out the Relief Programs and all. It couldn't do that.

W: No, they didn't have money to do that. And, any help that was given was done directly through the Chest.

M: You mentioned Mrs. Cranefield... Would that be the wife of Harold Cranefield of the UAW?

W: Yes.

M: I had wondered... I noticed in one of R. J. Thomas' report he mentioned the great help that Beulah Whitby had been to the labor movement and I was curious how you and the UAW got together. It might very well be through Mrs. Harold Cranefield then?

W: I know Harold Cranefield was the attorney for the labor movement...

M: He was a great friend of Maurice Sugar.

W: Yes, that's right. But, I used to be a part of the community movement of labor. I went to these meetings and...

M: What did you mean by "the community movement?"

W: I mean the community movement, the Negro community movement, to support the labor unions. I think this was the challenge, you know, to liberalism at that time.

K: This would be after 1937?

W: Yes.

M: I guess I'm rushing you ahead a little bit... John Conyers, Sr., I've heard say that it was as much as your life was worth in 1937 and 1938 to go in the Negro community and talk about labor.

W: Yes.

M: So, there was a small liberal group that was trying to do that and overcome this feeling?

W: They had mass meetings. Many of them were at the Lucy Thurman Branch. Not that the Lucy Thurman Branch and its program had anything to do with this program--there was just the use of their facility.

K: Yes, this is mentioned. They had the YMCA, the Negro branch of the YMCA, but it never allowed them to have mass meetings there. There were attempts on the part of White, not Horace White, but White at the NAACP to come here and talk. He was not allowed. But, at the same time there were all these meetings held at the YWCA.

W: At the YWCA, that's right, yes. Those were stirring days as the community tried to emerge into a more liberal community. It amazes me when I hear the Black Power advocates say that nothing has been done to

meet the issues of today until they came along. And that everybody else is an "Uncle Tom" which means that...

K: Now, wait a minute. Do you remember a fellow by the name of Jay Quarter, in the Citizenship League?

W: Yes.

K: Because they did some work, tried a little work in the League... They were a thorn to the Dancy type, attacked by the establishment in the city, white and black, but made some very interesting statements back then for that time and were, I guess you'd say, the first radical group in the city. I've only heard their opponents talk, but the opposition felt that they were dishonest. Can you remember anything about this?

W: I don't have a very clear picture right now of... But, when you say the "citizenship movement," I do remember. And, there certainly was no unanimity of opinion. There were, even within the Negro group among labor, those who felt that the radicals were too radical. There were some that were too radical. And, there was great concern about the infiltration of Communism, you know.

K: The Communists in the early years of 1931 through 1933 and 1934, certainly were active in the Negro community; how active and to what extent were they felt by the community?

W: Well, I never felt that they had made any real, substantial impact in the Negro community. But, their method was really a method of infiltration. They would become a part. Take that Sojourner Truth. There were mass meetings, sending people to Washington and that sort of thing. And, the community was very, very aroused. Well, there were Communists

who were very active in that movement. They never missed a meeting or anything. But, they didn't come out openly and say, "I am here and I'm doing this to represent the Communist Party." And, if they had, I think they would have been rejected.

K: Do you think that there were many members in the Communist Party who were black?

W: Many?

K: Were there many black members who were Communists?

W: No, I don't think so. I don't think Communism ever made any real impact on the Negro community.

K: You see, one of the problems that seems to have existed is that most of the Negroes in the labor ranks were of the left wing or were associated with the left wing; so consequently there are a lot of people today who feel that certain leaders were Communists--or duped. I don't happen to subscribe to this statement...

W: I don't either.

K: But, I think that somewhere along the line, one has to draw the line as to where the difference is. For instance, you talked about Sojourner Truth, Rev. Hill being attaked as a Communist and it was true that he associated with certain people who were considered Communists or at least fronts--Jack Raskin of the...

W: Jack Raskin is a good example of what I mean by infiltrating. He would come to all these community meetings and he was entremely vocal, but not as a Communist.

K: Yes, I see. You make a good point there.

W: And...

K: I think he was of help, wasn't he?

W: He was a help...

K: He was of help to the Negro community.

W: Yes he was! He was a help! And, I think particularly, he helped to define issues and really made people more aware of what was happening and maybe dropping their own conscious behavior, you know. He did and there were others. I can't remember some names now. But, they were hard workers, you know they didn't believe in...

K: Maurice Sugar was great help in fighting early civil rights cases. Then there were a number of people on the left wing of the whites, on the left wing of the UAW.

M: Did you feel that there was much radicalism in the Negro community in the early 30's? I've heard a lot about these Nat Turner Clubs and the Unemployed Clubs and so forth. Was that a consistent movement or were people just snatching at anything that would help them save their houses and keep them from being evicted?

W: I think that was it, rather than it being a conscious Communist movement. When I was administrative supervisor at Alfred District there were organizations of clients and they would come to the office and make demands for more adequate budget, more clothing, some of the same things which they have been doing today. But, there may have been some Communists again who penetrated these organizations; but not as Communists. And, I think that the people who were joining and were asking and protesting, were doing it sincerely before because they did need better housing and more adequate clothing and that sort of thing.

And, this was really the issue that brought them together and perpetuated and strengthened their organizations. Now, I'm sure it was some Communists who used this. But, I don't think they came out frankly and did it as a Communist movement. I'm sure they hoped to gain members and to strengthen the movement by using a valid complaint. But, it wasn't done openly.

K: Two other groups existed in that chain. One was the Muslims; it started up in the 30's, 1930. Do you remember any of the people in it?

W: Yes, yes I do. I was at the 15th District, which is on Grand River. I think it still is an old fire station. And, I had a whole case load of Muslims because they didn't know what to do about them. It was very puzzling. They had these assumed names, you know, and this became a great issue. They wouldn't issue a check to "Ali Bay" or something like that. They would, if his name was John Jones, they'd put John Jones. Well, these people would starve rather than--they made issues really that didn't have to be. And, at any rate, I had a whole case load of them. And, I didn't try to pressure them into accepting. I used every influence I could. Let them be 'Ali Bay,' you know, or 'Mohammed' or whomever it was. Then the other thing was their children had to go to the University of Islam, instead of to the public schools. Now I don't believe in this and it's completely against my training and my basic philosophy. But, I don't believe in using relief to make a person do something, you know. I think relief should be regarded as a right. And so whatever influence

I could muster, I did it to stop them from pressuring these people. And, I had very good friendly relationship with them.

K: I read somewhere that most of them lived in the area that was torn down for the Brewster Projects, right in there, because that was one of the poorest districts.

W: Yes.

K: Did this break up their ranks some?

W: No, I don't think it broke it because, now, I was telling you that I had a whole case load in...

K: Out at Grand River...

W: Out Grand River way... And, the district extended to places like Buchanan, those side streets in there. And, you see, that was a different geographic area than, you know...

K: Around Brewster...

W: I think it started in that Alfred District area where the housing was.

K: The leader was Fard up close to the 1930's. He was a merchant.

W: Did you know about the Relief worker for whom they had built an altar? Now she was in the Alfred District.

K: You knew her, did you?

W: Oh, I knew her very well; I still do. The thing about it, she was blond and blue-eyed and thin lipped and all and she was a Negro. And he thought that she was a white person. And, you see there was great racial hatred as a part of the movement and he could get a white person (he was a sick man, of course) but he was going to... This was her day

and it just happened that she had too much to... She didn't get to his house that day. But, he built this crude altar and he was going to kill her and put her on this.

K: Yes, this was grabbed by the press and made a big thing of. In fact, that article, I think, appeared in the Journal of Political Science. "The Voodoo Cult in Detroit"--they made a big thing of it. Another man that you may have remembered is Major Takahashi. Do you remember him and the Forward Movement?

W: Yes. I had forgotten about that.

K: Now, he was told... Well, whites made more of him than Negroes did, I think. He was supposed to have had 10,000 members in the Negro community during the 1930's. And, his group had a column in the Tribune every week. After the riot in 1943, the Detroit News had a series of articles on the Negro community. Now, in 1943, we were at war with Japan. And, nothing would please racists more than that Negroes were tied in with Japan. And this was made, and, I think this was just devastating. Since the News has a long history of playing a terrible role, I was wondering... Takahashi was supposed to be somewhat of a spell binder and a speaker on corners. Do you remember him at all?

W: I don't remember ever hearing him speak. But, I know that he did exert some influence and that he was perhaps responsible for rumors that there was a relationship between the Negroes and Japan.

K: He seems not to have been nearly as anti-white as some other group like the Muslims. He didn't like them; he felt that they must change.

But, it was through love more than through hatred. It was a very peculiar thing there, that this Mr. Takahashi preached. He had several wives too. This was another element that he seemed to desire too... Well, when did good times return, do you remember, after the Depression?

W: I don't know--you just seem to emerge into better times. For me, it's difficult to give a date. Things just sort of gradually got better. The point that you made before was about the Depression beginning first in the Negro community--being felt--and then remaining longer... You know, there used to be saying about Negroes--quote, "Last to be hired and first to be fired."

K: This happens in a social sense, too, I guess in a larger society.

W: Yes, that's right. And...

K: When did in-migration begin again in large numbers, do you remember? My feeling is that, from what I can understand, whites began coming into the city about late 1940 when contracts began to arise. But, the Negroes actually didn't come in, I guess the figures that I have are about 9 months before the Riot, which would place it in the fall of 1942.

W: You see, I think that the white migration didn't reflect always in Detroit because they went to Garden City and all these little satellite cities around Detroit. And, there was tremendous growth, you know, of these little satellite cities, which is continuing. Detroit has lost population hasn't it?

K: Yes.

W: So, I think it's really hard to judge.

K: Let's go back just a little bit and talk about the Riot of 1943. There was, of course, a riot. People referred to it as the Detroit Riot for two years--the Riot that existed around Sojourner Truth was still the Riot of 1942, otherwise known as the Detroit Riot.

W: I always thought that the Detroit Riot was... Well, there was a lot of feeling, before the 1943 Riot, that centered around Sojourner Truth. And, there were these mass meetings every Sunday at the largest place that they could find. And it did stir the community a great deal. But, I never thought that the activity about Sojourner Truth was associated with the Riot.

K: Well, I was confused going through the newspapers. I think that, in this case, in the Negro papers, we found a reference to the Detroit Riot and it was before June 1943. And, I was just wondering who was seeing into the future. And, it turned out, as the article continues, that it was the Sojourner Truth Riot.

W: There was activity but there wasn't violence. Well, maybe perhaps I shouldn't say there wasn't any violence, but it was very minor. But, there was picketing--like the City Hall.

K: Well, they were referring actually to that February 28, 1941, when they tried to move in and 164 were arrested and three Negroes were blamed for the Riot in a typical fashion, you see. Buffa and his gang, and another guy were not even arrested at that point. They were later arrested by the Federal government. It was the Federal government who came in, but the city--the police--wouldn't do anything. I wanted to

ask you, in reference to this build up of racial tension on which you later became somewhat of an expert on with the Barometer of Rumor Control. In the 1930's did you feel that there was a growing racism in the city for the competition of jobs and one thing or another?

W: You know there were two things really that happened. I think there was some build-up, you know, of negative feelings on a racial basis. But, also there were movements for integration that were taking place in the Urban League, in the YWCA. Despite the fact that both of them were segregated in their practices, they did provide some opportunity for joint effort between the racial groups. So, whereas there was perhaps a growing awareness of problems and issues and some hate movements, there was also a movement toward integration that was just taking off.

K: John Dancy seems to think, as revealed in letters at least that I've seen, that in the early part of the Depression there seems to be more integrated feeling and less hostility. But, as time went on, a lot of stores fired Negroes and hired whites; a lot of small factories did this. And, there were a lot of petty things that came. Of course, newspapers grew up at this time. You have the Tribune running from 1933 on daily and then the Chronicle starting in 1937, 1938, I guess. In fact, one has the feeling that foreign communities began to be thrown back on their own a little bit more in the 1930's helping each other and there was a sort of a separation of communities, you know, and that on top of that, grew up gang fights. There seemed to be a lot of roaming gangs over on Central, which is over there not too far from where Turner tried to buy and other people. A gang roamed

up and down that street for a week--white--breaking all the windows in all the houses. Over here in Hamtramck, the very southern part of Hamtramck, there seemed to be a lot of fighting. And, one gets a picture of the growing hostility based on ethnic lines, Poles vs. Negroes.

W: I remember this gang activity; it was the cause of great concern. But, I didn't get the impression that it was racial or that the activity was inspired by racial hatred. It was kind of a youth rebellion, you know, as well as youth asserting itself, too. Now, some of the gangs would be Negro gangs, some would be white gangs and there wasn't much getting together in that respect.

K: Did Negro families feel that things were, among their own youth, going out from underneath them a little bit--that the community was getting out of hand?

W: Yes, I think so.

END OF SIDE NO. 1

K: Well, what were you doing when the war started? Were you still working in the Alfred District then? You were then head of the Alfred District?

W: Yes.

K: And, case loads continued to be fairly heavy at that point?

W: That's right. Well, when the war started, I was there. But I left to work with the Office of Civilian Defense. Mr. Ballinger, whom you just mentioned, was at that time, the head of the Department of Welfare. And the Civilian Defense program was under his leadership and so he took

some supervisors from the Department of Welfare to head some administrative jobs. I had charge of the Emergency Welfare and it was to plan for a bombing or a raid, to have information centers so that people could find each other, to set up stations for shelter and food and that sort of thing. And, so it happened that my program was the only one that ever had action. It was a paper program for all the others--the air raid wardens--and all the others in Civilian Defense. But, when the Riot happened, we opened some of the places that we had planned to use in case of bombing and for the many people who were arrested, our information service and location of people actually did as it had been planned in the bombing. Because so many of the stores couldn't get supplies, we established feeding stations and gave out supplies of food--milk for children and that sort of thing.

K: It's been stated that you had a rather good view of the Riot from your window.

W: Yes.

K: Did you see any signs of this being organized among whites?

W: It did look that way because my office was on Woodward Avenue. And Woodward Avenue was no man's land for a Negro. And Brush Street, two blocks over, was no man's land for a white person. And, so I even got into the downtown section myself without realizing that there was a riot. And, I parked just behind my building; it was just across the street from the present Catholic Carmel Hall which was the Detroiter Hotel at that time. And, so along the opposite side of the street where we parked, there were two men--Negroes--that were killed in that parking lot. And, I finally had to go home on the floor of my car; it

was driven by a reporter from the Detroit News. And, then he got me home and then I had to get him back to Woodward Avenue.

K: So, you feel that it looked as though there were people at least egging on these people?

W: Yes, because, you see, the police would come and disperse a crowd or stop and pull the trolleys off. (They had streetcars in those days). If there were any Negroes on one of the cars, they would go and take them off or they would turn over the cars and all this. So, the police would come and disperse the crowd and then they would go away. And then you would see that when the crowd formed again, some of the same people were active. So, to that extent, it looked as though it had some organization and some plan. I think, however, someone who maybe was from Wayne--maybe it was Humphrey--

K: Oh, yes, who wrote the book on the Riots?

W: They, I think, felt that there were a number of youths that were just, you know, attracted to it for the adventure of it. And, I think that this is true that many were; not all who came were part of a plan. But, the fact is you saw certain leaders over and over again and when the crowd would be dispersed, soon it would come back with the same people. It does seem--I got the impression certainly--that there was some plan to it.

K: Do you think that any of the known racists were involved? I've forgotten the names of the various ministers. There was a minister who had a church on 14th street...

W: Yes, Norris, wasn't it?

K: Norris. F. J. Norris. Frank Norris. Was he involved, do you think?

He was in a beating two years earlier at the Finnish Hall. It was the Negroes that were beaten up. You held a meeting, or chaired a meeting, during the Riot or right after the Riot as I recall, with the liberals that I'm interested in. Once the Riot occured, it made it more and more difficult for integration and you had, of course, the election in 1943 and the election in 1945. Both were quite racist as campaigns. I'd be interested if you could tell us something about what are some of the problems that Negro leadership faced. I would assume that there were certain people who had been preaching that Negroes were going too fast at this time, and I mean Negroes were preaching this, who now would find themselves having a stronger position. There was an attempt, in other words, to go back toward a segregated community--a more segregated community. I'm thinking of the old line leaders. I know John Dancy has always been given the blame for this. But, I don't think it was people like Dancy. I think Dancy was more liberal than some people give him credit for. But, I'm thinking of others--Republicans--who have played a fairly important part and were to play a part later on, for instance, in being against the Medical Center, which came up about three months after the Riot. You remember this meeting?

W: I don't remember. Where was it?

K: Well, it was a meeting chiefly of Negroes to decide what to do--what ought to be done.

W: I don't remember it.

K: It didn't get very good coverage. That was the reason I can't give you very much to go on about what actually happened.

M: Mrs. Whitby called the meeting probably? And, had a group of liberals?

K: Yes. Well, I know that people like Rev. Hill, Rev. White, probably Rev. Dade were there. And, then a guy like Raymond Hatcher would have been there and Gloster Current and then there are people that I could name that probably wouldn't be there. Well, Joe Coles was there, as I recall.

M: Was this during the Riot or right after it?

K: During the Riot. It may have been the day after or something.

W: There was a meeting at the Lucy Thurman YWCA. I didn't get there though because I couldn't get out.

K: That was during the Riot?

W: Yes. I couldn't get... I was trapped in my office. And, I was supposed to go to this meeting but I couldn't get there. And, there were white people in my program who came to bring me lunch because I couldn't get out of the building. But, I don't remember calling a meeting. I have chaired a lot of meetings in Detroit from time to time, but I don't remember that one.

K: Well, could you sketch, just generally, what you think that the effect of the Riot was on the city and on race relations and on politics of Negroes at this time?

W: Well, I really do think that it had some very unfortunate consequences in the relationship between people, in that we lost ground in efforts toward integration, of things that would bring a more solid community. I was called on a lot to make speeches about the Riot. And, I remember that I was speaking in a white church out in Dearborn and the lady who was in charge of the program came to get me. And, I think it was also

during the war when gas was rationed. She said she would bring her little children along with her for the ride becuase you couldn't do very much riding. So, they came and she told me that these little girls stared at me so, you know, that it was very uncomfortable. And, later, their mother told me that they kept saying, "Where are we going?" And, she told them, "We are going to get a lady who's going to speak at our church tonight." They asked, "What kind of a lady?" (You know how children will ask questions). And, she said, "Well, she's a Negro lady." And, one of them said, "Oh, will she riot? Will we be safe in the car with her?" I think that even with a small child--these children were five or six years old or something like that--the significance is that even with children, they began to get a negative image of Negroes and to be fearful. And, I think it was responsible for fear and apprehension, just as the one in 1967.

K: What did the Mayor really have in mind when he set up the Interracial Committee?

W: Well, I think that he was pressured really into doing it. The people of the community said, "We had a riot back in 1924 and 1925." They studied these youthful gang activities, perhaps ten years after that or longer. And, they said, "We're tired of just having, you know, study committees--studying and then it ends up in the waste basket. Nothing is done." And, so there was a meeting at a Presbyterian Church on the Boulevard and they had a curfew on; they had to finish the meeting and get off the streets in time for it. But, they drafted--and this was a mixed group--they drafted an appeal to the Mayor to create a permanent group, not just a study group, but to create a

permanent group to program for better relationships in the community. And, I think that he hoped very much that this group that he established would do that.

K: Did they?

W: Well, they had several departments. One was a Department of Education and there was a Research Department. And, so they worked together. They had a department to handle cases of discrimination and I think this part of the program became a kind of steam valve because they began to feel, "Well, here is a place located in governement where you can turn." Now, I can't say that there was too much that could be done except...

K: Do you think that there could have been a lot done--more done--if he had chosen someone besides Thompson? I think Thompson was a big mistake.

W: Oh, yes!

K: I mean Thompson was sort of a "dead head" from all impression of him.

W: And, then another one after that--John... After Schermer left...

K: Schermer was there for a while. He was a pretty good man. I don't know how much he did with this committee thing.

W: Yes, I don't believe that this was an inactive group. I think that they did a great deal.

K: It took a lot of abuse from people who wrote about it in the Negro press. In the white press, you don't get any impression at all because you're still in the area where Negroes are generally not writen about in the white press in the 1940's. But, in the Negro press... Well, John Woods was still here and he was writing for the Chronicle and then Gloster Current had a big fight with him. Horace White always main-

tained that Current went out of his way to alienate. Current was then head of the NAACP. And, he seemed to go out of his way to alienate Thompson and the Committee. There was a lot of talk that they should let Thompson go and put you in his place--that you were the only one doing any work. And, then it came out that the most important thing itself was the barometer and at least knowing where the pressure was building up. What about housing? Why couldn't the Committee have done more--put on more pressure for housing? Housing just seemed to slide. Why?

W: Well, whenever there were incidents in the community that centered around housing, the Commission was there and tried to deal with the situation by substituting a conference table, as they say, for fighting. And, certainly you remember Father Coogan? He was the chairman of the Committee when they had this rather prolonged incident of of housing on Robson. And, he spoke out about it. Well, he was reassigned by his church, the Catholic Church.

K: When was this, in the late 1940's?

W: No, it was later than that.

K: In the 1950's or something like that?

W: Yes.

K: Well, what I think that I'm driving at a little bit is that, for instance, just recently the head of the Commission spoke out quite strongly and now he's no longer head of the Commission, you see.

W: Well, that's one of the reasons why I think it was difficult to be more militantly active.

K: Did the Negro community try to use the Committee?

W: What do you mean by "to use?"

K: For advice--to turn to it for help. What about some of the old leaders that have fought, like Snow Grigsby? Did he try it?

W: Well, we had... Well, I organized, when I was there, a coordinating council made up of, you know, organizations--a federation of organizations---interested in racial relations. We used to have workshops and conferences and that sort of thing. Snow Grigsby participated in that and both the NAACP and the Urban League were members of this coordinating council and very active members. And...

K: Did some of these organizations like the West Side Improvement...

W: Yes, that was one. And...

K: Did you live on the west side at all? Have you ever lived on the west side?

W: Yes, I have lived on the west side. I lived once in the Vancourt, which was then on Tireman Avenue... And...

K: Were you over there in the 1930's--in the late 1930's--when Snow Grigsby was told that he couldn't participate any longer because there was a conflict of interest?

W: Yes, I was living on the west side then. And, I went to many of their meetings and was invited to speeches and conferences there.

K: But, to some extent they were able to use the community?

W: Yes, they were members of the coordinating council and it was a way of spreading the base of participation. And, I don't know what else...

K: Were you able to get white organizations involved?

W: Like the churches--the Detroit Council of Churches, the Jewish Community Council...

K: What about the League of Women Voters, were they in it?

W: The League of Women Voters were members. And, it did, I think, coordinate, you know, efforts. After the Riot, every organization, every individual almost, who wanted to see Detroit prosper, felt very challenged to do something. So, we had much activity springing up, you see. And, it served to coordinate some of this. Some of the activity wasn't always best. But, we had a policy that we would investigate before we would start anything. Dick Marks, who was the Director, was in charge of the Information and Research Department.

K: Did the appointment of Joe Coles hurt the Committee in the Negro community--the image of the Committee?

W: It did some, yes. But, then Joe is, you know, quite a politican. And, so he has his friends and his followers, too.

K: They've always said that and I've never understood, really how much of a following Joe had... Well, and the people around--I've forgotten now the names of these guys that would every now and then put up another candidate for the Council. It was back in the days when Rev. Hill would run for Council every now and then. In the early days of the campaign, Joe and a couple of other people would put up another person. Just how much weight did these fellows have?

W: I don't know. You see, I don't think that he ever ran for a political office. But, he was a grassroot person and he belonged to grassroot organizations and too, he was one of those who developed strategy and

that sort of thing. Now, when they were trying to get Patrick to run for Mayor, for instance, they had a group. Joe was a member of that group, you know. And, these were strategists and people at maybe a higher level than grassroots were. Joe did both; he, you know, was part of the grassroots movement. I don't think he ever tried to get a following as such.

K: Sort of a cynical man, don't you think? Ever hear of Austin Chavis?

W: Yes, I have. I don't remember, what did he do?

K: Well, he was active in politics also and along the same lines as Joe Coles. He wrote a letter many years ago attacking Snow Grigsby for participating in his organization as well as being a postman--said he shouldn't carry the two. It was what I think could be geniunely called an "Uncle Tom" position. Do you have any questions, Roberta, about the Committee during these years? It got started under terrible conditions--war, being one--the fear that when the war ended, we'd go right back into a depression again. There seemed to be very strong feelings.

M: Did the UAW give a great deal of support to the Committee, rather, the Commission?

W: Yes, yes.

M: It was one of the strong liberal forces throughout this period?

W: That's right. And, always the Coordinating Council, they always had someone who was a member of the Executive Board. So, the Commission did have strong support from labor and also from ethnic groups--like the Jewish Community Council, the Catholic Interracial Committee--all these were strong supporters.

K: The NAACP changed quite a bit in character during these years, didn't they?

W: Yes. Either the times changed or... I don't know that the NAACP, you know, if it really did change too much. It still seeks redress through the courts and through voting and that sort of thing. But, with the advent of Black Power and the militant movement, I think that the times changed really.

K: Well, there are people who seem to feel that back in the days of the Sweet case that the NAACP under Dr. McClendon was largely a middle-class group with a large number of doctors, lawyers, and dentists and that with the development of the union, this changed and Dr. McClendon himself was not particularly interested in the union.

W: In what?

K: In the union and in the development of the union. But, young people like Gloster Current and others, were interested in the union. And after the fall of Ford, in 1941, the base of the NAACP became more a mass base. The larger number of the community were interested in its policy. And, of course, Rev. Hill became president when McClendon retired in 1945. I don't know how long he was president, but... Oh, it was Gloster Current's secretaryship that had an almost radical, comparison to the old days, too. I think you're very correct in saying that they continued to use the courts, in fact, even more so. They had all these cases that came up dealing with the Improvement Associations--the neighborhood associations. They tried to break this barrier that had been strung up all the way around in the city. But,

you don't feel that the change was really that great?

W: I feel that the NAACP has always been a people's movement. And back in my own father's day, when he organized the first chapter of the NAACP in the community where he was pastor of the church, it was based in the community. Now, it's true that the leadership... It was very necessary that the leadership should come from trained people. In response to the feeling that many people used to have that in the middle-class when a person got educated, got trained, he forgot about the common people, you see, and he moved away--he moved out of the ghetto--if it had not been for these people who had some advantages of training being willing to give of themselves in leadership, I think that the Negro group as a whole would be in a much worse position. And Gloster Current was here and worked with Dr. McClendon.

K: Yes, they did work together. Well, there were issues of some sort. Dr. McClendon had a hospital as I recall. It was one of these 4 or 5 hospitals serving Negroes and on that issue, for instance, he tended to be less than liberal. Snow Grigsby went after him in a big way. There was a feeling among a number of people that the NAACP on a local level had to be dragged into this fight having to do with the union. Let me ask you this: is there a feeling among a lot of people that the NAACP had a tendency to come from outside and take over issues? I believe they did this in the 1926 trial of Dr. Sweet. They did this again in 1940. Between 1937 and 1941, Father Daniel attacked the NAACP for doing this. Who was Walter White to say anything in

the New York office about what was going on in Detroit? And, there seemed to be a feeling among, I suppose you'd call the older families, that the NAACP was getting its nose into affairs that didn't concern it. Did you feel that way?

W: No, you see, the NAACP operates, you know, on the local levels and I don't think that it was a local group. Now, they did have some help from the New York office in getting Mr. Darrow as the attorney and that sort of thing. But I'm sure that they believed that they were being concerned with an issue that was basic to the people of this community and that it was the local group that really was in control. I don't think that's a valid criticism. You see, it's a thing of being "blamed if you do" and "blamed if you don't." Now, if they don't take over or don't become active in some issue that is very important to the people, then they'll say, like they do about the Urban League, "They're no good; they're just a bunch of Uncle Toms."

K: Well, Cecil Roulette had made this criticism. Now, he was one of the lawyers hired by the local NAACP to fight that case. He felt that if Darrow had stayed out of it and that if the national office had stayed out of it, that it wouldn't have alienated so many whites in the city. Now that's his position and his feelings. And, one has a feeling that during the Riot in 1943, if one reads carefully the letters from Dancy, one gets the impression that Dancy felt the NAACP, with White coming in--and there have been various statements that he's made--that he was roiling waters he shouldn't roil.

W: Well, there are, you know, the extremes in both sides of conservatism

and yet, you know, I don't blame Mr. Dancy for the position that he took. He said that he had always been consistent, that he felt that his job was to negotiate and he couldn't sit with General Motors or Chryslers one day and try to negotiate increased opportunities of hiring and that sort of thing and the next day be out on a picket line. So, he was always consistent about that. And, at one time it was true that people believed that if a person was active with the NAACP, then he was far out. And, if he was active with the Urban League, he was extremely conservative. But, I think there came the time when these organizations cooperated with each other.

K: Wouldn't it be about the time Ray Hatcher was with the Urban League and Gloster Current was with the NAACP? They both seemed to think alike. And, Raymond Hatcher told us the story that he slept on Gloster Current's couch the night of the Riot. He couldn't get home. There's a lot of people in town who felt that the two should be scrapping each other because they belonged to organizations that opposed each other. What I was trying to get at, I think is that the feeling that Detroiters more than New Yorkers, white or black, seem to have grown up on this sort of individualism, "we'll do it ourselves."

W: Yes, but I think that did change and I have even heard Mr. Dancy say, "I have nothing against the NAACP, but we have different approaches. But, we frequently get together and decide..." Well, when they were picketing Sams--Sams Department Store-- Do you remember the man who was the head of Sams? And its head was on the Board of the Urban League at that time? Mr. Dancy would say, "I'd like to see Negroes

employed, but I have a different way. I would go to the president and ask him to present the problem--ask him to make changes. But, he said, "If he didn't make the change, then I call the NAACP and say go to it with the approach that you have." And, I really think that it got to be that way because once there was a time when I served on both the Board of the Urban League and NAACP, at the same time.

M: Simultaneously?

W: Yes. And, I think this was when they started to end this individualism that you talked about and the antagonism of one against the other. I don't think that exists today.

K: No, one doesn't see it too much. I know an article appeared in the Detroit News after the Riot. There was some blame heaped on the NAACP for the Riot. Apparently the NAACP had a meeting, I think about two weeks before the Riot. It was an emergency war-time meeting. And, there were some guys that came out, you know, firing speeches of one sort or another, largely misinterpreted by the white press after the Riot. Now, the speakers hadn't known that there was going to be a Riot. Anyway it was made clear in the article that there were members of the Urban League that wouldn't join the NAACP or have anything to do about it. It tried to drive a wedge between the two which quickly healed.

W: Which riot was this?

K: 1943.

W: 1943. Well, another contributing factor, I think, was in the labor movement. You know about how they walked out because a Negro was

promoted up to a higher level. And, this was just a couple of weeks before.

K: At Packard, the "hate strikes." Yes, there wasn't too much of that after the Riot, as I recall. The Interracial Committee didn't get involved in anything like that, did they...well, after they were set up?

W: They were involved in, you know, everything that had implications for bad race relations. I was assigned once to go to Prophet Jones' church because we had a report that he was promoting a great deal of hatred. So, we wanted to find out if this was true. Ulysses Boykin, do you know him?

K: Yes.

W: He was the public relations person for Prophet Jones.

K: Oh, was he? I didn't know that.

W: Oh, yes. So, I arranged through him to go. In fact, I went with him and his wife. And Prophet Jones did do a great deal of fomenting strife and hatred. And, at one time, before he lost out, he had quite a following. And, it was from people of low socio-economic level who really were being terribly exploited. He would have them to come up and give their little money that they needed so badly just for living, you know. And, he was really fomenting all kind of hatred, you know. And, they were answering him, you know, very emotionally and that sort of thing.

K: How much... You spoke of the Committee... You had an assignment to go to Prophet Jones and find out this fomenting or racism among Negroes.

One has a feeling that there wasn't too much pressure put on whites who might do the same thing. Do you think there was?

W: Oh, yes, we did that too. We often covered movements, you know, that were supposed to be so called Neighborhood Improvement Associations. Well, the white members of the staff would go to those meetings and would watch very closely to see where hatred and ill will was being fomented. We had a file on the Improvement Associations and their activities. And, then there were certain--I can't remember the names now. There were individuals, too, who did a great deal to create bad feelings by speaking out to the community.

K: Buffa was very prominent.

W: Yes, that's right.

M: You know, it's now 1:30 and you have an appointment at 2 o'clock?

W: 2 o'clock, yes.

M: I have a terrible feeling that we better not keep you any longer.

END OF TAPE