Memphis Voices:
Oral Histories on Race Relations, Civil Rights, and Politics

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New Albany, Indiana: Elizabeth Gritter Publishing 2016

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Introduction

In 2015, the nation commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, which enabled the majority of eligible African Americans in the South to be able to vote and led to the rise of black elected officials in the region. Recent years also have seen the marking of the 50th anniversary of both the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination in public accommodations and employment, and Freedom Summer, when black and white college students journeyed to Mississippi to wage voting rights campaigns there. Yet, in Memphis, Tennessee, African Americans historically faced few barriers to voting. While black southerners elsewhere were killed and harassed for trying to exert their right to vote, black Memphians could vote and used that right as a tool to advance civil rights. Throughout the 1900s, they held the balance of power in elections, ran black candidates for political office, and engaged in voter registration campaigns. Black Memphians in 1964 elected the first black state legislator in Tennessee since the late nineteenth century. Even before the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the *New York Times* reported that Memphis had "made more progress toward desegregation with less strife than any other major city in the Deep South."[1] So what accounts for the formal political mobilization of Memphians before the Voting Rights Act of 1965? How did they become a powerful political force? What accounts for the *New York Times*' comment that Memphis had made so much progress with so little strife? What did civil rights activists think of this assessment?

Although archival documents, newspaper articles, and other secondary and primary sources shed light on these questions, oral history provides crucial and unique information.

[1] John Herbers, "Integration Gains in Memphis; Biracial Leadership Takes Hold," *New York Times*, 5 April 1964, Schomburg Clipping Files, University of the District of Columbia, Washington D.C.

Much has been written on the black freedom struggle in Memphis, but aside from Michael Honey's *Black Workers Remember*, which examines the intersection of civil rights and the labor movement, no oral history collection exists on the civil rights movement in Memphis.[2] This book not only will help remedy this gap but also will focus on formal politics there and the intersection of this prong of the freedom movement with direct action, legal, and economic equity campaigns. The two major civil rights organizations in the 1960s in Memphis were the Memphis NAACP branch, which became the largest branch in the South in 1961, was consistently recognized nationally for its activism, and powered the local civil rights movement that encompassed people of all ages and backgrounds, and the Shelby County Democratic Club, the black Democratic club in Memphis that mobilized black voters to hold the balance of power in elections and vote successfully for black candidates; these organizations worked together with overlapping leadership and membership. Because most of the records are lost for the Democratic club as well as some records of the Memphis NAACP branch, oral history becomes all the more important for telling the story of civil rights in Memphis. These organizations were so strong that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Congress of Racial Equality, and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee made few inroads into Memphis. Both organizations also assisted with the struggles for voting rights in the nearby and rural Fayette and Haywood Counties. Black Memphians had a locally driven struggle in which they relied on their own activism and organizations although they paid attention to national civil rights developments.

[2] Michael K. Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

By incorporating the voices of more than twenty civil rights activists (both leaders and grassroots workers), politicians, and others involved, this book, which focuses on the years from 1954 to 1969, includes not only valuable information on the Memphis NAACP branch and the Shelby County Democratic Club but also on strategies of and resistance faced by civil rights activists. Voices of black and white Memphians paint a picture of the racial climate of the time and the impact of civil rights activists then and later. *Memphis Voices* not only provides crucial behind-the-scenes information but also includes stories and perceptions of women and grassroots workers, whose work often was neglected in newspaper accounts of the day and often in subsequent historical scholarship.[3] Certainly, firsthand accounts of participants discuss the inner workings of the local movement, show how it connects with national and state developments, and highlight largely unsung heroes of the civil rights movement, which was one of the most important and transformative developments in American history.

Understanding civil rights movement and political developments in Memphis is crucial to the development of an in-depth, nuanced portrait of the black freedom struggle and, more broadly, southern politics. After all, the overall civil right movement was a movement of thousands of local movements. By discussing the prevalence of the black vote in Memphis in the 1950s and 1960s, the book disrupts the conventional narrative of the civil rights movement that focuses on voter discrimination before the Voting Rights Act of 1965. To be sure, numerous scholars have looked at voter mobilization, including voter registration campaigns, in the years before 1965, but less noticed among scholars than direct action, labor, and legal prongs of the

[3] The work of historians Michael Honey and Laurie B. Green, in particular, provide an invaluable spotlight on the activism of working-class people. Yet while Honey focuses on labor and Green does not focus on formal politics and the Memphis NAACP branch, this book builds on their and other work as well as provides new information on the black freedom struggle in Memphis through highlighting the stories of Memphians that little attention has been paid to by scholars. Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1993).

movement are the ways in which African Americans in the South who could vote before 1965 used their voting power as a tool to advance civil rights. This book explores how formal politics was part of the civil rights struggle in Memphis and how African Americans there contributed to making the Democratic Party more progressive, a development that occurred across the South. The book also looks at the gains and limits of the black freedom struggle in Memphis by including assessments of the struggle by oral history subjects, all of whom were interviewed in the 2000s.

Historical participants provide behind-the-scenes details on strategies and conflicts; valuable perspectives on change over time; and other information that might or would be forgotten or not emphasized enough if their stories were not captured. These goals were all part of the author's strategy for conducting oral histories. To be sure, memories can be flawed and stories can be jaded, so this oral history collection relies on other primary and secondary sources in order to assess their words and tell the story of Memphis. Yet, this collection contends that it also is invaluable to learn about history from those who lived it.

Furthermore, voices of Memphians breathe life and provide enhanced understanding of existing documents and other information in the historical record. Oral histories reveal the feelings and emotions of interview subjects as well as how civil rights developments had a personal impact on people. They get at the motivations of historical actors as well as how previous generations influenced them. They shed light on what can be a confusing newspaper articles from the time as well as spotlight covert resistance that is not so discernable. Oral histories provide us with perspectives of what civil rights activists saw as important and may lead future scholars to pursue angles that they otherwise might not have.[4] While this author has

[4] For instance, Memphis civil rights activists stressed how the leadership and membership of the black Democratic club and NAACP branch overlapped. After learning this information, this author's research led her to see that

extensively utilized oral histories, employing minor edits for the sake of clarity and flow, readers, however, may want to consult the actual recordings as the written word cannot convey the voice, tone, emotion, and laughter of these conversations. To say a bit more about the transcription methodology, certainly the spoken word does not have the finesse that the written word does. Yet, it is possible to add some clarity and flow by eliminating "ums," "you knows," and the like as well as to combine some excerpts of oral histories in order to make stories and insights more complete in meaning. This collection has done just that in conveying the oral histories to the readers.

Scholarship on both the civil rights movement in Memphis and formal politics there continues to evolve.[5] On the one hand, histories have been top down, focused on formal political and civil rights leaders and institutions.[6] On the other hand, histories have focused on grassroots and working-class activists and construed politics more broadly to encompass not only formal political institutions but also direct action, legal action, labor activism, and so forth.[7] In addition,

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overlapping leadership and membership of black political clubs and NAACP branches existed elsewhere in the South too.

[5] For historiographical work more generally on the civil rights movement, see: John A. Salmond, "'The Long and the Short of It': Some Reflections on the Recent Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 32, no. 1 (2013); Danielle L. McGuire and John Dittmer, eds., *Freedom Rights: New Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement and the Struggle for Black Equality in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011); Emilye Crosby, ed., *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2011); "Bibliographical Essay" in Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009), 347-79; "Bibliographical Essay" in Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 25th anniv. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 245-78; Steven F. Lawson, "Civil Rights and Black Liberation," in *A Companion to American Women's History*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 397-413; Kevin Gaines, "The Historiography of the Struggle for Black Equality since 1945," in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, ed. Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2002); Charles Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *Journal of Southern History* 66, no. 4 (2000), 815-48; Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (1991): 456-471.

[6] These works include David M. Tucker, *Memphis since Crump: Bossism, Blacks, and Civic Reformers, 1948-1968* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1980); G. Wayne Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2010); Marcus D. Pohlmann and Michael P. Kirby, *Racial Politics at the Crossroads: Memphis Elects Dr. W. W. Herenton* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1996).

[7] Two prominent works in this vein are Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*; Honey, *Southern Labor*.

works on Memphis have focused on specific slices of the movement, such as the role of white women in the civil rights struggle and the kneel-in movement at a local church.[8] The sanitation strike and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s murder in Memphis remain the city's most remembered and written about point in civil rights movement history as the amount of scholarship reflects.[9]

Memphis Voices focuses both on formal and grassroots leaders in order to better make sense of political and civil rights developments from 1954 to 1969 years, which remain under-explored in scholarship. No work, for instance, focuses on the Shelby County Democratic Club or Memphis NAACP branch. To be sure, Laurie B. Green in *Battling the Plantation Mentality* explores this time period but she particularly examines the roles of popular culture, working-class black women, and students in the civil rights struggle and does not focus on the NAACP branch or formal black politics. Michael Honey's work on civil rights during these years emphasizes the connection of civil rights with the labor movement and 1968 sanitation strike.[10] To be sure, *Memphis Voices* builds on and extends the aforementioned work on Memphis. It uniquely focuses on the role of the Memphis branch of the NAACP, legal efforts in the 1950s, direct-action protests in the 1960s, and local politics in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, *Memphis Voices* gives a new and more nuanced understanding of the civil rights movement in Memphis by including voices not before heard in scholarship by looking at key civil rights and political participants, both men and women, black and white; putting a spotlight on formal black politics

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[8] These works include Stephen R. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Kimberly K. Little, *You Must Be from the North: Southern White Women in the Memphis Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2009).

[9] Works include Joan Beifuss, *At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989); Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: the Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007); Steve Estes, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2005).

[10] Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*; Honey, *Southern Labor*; Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*; Honey, *Black Workers Remember*.

during this time; and revealing how the various strategies for civil rights worked together. Although Memphis was ahead of much of the South in regard to civil rights and black political progress, today it is impoverished and crime ridden to a greater extent than many cities, and it became one of the last major cities to have a black mayor. By including the long-term assessments of the oral history subjects on race relations, this collection also sheds light as to why developments took place as they did—why Memphis was ahead, why Memphis fell behind, and yet what long-term gains were achieved by black political power and civil rights developments.

Although civil rights scholarship is a voluminous field that continues to grow, so voluminous, in fact, that keeping up with it would be a full-time job, there are not nearly as many oral history collections focused on the black freedom struggle as one might expect although thousands of transcripts exist in archives all over the country. None, to this author's knowledge, focuses on formal black political mobilization before 1960, which is not surprising given Memphis was unique in regard to its large number of black voters. It is not commonly recognized, for instance, that 25 percent of eligible African Americans in the South could vote by 1956 and black formal political organizations and clubs existed in many southern cities and states.[11]

[11] The statistic is from Donald R. Matthews and James W. Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), 18. For a database containing information about oral histories on civil rights, see the Civil Rights History Project at www.loc.gov/folklife/civilrights. Oral history books on the Jim Crow South and civil rights movement include William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South* (New York: The New Press, 2001); Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991); Kim Lacy Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1996); Anne Valk and Leslie Brown, *Living with Jim Crow: African American Women and Memories of the Segregated South* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

This author's own book, *River of Hope: Black Politics and the Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865-1954*, examines the role of formal politics in the long civil rights movement and makes the argument that a small but significant number of African Americans engaged in the right to vote and other formal political activities even though most black southerners were disenfranchised. Memphis has a strong tradition of black political mobilization given African Americans could vote there because state political conditions did not hinder their political participation as much as other places in the South, the role of skilled black leadership such as Robert R. Church, Jr., and George W. Lee, the two-party political system that existed in Tennessee, and the fact that black votes were needed for the maintenance of the longstanding Edward H. Crump machine. Crump, who was white, dominated Memphis politics from 1909 to 1954. However, *River of Hope* only utilizes this author's oral histories in a limited way given just its conclusion covers the 1954 to 1969 time period. *Memphis Voices* continues this author's scholarly focus on the formal political aspect of the civil rights movement by spotlighting how African Americans in Memphis were able to engage in formal political activity in the 1954 to 1964 time period even though most eligible black southerners could not vote until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Because so many African Americans were disenfranchised, scholars have neglected those who could politically mobilize, particularly for the period before 1960. Memphis was on the cutting edge of black political activism in the South, and this political action intersected with legal and direct action aspects of the black freedom struggle.[12]

More generally, although scholars have written on formal black political mobilization before 1960, it has not been a focus of civil rights scholarship as direct action, legal action, and

[12] Elizabeth Gritter, *River of Hope: Black Politics and the Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865-1954* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2014).

labor activism has.[13] *Memphis Voices* shows the inner workings, strategies, and impact of formal black politics and may inspire other oral history collections and scholarship on this topic. Politics is the "womb to the tomb" as Memphis civil rights activist Maxine Smith said, and it is important, while not to minimize the extreme barriers that most southerners faced when attempting to register, to recognize those who could vote and what they could achieve and how this work shaped later civil rights developments and political change in the South. Indeed, *Memphis Voices* reveals how the formal black political mobilization of the 1950s connected with 1960s protests and played a role in African Americans further shifting to the Democratic Party, thus reshaping party politics in a way that had significance and an impact for years to come. It also explores the role of black civil rights activists in the John F. Kennedy campaign and administration by showing how crucial their activism was.

By looking at formal black politics and related developments in Memphis from 1954 to 1969, this book will not only give a more nuanced understanding of the black freedom struggle by showing how African Americans used their right to vote at a time when many other black southerners were struggling for it, but it also will build on and extend important aspects of civil-

[13] Certainly exceptions occur such as J. Mills Thornton III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2002) and the work of Steven F. Lawson including *Running for Freedom* and *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1976). As for other civil rights scholarship that addresses local black electoral politics before 1960, works include Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1995); Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Victory: The Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas*, 2nd ed. (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2003); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1995); Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee*, rev. ed. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1998); Tracy E. K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky, 1945-1980* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2009; Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Laughlin McDonald, *A Voting Rights Odyssey: Black Enfranchisement in Georgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "Down to Now: Memory, Narrative, and Women's Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta, Georgia," *Gender and History* 11, no. 1 (Apr. 1999): 113-44.

rights-movement scholarship, namely on lawyers, white southerners, local people, NAACP branches, female civil rights activists, and economic emphases of the movement.

Tomiko Brown-Nagin's award-winning book *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* shows the influence of local lawyers in the movement and makes the case that their significance has been overlooked. *Memphis Voices* forwards this work by providing excerpts of oral histories of key civil rights leaders who were lawyers and discussing their work and how it intersected with national legal efforts as well as local direct-action and formal political efforts. These local lawyers include Harvard Law graduate Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., who ran for public office in 1959 in a ground-breaking campaign that was a civil rights milestone in Memphis, and H. T. Lockard, who headed the local NAACP branch in the 1950s and later became the first black Cabinet member in the state. The movement in Memphis, in addition to being spearheaded by Maxine Smith, was largely led by professionals including lawyers.[14]

By looking at the attitudes, views, and transformations in thinking among whites, this study will extend the work of Jason Sokol and other scholars who have examined the "white" side of the civil rights struggle. While much scholarship has been written on the role of African Americans and the opposition of bigoted whites, the story of Memphis shows a range of responses of whites as well as how structural barriers persisted over time. Memphis, aside from the violence during the sanitation strike and after King's death, did not see violent opposition on a large scale to civil rights activities unlike other southern cities, yet the white citizenry and many white politicians presented obstacles to civil rights. In this way, the book also extends the seminal work of William Chafe and others who have discussed "civil" ways in which whites

[14] Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011).

resisted gains in the field of equality for African Americans. In addition, the book includes excerpts of an oral history a local white lawyer opposed to the desegregation lawsuits before undergoing a transformation in regard to his racial attitudes that led to his supporting a black lawyer in Memphis to be elected as a judge there.[15]

Memphis Voices also extends the continually growing field of local community studies that focus on the role of local people in the movement; notable early works include John Dittmer's *Local People*, Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, and Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights*.[16] More recent works include Benjamin Houston's *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City*, Tracy E. K'Meyer's *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky, 1945-1980*, and Emilye Crosby's *a little taste of freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi*.[17] These community studies often put a spotlight on local organizations and leaders indispensable to the struggle as well as grassroots activism, sometimes especially concerning women. As Emilye Crosby has written, "local studies and bottom-up history . . . demand a rethinking of *what* and *who* we think is important."[18] *Memphis Voices* reveals the importance of not only the leaders of the movement but also the grassroots activists.

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[15] William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980); Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006). Other works include Benjamin Houston, *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1935-1965* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2011); David L. Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994).
[16] Dittmer, *Local People*; Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*; Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
[17] Houston, *Nashville Way*; Crosby, *Civil Rights History*; K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South*.
[18] Crosby, *Civil Rights History*, 6.

Accordingly, a spotlight on Memphis reveals that it had the largest NAACP branch in the South and one of the most active in the 1960s. Civil rights scholarship often focuses on the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee for these years, not the NAACP although recent works have added to our understanding of this organization.[19] *Memphis Voices* examines the NAACP given its influential role in Memphis. On a related note, this author conducted two oral histories of Maxine Smith, the most prominent civil rights figure in Memphis and long-serving executive secretary of the NAACP branch. No one was more identified with the civil rights movement in Memphis than Smith. Yet, Smith remains largely unknown to civil rights scholars given her own de-emphasis on being labeled a leader, the lack of scholarly attention to the NAACP, and the fact that she was a woman. *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom* by Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck addresses the Memphis NAACP in the 1950s and 1960s and local lawyers in the movement but it is a biography of Smith and not an oral history collection. Even with this book, Smith remains a figure whom scholars have neglected. For instance, Laurie B. Green barely discusses her in her civil rights book.[20] *Memphis Voices* helps remedy the neglect of Smith by featuring oral histories of her and placing her story within the wider context of the civil rights movement in Memphis and the nation. It supplements the existing biography of her

[19] The first two works are examples of scholarly work not focused on the NAACP, and the rest consist of recent work dealing with the NAACP. Clayborne Carson, *SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); James P. Marshall, *Student Activism and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2013); Merline Pitre, *In Struggle against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1999); Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005); Thomas L. Bynum, *NAACP Youth and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1936-1965* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2013); Lee Sartain, *Borders of Equality; The NAACP and the Baltimore Civil Rights Struggle, 1914-1970* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013); Francoise N. Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2012).

[20] Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007); Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*.

and provides new details about her life and activism, thus further showing how women engaged in the civil rights movement in formal leadership roles even though much civil rights scholarship focuses on male leaders.

More recently, scholarship has increasingly focused on women's role in the movement, finding their work to be crucial to the movement. They spanned the gamut from formal leaders to grassroots workers and, at times, tackled gender-specific issues such as rape. This scholarship has spotlighted other women similar to Maxine Smith, whose leadership came from grassroots organizing but who also were recognized by the black community as key leaders of the movement. For instance, Vera Mae Pigee was secretary of the NAACP branch in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and presided over the strongest NAACP Youth Council in the state. In Baltimore, Lillie Jackson, a grassroots-based leader, was a key figure of the city's NAACP chapter.[21]

In addition, recent scholarship in particular has stressed the economic focus of much of the civil rights struggle. Michael Honey's work has already been mentioned; he and numerous scholars have looked at labor activism. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's seminal article on the "long civil rights movement" urges scholars to recognize economics as part of the struggle as does Nancy MacLean's book *Freedom Is Not Enough*; recent books of William Jones on the March on Washington and Thomas F. Jackson stress the economic component of Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights efforts. Moreover, like MacLean, Gavin Wright addresses the economic impact of

[21] Sartain, *Borders of Equality*; Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale*. Other works include Pitre, *In Struggle*; Crosby, *a little taste of freedom*; Faith S. Holsaert et al, eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2005); Bruce A. Glasrud and Merline Pitre, *Southern Black Women in the Modern Civil Rights Movement* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013); Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2009); Shannon Frystak, *Our Minds on Freedom: Women and the Struggle for Black Equality in Louisiana, 1924-1967* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2009); Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

the movement in *Sharing the Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the American South*. A key demand, indeed, of Memphis civil rights leaders was for better economic opportunities for African Americans—a demand that they exercised and infused through their formal political and other civil rights activism. Memphis labor leaders and activists engaged in formal political and direct-action efforts as well.[22]

Hall's article also urges scholars to look at the black freedom struggle as taking place beyond the 1954 to 1968 years whereas other scholars such as Steven Lawson have called on scholars to recognize the 1954 to 1968 years as the "short civil rights movement' but with long origins. Whether one agrees or disagrees with their interpretations of the movement, it is true that the struggle for black freedom extended before 1954 and has lasted since 1968. While *Memphis Voices* focuses on 1954 to 1969, it shows the ongoing struggle for black equality by discussing activism and race relations before 1954 as well as assessing developments after 1968.[23]

Chapter 1 of *Memphis Voices* addresses Jim Crow segregation as well as civil rights and political developments up to the year 1959. Doing so is important for revealing how segregation manifested itself, what civil rights activists were up against, and assessing the impact of their activism then and later—what changed and what continuities existed. It also reveals views of white Memphians toward African Americans. In addition, the personal memories of civil rights activists show how their youth, education, and early adulthood had an impact on their activism as

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[22] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263; Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006); William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2014); Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Gavin Wright, *Sharing the Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the American South* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2013).
[23] Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement," McGuire and Dittmer, eds., *Freedom Rights*.

well as how past civil rights figures influenced them. The chapter looks at the impact of the seminal *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that ruled school segregation unconstitutional by showing how the decision had an impact on civil rights activists as well as reactions of white Memphians to it. The *Brown* decision as well as the return of a small group of African American Memphians who came to make up the local leadership of the NAACP branch all gave an impetus to the civil rights struggle in Memphis. The chapter especially explores the political, legal, and direct action of black Memphians during this time as well as assesses how these civil rights actions fit within the activism of civic clubs.

Chapter 2 focuses on the 1959 election, a pivotal time in the history of civil rights and political developments in Memphis. Four black men ran for public office as a unity slate called the Volunteer Ticket, and their campaign marked the black community's first large-scale attack against white domination in decades. The chapter looks not only at the role of the candidates and leaders but also explores grassroots mobilization of African Americans, including women, for the black candidates and white candidates that the black community threw its support behind. The chapter also looks at intraracial divisions and the opposition of white Memphians to the black candidates as well as the few whites who supported them. Exploring the 1959 election provides an excellent case study more broadly of Memphis political culture at this time, and voices of white and black Memphians are utilized in order to discuss campaigning more generally during this time. The role of media in the election is explored as well as the motivations of black Memphians for engaging in this political effort and reasons why so many white Memphians opposed it.

Chapter 3 addresses direct action from 1960 to 1962 period. When the sit-in movement hit Memphis in March 1960, Maxine Smith, executive secretary of the NAACP branch,

coordinated what became a twenty-month direct action movement locally in order to break down segregation barriers and open up employment opportunities for African Americans. The responses of whites are included to the civil rights activism including that of Claude Armour, the segregationist police chief who above all stood for enforcing the law. Black lawyer H. T. Lockard also discusses escaping a near lynching in nearby Haywood County. The year 1961 saw the beginning of elementary school desegregation, and the chapter reveals how Memphis NAACP branch leaders played a crucial role as did the city's white police chief.

Chapter 4 looks at formal political developments from 1960 to 1963. After the 1959 election, black leaders restructured the Shelby County Democratic Club, a black political club, and it became one of the two major civil rights organizations in Memphis for the next few years in addition to the NAACP branch. Black political club members mobilized for John F. Kennedy in 1960 and white and black candidates in a local election that same year. Strategies, workings, and the impact of the political club are explored. Many black political club leaders and members also were members of the NAACP branch, which continued to engage in legal and nonpartisan political action such as voter registration. The chapter also explores the relationship of both the Memphis NAACP branch and Shelby County Democratic Club to other organizations and movements including the civic clubs, labor movement, and nationally publicized struggle for voting rights in the nearby rural Fayette and Haywood counties.

Chapter 5 looks at civil rights developments from 1962 to 1969. NAACP branch action included legal, direct action, and political action in order to break down additional barriers of segregation. Branch leaders were connected to civil rights developments elsewhere such as James Meredith's integration of the University of Mississippi. Memphis NAACP leaders also worked locally with the Memphis Committee on Community Relations, a biracial group of

community leaders who came together to address civil rights issues. In 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the gradual park desegregation plan of Memphis unconstitutional in *Watson v. Memphis*, a decision argued for by local NAACP attorneys and against by Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr., a local white attorney whose perspectives are included. The year 1964 signified the Shelby County Democratic Club's high-water mark when the black vote provided the balance of power for the election of state and national politicians. A. W. Willis, Jr., a Memphis NAACP lawyer, became the first black legislator since the 1800s, and H. T. Lockard, another Memphis NAACP lawyer, was elected to the county commission. Certainly, the sanitation workers strike of 1968 reveals the continuing economic and racial disparities faced by African Americans despite past civil rights gains, and oral history excerpts of not only African Americans but also whites are used in illuminating this story which sadly led to the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The following year, African Americans conducted a "Black Mondays" movement in order to protest ongoing educational discrimination.

Chapter 1: The Civil Rights Struggle in Memphis in the 1950s

The mid-1950s saw the burgeoning of the black freedom struggle in Memphis. Following the death of the longtime white political boss there, Edward H. Crump, and the Brown v. Board of Education *decision that ruled segregated schools unconstitutional--both of which occurred in 1954--a new generation of African American leaders pressed forth. They were especially active in the formal political and legal realms although some protest activity occurred. Faced with the hostile and paternalistic environment of the Jim Crow system widespread throughout the South, these leaders built on the shoulders of those who were activists before them. For instance, young attorney H. T. Lockard was mentored by Dr. J. E. Walker, the longtime leading black Democrat in Memphis who had made a courageous though unsuccessful bid for the school board in 1951. This chapter particularly focuses on this new generation of leaders and ways in which they contributed to the civil rights movement. It looks at their backgrounds, their personalities, and their efforts as well as the post-Crump political scene in Memphis.*[24]

Childhoods and Youth

Two key African American leaders were the wife and husband team of Maxine and Vasco Smith. Maxine Smith was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1929, and Vasco Smith was born in Harvard, Arkansas, in 1920. Here they describe early childhood experiences that shaped them as eventual leaders.[25] *In addition, Vasco Smith shares his memories of the longstanding historically black school in Memphis, LeMoyne College.*

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[24] Hoppe and Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils*; Elizabeth Gritter, "Local Leaders and Community Soldiers: The Memphis Desegregation Movement, 1955-1961" (honors senior thesis, American University, 2001); Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2007), 190-1; H. T. Lockard, interview by author, Memphis, 13 Jul. 2004, typed notes in author's possession.

[25] On children and youth and the Jim Crow system, see Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006).

Maxine Smith: Early on, with indignation, anger as a very small girl perhaps it led to activism. When I was less than nine years old, my father was hospitalized. I know I was less than nine, because I was nine when he died. I am one of three siblings, the youngest of three. When we would go visit my father at the veteran's hospital and ask for him by name, Mr. Joseph Atkins, the clerk in the window said, "Niggers aren't called mister to white people. So, don't do that anymore," something to that effect. The next time, my mother went one day and the three kids went from school. I asked for Mr. Joseph Atkins. She said, "I *told* you not to say that. I'm not going to give you a permit." I said, "I don't care. I know where my daddy is." I *never* recovered from it. I guess I was ripe and ready by the time. There are other incidents, similar incidents that I can mention.

My mama was poor. The year my daddy died, we wouldn't have had a turkey for Thanksgiving and might not have had one anyway if we hadn't won one with a nickel chance. She had to get out and go to work. Most black folks came up poor. Vasco's father and mother didn't have a sixth grade education between the two of them.

Vasco Smith: My first awareness of racial consciousness occurred almost from the day I was born. When I was two years old, I was in a grocery store, and my father was getting some things further down. This was one of those neighborhood grocery stores owned by some white person. And the white person picked up a cleaver, a big knife cleaver, and sort of just shook it at me, not going to hurt me in any way, but just to frighten me a little bit. My daddy saw what he was doing. I yelled and cried. He came up to the man and asked him, "Look, fellow why you doing that?" He said, "I just wanted to see if he had any rabbit in him." He said, "Hell, no, he doesn't have any rabbit in him. He's all human. And if you do it another time, I will choke you to death with my bare hands." That was in the South in 1922. I knew I was black when I was

two years old, honey, and I've known it ever since. [Laughter.]

My mom was a maid scrubbing white folks' floors. My daddy worked on a railroad, backbreaking labor. My daddy only had a seventh-grade education, but he was an unusual person for just having a seventh-grade education. Mama did not have one year of formal education. But they somehow or other knew the value of education. I was born beside a railroad track in Harvard, Arkansas. It was no city. They called it Harvard because there was a Harvard Yards for the Frisco trains. The Frisco trains used to come to Memphis, but they had to go across the river to be serviced at Harvard Yards. That's where I was born. Now they have resurrected Harvard Yards. It's an upper-class housing area now in that area of homes. They call them Harvard Yards. Most people, I guess, don't know where the name came from. But in riding the locomotives into Memphis and then riding back with them to the shops where they were serviced, Daddy passed the old Virginia Avenue Grammar School, which was right in there. There used to be a lot of railroads coming across the Frisco Bridge down there. There were two railroad bridges down on this end. You would be surprised the number of railroads coming into Memphis. There was the Frisco, the Southern, the L and N, Rock Island, and so forth.

Daddy said that my father's daddy, my grand-daddy, was whiter than you. His father, which would be my great grandfather, was white. He was a plantation owner. A plantation owner had a family here and a family there. Neither one of the women worried about it too much. The black woman was glad that her children were being taken care of. The white woman was afraid to say something about it up there where she was. That was the custom throughout the South. It just wasn't in one case.

Now they're still on the farm, and the white master's up there who is also his granddaddy.

When he got in the fifth grade, my daddy had heard about a school that a man named Booker T. Washington had founded down in Alabama--not too far from Union Springs, Alabama, where my daddy was--the school was called Tuskegee. The word was that if you could found find some way to get there, if you had to walk, they would take you in and give you an education and let you work for them. That was on his mind all the time that one of these days I'm going. But when he got to the fifth grade, the man in the big house--his granddaddy--told his daddy, "You got to take the boys out of school. They've been there long enough. They have to go to the fields." There was no arguing about it. Even though my daddy was in Arkansas, he later said that when his boys got big enough to go to school, he was going to take them to Memphis. Wasn't no white son of a bitch was going to tell him you got to take your boys out of school. Can you imagine that?

Let me tell you what my parents would do. Wasn't making much money. We lived in three-room shotgun houses most of my life. Toilet out in the back, didn't have any damned hot water. Hell, when I grew up I thought folks in Dixie Homes [a public housing project] were rich. Shit, they had hot water, bathtubs, all that stuff. Well, he brought us to Memphis when I was two years old. My brother was four. We didn't have an automobile. We walked everywhere we went. They were active in church. Go to church at night, go to church Sunday morning, church Sunday night. Me and my brother would be behind them and we'd be, "If we ever get out of this house, we're never going to church no more, nowhere." [Laughter.] But as we would be walking, they would compare neighborhoods. They'd say, "Now you see where we live, they don't have any sidewalks, and the street's not paved. You see, this street here is paved. Now these folks got more education than I got, and they make more money than I do. They can live in a better house. Now we want you to get an education so you can live in better houses." Then

we'd get to a street with sidewalks. They'd compare the same thing again. Then when we'd get to a street where a car was parked. "These folks went to what's called a college, and that's after you finish your grammar schools and stuff here. When you go there, they teach you everything that is to be known. You boys are going to college."

Fortunately for us, when I was in the fourth grade, my brother was in the sixth grade, we moved to 825 Saxon Street, which is right behind LeMoyne College. It's a little three-room cottage. When we were there, the john was on the back porch. I think they've enclosed it now. LeMoyne was a very small school then, and it was an American Missionary Association school. That was the only place in Memphis where whites and blacks lived together on the campus. That's right, faculty members, white folks along with blacks. We'd see whites and blacks out on tennis court playing together. That was the only place in Memphis where whites and blacks played together on a tennis court. Nowhere else. My parents would point up there and they'd say folks with education don't bother with nothing like race. They know that everybody if you give them a chance can achieve. They kept pounding that thing into our heads. LeMoyne would have handbills that they circulated throughout the neighborhood whenever, let's say, a missionary to Samoa, Africa, or whatever was going to come and make an address. They'd pass these handbills out. Mama and Daddy would scrub us up, put on some clean clothes. We'd go down, sit up there and listen to this lecture. Daddy would bring his program home. He'd say, "Now, let me tell you about it. In the first place, I've been telling you about college. Now this is a college. Now this one here, if you noticed, he got two letters behind his name. Now that means that he finished college, and he's pretty smart. Now this one here has got about four letters behind his name. Now, he went to two colleges, and he knows twice as much as that one does. That one's already smarter. Now, look at this one here. He got five or six letters and his

last one got a D in it. Now when you see that, ain't nothing in the world he doesn't know." He said, "I want you boys to go to college. If you stay in there if you want to long enough to get a D behind your name, we will work our arms to the bones. All you got to do is stay out of trouble and keep your nose clean." That's right. Can you imagine that? No education at all, really. So while I was in grammar school, it was a foregone conclusion that I was going to college. I just knew it. When I registered at LeMoyne, I just figured that's what I was always going to do.

Now another thing about Daddy and Mama. This was one of the worst things that they ever had to do. There were two newspapers that we used to get in the black community. One was the *Chicago Defender*. The *Chicago Defender* went all over the United States. Sometimes the Pullman porter had to carry them under his coat and drop them off in Ripley, Tennessee, and drop a few off in Covington. That's right. The other was the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The *Pittsburgh Courier* was a national black paper. Got it almost down to Mississippi. I mean you're liable to get your damn head beaten for even reading one. But they've got it, and they'd read it under lamplights. Call in the neighbors. Here's a black hanging up from the tree with fire underneath him burning his body. My daddy called in me and my brother. I was in about the fourth grade. My brother was about the sixth grade. Poor black folks and white folks in the South lived together. But Daddy called us in one day. We played together; we fought together; we did every darn thing except go to school together. Blacks and whites, I mean. Finally, Dad called us in. Daddy was very religious, so was Mama. He had tears in his eyes when he did this. He pulled out a paper, the *Chicago Defender*, and it had a picture of a black being lynched. And he said--it's against all his principles, against everything he ever believed in, but he had to do it for our own protection--he said, "You're getting to the age now, where you going to stop doing what you're doing." He said, "Actually, you can fight together; you can wrestle together." But

he said, "A year or two from now if you wrestling with a white girl, you can be accused of rape. I just got to stop you from doing it." He says, “She's human. You're human. You're all the same. But other folk don't see it that way.” He said, “Somebody could be passing by, who doesn't even know you or her, but he just doesn't like the fact you are playing together. He can get you killed." He cried while he was telling me this.

On the Crump Machine

In order to understand the Memphis political environment that these new leaders found themselves in, it is key to look at the history of Memphis politics, particularly the figure of Edward H. Crump. Born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1874, Crump, a businessperson, quickly rose up the ranks of Memphis politics, being elected mayor in 1909 and serving as the longstanding political boss of Memphis and Shelby County until his death in 1954. His control was so complete that he determined elections not just in the local area but also the state. As historian J. Morgan Kousser observes, “In the four mayoral elections from 1931 to 1943, Crump-backed candidates polled almost 99 percent of the votes . . . a record of one-man control unmatched in any large city in U.S. history.” At the same time, a two-way street emerged between him and black Memphians given that they could vote, which certainly was very unusual for black southerners who overall remained disenfranchised. Although some of this vote was manipulated--the Crump machine, for instance, paid the poll taxes of black Memphians in exchange for their votes--independent black political leaders developed such as Robert R. Church, Jr. Born in 1885, Church mobilized grassroots Memphians into an electoral force and promised votes for the Crump machine in exchange for benefits such as better public services and job opportunities. Church was exiled from Memphis in 1940 for becoming too much of a threat to Crump, and he died in 1952. Before Church’s death, however, Crump’s control was

dealt a severe blow. In 1948, white liberal reformers, laborites, and African Americans united to elect two non-Crump supported candidates to office: Estes Kefauver to the U.S. Senate and Gordon Browning to the governor's office. Although Crump saw his influence diminish after that election, "his iron hand wrapped in velvet" continued to operate in local and state politics until he died, as the black newspaper the Memphis World observed.[26]

In these excerpts, white and black political observers discuss the Crump machine.

Hunter Lane: Well I think to set a backdrop for Memphis politics in the '50s and the '60s you've got to go back a little while and take a good look at what politics was like in Memphis up until that time. We had a very effective, very all-inclusive political machine here headed up by Edward Crump, who had served in the government back in the '20s, but in the later years he was just sort of the uncrowned king. He was the one that headed up the organization and he was a fantastic organizer. Actually during the years that he wasn't in office it served in his way. He provided honest government, I mean honest in the sense there wasn't any graft or that sort of thing. Of course a dictatorship is never very honest in that way. It pervaded the whole social structure here, I mean Crump even controlled the people who ran for Parent-Teachers Association offices. He was just thoroughly in control. He had a lot of contemporaries who were leaders in the city in one way or another that really thought a lot of him. There's a great statue of him out in Overton Park in Memphis. The title of it is "The Great Public Benefactor." He provided honest government. He did some pretty reprehensible things too. He was really against organized labor and there were rumors that he had labor leaders beaten up and that sort of thing. He never got tagged with it, but they were beaten up and he was the man in

[26] Gritter, *River of Hope*. The quotes are from J. Morgan Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice: Minority Voting Rights and the Undoing of the Second Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1999), 143, 146; Gloria Brown Melton, "Blacks in Memphis, Tennessee, 1920-1955: A Historical Study" (Ph.D. diss., Washington State University, 1982), 330.

control. He would have known about it. But anyhow, Edmund Orgill was another one of the real leaders, and it was a relatively small group, but they kept chipping away and in 1948 they supported Estes Kefauver for the Senate. Crump's man was in the race too, and although Kefauver didn't carry Shelby County, he did carry the state. That was the first real chink in Crump's armor, and from then on there were more insurgents, or whatever you want to call them. The opposition was more successful and gradually this group of people, anti-Crump people, took on more momentum and more success. The labor movement was generally anti-Crump, because Crump was anti-labor. Crump died in 1954, and his organization sort of fell apart after that.

Samuel B. Hollis: It was a paternalistic environment. Mr. Crump made all the decisions. If Mr. Crump said that's the way it was going to be, that's the way it was, and so people didn't use their intellect, didn't think outside the box. They thought in the box, in Mr. Crump's box, and they just didn't think. You know, look at the rise of Hitler. I mean if you think about a dictatorship and people getting used to it, and things are pretty good, and they don't have to make any decisions, and the guy seems to make more right decisions than wrong decisions people go along with it.

In those days, Mr. Crump found young, bright guys and said, "I want you to run for the county court." They said, "Sure, we'll do that." So they served on the county court. I mean you didn't get elected president of the Rotary Club unless you were a Mr. Crump man or the Kiwanis Club, or the Elks, or the VFW. They used to say Mr. Crump maintained the political power and Mr. Hale maintained the economic power. E.W. Hale was the political boss in the county outside the city. He and Mr. Crump worked everything out. Hale was a smart businessman.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr: A lot of states had devices to keep blacks from registering to

vote. But in Shelby County, the black vote was a key part of the machine that a guy named Crump, Ed Crump from Mississippi, put together. He controlled the black vote. He headed that machine. The black vote in Memphis was basically maneuvered through control of the school system. Teachers got hired, principals got made because of being responsible citizens in terms of what their districts did in support of the machine. If your student population was caught in an area that did not show a healthy turnout for that machine, then you had a hard time getting stuff for your school. You had a hard time getting good teachers or promotions for teachers and so forth. The teachers would give out lists to people that the Crump machine wanted supported. That was the way it went. In the other areas, he had one or two blacks that sort of were muscle. Like one of them had a whiskey store--the only one in town black-owned. That was his reward for muscle. That was the system in place, city and county, until 1948 when Estes Kefauver ran and some of the anti-machine Democrats because then it was Solid South and the Democratic primaries were the election.

Maxine Smith: Memphis was a little different from other cities because of the old Crump machine. You know, that machine government. I hate to say anything good could come out of machine politics. E. H. Crump died when Vasco and I were at Scott Air Force Base, about a year after we married. He controlled Memphis and Tennessee, gosh, for years and years and years. But black folk voted. The better is black folk were voted by Mr. Crump because they thought Mr. Crump would know who they voted for. He had methods of calling them to the polls. This had started early on in the century. I'm saying that to say we at least were acclimated to the political process. We had been to the polls unlike in many of the cities where blacks couldn't go. See up in Fayette County, a predominately black county at that time, they wouldn't even let them go. But Mr. Crump sent us and we voted. The forward thinking whites who

finally brought an end to his machine would not be dominated by a machine. Of course he had his Crumplets. [Laughter.] We were called, those of us who subscribed to him were his little brown Crumplets. That was a little before my active time. He kind of controlled the state in his heyday.

Cadre of Leaders

Crump left no political successor in his wake after his death. White political activist Anne W. Shafer recalls, "When Mr. Crump died in '54, then that's when Memphis politics opened up. Everybody was scrambling to be the leader and there were so many of them fighting among themselves. Some of the people who had been Mr. Crump's leaders--he had them all appointed to all the different commissions and whatever--were vying for power too." Maxine Smith remembers that Crump's death provided an opening for more political efforts by African Americans. Into this mix came the cadre of leaders, all involved with the Memphis National Association for the Advancement of Colored People branch, who spearheaded the black freedom movement in Memphis, Tennessee, from the mid-1950s to mid-1960s. The core leadership included H.T. Lockard, who served as president of the branch in the 1950s and headed the legal redress committee; Maxine Smith, first a full-time volunteer and later executive secretary of the branch; Vasco Smith, who was a board member and then vice president of the branch; Benjamin L. Hooks, Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr. and A.W. Willis, Jr. who were involved as lawyers and political strategists; Jesse H. Turner, Sr., who was chair of the board, later branch president, and the plaintiff in the lawsuit to desegregate the libraries; and Laurie Sugarmon, later known as Dr. Miriam DeCosta-Willis, who was the wife of Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., and involved in political and protest efforts. Most of these individuals hailed originally from Memphis. They all studied outside of Memphis, earning graduate degrees, and came to or back to the city to fight

for desegregation. Most of the men were war veterans. The <u>*Brown v. Board of Education*</u> *decision provided their efforts with legal backing. Maxine Smith remembers about* <u>*Brown,*</u> *"It was like the Emancipation Proclamation to us. It was just that important."*[27]

In the following excerpts, the personalities, backgrounds, and connections of the leaders are discussed, and Dr. DeCosta-Willis discusses the importance of education in her family.

Vasco Smith: I was in the Korean War. I was at Scott Air Force, had a rank of captain. When I came back to Memphis, Maxine and I got involved almost right away. Just not much was going on. Well, let me go back a little back further than that. You asked Maxine Smith something about the reasons for the type of results that were obtained here without violence to the extent that you had in other areas. It was due to the fact that the May 17, 1954 decision, *Brown v. Board*, had just been reached. The year before we started coming back. Jesse H. Turner, Sr., had served as a captain in the artillery in the Army division in World War II, and then he came back to study, to do his post-grad studies. He was just coming back at that time. Russell Sugarmon. A.W. Willis Jr., H. T. Lockard had come a little bit earlier. Ben Jones had come a little bit earlier, Ben Hooks. In other words, this group of intelligent, well-prepared blacks who were concerned about the progress of their people just happened to be coming back as a group at the same time to the same place with the same ideas, and that's the beauty of it. That's where it really started.

I think that the remarkable thing about this group that formed the core of the leadership of the movement in Memphis is that there were social connections, there were family connections,

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[27] Anne W. Shafer, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 28 Jun. 2004, Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter referred to as SOHP), 9; Maxine A. Smith, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 26 Jul. 2004, SOHP, 5; Shirley Downing, "Desegregation Ruling's Impact Called Monumental," *Commercial Appeal* (hereafter *CA*), 15 May 1994, B1.

college connections. Some had been schoolmates with others. Even though there was a range of difference in ages. I'd say that maybe Jesse Turner Sr. was probably the oldest, and I would be maybe the next oldest. Probably H. T. Lockard is my same age. Then we'd drop down about eight or ten years and pick up Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., A. W. Willis, Jr., Benjamin L. Hooks, and my wife Maxine. That's basically the inner core unless I can think of somebody else. For example, I went to school with Jesse Turner. We were classmates. Turner was certainly one of the most outstanding leaders in the movement, president of the NAACP for many, many years and during this particular era he was. There were church connections, social connections, just so many different things that we just knew each other.

The NAACP board met once a month. The organization branch meeting itself, the public meetings, were once a month. We just met whenever it was necessary. We saw each other all the time. For example, I was always on the board of Tri-State Bank. Jesse Turner was also a banker. He was president of Tri-State Bank. That's our black bank here. I'd see Jesse, and we'd talk down there. Maybe Russell would stop by, whatever. We all lived generally in the same neighborhoods too. We socialized together. We belonged to the same clubs. Some of us belonged to the same fraternities or what have you. It was just a matter of seeing each other very often.

Now Jesse Turner. He was tall, slender, dark-brown-skinned person from Mississippi, a very small town in Mississippi. The odd thing about Jesse was that though he was from Mississippi, he never went to public schools a day in his life. He was educated in private schools. Where he came from, private schools were about the only thing he could go to, because they didn't have public schools. So actually, at that time, you had these little small church schools. They called them academies that went through grammar school and high school. They

may or may not have been good schools. I don't know. They probably didn't teach much other than arithmetic and English and writing and reading. But, whatever. There was even a college there. These were religious schools. These were schools that were financed by the various churches, because Mississippi just didn't have educational opportunities other than that for blacks. So it's an odd thing. You say you attended private schools that meant that you were on a certain level. But he said he attended private schools because that is all he had to go to. Then, after leaving there, he came here to LeMoyne College. We entered LeMoyne College at the same time. LeMoyne's a small, black, historically black private school. Then, he went to the University of Chicago and what have you. Jesse was an accountant. He was also a veteran of the World War II. He served in the Army divisions. Had a very, very outstanding record.

He was the exception to a part of thing that I don't think I've mentioned and that is that we all enjoyed socializing together. We didn't just sit around and plan on how to take advantage of any situation or how to get the white man off our backs. We enjoyed ourselves too. However, the one thing that Jesse did was, strangely enough, he was an unusually good bridge player. That's odd, because he really didn't care for social life much at all. I think that came about because of his mathematics, because bridge is mathematical. He loved to play bridge. He was just all business. While some of us were eating and drinking and having fun together, he wanted to talk business. If we weren't talking business, he'd just as soon get up and go home. I would say that he was one of the stalwarts in the movement. But I can't point out just one, because I think all of those people contributed something one way or another.

Jesse was president of the N-Double-A-C-P branch a long time. I was even thinking about it, because I was looking through my yearbook at LeMoyne College. Jesse was active in the N-Double-A-C-P then. So was I. I'd forgotten all about that until I saw it just the other day.

He was president for a little while. I don't know just how long. I know he must have been president for some five or six years. Of course, you know he was involved in some of the lawsuits, the libraries. He was the plaintiff. He brought some stability to the organization.

Then of course there was Maxine. Maxine could very easily have gone ahead and worked on her doctorate and been head of the department of languages in most any college if she wanted to. That probably would've been what she would've done had it not been for the fact that the movement came along. It was the thing that she felt compelled to do. She just--as history has shown--dedicated her life to it. That almost describes her.

She put all of our bull into action. [Laughter.] She organized. She recruited people, young and old. She did the public relations. She did the day-to-day work. All of us also had jobs to do. But she just put it all together.

I pushed the organization to the brink. I just always felt that I was impatient. I just always felt that we could go a little bit further and a little bit faster. As a result, there was nothing that I was not willing to do. As a result, I think I was jailed either five or six times. I don't know which it was right now.

I think everybody of this inner group was jailed, well, except of course, the lawyers. We tried to keep them out of jail, so that they could get us out of jail. [Laughter.] Maxine was jailed. Jesse was jailed too. Then, the others were lawyers.

Benjamin Hooks was part of the inner circle but I'm trying to think of the thing that separated Hooks just a little bit. Hooks was very active in the events and the planning in the early stages, but early on, somehow, Ben was appointed assistant public defender. So yeah, up until that point, Ben was very much an active part of everything that was going on. He was also a stabilizing influence. Ben was a minister. He became a minister very early. While we were in

the midst of the movement, he was called to preach. I think that that caused him to be a person who thought things out just a little more carefully than some of us did. Ben was a person who thought things out a just a little bit more clearly than some of us. All of us wanted the same thing, but frequently we had different methods to suggest of obtaining that particular thing. So it all had to come together at some point. Ben's influence was he was more legal minded, and he was just the leveling influence in the group. He went on the national level. For example, he became national president of the N-Double-A-C-P.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: When Jesse Turner was in the Army, he won the Bronze Star.[28] He was the commander of a black tank unit in Italy in support of a white regiment.[29] He came to a mine field. He was leading his tank or whatever the assignment was. His tanks followed him through. He got up and walked through this minefield. His tanks followed him through the minefield. He got a Bronze Star for it so they could complete that mission. That was the kind of man he was. He was to the point, and there wasn't any frivolity. If you have something to say, say it. Once it was discussed, he wanted to vote. Once the vote was over with, he went. That was it.

A.W. Willis was brilliant. He was conceptually a genius. I think that he conceived the idea of the precincts sort of thing. I went around and explained it to folk, precinct by precinct.[30]

Maxine Smith never let up. I mean, I remember, three or four years into this process, it was almost like going to work. You get up and wonder what is going on. Maxine would call. One day she called me, said, "Hey, what's going on?" I said, "Oh, nothing." "Good, there's this

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[28] The Bronze Star Medal is a U.S. military decoration awarded for heroic or meritorious service not involving aerial flights.
[29] The black tank battalion was the 758th.
[30] The local black Democratic club, the Shelby County Democratic Club, that Sugarmon and Willis were part of had a precinct structure.

guy named Eric Weinberg in jail in Brownsville. You got to go fix it." [Laughter.] *Damn*, Maxine. You know, I'm thinking about a lazy Saturday. Go to hell. She took my alibi before I had a chance to come up with one. [Interruption]. Brownsville was a town where if you had to rank the cities a black person would be most likely to enjoy himself on vacation and you're ranking from one to fifty, Brownsville would be number 300. I mean the last lynching in Tennessee occurred in Brownsville. They say they locked up all of the bums to keep them out the lynching party to make sure that everybody knew it was an official action.
They didn't want anybody to misunderstand that this was the leadership of Brownsville.

H. T. Lockard was from rural West Tennessee. Lockard is a very determined human being too. He worked his way through college and law school. He was one of the people who came *in* to Memphis. Most of the rest of these people were just sort of Memphis rooted, I think. Lockard put down his roots in that process. He's amazing. He's got real drive and tenacity I guess you can call it.

Vasco is a guy who: he has a fire, but he can get ignited, [Laughter] which you don't want to do. [Laughter.] He can make it a weenie roast or a cinder pile, one of the two. He's fiery. Maxine is just persistent. She just never quits, really. It was an interesting mix of personalities involved in this thing.

Ben Hooks. I guess I'm like Benny, but I'm a private person, and Benny is a public person. I mean, I don't think there's anybody Benny hasn't met, doesn't know. He's very articulate. A.W. used to like to go watch to see who would stiffen up and see how many people would get stiff by the time he got through with a speech. Passed out and stiff.

Miriam DeCosta-Willis: I come from a family where education is the number one priority, beginning with my great-grandfather, who was born a slave, who could barely read and

write. He was taught a little bit of how to read and his numbers by his master, who was the same age as he was. He came out of slavery, got land, property, became one of the wealthiest blacks in Georgia, educated twelve children, sent all twelve of them to college, five of whom were in college at the same time, and one of the mantras, so to speak, that I always heard growing up was what he said, "Get your education. They can't take that away from you." I heard that over and over and over. [Laughs.] I happen to come from two parents who are highly educated. My father was the youngest of eleven children, put himself through college, married, had two kids, put himself through the master's program, worked the whole time, acquired a Ph.D. My mother was educated. She too received a master's in social work and then after that did post graduate work at Stanford, Columbia, the University of Chicago, five or six universities, and I told her, "Mother, you're the one who should have gotten the Ph.D.," but she supported my father.

So growing up there was never an idea that I would not go to college. It was just a matter of where I was going to college. I feel that I'm very privileged in that I attended a very exclusive private school, Westover School in Middlebury, Connecticut. From there I went to Wellesley where I got my college degree and then I got a master's from Johns Hopkins at a time when I was the only black, one of very few women, at Johns Hopkins because it was a male school. Then I went back, with four children, to get my Ph.D. I had a really interesting time at Johns Hopkins, because I tried to get into all of the universities around Memphis but they were segregated and so I applied to Johns Hopkins because my family lived there and I could get support. Dr. Edelman, who was chair of the Romance languages department, looked at my picture, and it was sort of nondescript and my name was Miriam Sugarmon so he thought that I was Jewish. He started not to admit me, I found out later, because he wondered what a nice Jewish woman was doing leaving her husband [Laughs] and coming to graduate school.

The Hostile Environment of Race Relations

All African Americans in Memphis faced a hostile and paternalistic environment of race relations. Here white and black observers discuss this aspect of city life.

Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr.: I remember I had to ride the bus sometimes, didn't have a car, and the blacks all had to sit in the black. I later represented Memphis Street Railway, and of course it was a city ordinance that blacks had to sit in the back. Didn't matter how many seats were open in the front of the bus. The fares were seven cents when I came to Memphis. The fare was the same for both races. It just occurred to me how unfair that was with seats open they'd make poor blacks all stand up in back of the bus with seats vacant in the front of that. I remember making that observation. Same with bathrooms. We have a bathroom in Central, in well, it's a park in the middle of downtown Memphis that's been here since Andy Jackson and the other two founders of Memphis laid out Memphis. We had one bathroom for whites only. I said, "What do blacks do when they want to go to bathroom in downtown Memphis?"

John T. Fisher: So I've really been in Memphis all the time. I grew up in a traditional Southern city. There were no black children in my grammar school in the '40s. I went to few social occasions with a black person on an equal kind of basis. It just didn't happen. It wasn't what the world was about. That began to change some. In the '60s is when it really started to change. All kinds of social awareness to do with racial divide came up, and there's still plenty of racial divide around. It's not short in supply today, but it's better than it was. It's a lot better than it was.

Lewis Donelson: I was walking out of a cocktail party in the mid-'50s and Harry Wellford was with me, and I said, "Harry, I'm so tired of nigger jokes I can't stand it." He said, "So am I." I said, "Let's try something. Next time someone starts to tell it let's just say, 'I don't

want to hear it.'" And you know we stopped them in our crowd. Oh, it took half a dozen times of saying I don't want--but the first thing you know, other people were saying, "I don't want to hear it either."

Helen Wax: When my husband and I came to Memphis in 1946 to Temple Israel, we found in Memphis the zoo was restricted to coloreds, as they were called, one day a week. There was one public library branch open to blacks one day a week. There was Jim Crow on the buses. Memphis State was completely segregated. I mean there were no blacks accepted at Memphis State. It was called Memphis State then.[31] Let's see, the buses, the zoo, the library, Memphis State, were all definitely restricted.

See, Memphis touches Mississippi and Arkansas. I mean we literally touch Mississippi. You go down Third Street and you cross a line and you're in Mississippi. Arkansas is right over the river. Well, those states had more of what we call plantation mentality and we had a lot of that in Memphis. A lot of the people here came from there. So this was really a population that was strongly anti-black. They were used to certain things.

Johnnie Mae Peters: We had to ride in the back of the bus. If you wanted to go in some of these eating places you had to go in the back door. You know, it just wasn't open. Like my baby, he was five years old. He didn't want to drink "colored" water. We went to Goldsmith's Department Stores. You couldn't even try on hats at some department stores. It was bad back in that time. And you know it was just, people were getting killed and everything else back in that day, trying to get folks registered to vote and stuff. You was just getting an opportunity back in the '60s to get some elected officials that were black, you know. So what we did was help to elect mostly the white candidates back like in the '50s leading on up to the early '60s until we

[31] Memphis State is now known as the University of Memphis.

got enough blacks elected, and some whites that would vote for blacks, to get our first elected officials. You know back then there just wasn't nothing opened up to us. We had to fight for everything we got. That's why it was people going to jail. Maxine and Vasco Smith stayed in jail more than anybody. [Laughter] It was just hard back in the early '60s and stuff like that, '50s, like about '54 on up until I guess about '64. You know it was just harder then. But by the time it got up in the '60s we were getting black elected officials, or blacks had influence, and some whites that would help people.

We were just picketing for our rights, trying to achieve the things that everybody else had that we wanted and felt that we had a right to, to be able to go in the front door or go to a bathroom and not have to go to a segregated bathroom and ride in the back of the bus. You know you could be sitting in a seat halfway in the bus and a person could come ask you to get up. Even the bus driver would stop the bus and say, "Move farther to the back." So that means you had to stand up, and you could have just got off of work and be tired. You could go in Levy's, or another store downtown, where they had hats and stuff and they wouldn't let you try them on, back in the '50s and '60s, because of the fact they just didn't want you to try on their goods because they felt that you wasn't a full class citizen so you didn't have a right to try on their goods. You could buy it but then you couldn't try it on. Now how you see yourself buying a pair of shoes and you couldn't try then on? But those things happened, you know. People were beat, killed, sent to jail and everything, just to have rights.

I was in Montgomery, Alabama, for a convention when you couldn't ride the bus. We walked everywhere. We went to a PTA convention and everybody--cabs, the people who drove their car would let you ride. That's when they was trying to get the buses integrated.

H. T. Lockard's Story

Even before Crump's death and the Brown v. Board of Education *decision was reached, H. T. Lockard was working for civil rights in Memphis, Tennessee, out of his office on Beale Street. He was aided by Johnnie Mae Peters who assisted him in such aspects as maintaining the membership files. Mentored by the prominent black Democrat J. E. Walker, Lockard also involved himself in local and state political campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s including supporting Walker in his unsuccessful bid for the school board in 1951. Lockard recalls, "As early as I can remember, my involvement involved speaking at churches, urging people to ride the bus to go to the courthouse and vote."*[32] *In addition, Lockard was connected with the national office of the NAACP, working with such luminaries as famed lawyer Thurgood Marshall.*

Vasco Smith: H. T. Lockard was a country boy from the hills of West Tennessee. He never lost a little bit of that touch. I guess, tenacity would be the best characteristic I could think of for him. Very tenacious. Actually when Lockard began working for the N-Double-A-C-P in Memphis, most of this cadre of individuals had not come back to Memphis from their various studies and so forth and so on. For a while, he was here by himself. There were other people but not this particular group. It just hadn't assembled yet. We knew generally about them, but Lockard, as I said, was pretty much the whole show. He was president of the local chapter. He was state president. He was legal counsel. He was everything. He did an outstanding job, and he probably laid the foundation for a lot of things that happened later on.

H.T. Lockard: I was born in Lauderdale County, Tennessee. That's fifty-four or five miles north of Memphis. That's called northwest Tennessee. I was born at ten a.m., so my

[32] H. T. Lockard, interview by author, Memphis, 13 Jul. 2004, typed notes in author's possession; Johnnie Mae Peters, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 29 Jun. 2004, SOHP, 1-2; H. T. Lockard, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 29 Jul. 2004, SOHP, 4-6. For a profile of Lockard, see Elizabeth Gritter, "Memories of H. T. Lockard," *Southern Cultures* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 106-16.

mother says, on June the 24th, 1920. I was enlisted on April the 18th, 1942, and I was in the Army assigned specifically to the Medical Corps. I served six months stateside and the rest of the forty-three months was in North Africa, Italy, France, and Germany. I was discharged on October the 28, 1945.

On the completion of high school in 1940, I had a scholarship offer, and I accepted to attend LeMoyne College in the fall of 1940. I was there two years--that's preceding going into the Army. Following my discharge from the Army, I came back and finished in two summers and one full school year, and thereafter, with the lapse of one semester I went to law school in February of 1948 in St. Louis, Lincoln University's Law School, which was a law school mandated by the Supreme Court as a result of the refusal of the board of regents at the University of Missouri to admit minorities. They said prior to that time, the university was paying tuition and train fare or bus fare, whatever, twice a year for blacks to go to the University of Illinois Law School at Champaign-Urbana or such other law school that has its doors open. Of course, the Supreme Court in that decision simply said that the state of Missouri could not discharge its duties to its minority citizens by providing out-of-state tuition.[33] I entered in '48 and went two summers and two regular sessions. I graduated in June of '50, passed the bar, took the bar in June the same year, missed it. I took it again in October same year. I passed. I worked there in a job unrelated to law from October to December. I applied to reciprocity to Tennessee, and thereafter, I moved back to Tennessee.

My involvement in the NAA actually started in St. Louis while I was in law school. For the lack of anything better to do--and that's not the way to word it--but the economic situation

[33] In *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada*, 305 U.S. 337 (1938), the Supreme Court struck down the part of Missouri's law that denied blacks admission to law schools in the state but provided funding for blacks to attend law schools out of state. As a result, Missouri established a separate law school for blacks at the all-black Lincoln University.

was very bad, and I just didn't have a lot of activity on Sunday afternoons. The pastor of the church that I attended was the president of the NAACP. He periodically made an announcement to come to the NAACP meeting. They served a little repast and I found it to my liking since I was so strapped for cash other than necessities to make the NAACP meeting. From that, I would get some inspiration as well as some food and fellowship and that sort of thing. So I really got my introduction as to what it was like, what they were doing, and so forth in St. Louis.

From that exposure/experience, I came to Memphis to set up practice. Little did I know that conditions were as bad as they really were. Having spent my younger years at LeMoyne--which is just across the way over there, away from downtown--working at odd jobs at night, it wasn't a real opportunity to get a *feel* of really what the conditions were. As I said, being a student and strapped for time and studying, I just spent most of my time in the neighborhood where I lived and on my job and in school. Little did I know when I got out of school and started to work in the community, encountering such institutions as the police force, city courts, all courts as far as that goes, there was just so much *blatant* discrimination until it dawned on me that maybe I might want to sort work on that in that area to make working conditions and the surroundings just a little bit more peaceable.

It was from that I joined with the local branch, having gone first to my college fraternity. I wasn't inspired at all at what the regular chapter was doing. I went to the LeMoyne alumni, and they likewise were sitting around talking about fund-raisers and annual events and that sort of thing. So what I experienced didn't lend itself to the kind of thing that I was interested in. I went to the branch and found branch meetings. There I found very, very few people but a solid core of mostly men who seemed to be interested and determined to addressing some of the existing problems and in fact doing something about it.

I think it must've been in 1952, maybe. We had an election, and I ran for president of the NAACP branch. I lost the election by one vote. What had happened, the national office of the association through its youth director had written to all the local branches and state conferences throughout the country to seek some means by which we might get into the youth chapters, form youth chapters by going into the schools. To my surprise, when I made that attempt, I found that all African American principals, except one, were just a little bit hesitant. They promised to get back to me in the mail, something of that sort. They never did. Then I contacted this one principal. He leveled with me. He told me that the NAACP was controversial in its nature. But he said that if the superintendent agrees, I'll be to glad have you come into school and form a chapter. Well, I thought that was just more than helpful because the whole objective was to get into the school. The response I was getting from these others guys was kind of a subterfuge. They weren't saying yea or nay. They weren't saying anything.

What follows is what I have always found rather intriguing. I made an appointment with the superintendent, and he kept me waiting for, oh, at least an hour and a half. It was an afternoon. I don't remember now whether he or his administrative assistant said that the day had come to an end and that he wouldn't be able to see me. I then and there made another appointment to come back sometime subsequent. The date arrived, and after a long, extraordinary delay of waiting I was able to see him. I guess nowadays we'd call him a redneck. Then you'd call him a reprobate. But he proceeded to lecture me as a young lawyer by saying such things that the NAA was for adults. It was a communist front organization. I, of course, knew what the NAA stood for. So, I engaged him, I think, rather effectively.

In conclusion, after admonishing me and attempting to embarrass and all, the answer was no. We had another African-American lawyer who had not been involved in the organization.

He said simply this, "Young man, you would do well to follow in the footsteps of--" and he called this lawyer's name. But he didn't say why. I was, at that time, in this lawyer's office. So, after he had finished, I said, "Mr. Superintendent you mentioned a while back that I would do well in emulating my mentor and so forth and so on. Just what did you mean?" He said, "Well, he hadn't caused us any problems." So I guess, well, I knew what he meant--the white establishment had been left untouched and undisturbed. This lawyer was a very brilliant lawyer, much more than I or I will ever be. No criticism of him, but that was the observation the superintendent made.

I was elected president of the Memphis branch of the NAACP in 1953 and served until the summer of 1957. Summer of '57 something came up. Something came up. All the Southern states and their respective legislatures were in the process of passing laws that were referred to as interposition. It was to interpose the state against the federal government and all those that espoused the tenets of the federal government and so forth. Not in this state, but we feared it. It was pretty widespread throughout the South. As a result of passing these laws, the law enforcement people were invading the NAACP branch offices. They were raiding NAACP offices. They didn't get to us, the Memphis branch. But we having heard that was going on, in 1957, that was the year we didn't conduct a membership campaign. Incidentally, the office of the NAACP was in my law office. So I carried all of the old membership files and so forth home. But what we did was we conducted a life membership drive. Life memberships, I think, were $500 or so. Mainly, we solicited professional people, except school teachers. School teachers felt vulnerable.[34] As a consequence, they wouldn't join. All the physicians, doctors,

[34] Branch records indicate that Lockard was elected branch president in January 1955 and stepped down in March 1958. However, branch records for the early 1950s are spotty. H. T. Lockard, "Letter to Walter White," 17 Jan. 1955, NAACP Branch Files Geographical File, Box C186, folder: Memphis NAACP 1951-55, Papers of the NAACP, Group II, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter MD). See also:

dentists, other businessmen, undertakers, insurance executives, and all that. We did real well on our fund-raising that year. As a consequence, we were able to convince Thurgood Marshall to come here in the spring--I think it was in the spring of 1957--to speak to a mass rally. We had all these people stand up who we had already solicited. These, of course, were announced at that meeting, very memorable occasion. It started raining early afternoon. The downpour increased with the passage of time. By the time we were to assemble in this church, which seated about 1,800, you couldn't see your hand before your eyes. People were just coming and coming and coming. We brought in chairs to put in the aisles.

It might be interesting to know we had legal clinics throughout the South and Southwest. I started in 1955. I attended my first NAACP convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. From that meeting, the powers that be, I guess, kind of evaluate you and see that you have interest and all that. So from Atlantic City I got invited to various seminars and meetings and so forth. So, beginning in 1955 and continuing on ad finitum I was invited, possibly up in the ’70s.

I served as the administrator or executive of the NAACP, and I also was head of the legal redress committee from 1953 to '57. Obviously that was wearing two hats. The heat was turned up on lawyers stirring up litigation. I'm sure there were some instances of it. But I never stirred up litigation. People came to me and said, "I'm tired on riding on the back of the bus. Will you represent me?" I said, "Sure." "I want to play golf." This dentist came to me and said, "What do I do?" I said, "Go out on the golf course and attempt to play. If they don’t bother you, you play. If they do, come back to me and tell me what happened." But it was a matter of people just looking, the powers that be, looking for the opportunity to strike out at lawyers. So,

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“Lockard Is Named Head of Memphis NAACP, *Memphis Press-Scimitar* (hereafter *PS*), 3 Jan. 1955. As a result of the official attack on the NAACP, no Memphis branch meetings were held from March 1957 to February 1958. W. C. Patton, “Memphis NAACP Campaign Moves Forward,” Mar. 1958, Papers of the NAACP, Group III, box C145, folder: Memphis NAACP 1958, MD.

Thurgood Marshall and some of his colleagues were at this meeting in Dallas and I was trying to get some direction. It was a special meeting for discussing legal strategies of cases that we had pending. So, Thurgood had said, "Lockard, you're in too many things." Well, it wasn't that simple because I had tried all along to get somebody to serve, but there was just no takers. People, it might not be easy for you to understand, going back fifty years or almost fifty years, things were just different. People were losing their lives for nothing in terms of the violence and intimidation and that sort of thing. It just so happened that my make-up was such that I guess you could say, "Well, it can't be any worse. It can't. If I'm taken, if my life has to go for this cause, so will it be." I just willed it. I was going to stay with it. And I did.

During this time I had my own law practice in addition to doing civil rights activities. African-American lawyers weren't in vogue in this town at that time, which is to say I just didn't have much legal business. I had plenty of time to devote to the efforts of the local branch, of the regional branch, of the state conference, and of the national office. So, I kind of got a good baptizing in what was going on because I had the time to do it. As time passed, my business picked up.

On the Arrival of the Smiths in Memphis and the NAACP

Lockard was soon joined by other key leaders of the Memphis freedom movement, including Vasco and Maxine Smith. As Maxine Smith details, she and her husband quickly became involved with the local branch of the NAACP.

Maxine Smith: Vasco was in service paying Uncle Sam two years when we married. That was from '53 to '55. We could hardly wait as time came closer for his discharge to come back to Memphis. Counting the days almost. Some time just a day or two before we were packed and they were moving us, we just questioned each other, "What are we so excited

about?" Memphis was a *completely* segregated city. We didn't have jobs. We didn't have a home. Our mothers were here. But it's always good to come home. That was the atmosphere in '55. Despite the '54 Supreme Court, May '54 Supreme Court action, *Brown versus Board*, no movement, whatsoever, had been made in Memphis to comply.

We immediately looked for the NAACP, which was the only civil rights organization here at that time and practically now. The others come and go, which I have no problem with. So, I guess they had 300 members. It wasn't always easy to find. Well, you know, who knew about it or where do you join the NAACP? But we found it and began attending meetings. Still do, the fourth Sunday of every month. [Laughter.] Just changed places once. The YMCA, which happens to be right across the street from where we still meet, kicked us out. We were a little too--not rebellious--active or whatever. They just weren't in tune with the NAACP. So there was a black church right across the street that welcomed us, and we've been there ever since.

Vasco and Maxine Smith started attending meetings, and Maxine Smith looked at the older men who were part of the branch "as heroes." She remembers that the NAACP had a small membership. "I was just so glad to be there," she comments. "I was twenty-five-years old. Really, they were our leaders. We just came back with fresh ideas, fresh blood." After surpassing more than 3,500 members per year from 1946 to 1948, the Memphis NAACP chapter had declined to 880 members in 1949 and had usually not exceeded 1,000 members over the next five years. Maxine Smith's memory that only some 300 members existed indicates that many members were not active.[35]

[35] Smith, interview, 41; Gritter, *River of Hope*, 189.

Maxine Smith: Let me tell you how I got involved in Tennessee. I was rejected from Memphis State at that time. Russell Sugarmon's wife--they're since divorced--would say, "Maxine, come and go to Memphis State with me."[36] We both had six-month-old babies. I said, "Suppose they take us." She was Phi Beta Kappa from Wellesley, and I had a master's degree from Middlebury. But we weren't quite good enough according to them. But anyway, we went on our own. You know, I was just a member of the NAACP. We just went as two young mothers. I don't know how it made the papers because we didn't know anything about press conferences or anything like that. We just went. But somebody out there must've known that this was just pure racism. Two applicants with our qualifications being rejected because of our scholastic backgrounds, and it made the paper. I don't know how. From this, the NAACP called us to serve on the board. As I say, the NAACP was very small here in those days. I don't think they had any women on the board. I think they probably wanted some women. So, that's how it started. This was in '57, now. I was a volunteer.

This was funny. When Laura Sugarmon and I applied for Memphis State, we'd have these calls. *Late at night*, they started. *Late at night*. "Maxine, if you're going to come to Memphis State"--excuse their French--"I'm going to fuck you everyday." I said, "Oh, good. I like that." [Laughter.] "Can I major in it?" [Laughter.] Laura was screaming, and they didn't call me anymore. [Laughter.]

Miriam DeCosta-Willis: I was pregnant, had my baby November 17. That's my Tarik, who is now a city judge. Maxine had her baby two months early, Smitty, about a month later. She was teaching at LeMoyne College. I took her place at LeMoyne College because my baby had come, he was fine, he was a nine-month baby, and then I thought, well, I come from an

[36] Russell B. Sugarmon Jr.'s then-wife Laurie Sugarmon is now known as Miriam DeCosta-Willis.

educated family, it's time for me to get going here. So I said, well, there's Memphis State College, at that time. They did have a limited graduate program. So I talked to Maxine about why don't we go out to Memphis State and try to enroll, try to get in, and she wasn't interested at all. Number one, she already had a master's. She had graduated from Spelman College, got her master's from Middlebury, and I had graduated from Wellesley by that time. So we decided we would go out there, I think it was late April, first of May, and we went out and filled out our application. Well, they diddled and dawdled [Laughs] around and finally we heard from Mr. Smith, or whoever it was, that we were too late, or some sort of excuse, and we said, "Well, we'll take some undergraduate courses so we can be ready for graduate school," and he said, "Well, you're not qualified." Well, what did he say that for? We were too upset. Maxine, [Laughs] went to college at age fifteen, graduated top of her class, got her master's. Me, Phi Beta Kappa. Oh, Lord, we were upset. [Laughs] We really got into the fight at that point.

After the effort to get into Memphis State, Maxine Smith and Laurie Sugarmon were asked to serve on the board of the NAACP branch. Smith served as membership coordinator of the branch and utilized civic clubs, neighborhoods, churches, and other existing institutions to attract members. She speaks about how she was able to increase membership.[37]

Maxine Smith: Well, I think the mood of the times. I don't know if many people had ever been asked. The adult membership, I think, was two dollars. I guess during that first or second year, if we had 300, we went from 300 to five thousand, five or six thousand and a few years later, over 10,000. That's not a lot of people, but we became the biggest branch in the South. We probably still are. People were just in the midst of the most exciting thing that had happened in Memphis. There was a ray of hope that we would get out from under the yoke of

[37] Maxine A. Smith, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 9 Oct. 2000, SOHP, 6.

complete discrimination and racism. You know, there's so many beautiful people–Lorene Thomas, Mr. McGee.[38] Nobody will ever know their names. But they were back there writing hundreds of memberships. It was a matter of *love* and wanting to go somewhere, tired of the old status quo.

Maxine Smith also served as coordinator of voter registration for the Memphis NAACP branch. Voter registration among black Memphians grew tremendously during the 1950s, from 19,614 in 1951 to 62,606 in 1960, a 219.2 percentage point increase with most registering in 1955 and afterward.[39]

Maxine Smith: The big thing here in the late '50s was voter registration. In those days, we had to, after coercing people to vote, get them to go downtown to the registrar's office. See we had nothing like the mail system, postcard system--that's very new--and we had to get drivers to drive them. We had done about 50,000, which was *hard* in those days, which was hard. We weren't that long after the Crump machine. Crump died in '54 so that mentality was still around, the Crump mentality, the machine politics. The one thing good was that Crump did encourage folks to be prepared to vote. Rather than voting, they were voted. But, the good thing about machine politics our people were used to participating one way or another in the voting process. So if that's a good thing. That's probably why our numbers were not too far out of balance with the majority population at that time.

Smith remembers that the Citizens Nonpartisan Registration Committee was used as an umbrella for voter registration efforts; it included labor groups, church groups, and the NAACP. The NAACP acted kind of as the core because it had an office. According to Smith, there was a

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[38] Lorene Thomas was the wife of Rufus Thomas, the internationally known entertainer.
[39] James B. Jalenak, "Beale Street Politics" (honors senior thesis, Yale University, 1961), 29.

lack of resistance by whites to the voter registration efforts because they were used to black people being a part of the electoral process.[40]

Maxine Smith: We were not looking for anything, not looking for anything. Russ Sugarmon, A.W. Willis, H. T. Lockard, Ben Hooks, any of them could've gotten an appointment because we were active. But, we never thought about it. Never thought about it. We never asked *who* would go through the door, but all we wanted to do was *open* the door. And I must say we opened many a doors.

Despite efforts, no African American won public office in Memphis or Shelby County in the 1950s. To influence the outcome of elections, blacks learned to single-shot--throw black support behind one candidate--either a black candidate or white candidate who promised to be the best choice for African Americans. However, African Americans faced resistance from white politicians. Maxine Smith recalls, "Every time we began to get a little more of a threat to the white electorate, the law would change in a way to our political detriment." Jesse Turner made the same observation in his testimony before the U.S. Civil Rights Commission in 1962. He recalled the 1955 election, in which African American candidate Reverend Roy Love came in fifth, nearly getting elected to the school board: "In 1955, of course . . . the four top votes were the ones that were selected for members of the board; but after 1955 they changed it so that the persons had to run for numbered slots, which, of course, precluded Negroes from bloc voting, and, of course, this, we think, was designed for no other reason than to see to it that Negroes did not get in the administrative position of the educational system of our city here." Black civil rights activist Fred L. Davis later remarked, "The system was changed to prevent us from exercising the power of numbers as far as black people were concerned."[41]

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[40] Smith, interview, 26 Jul. 2004, 5-7.
[41] Smith, interview, 9 Oct. 2000, 11; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, "Hearings Held in Memphis, Tennessee.

Attempt to Desegregate the Buses

Formal black political efforts were ongoing in Memphis; at the same time, challenges to segregation were beginning to occur.

Vasco Smith: I can remember the first thing that happened toward actual movement toward desegregation was the arrest of O.Z. Evers and Mr. Miles, I think it was, on an aborted attempt to desegregate the streetcars and buses. They did not get arrested. They were told they would be arrested if they continued to sit on the bus. They just got off the bus. H. T. Lockard at that time was president of the NAACP. Maxine and I hadn't been here very long. We didn't live too far from him. The Klan had burned a cross in Evers' yard. The word got out that the Klan intended to burn a cross in Lockard's yard the next night. Since Lockard was representing him and was president of the NAACP, the Klan supposedly was going to burn a cross in his yard. So I was talking to Maxine and said, "Baby, you know, Lockard ought not to be around there by himself. The Klan plans on burning a cross." And she said, "No, let's go around there." I don't know what we were going to do. He only lived about three or four blocks from us. So, we got up to go. Now, you'd be surprised because, yes, things were nonviolent. But when we got to Lockard's house, he was sitting out on the front porch in a rocking chair. There was this little brick banister around the porch, and his feet were up on that. We said, "Hey Lockard. We came around, man, to make sure the Klan didn't bother you." We looked a little bit more closely. There was a shotgun here, and there was a pistol there. And there was a half pint of liquor here. He doesn't tell this very often. He said, "Vasco, ain't no damn Klan going to burn no cross on my yard." And they didn't. I thought that was a beautiful thing. [Laughter.]

June 25-26, 1962" (Washington DC: GPO, 1963), 124-25; Fred L. Davis, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 11 Oct. 2000, SOHP, 5.

O.Z. Evers filed in 1956 a desegregation suit, Evers v. Dwyer, against the Memphis transit company after being ordered off the bus for sitting behind the driver. At the same time, African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama, were engaged in a bus boycott. Lockard was the lawyer in charge. Evers, a postal employee, was president of the working-class Binghampton Civic League, one of a number of civic clubs active in protesting segregation. Formed in 1951, the Bluff City and Shelby County Council of Civic Clubs united African American civic clubs in the city, engaged in voter registration efforts, called for better public services for African Americans, and called for integration.[42]

Lockard details the opposition that he and Evers faced for participating in the bus case and talks about taking steps to defend himself with arms. Recently, the topic of armed self-defense by African Americans has received particular attention by historians. Historian Akinyele Omowale Umoja, for instance, makes a persuasive argument that armed self-defense was crucial to stopping violence against African Americans in Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s.[43]

H. T. Lockard: We referred to it as the bus case. The corporate structure was known as the Memphis Street and Railway Company. It provided bus service for the city. It was all rails like throughout the city. That's why I guess it was called Memphis Street and Railway. We now have buses, a few rail cars. But, that was the first suit that struck the nerves of the power structure here. After the case was set, and I believe shortly after the trial, the Middle District

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[42] G. Wayne Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2010); Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 204-7, 213-4; Gritter, *River of Hope*, 196-7.

[43] See, for instance, Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); David F. Krugler, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence: How African Americans Fought Back* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015); Emilye Crosby, "'It wasn't the Wild West': Keeping Local Studies in Self-Defense Historiography," in *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement*, ed. Emilye Crosby (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2011), 194-255.

Court of Alabama handed down a similar case that was pending in Alabama, which settled the whole question of transportation throughout the country. But leading up to that, people were very irate. I think all the policemen were against it. Everybody was against it, except black people. They made certain threats, and I will just tell you this one among many. Well, one, I got threatening calls every day for six to eight months. *Every* day. Mostly in the evening around five or six o'clock when you're having your evening meal and at around bedtime. So, we had two bedrooms. Whenever I wanted to talk with them--. We used foul language to each other. Very, very, very, very, very bad language and went on and on. [Laughter.] I have a pretty good vocabulary. But then I'd get tired. I'd take the phone in the other bedroom and sandwich it between the mattresses. I couldn't hear it. If I wanted to make a call or my wife wanted to make a call or whatever, we'd do that. Then I'd get a nap, get some sleep. I'd entertain them some at night.

It was something. It could have been from anywhere, but I always had a strong suspicion that these calls were coming from our daily paper, the *Commercial Appeal*--people who were there. We had such stinging editorials against what I was doing. I'll have to admit I was one of the most arrogant SOBs that you have ever seen. Whatever came up, came out. I just didn't care. I was called by a reporter and made an observation regarding some meager step that the school board was taking. They, of course, just thought this was grand. Of course, I took the opposite view. I just played it down. I said, "This isn't blank." They came out the next morning with a gift horse with his mouth open. [Laughter.] It was a cartoon. This gift horse had his mouth open, long neck, and I was looking in there. The caption was, "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

I think the worst thing that I experienced in terms of harassment was one night I could hear tires burning, automobile tires burning, speeding. So, I got up to look out and it was all police cars, just zooming and zizzing all around outside my home. This is past midnight. I just remained in the window with my shotgun. So finally here comes about ten officers--all white--with their flashlights, they stepped on the porch. Before they had a chance to knock, I opened the door. They wanted to know, "We got a call down here that there's been a shooting." I said, "So?" "Well, have you heard any shots?" I said, "No." "Okay, we're just investigating." A few minutes later, after they had gone, here come the fire trucks, about two fire trucks, sirens running. "We got a call that there was a fire." I said, "No, no fire."

These callers told me that they were going to burn this cross in my yard. They called O. Z. Evers too because he was the plaintiff in the bus case. I said to O.Z., "I resent that somebody zooming around and going to burn a cross in my yard." I said, "O. Z., you ought to watch your yard." I was just *foolish* enough to go out and prepare myself to kill somebody. Because if somebody had stopped to burn a cross in my yard, they would've been shot. I ought to regret both the incident for saying it and letting it get out. You understand what I'm trying to say. It isn't as bad as I actually did do the preparation as it is that I told somebody about it. I felt frankly that the danger and the threat was impending. So I took them at their word**.** I slept outdoors several nights besides the hedges with two shotguns. Nobody ever came, and I'm glad they didn't because I probably would have been locked up. I regret that. Vasco and Maxine Smith came by to see me. At that time Vasco lived around the corner from where I did. He just gotten out of the Air Force, and they'd been married a short period of time. He and Maxine were getting involved in the movement. I had been in college with Vasco. We were pretty much of the same mind, varying in degrees of participation and all that. So, out of interest and concern

for me, I guess, he decided to walk around. There I was sitting up on the porch with a shotgun and a half a pint. At the national civil rights museum, he decided to tell that thing. He said--if you don't know about liquor--the Rolls Royce of bourbon is Jack Daniels. So, Vasco said, "He had this half a pint of Early Times." Early Times is the Volkswagen. I said, "No, Vasco, you got that wrong." I said, "That was Jack Daniels." [Laughter.]

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.'s Story and the *Commercial Appeal* Boycott

Another key leader who came into the mix of civil rights activists in Memphis in the mid-1950s was Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr. Here he gives details on his personal journey and discusses the boycott of the Commercial Appeal by civic clubs in Memphis.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: Maxine was at Spelman College when I was at Morehouse. We both finished Booker T. Washington High School in 1945 in three years.[44] I went to Morehouse. She went to Spelman. I was at Morehouse when Dr. Martin Luther King was a sophomore there. I met him, but he was a year ahead of me. Just before the end of the first year, four of us from Memphis had made the dean's list, so we chipped in and got a fifth of Scotch. I think it cost us about $1.90. Went up in the bell tower in what they called Graves Hall, which was the first building built on that campus. It was condemned, but because of the war, they'd gotten exemptions and all before they could do major stuff to it. The bell tower was off limits, and alcohol was off limits on the campus. We went up in the bell tower and got drunk and got discovered and expelled. [Laughter.] I finished high school in '45. That was in June. So in September 1945, I went to Morehouse. So, it would have been May or June of '46 that I got put

[44] Booker T. Washington High School was the leading school for African Americans in West Tennessee. Sugarmon graduated from it when, as he says, "it was a segregated high school with 75 to 78 students in my homeroom and we sat two to the desk." He continues: "Our textbooks were throwaways from (the white) Central High School. But we had good teachers." Shirley Downing, "Desegregation Ruling's Impact Called Monumental," *CA*, 15 May 1994, B1.

out.

I showed my father the letter expelling me from Morehouse after I showed him the degree I had obtained from Rutgers because I figured priorities were important. I might not have survived to get to Rutgers if I had done that the other way. I beat the letter home, and I kept it in my very personal affairs until it was safe to let him know what happened.

I went to law school because in high school our teachers really couldn't encourage us to look across the spectrum of options. You know, this was 1945. If you were an African American, you were thinking about being a preacher, an undertaker, a doctor with a black practice, a lawyer with divorces and estates and that sort of thing. Blacks were limited. Not much else. The guy who designed St. Jude Hospital was an architect in California, but he was almost across the country the only one that we were aware of. So my generation, I think, Maxine and Vasco Smith and Ben Hooks, A.W. Willis, Jr.--. There were a lot of us like that in Booker T. Washington, and I think this happened across--. We were looking at options, and that society was like living in a medium that you couldn't quite get a deep breath in. You know, like almost water. You weren't drowning, but you felt like you were suffocating.

So, I figured law was a good tool to try to change things. So, I took the law aptitude test, made a good score. I wrote to Harvard and, four schools, Harvard and Michigan--. I forgot all of them. Anyway, I heard back from Harvard. They had the question, "Why do you want to be a lawyer?" I said, "Because I don't like my hometown." They accepted me. I heard from them first. I said, well, you know, "Great." So then, I got information about the price so I wrote--. The University of Tennessee was being sued, desegregation case--the dean of admissions at U-T, and I said that I'm a graduate of Booker T. Washington. In that case, that's a code for black. I couldn’t say to any of them, “I’m a graduate of Booker T. Washington, but I’m not black.”

[Laughter.] Okay he's one of them. I said that I'm finishing Rutgers University in May, and I've been admitted to Harvard Law School. I said, "Since my credentials seem to be acceptable to them, I'm sure I'll have no trouble meeting your standards. So, please send me an application." About, oh, a month later, I got a letter from the commissioner of education, congratulating me from Nashville, saying, "Tennessee wants to see all of its young citizens fulfill their career dreams." He asked me how much the tuition was and all that, and they paid my way to Harvard. Probably I could've gotten into that suit, but I had been student deferred. The Korean War, I think, was underway or getting hotter. I knew if I joined that suit I'd be on the first next levy to go into the Army. So I went to Harvard then. They paid three years--tuition, transportation, and fees. They paid Maxine Smith's way through Middlebury College.

When I finished law school--that was 1953--I called the draft board and finally asked them when I'd be called up. They said, "Probably next year." I said, "Well, can I get that? Because I don't want to be sitting here in limbo." They agreed, so I went into the Army. I finished in May and went in August of that year, '53. I went to A-G [Adjutant General] school. The commission had been three years and indefinite reserve. I volunteered for the draft because that's two years, and I'm out. I wanted it in and out and clear when my obligation ended. I enjoyed it. I finished A-G school and wound up in Fort Lewis, Washington, in a depot going to Asia. I wound up after a bit in the first cavalry division headquarters in Japan. They had been pulled out of Korea by then. But the Korean War was still underway. There were peace talks underway. So, I enjoyed it. It was a nice experience. But since I had to do it, when the time came for me to get out, I wanted out.

I came back, and I got married to a young woman I met who was a freshman at Wellesley College in my last year at college. She was from South Carolina. She was a southerner. Laurie.

Miriam DeCosta. Most of the girls I dated--when they found out I was from the South and wanted to go back, it was like I had some measles or something. They sort of backed off a bit. That didn't deter her, so we got married. She had one more year to get her degree from Wellesley, so I used the G-I Bill and went to graduate school at Boston University. Got some courses in business administration, business cycle theory, stocks and bonds. I figured stuff that I could use when I came back to Memphis if we got to where we could have some economic development going on in addition to civil rights stuff. That was after the Army. That was, I finished '53 at Harvard. Two years in the Army, got out in '55. So, it would've been '55, '56. Then, I came back to Memphis.

When I first came back, there was a council of civic clubs. The Bluff City and Shelby County Council of Civic Clubs. Black civic clubs that had been conducting a boycott of the *Commercial Appeal* about issues like courtesy titles and the types of news they carried about blacks--usually criminal news, reinforcing the negative stereotypes and not referring to people they featured in black articles by any kind of courtesy title. Men would be called “boy” and that sort of stuff. We were trying to get people to cancel the paper. We didn’t have a lot of people added, but their circulation was affected. The subscriber list dropped so that their circulation ratings, which determined their rates, was affected, because we were a big chunk of the city then. We were a third of the city then.[45] I wrote the "why we strike" rationale. When we met with the editor, he had that letter as a basis for our negotiation.

More on Legal Efforts

[45] In 1960, the population of Memphis was 497,524, 37 percent of it black. Gritter, “Local Leaders and Community Soldiers,” 5.

In addition to political and direct-action efforts, there were ongoing legal efforts in Memphis for dismantling the system of segregation. H. T. Lockard remained connected with national NAACP efforts, attending legal conferences at least once a year.

H. T. Lockard: At first, the Legal Defense Fund and NAACP was all under one umbrella. They separated. I don't remember when that was, but it must've been late ’50s or early ’60s. See, we maintained a lobby in Washington. The first lobbyist I remember is the person of Clarence Mitchell. He was a very effective lobbyist. The way the organization was structured you could make tax-exempt donations to the NAACP. Well, engaging in the lobbying part of it made it soliciting. At least these Southern gentlemen so convinced their colleagues that to allow tax-exempt statements to NAA was in effect financing our lobbies in Washington. So we contained our lobby, but at the same time we structured a separate corporation. It was known as the Legal and Educational Defense Fund. That was the umbrella under which donations could be made. That was when Roy Wilkins was on the side of the NAA, and Thurgood was over on the side of the Defense Fund. So I was invited and we had several seminars on the East. Whenever something was brewing, something was afoot, and Thurgood could get funds with which to furnish our transportation and our lodging and all that, he would call a session. Being in an area where it was just fertile with civil rights problems, and I was the activist--there were others, but I was the most active--I was privileged to be invited all the time. It was always my pleasure. I met such stalwarts as Wade McCree, Damon Keyes from Detroit. Most of the guys who are federal judges now, especially on the East Coast, were very, very active in that. It was just an inspiration.

James Nabrit, Sr., in my opinion, was not as celebrated as Marshall. But he was a brain. He was a brain. His son, I'm not sure, still might be with the Legal Defense Fund. But Jim

Nabrit was a brain. He was a lot of inspiration to me. The district judge here in Memphis, Judge Boyd, would not *rule* on our cases. Every last one of them. Number one we had difficulty getting a hearing. We couldn't get him to rule. There was no problem if he ruled against us, you can always appeal. But he was a master at putting off. As such, we couldn't get anything to appeal from him. It was at this Dallas meeting that I raised the question about filing a show-cause order against a federal judge. It means: why he should not be held in contempt by a superior court for his failure to hear and decide these cases that were pending. Marshall jumped up and said, "Boy, you are crazy." Jim Nabrit said, "Lockard," and he told me some theory that Marshall and Nabrit and some of the others had on a case before the Supreme Court. He said, "This was a wild, foolish theory, and Justice Frankfurter seemed to take an interest." Nobody until he brought up this wild serious notion had paid any attention to the whole argument. As such, he was saying to me, "If you *feel* it, I don't care *what* it is, how asinine it is, how wild it is, if you feel it, argue it! Do it!"

I came back home. I read the rules. I filed a show-cause order against the federal judge here, laid out my reasons for it, and filed it in Cincinnati at the Sixth Circuit Court.
It was set for a hearing. They decided against me. But listen to the language they put in their order: "In the near future, no doubt, the learned judge will set these cases for hearing." That was possibly between '58 and '59. And that's what happened. It did. Then we started the appeal. Rule against me. Fine! But then don't not hear me! So from that, I just learned to have the utmost respect for Jim Nabrit, and it strengthened my belief in doing, I like to refer to as doing wild things! Doing unconventional things! To hell with what somebody says! If you think it has some foundation, file it!

Memphis State University

One key legal effort Lockard was involved in was the attempt to integrate Memphis State University. In 1955, Lockard and his fellow Memphis NAACP branch attorneys James F. Estes, A. W. Willis, Jr., and Benjamin L. Hooks filed suit against the Tennessee Board of Education in federal district court for its desegregation.[46]

H. T. Lockard: Going back to the governorship, starting in 1952, Frank Clement was elected governor. Two years later, Buford was elected governor. They called it leapfrog. They just exchanged places every two years. In about the middle-fifties—I can't remember, about '56, could've been '58, no later than '58--they passed a law that the governor would have four-year terms, but you were limited to two terms. In the process, that suit lasted so long through both governors because anytime you are challenging a law of statewide application, the governor automatically has to be sued. We sued Buford Ellington once and sued Frank Clement twice. That's to me significant if for no other reason that it shows how long it lasted.

Can you imagine what the real big hold up was? The real big hold up was a man named Jack Smith, who then was the president of Memphis State. He had decided in his own mind for his narrow-minded, selfish, and personal reasons that he was just a diehard segregationist. "While I'm president, I don't want to see minorities matriculate in this university." That word was out. I think that case was argued before the Supreme Court three times. Three times. A whole two sets of plaintiffs. People who started off in that case in '53 had gone on to other things. We had to recruit--I use that word loosely--other people. I believe there were nine people, but Jack Smith's retirement eligibility came in September of 1959. The solicitor general--that's the lawyer for the state--called me and said, "Well, we are going to admit your

[46] Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 197.

clients to the university beginning in September." No mention was made of Jack Smith, but it was universally known that these were his feelings. So Jack was retired.

The kids didn't have any money. There were other people who were interested in going too. So the NAACP and the business community, most of the business community, came together, raised tuition money. I wasn't in on that. I knew about it. I knew money was being raised. I knew what it was being raised for. But I tried to stick and did stick pretty much to the legal aspect.

Speaking of turning the heat up, during the pending of the trial to get the kids into Memphis State, they were saying, “We don’t have space; we don’t have any slots; we’re full. We just don’t have any slots.” So the question rose, “How many out-of-state students do you have? How many foreign students do you have?” I submitted that question, and they said in effect, “None of your business.” You can’t get by with that. You’ve got to tell me how many out-of-state students that you’ve got. Don’t you know that? Don’t you know that I have a way of finding out and you have to tell me? So I wrote the president, got turned down, and then I took it up with the solicitor general. The solicitor general is the attorney general’s assistant who tries cases. Humphries was solicitor general at that time. So I said to myself, “Well I’ll show him.” My little cocky self. I got out what’s called a *subpoena duces tecum*. It’s a paper writing signed by the judge, served on you by the sheriff, telling you to be in court on a certain day with all your records pertaining to the order.

I thought I’d turn the heat up. So, I said, “I want these records for out-of-state students for the past fifty years.” Humphries called me up, “Lawyer, I hear you issued a *subpoena duces tecum* for the records of Memphis State for a fifty-year period.” I said, “That’s right, general.” He said, “Do you realize that this would take literally truckloads to bring those records down

there, and it would take months and years to examine them." I said, "General, I don't have much to do," and I said, "Getting them down there is your problem."

In two or three days I got a call from Memphis State, "When would you like to all come out," and they showed us around. Too many instances in human endeavors you have to take extreme positions to get what is right. These guys could've let us come on out there. They just thought that they were just adamant and all that. So I said, "We'll see." What we did, we went there. We checked back for three or four years and saw that there were in fact out-of-state students. No school can probably function without out-of-state students. I think there should be, but by the same token don't discriminate against your local people.

On September 18, 1959, following the intervention of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, eight black students, graduates of Memphis public high schools, entered Memphis State. A. Maceo Walker, the son of J. E. Walker and a prominent businessperson, led a committee that paid their tuition.[47]

[47] Ibid., 197-8; Memphis Branch NAACP, "Newsletter," 22 Sept. 1959, NAACP Branch Files, Geographical File, Box C145, folder: Memphis NAACP 1959. Papers of the NAACP, Group III, MD; Quintin Robinson and Lela Garlington, "Civic Leader, Businessman Maceo Walker is Dead at 85," *CA*, 9 Jun. 1994, A1.

Chapter 2: "The Ballot as the Voice of the People": The Volunteer Ticket Campaign of 1959

In 1959, African Americans represented one third of the registered vote in Memphis, and they decided to mobilize their voting power in a major civil rights effort. As activist Maxine Smith commented, "I think we were ripe for seeking all things. We were very uncomfortable being completely segregated in all walks . . . This was pre sit-in movement . . . We saw the ballot as the voice of our people."[48] *In a race that received nationwide attention, four African Americans ran for public office in 1959 as the "Volunteer Ticket." They called this black unity slate the "Volunteer Ticket," because Tennessee is known as the "Volunteer State."*[49] *Nowhere else in the South did such a massive black political effort occur either then or in previous decades in regard to the running of so many black candidates for public office. This political effort, as the first large-scale attack against white domination in Memphis, represented the beginning of the breaking down of segregation, and it thus showcases the importance of formal political mobilization to the long black freedom struggle.*[50] *On June 5, 30-year-old Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., entered the race for public works commissioner. Future national NAACP leader Benjamin L. Hooks ran for juvenile court judge. Both were lawyers. Reverend Henry Clay Bunton, minister of the largest Christian Methodist Episcopal congregation in Memphis, and*

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[48] Maxine Smith, interview by author, transcript, Oct. 9. 2000, Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (hereafter SOHP), 8-9.

[49] Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., phone interview by author, handwritten notes, April 10, 2001. For an extended treatment, see Elizabeth Gritter, "'This Is a Crusade for Freedom': The Volunteer Ticket Campaign in the 1959 City Election in Memphis, Tennessee" (Master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2005).

[50] Miriam DeCosta-Willis, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Black Culture in Memphis during the Fifties," in Memphis: 1948-1958, ed. J. Richard Gruber (Memphis: Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, 1986), 83; Jennie M. Betts, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, June 28, 2004, SOHP, 4; Johnnie Mae Peters, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, June 29, 2004, SOHP, 35-6. Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., does not know of any other similar electoral effort at the time, and I have found no evidence of any in the course of my research. Sugarmon, telephone interview by author, typed notes in author's possession, 11 March 2005. The closest campaign to the Volunteer Ticket that I have found is a black unity slate in Baltimore in 1958. G. James Fleming, *An All-Negro Ticket in Baltimore*, Eagleton Institute Cases in Practical Politics (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960).

Reverend Roy Love, head of the Baptist Ministers Alliance, ran for the school board.[51] *Martin Luther King, Jr., and Daisy Bates travelled to Memphis to speak on their behalf.*[52]

Sugarmon's campaign, in particular, received local and national attention because of the significance of the post and he had the greatest chance of winning. As public works commissioner, he would become part of the five-person commission government of Memphis.[53] *If elected, Sugarmon would join the mayor and other three commissioners in administering the Bluff City's day-to-day operations, making its policy, and controlling its budget. By supervising the public works department, he would hire and fire employees, oversee flood control and sanitary services, and supervise all municipal engineering including construction and maintenance of streets, bridges, sewers, and city buildings.*[54] *In short, Sugarmon would become one of the five most powerful city officials. When Sugarmon entered the race, six white candidates were in the race with no clear favorite. With Sugarmon's educational background at Morehouse, Rutgers, Harvard, and Boston University, he had qualifications that surpassed all of*

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[51] For this chapter, I examined the election press coverage of the two white dailies, the *Commercial Appeal* and *Memphis Press-Scimitar*; the two black newspapers, the *Tri-State Defender* and *Memphis World*; and the *Nashville Tennessean*.

[52] President of the Arkansas NAACP branch, Daisy Bates was an instrumental figure when nine students (the "Little Rock 9") integrated Central High School in Little Rock in 1957. Bates spoke at a fund-raising dinner on August 14; press coverage includes Marjorie I. Ulen, "Society Merry Go-Round," *Tri-State Defender* (hereafter *TSD*), 22 August 1959, 10; Clark Porteous, "Candidates, Mrs. Bates Address 400 Negroes," *PS*, 15 August 1959, 12; Thomas Michael, "Negro Candidates Outshine NAACP Leader at Rally," *CA*, 15 August 1959, 13; Nat D. Williams, "Leader Says She's an Angry Woman in Hurry," *TSD*, 22 August 1959, 5; "400 Attend $10-a-Plate Dinner for Volunteer Ticket Campaign," *Memphis World* (hereafter *MW*), 19 August 1959, 1.

[53] Memphis local government had changed to this Progressive-era-inspired commission system after Edward H. Crump became mayor in 1909. Crump had run for office on a commission platform. Throughout the United States at that time, a movement occurred to install this local governmental system because of its apparent efficiency and "expert" management, among other attributes. Laurie B. Green, "Battling the Plantation Mentality: Consciousness, Culture, and the Politics of Race, Class and Gender in Memphis, 1940-1968" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1999), 331; Lamar Whitlow Bridges, "Editor Mooney versus Boss Crump," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* (hereafter *WTHSP*) 20 (1966): 78; James Hunter Lane, Jr., interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 14 July 2004, SOHP, 9-10; Gritter, *River of Hope*, 34, 36.

[54] Frank T. Tobey et al., *The City of Memphis: Nucleus of the Mid-South, Municipal Report for 1955* (Memphis: Board of City Commissioners, 1955), 33, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis-Shelby County Public Library and Information Center; Mantri Sivananda, "Henry Loeb III As Public Works Commissioner, 1956-1959," *WTHSP* 54 (2000): 66-80.

his opponents.[55] *A splintered white vote would mean a win for Sugarmon, resulting in the first African American in local public office since 1890.*[56]

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: What we did was we picked out races where you had two or three white candidates.[57] The ratio was 1 to 2--one black voter for every two white voters. That was the ratio for a good long while. To get in one where the white vote was split, then you got a mathematical even balance. They split equal, then it's a horse race. Henry Loeb had won the public works commission seat in 1955, and he was obviously campaigning for mayor in '59.

We ran the Volunteer Ticket campaign. That was a *total* campaign. Everybody in black skin and in a black organization endorsed. The same way for whites--East Memphis Garden Club, the DAR, whatever you have. So I got in a race where we started out with seven people running for public works commissioner. Based on the Henry Loeb election, where he got elected as public works commissioner with something like 27,000-28,000 votes four years earlier, we figured given the growth in registration and given the heightened reaction to a major effort by blacks, if we could get 36,000, we'd have a chance.

The Volunteer Ticket campaign spurred black voter registration efforts that had accelerated in Memphis since the mid-1950s.

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[55] Sugarmon faced Will Fowler, a long-time public works engineer; William Farris, city personnel director; John Ford Canale, a county commission administrative assistant; Sam Chambers, a painting contractor; A.W. "Ott" Anderson, a city park department official; and Sam L. Clark, a carpenter. Fowler, Farris, Canale, and Chambers all were considered strong candidates.

[56] Joe Walk, *A History of African-Americans in Memphis Government* (Memphis: Joe Walk, 1996), 7.

[57] By "we," Sugarmon refers to a group of leaders around his age that included Jesse Turner, Sr., A. Maceo Walker, H.T. Lockard, Maxine and Vasco Smith, A.W. Willis, Jr., and several ministers. Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 13 October 2000, SOHP, 10-11. For more on this new generation of activists across the South, see Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995). For a take on generational differences in the North, see Jack Doughtery, *More than One Struggle: The Evaluation of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Maxine Smith: Although the sit-in movement had not started then, we were deeply involved in politics. "Get out the vote" and that type of thing. In the late fifties, which still hasn't stopped, we put on gigantic voter registration, voter education drives. The NAACP had been kicked out of the state of Alabama in those years, and each state has what they call a field secretary that covers the state. So, they sent that field secretary--these are national employees—to Memphis to head political action. Mr. W. C. Patton from Birmingham really was my beginning teacher. He was the field secretary based in Alabama. He directed for the whole region then political action, "get out the vote." We're not partisan--very political--but not partisan. We still don't endorse candidates. "Get out the vote," registration, voter education, voter participation--all those things were involved. I was a volunteer down at the NAACP office. He asked me would I coordinate that effort, which I did.[58]

In 1957, Maxine Smith became a full-time volunteer for the Memphis NAACP branch and its membership coordinator. W. C. Patton, a voter education director for the NAACP, moved from Birmingham to Memphis and worked out of the NAACP office because Alabama had outlawed the organization. Their combined efforts resulted in an unprecedented number of African Americans registered in the late 1950s. Patton later remembered that Memphis was one of his top branches for voter registration.[59]

Maxine Smith: In those days, this is the late '50s now, blacks were not fragmented to the point we are now. We had nothing. We wanted everything. So, it was, I can't say chore, but a task of fulfillment. We knew we were going somewhere. We had about a third of the votes in

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[58] Maxine A. Smith, interview, 2000; Maxine A. Smith, interview, 2004; William C. Patton, interview by Tywanna Whorley, transcript, Birmingham, 14 June 1994, Behind the Veil Collection, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (hereafter BTV). For more on these voter registration efforts, see Papers of the NAACP, Group III, box C145, folders: Memphis NAACP 1958 and 1959, Manuscript Division; John H. Bracey, Jr., and August Meier, eds., *Papers of the NAACP*, Supplement to Part 4, Group III (Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, 1995), microfilm, 3:722-729, 763-794, 801-02, 806.
[59] Patton, interview.

Memphis. Now we have over half. We just worked. We walked the streets. We maybe had some telephoning. But it was perhaps almost totally face-to-face contact. Our effort was to get the blacks registered, educated, participated, so the difference could be felt by the politicians.

In 1959, Russ was obviously the most qualified in any way that you could imagine. There were several whites in the race. To show how determined they were not to have a black in a position, any position, any position--we didn't have *any*--the newspapers ran a campaign against Russ, just to beat Russ. They encouraged the others--not just the newspapers, but the powers that be--encouraged the others to get out. But it was a fight. It was a galvanizing fight. It was a call to arms for black people. We didn't let up.

Grassroots Campaign Efforts

This section further spotlights the activism of grassroots political activists who supported the Volunteer Ticket. Grassroots refers to on-the-ground political workers who were not out for publicity but rather who often worked behind the scenes to help their political candidates succeed.

William N. Morris, Jr., who was white and later a popular mayor of Shelby County, was becoming involved in politics at this time.

William N. Morris, Jr.: I do remember when Russell Sugarmon ran for public office in 1959. I remember that it was a unique situation to have an African American involved in a local political situation where there was an obvious bias in the community towards whites, and the numbers suggest that whites would not vote for blacks. I thought it was a very courageous thing for him. He’s a very intelligent, qualified, competent person. His only negative as far as political office was concerned was that he was black. He conducted himself in such a scholarly and mannerly way, you know, you had to be attracted to him as an individual, and I thought that

that was important. It was not a hostile candidacy at all as I recall, and it was one where he articulated his qualifications in a very good manner. Then, as even much later, it was difficult for black candidates to get sufficient funding. So he had to run a very frugal campaign based on getting grassroots people out working and getting into the churches, as you do in the South. Particularly in the African American communities a great deal of the political effort is handled more in the churches through the ministers and church congregations than most places.

The black community, almost entirely, raised more than twenty thousand dollars for the campaign, with monies coming from fund-raisers, individual contributions (solicited and unsolicited), and church collections.[60]

Maxine Smith, one of the grassroots workers involved in the campaign, remembers that the workers themselves and those whom they targeted were mainly working class, a remark echoed by Johnnie Mae Peters, another black grassroots worker who was working class.

Maxine Smith: So many of our people had problems with literacy, poor education, sometimes almost no education. In those days, we had to get blacks to go down to the registrar's office to register to vote. See we had nothing like the mail system, postcard system--that's very new--and we had to get drivers to drive them. We had done about 50,000, which was *hard* in those days, which was hard.

Johnnie Mae Peters: Your biggest problem back in that time, in the early time, was to make sure people went to the polls and voted, because sometimes people get the idea, "Well, my vote ain't going to count anyway." I worked hard and everybody else worked real hard to get Sugarmon elected. Back then it was hard to get whites to support blacks. They just hadn't come to the realization that we had supported them all of our life, then they ought to come in and

[60] William E. Wright, *Memphis Politics: A Study in Racial Bloc Voting*, Eagleton Institute Cases in Practical Politics, no. 27 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1962), 24-5; Jalenak, "Beale Street Politics," 110-11.

support us, our candidates. My job was really trying to get the black folks to go vote in 1959. We was right there to help Sugarmon in any way we could and beg the people to go vote.

Jennie Betts and Lillie Wheeler were two other working-class, black grassroots workers. Wheeler lived in the LeMoyne Gardens housing project, a major public housing project in Memphis. Whereas Betts was seeking integration through her political efforts, Wheeler explicitly states that her goal was opportunity, not mixing. This difference bespeaks of the variety of goals that African Americans had for their political effort. They all wanted racial advancement but they could differ in ways to achieve it. Wheeler also discusses lawn and Coca Cola parties (known as Coke parties) that were commonly used during campaigns as a way to connect candidates with the community. As Vasco Smith describes them, "We had what we call Coke parties, where a person would just invite people to come on over to his house to a Coke party. He'd have some have some Coca Colas. Just get a case of Coca Cola, put them on ice, and say, "Come on over, we're going to have a Coke party at my house tonight."[61] *Coke and lawn parties increased from four to five weekly at the beginning of the campaign to as many as eight parties a day by its end.*[62]

Jennie Betts: I worked in the campaign in 1959. I went from door to door canvassing, passed out literature for Mr. Sugarmon. We met practically every day at the campaign headquarters for meetings and then we'd come in when night came and we'd look over--we had maps—to see what part of the town we hadn't covered. We walked. We didn't ride, we walked. The black community was interested in elections. Everybody knew each other. There was good communication. At that time everybody knew Russell Sugarmon. Everybody knew Ben Hooks. When we started the moving out, could move where we want to move, that's when I saw the

[61] Vasco A. Smith, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 9 October 2000, SOHP, 24.
[62] Gritter, "'This Is a Crusade,'" 58.

interest declining. Because when we was in one segment of the city people were very interested, but they don't seem to be interested now.

I was hoping to make Memphis better by black and white working together, going to school together, living in the same neighborhood. That's what I was hoping for, because we do have some parts of the world it is like that. Like in Wisconsin, my husband went to school in Wisconsin and he never had a black teacher, he told me, 'til he came to Memphis. All his teachers were white. I had a chance to visit the little town and they are still integrated. I was wondering how come we in the South couldn't be integrated like in the North. I wondered how come the South had to choose to be segregated. Break the segregation barrier down, that's what I was hoping for and in some sense it has.

Lillie Wheeler: I've always worked and am proud to say that I was grassroots. I call myself a grassroots worker even now because that's where the activities are. You're not out there for publicity or to be seen but to work hard to get something done. At that time I worked for Mr. Sugarmon to get him elected. After that we got involved in getting President Kennedy elected. Mr. Sugarmon was an attorney, and we had a lot of faith in him. He was never a person who was trying to be loud and seen. He just worked kind of like we did at the grassroots level. For the 1959 election, we went out door to door to get people registered. That was the first task--make sure we could try to get everyone registered to vote. We used young people right along with us. My children worked right along with me. Wherever I went, I took them. So at an early age, they got involved. We would put literature out door to door. We threw parties and had the candidates come in and speak to a group of people and raise funds. At these parties, we served sandwiches and drinks and talked about the issues that were going on and had the candidates come in and talk about them and let the community ask questions of the candidates. We had

good turnouts at these parties where I was because we worked really hard and did the complete community and talked it up how important it was to vote and how important it was to get someone elected that you believed in whether it was black or white. We didn't just work for the black candidates but white candidates too. A lot of the education came during those parties that we had. The group was small enough where you could really kind of get in one on one and talk to them. It's not like talking to 1000 people at once but rather anywhere from maybe twenty-five to maybe a hundred people at the time. We used to call them Coke parties. At these Coke parties the community could get information from people like Russell Sugarmon, Ben Hooks, and A. W. Willis Jr. Those three I worked with closer than any of the other attorneys that we had at that time. They sometimes worked around the clock.

At that time, we were really trying to get Memphis from being a segregated to a desegregated city. We wanted to know about that and what would be done for the city, streets improvement and all that kind of stuff that the city was involved in, garbage collection, everything. So that was what we were mostly interested in then. We also wanted it to be so that everybody could live in one city and be a group of people who could love and respect each other and do things together. But you had a choice. We weren't just trying to get in with whites. We were just trying to get in where we thought we had a right to be, like the library and places that we wanted to eat and places that the government was spending our tax money on that we couldn't utilize the benefits from it. We had one day that we could go to the zoo, and things like that that really bothered us. Our children couldn't go to certain parks, just had certain parks our kids could go to. We did want to get some blacks in office because we felt like it would make a difference because they knew how we felt where the others didn't. We thought getting in there would make a big difference.

The campaign also employed "Volunteer cards" that people would fill out if they wanted to volunteer for the electoral effort. The campaign would try to persuade them to to talk to everyone they knew about the campaign and/or provide them with lists of people who were living in their neighborhoods. Lillie Wheeler, involved in these efforts, recalled, "I think everyone has influence over five or ten people. Some may say three but I say five to ten. When you talk to that five to ten, tell them to talk to their friends and relatives, then keep it going like a chain."[63] *As part of the Volunteer Ticket campaign organization, precinct clubs formed for the campaign and within them were block clubs. Wheeler remembered they would divide up the blocks for canvassing, and that "everyone wanted their block to be the best. For the most part, it was just that everybody wanted to feel like they achieved what they started out to do. So it made you feel good that you could do what you were assigned to do."*[64]

White Resistance

The black and white communities mobilized in support of their candidates. The Volunteer Ticket's slogan was "This is a Crusade for Freedom." The unofficial slogan of white political figures was "Keep Memphis White." The black candidates faced opposition from white newspaper editors and civic leaders. Faced with the threat of a Sugarmon victory, editorials of the two daily newspapers in Memphis, the Commercial Appeal and the Press Scimitar, and white civic leaders urged some white candidates to drop out the race and white citizens to cast their vote behind one white candidate.[65]

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[63] Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., interview by author, Memphis, June 25, 2004, handwritten notes in author's possession; Lillie J. Wheeler, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 28 June 2004, SOHP, 39.
[64] Wheeler, interview, 40.
[65] Ibid., 39; Wright, *Memphis Politics*, 45-49; Jalenak, "Beale Street Politics," 64-71, 99-104; Gritter, "'This Is a Crusade;'" Christopher Silver and John V. Moeser, *The Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1960* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 95-7; Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice*, 138-96.

Russell B. Sugarmon Jr.: As soon as the deadline for qualifying passed, there was a reporter who was regarded as a moderate, so he had access to the black leadership. We talked with him. Well, they ran the same article that he wrote two days in a row: "Black Vote has a Chance to Win." He spelled out the ratios, the seven white candidates. Two white votes for every black. Two to one, so a two-to-one race would be an even race. A seven-to-one race--I got a real good shot at winning. So, I called him and said, "You sound like that peckerwood Paul Revere." He never interviewed me again. He had a long and fruitful career after that.

Tom Prewitt and Anne W. Shafer were two whites in Memphis during the 1959 election, and Prewitt was involved as a campaign official for a white candidate who did not run against the black office seekers.

Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr.: The white citizens were polarized against the idea of any black man being elected to such an important position as a city commissioner. In retrospect, I don't think Russell had a chance. I think he knew he didn't have a chance, but he wanted to start things moving. You've got to take the first step if you want to walk the whole mile. It was a first step. After that they gradually became stronger. It was a slowly evolving process.

Anne W. Shafer: The whites tried to discredit or ridicule you if you supported the black candidates. Whites did not want any blacks getting elected. They didn't say too much about them except they were niggers. I hate to say that word but that's what they said. In fairness, all segregationists were not as crude as others. But, they were genuinely fearful for themselves and their families if a black stepped out of line, crossed the segregation line. I know how and why because I had grown up with it. I knew where they were coming from, but how grown people could have been so fearful. A lot of them knew black people. Most people in the South had grown up with domestic help in the house, taking care of the babies and cooking the meals and

putting them on the table and everything. They weren't afraid of those black people, but to them those were not the people out there marching for equal rights. So it was the thrust for equal rights that terrified the whites. I listened to them talk. I lived with them. Whites were afraid of intermarriage and miscegenation. That was the big thing, see. They said that "many blacks had venereal diseases" and were an "inferior class." That was the excuse for separate water fountains and restrooms. I got literature in the mail, anonymous literature, little pamphlets about that. They didn't want interracial marriage. They didn't want their children going to school with black children.

Indeed, a Washington Post op ed about the 1959 election said that underlying the white opposition to the black candidates was the fear of school integration. Even though the Supreme Court ruled in its 1954 Brown v. Board of Education *decision that segregated schools were unconstitutional, schools remained segregated in Memphis as was the case most elsewhere in the South. Jesse H. Turner, Sr., chairman of the board of the NAACP branch, predicted that school integration in Memphis would not occur within the next year because of the refusal of public officials to comply with the new law, the complacency of black citizens, and the failure of the local courts to expedite civil rights cases. The latter was a major problem faced by the local NAACP lawyers. Five years after the* Brown v. Board of Education *decision,* Southern School News *found only token desegregation in Border South states and no desegregation in Deep South states although Florida and Georgia had some mixing at the college level.*[66]

John T. Fisher was another white observer of 1959 developments; he and the black grassroots women address the claim uttered by white newspapers, politicians, and citizens that

[66] Virginia E. Lewis, "Memphis Torn by 'The Problem,'" *Washington Post*, 9 August 1959, E3 (a copy of this article is in the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers at Boston University); "No Integration Seen Here Soon," *TSD*, 23 May 1959, 3; "School Desegregation Ruling Five Years Old," *TSD*, 16 May 1959, 3

race relations were peaceful and harmonious in Memphis. The black newspaper the Tri-State Defender disputed this claim.[67] *The women also speak to the question of why whites would feel so threatened by the election of an African American to public office. Wheeler said that African Americans were not surprised by the strong white reaction against the black candidates because they were used to it.*[68]

John T. Fisher: Everybody here was talking about how peaceful Memphis was and how content the black people in Memphis were and that we wouldn't have any troubles here like they were having elsewhere. Memphis took a lot of pride in that. I came out of the Marine Corps in '58, met my wife in '58, and married in '59. I went to work in '58 so that's the very beginning of my work career, so my view of that is strictly a bystander really in '59. In keeping my ear to the ground and being in the car business and working I took some comfort in the fact that Memphis was not having the racial push and shove that was going on in other cities, beginning to go on in other cities. The reassurance I got was that the black people in Memphis were content. That was the story I was told and I had no reason to challenge it.

Jennie Betts: I think they knew better but they just was trying to brainwash us. They was trying to get us to say they was peaceful. We didn't think it was peaceful. Everything was labeled "black" and "white"--water fountains was labeled "black" and "white"; bathrooms labeled "black" and "white."

I didn't see any white resistance with the '59 election. They were scared. Because they really felt Russell Sugarmon was going to win. They just didn't want no blacks to be holding

[67] "Volunteer Ticket *Is* Good for Memphis," *TSD*, 8 August 1959, 1; "Let's Accept Unity Ticket," *PS*, 29 July 1959, 6.
[68] Wheeler, interview, 47.

elected positions. That would have been the first blacks holding elected positions. They just didn't want it. They wanted to keep things like they were.

Lillie Wheeler: They want you to believe that race relations are peaceful and harmonious. They want you to think things are going well. It would help them financially because businesses would come in. I think whites felt threatened by having blacks in public office because it's just the way they came up. They've always felt that they should be on top. Some of them still do. Desegregation has accomplished opening some doors, but some people still have the same heart. My work for desegregation was not to mix with whites. It was just to have equal opportunity.

African Americans faced not only lies and brainwashing but also illegal activities in opposition to the Volunteer Ticket campaign. At one point, Sugarmon, Hooks, and a campaign official were shot at while driving home. The Volunteer Ticket candidates received death threats and harassing phone calls; taxis, police cars, and fire trucks were sent to their homes on a regular basis. An anonymous caller phoned Sugarmon's mother, warning her, "If he wins, you won't have to worry. He won't live to serve." When the Sugarmons went out of town during the campaign, they decided after they got in the car where they were staying. At one meeting, an attorney told his audience of the "necessity" of defeating the black candidates. If they won, he said that he would meet the members of the audience at the hanging tree on August 21. No one there protested his statement. White candidates were also not exempt from harassment. A "James Miller of the Confederate Underground" telephoned white public works candidate Sam Chambers and threatened him and his family with death if he did not withdraw from the race and Sugarmon won.[69]

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[69] Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000), 48-49; "400 Attend $10-a-Plate Dinner for Volunteer Ticket Campaign," *MW*, 19 August 1959, 1; "Can

Some whites recognized the power of the black vote and pressured and interfered with the grassroots workers accordingly.

Lillie Wheeler: There was a lot of undercover stuff going on. It has been known that whites would try to pay us not to work for black candidates but work for theirs because they could pay us more money. They were mostly businessmen. They could walk up to you on the street if they see you giving out literature. If you were standing at a bus stop or something, they would come to you. If they knew your name and about where you lived, some had the nerves enough to call. They were just trying to convince me that they were the best and what they would do for us when they got elected. I told them I was where I wanted to be and I was working for the person who I thought would do the most for me. Some of them told me to think about it, and they were going to get back with me. Some of them did, but the answer was still the same, but I never told the black candidates. I know several other grassroots workers had the same thing happen to them, but they did the same thing that I did. They turned them down.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: We had in those days no computers. The election commission was hard files. We had gotten copies of the whole list of black precincts, something like 57,000 names. The Universal Life Insurance Company, a major black insurance company in Memphis, allowed the secretaries to stay late and use the equipment there and anybody who wanted to volunteer. They did that. They worked after work at night for maybe six weeks typing from just an alphabetical list canvassing lists by precincts. But the day we got that done,

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Memphis Negroes Elect City Officials?: Unprecedented Six Candidates Entered in August Election," *Jet*, 30 July 1959; Russell B. Sugarmon, interview by author, 19 June 2004, Memphis, typed notes in author's possession; Virginia E. Lewis, "Memphis Torn by 'The Problem,'" *Washington Post*, 9 August 1959, E3; "Anderson's Plea to Candidates," *PS*, 14 August 1959, 5; "Chambers Tells of Phone Threat," *PS*, 20 August 1959, 28; Nat D. Williams, "Aug. 20 Autopsy Given by Nat D.," *TSD*, 29 August 1959, 1.

the lists were moved to the headquarters of the Volunteer Ticket down on Beale Street, and the next morning they were gone. Somebody had broken in and stolen *all* of them.

Beale Street was the major black thoroughfare in Memphis. Located downtown, it was the center of black business and culture in the city, with legal offices, churches, entertainment establishments, and so forth located there.

Intraracial Tensions

Black campaign workers and office seekers dealt with both white opposition and intraracial tensions, much of which dealt with class and gender issues. There was resentment surrounding Sugarmon as well as Volunteer Ticket campaign official A. W. Willis, Jr. for their middle-class status. Furthermore, other black Memphians, whom many blacks saw as "Uncle Toms," backed white office seekers or were subservient to white domination. Volunteer Ticket backers viewed these "Uncle Toms" as traitorous dissidents within their own ranks and as obstacles to their effort.

Jennie Betts: There was resentment in the black community to Sugarmon and some of the other leaders because of their middle-class background, and it was our job to educate them up, let them know that they're just trying to bring them up where they were. Some of us was able to do that, let them know that yes they have a middle-class background but they're trying to bring you up to middle class. We'd just tell them, "Come work with us." They was preaching what we were preaching. But they had lots of resentment of their background. Mr. Sugarmon did have a middle-class background. Mr. Willis had a middle-class background. That's the way it was. I used the word resentment but I call it jealousy. But people would always come round. A gentleman at my church would say, "You can say what you will, that boy,"--referring to Mr.

Sugarmon--"That's boy's smart and he's honest. I don't know what y'all are going to do, but I'm voting for that boy." Overall they respected him.[70]

Lillie Wheeler: Some of our most influential people lived around the projects, including people like Russell Sugarmon, who always wanted to make things on his own. He didn't want to profit from what his family had. He wanted to just go step by step on his own. That's really what kind of drew me to him. At one time we begrudged each other a lot if we thought you had a little something. The resentment was pretty widespread, mostly with the uneducated people, which we had quite a few in those days because we had a lot of school dropouts. Sometimes you can be led by whoever has largest voice out there shouting things, especially when you're not educated. I think that's really what happened during that time. People kind of resented those who had a penny when they didn't. They always said, "Well, Russell Sugarmon was born with a silver spoon in his mouth." That was a phrase thrown around because he didn't have to chop cotton. But he went to school, and he worked hard, and he was always anxious to learn, and then he was anxious to share what he learned with others.

I told those that resented them that Mr. Sugarmon and Mr. Hooks and all weren't wealthy people. They just didn't have to do a lot of things like we had to do to get ahead. Russell just wanted to go slowly and start his law firm and not try to get a big office downtown. He started out on Vance Street. He and A. W. Willis and Ben Hooks shared an office for some years down there working together. It was really hard trying to educate those people like the school dropouts because they just seemed to not really understand the process of getting through everyday life and not being resentful of what others had or were doing or had achieved but that you could do the same thing that they did if you worked hard, got an education. So that was really the hardest

[70] Also see Peters, interview, 37.

thing that we had going on. I think there was just a resentment toward Mr. Sugarmon during that time because they felt like he didn't have to work. He didn't feel that way because he was working. He wasn't living off his father. Mr. Sugarmon had a good education and was able to talk to others and go with any group. He could talk with a judge. He could talk with an uneducated person on the street and still be the same man. He had a good personality. He never flaunted anything, and he's still that way. He's still humble. When he got to be judge, he was still Russell Sugarmon. I think overall people respected them.

Women were very involved in the political campaign and sometimes exerted leadership over men.[71] *One reason they could be involved was that some did not work outside the home. For instance, Johnnie Mae Peter's husband drove a truck and worked for Ronoco Foods. He did not involve himself much in politics in contrast to his wife who had more time to do so. "Women did everything except run," Maxine Smith remembered. Jennie Betts recalled, "Lots of womens campaigned. Womens were very involved in the campaign process. But now womens are running for office themselves. But at that time we were more or less pushing our mens."*[72]

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[71] For an extended treatment of women in the 1959 campaign, see Elizabeth Gritter, "'Women Did Everything Except Run': Black Women's Participation in the 1959 Volunteer Ticket Campaign in Memphis, Tennessee," in *Entering the Fray: Gender, Politics, and Culture in the New South*, eds. Jonathan D. Wells and Sheila R. Phipps (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010). My work supports revisionist scholarship that argues that women were not confined to the domestic sphere in the post-war era but instead participated in public affairs. For a sampling of this scholarship, see Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1994); Pamela Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes: Women and Politics in New Orleans, 1920-1963* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996); Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminist Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (March 1993): 1455-82; Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2001); Gail S. Murray, *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2004); Joanne Meyerowitz, "Rewriting Postwar Women's History, 1945-1960" in *A Companion to American Women's History*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 383-396; Lee Sartain, *Borders of Equality: The NAACP and the Baltimore Civil Rights Struggle, 1914-1970* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013); Bruce A. Glasrud and Merline Pitre, *Southern Black Women and the Modern Civil Rights Movement* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013).

[72] Peters, interview, 36-7; Maxine Smith, interview by Laurie B. Green, tape recording, Aug. 17, 1995, BTV; Betts, interview, 3. For an analysis of black women's leadership in the civil rights movement, see Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

According to Wheeler, major challenges in the black community faced in the campaign were class divisions and sexism.[73]

Lillie Wheeler: I think more women were involved than men with political campaigns. I don't think the roles were different so much as just the way we think. Women just don't think like men. We don't mind being educated on what's going on and sometimes men and especially our men that didn't have much education, you couldn't talk to them the same way you could to those who did. It took longer to get them into the mainstream because you had to work harder with getting them to understand what was going on. It wasn't anything that we weren't used to so we knew how to handle it. It's just like housework. You know, they don't think they should play a role in housework. They didn't in those days. You see men babysitting now and doing housework because the man and woman are working to try to get a decent home and everything. So it takes two salaries.

I always believed in catching flies with honey rather than vinegar. So that has been my philosophy since I was a little girl. That's why I have never had any real problem with anyone, any race. I've never been arrested. I've never had fights, not in school or anywhere because I've been a believer in God since I was twelve. I have always believed in the Bible. So that's where I got a lot of my training because my parents, even though they were poor, they were not haters. They didn't go around teaching to hate. I tried to make the men feel that they are important and that it is important that a man lead. We don't mind following, but you know you have to be a good leader. So we just made them feel like you can do this and you can do that, and we can help you. That was all, you have to use some psychology.[74]

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[73] Wheeler, interview, 30.
[74] Also see Peters, interview, 41.

Maxine Smith: As usual, we were the mass in the background for political efforts. The mass, somehow I got to be one of the boys. I don't know why. But we were there. Women did the majority of the grassroots work then, the door-to-door work, because men were at work. Yeah, we were there. We were the work force. I think it's pretty typical of what men think of us. I don't think that attitude has gone yet, but it's moving. To give an example, I went and got my master's in French and taught French before we got married. When we came back home, Vasco didn't have any job. Because he's so macho, his wife ain't going to work. I said, "Somebody's got to work." He hadn't opened his dental office here. He came back here to open a practice. It took a little time. Being a captain in Air Force was no big bucks. We didn't have any money. They called me to teach at LeMoyne and he was very indignant because his wife wasn't going to work on him. I said to him, "We've got to eat boy." That's just how men are.

Edmund Orgill, Henry Loeb, and White Campaigning

While the Volunteer Ticket activities persisted, Edmund Orgill, the incumbent mayor, initially ran against Henry Loeb for mayor, and other white campaign activities took place. At times, these campaign actions intersected with the black campaign activities.

Samuel B. Hollis: I had to run Edmund's office while he was running for re-election as mayor in 1959. That was also true during the governor's race in 1958. I traveled some with him but he was gone so much that I had to run the mayor's office and keep things going, you know, keep correspondence moving and stuff happening, so I didn't get as much involved as really I would like to have had in the campaign. Then of course he had that stroke. It was a carotid blockage, and so he had to withdraw from the main race.

I don't know if Edmund Orgill hadn't dropped out of the race if he would have won against Loeb. Henry Loeb was a real politician. I used to laugh. Henry was a friend of mine but

I used to kid him, "Henry, you make a speech and everybody claps and then we walk out of the room and we don't know what you said." He was one of these imposing people but he didn't really have any program or any principle. I don't mean he was unprincipled. He just didn't have the substance that Edmund had. Edmund had some basic principles that he lived by and basic philosophies, and Henry was just this tall, handsome, good looking, hand-shaking politician.

Edmund was definitely thought to be, in those days, extremely liberal, and he didn't hide it. He made black appointments to boards, and attended meetings where blacks were that other politicians didn't go, and that sort of thing. He had crosses burned in his yard, and once some appointment he made upset a lot of the white supremacists and they tied up his telephone for two days. They would call and his wife would answer and they would just put the phone down and keep his phone tied up for about two or three days.

Hunter Lane: I was involved in 1959 to the extent I was a campaign manager for one of the candidates, a guy named Lewis Talieffero, who ran against the same guy I ran against in 1963. They called him "Buddy" Dwyer, John T. Dwyer. I worked for Orgill some too. Crump still had some clout then. There were no really great, super leaders like Crump, but there were a lot of people who had learned under Crump so they were able to give Dwyer and Claude Armour and those people support.

Edmund Orgill, who was anti-Crump, was a very successful businessman and had a real jagged kind of personality. He wasn't a very likeable guy. He was really an honorable guy and he was very impolitic. He wasn't a good backslapping, good old guy politician. For example, when he was elected as an anti-Crump candidate in 1955, he kept the city attorney who had been the Crump appointee; just outraged his followers. I'd worked real hard for him. I was just out of

law school and I served three years in the Marine Corps and then I came back and went to work with my dad, and I was just drawn to politics.

Orgill ran against Loeb for the next term and I think he was going to be beat anyhow, but Orgill had to drop out of the race. Loeb had been the director of public works. He ran in '59 against Orgill, who was the incumbent mayor. Orgill did get elected one time. Then he was running against Loeb and he had this stroke and Loeb sort of by default got to be mayor.

Loeb was the darling of the redneck, blue-collar guys. He was a Hollywood good-looking guy, real tall and handsome, and--he was very outspoken--somebody said he always said what was on his mind, but his mind wasn't working. He was really highly overrated. Like the saying goes, you had to know him to dislike him. He was a bigot, I think, by and large, even though he was Jewish. He had been in government before. He'd been the commissioner of public works. He got a reputation of fixing potholes in a timely manner. He was a pretty good politician. He always answered every letter that he got.

Charlie Peete, a strong supporter of Loeb, was involved with his 1959 and subsequent campaigns for mayor too. Loeb was mayor when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was later shot dead in Memphis in 1968; Loeb's refusal to negotiate with striking sanitation workers had been a reason for King's visit.

Charlie Peete: When Henry was commissioner of public service he used to go out on these garbage trucks and help pick up the garbage. He didn't have to do that. Henry was very civic minded. He did not mind getting out and doing the work himself. He wasn't one of these office holders that stays at his desk and does nothing. He really got out there and helped clean up Memphis. We're nonpartisan, but we're conservative, basically. My father was a very strong Loeb supporter, and I've always liked Henry. I like him for his honesty and for the fact

that he's a straight shooter, and I think he helped Memphis a great deal. I also liked him for his conservative ideas. I'm a strong conservative. I liked his conservative ideas concerning limited government, efficient government. Henry was a man of integrity and I liked his ideas and I think he did a good job for the city.

I mainly passed out literature. I manned the telephones for him. I didn't raise any money for him. I'm not good at that, but mainly knocking on doors and that kind of volunteer work. I think Orgill might have won if he had stayed in the race. I hate to say that, but that was a well-known name in Memphis, well known, and it's unfortunate that he had to retire. It would have been a close race, but I think, to be honest with you, I think Mr. Orgill might have won that, but who knows.

Although vying for different candidates, whites and blacks politically mobilized in similar ways, and women held comparable roles in campaigns. As white politician Lewis Donelson later observed, campaigning was so different in the 1950s and 1960s compared to the 2000s. He commented, "It was so much more one-on-one, so much more personal, and now it's all television and all that, and all some paid guy who tells you exactly what you're supposed to think."[75]

Pete Sisson: I campaigned for Orgill in 1959. You know it would have been a close race but he could have won. It's just a shame he had something in his neck, carotid artery blocked up. I was one of Orgill's key men. Women played a significant role in political campaigns and politics back then and were volunteer workers. They played a different role than they are now because women were always available to come in and help do the grunt work. They were important. They did telephoning. They did addressing mailings, and they did that type of thing

[75] Lewis R. Donelson III, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 25 June 2004, SOHP, 46.

that's very important. Now you can hire to get that stuff done. In fact now you can go and get recordings and somebody can just sit there and dial the phone and the machine goes all the time. But then it was all manual stuff. But it was fun. You had your Coke parties and lawn parties. Women would come in and help set those up and come and do them, and there would be significant activities in somebody's neighborhood. You bring the neighbors in, and you have fifteen or twenty people in a room, and pass out the Cokes and that type of stuff, and the candidate stands up and talks a little bit and everybody feels part of the team. So instead of just going down to vote, they're pulling for their team to win. Now it's you go down and punch the button and vote and go home. If you're interested enough you turn the TV on and see what the results are. Back then, you had participation, people coming out and doing things. It's not just sitting at home and reading your newspaper like you do now or listening to the news and then go and vote. I mean you had the activity. People wore big buttons and all that sort of stuff. It's gotten away from that now. Now it's money. They want to advertise. It's not the people power that counts in the campaigns now; it's financial score.[76]

Anne W. Shafer: The ladies that I knew, we answered the phone in the office and we stuffed envelopes and did that kind of thing, then we'd go out and hand out literature. Frances Coe was in the group that was among the leadership. I was not among the leadership in those days and Frances Coe had a more prominent role in those political campaigns than I did because she was educated for it and her family was involved in more things. I think here in the South a lot depends on who your family is and what they do. You get in on their reputation or their status. My family didn't have any status. They were just plain, poor, working folks. They were

[76] For more perspectives on white women in politics in the 1950s and 1960s, see Lane, interview, 18-9; Charlie S. Peete, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 22 June 2004, SOHP, 13; Donelson, interview, 5-6, 46-8; Samuel B. Hollis, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 14 June 2004, 22-3.

1st and 2nd generation Americans—Christians, who tried to get along and practice good citizenship. They had never gotten involved in politics. They never failed to vote though and they knew their civic duty. My mother would sweep the driveway and then go out there and sweep the gutter. She was a believer in keeping your property clean, which you don't see all the time today.

Samuel B. Hollis: It was the days before television, and so you had the radio and newspaper and lawn parties, little small neighborhood group gatherings, and that sort of thing. That was going back to Mr. Crump's days, because he had ward workers in every ward and precinct, so to run for a city election you had to get into each ward and precinct and have your supporters in each precinct to offset the Crump machine. The civic clubs were very powerful, and Mr. Crump had controlled them all. My mother was active in the Red Acres Civic Club and it was very obvious--I mean she talked about it--if you didn't have Mr. Crump's stamp of approval you weren't an officer in that club.[77]

Anne W. Shafer: Civic clubs had the responsibility of teaching citizenship and being responsible to the city of Memphis and to the neighbors. If there was a pothole in the street it was the civic club's duty to call downtown and tell them that it needed to be fixed. If there was a problem in the schools, the civic club leadership did their duty by keeping the city hall informed and then the work crews went right out and fixed whatever was the problem. So the leadership moved up the ranks in the civic clubs and frequently then they became one of Mr. Crump's crowd or they ran for office themselves. It was a leadership training program going on and they were divided on ward and precinct boundaries. In the white community they called them civic clubs and in the black community they called them by their name, the 29th Precinct or something

[77] Also see Anne W. Shafer, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 28 June 2004, SOHP, 22.

club, or they called them the City Beautiful club. They were involved in the very same thing the white people were doing which was trying to make Memphis clean and beautiful.

William N. Morris, Jr.: The neighborhoods used to have civic clubs. Those civic clubs were very political: if their neighborhood wasn't treated right by sanitation and so forth they appeared before the bodies and said, "Why not?" The community of Frayser was all white back then for the most part, and if you talked about building a housing project in that area, man, the civic clubs would come out and storm the city council, oh yeah, and raise all kind of ruckus about that. So public housing became a very bitter word in the community.

In fact, the Frayser Community Council took particularly visible actions against the black candidates. The Council consisted of a conglomeration of civic clubs, Parent Teacher Association units, and other community organizations in a working-class white neighborhood. These Frayser residents adopted a resolution calling for a runoff law and wrote the mayor and city commission to request it. The group also conducted a voter registration drive and formed a car pool to transport potential voters to the registration office. Attracting an estimated crowd of 1,200, the Council sponsored the first big gathering of the white candidates. At the political rally, an attorney asked, "The Negro is working for his cause--what are you doing for yours?" He pontificated, "Unless whites come to the forefront, we're going to have a Negro in a commission office the next four years . . . . The time is soon coming when a coalition of Negroes, do-gooders, and liberals will elect a Negro chief executive. If we don't want this we had better do something about it now."[78]

[78] H. H. Van Eaton (president of the Frayser Community Council) to Edmund Orgill and the City Commission, 15 June 1959, box 26, folder: Politics Local, Edmund Orgill Papers, Special Collections Department, Ned McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee; "Frayser Voters Getting Ready," *PS*, 22 June 1959, 18; James H. White, "Line Awaiting Her As Office Doors Open," *PS*, 1 July 1959, 1; "City Runoff Law Recommended," *PS*, 12 June 1959, 5; "Clubs in Frayser to See Candidates," *CA*, 25 June 1959, 33; "Negro to Win Race Unless," *PS*, 26 June 1959, 10.

Because of the high interest citywide in the election, the registration office kept special weekend and evening hours, and blacks and whites swarmed it by the hundreds. The numbers of voters reached record levels. From the time of Sugarmon's entry into the race in June until the July 21 qualifying deadline, the last day that Memphians could register to vote, nearly 7,000 blacks, an average of about 140 per day, and nearly 19,000 whites, around 400 a day, registered to vote.[79]

Not all whites were polarized against African Americans. As Lillie Wheeler previously indicated, some tried to get her and other grassroots workers to throw their support behind white candidates. Jimmy Moore's campaign developed an alliance with H. A. Gilliam, a black member of the Volunteer Ticket Steering Committee, and placed ads in the Tri-State Defender.

Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr.: In that same election in which Russell Sugarmon ran, I was very active in the race for another position on the commission. My candidate was Jimmy Moore who played in the World Series for the Philadelphia Athletics back in the 1920s. He was a great athlete, and he was extremely popular in Memphis. He was about twenty years older than I was, but I'd gotten to know him real well. We both went to the YMCA and played volleyball in those days. I was one of the people who talked Jimmy into running. I don't know that I was the first one that suggested it but I was very active in getting him to run.

Jimmy was a very personable fellow, but he had never been on television. I wrote his first speech on television, put it in bold-faced type, and he got on television and froze. Fortunately, very few people were tuned in. So we decided no more live appearances on television for Jimmy. It was going to be on tape from here on out. Well, that's just an aside.

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[79] The *Press-Scimitar* and *Commercial Appeal* contain numerous articles in the weeks preceding the deadline on the crowds at the registration office. For example, see "Desire to Vote Draws a Mob," *CA*, 17 August 1959, 1. I calculated the voter registration statistics from "168,688 Are on Voting Rolls," *PS*, 5 June 1959, 1; "Heavy Voting May Set Record," *PS*, 20 August 1959, 1.

Jimmy later became an accomplished television speaker. He wasn't a well-educated man but was what I called street smart.

We had a mighty fine black man, H. A. Gilliam, Sr., who was our advisor. His son Art Gilliam owns a radio station here and I think he's got some more in other parts of the South. I became a very close friend of H. A. Gilliam. He was our advisor. He was vice president and second in command of the Universal Life Insurance Company, a wholly owned black insurance company in Memphis. He was very well educated. I know he told me that in order for him to go on vacation he had to either go to Hawaii or the Caribbean.

We knew that we had to reach the black community. Jimmy wasn't known among the blacks. I know Bailey Brown who was then a lawyer, he later became a federal judge and later was on the Sixth Circuit at Cincinnati. I know I talked to him about this very thing. He had been the campaign manager of Albert Gore, Sr. who ran for the Senate in 1958. In that 1958 race, Bailey Brown was his campaign manager. So I talked to him about it, and he told me that he had gotten the support of H. A. Gilliam. He built him up--said he's trustworthy, and he can be of great help to you. So then we talked to him. I don't know, but I think I was participating in the discussions with Gilliam and he agreed to support us. We didn't question Gilliam too much about what he was doing. We knew he was lining up all the black preachers, and it took some money to do that. So that was our entrée into the black community. That was a watershed time, 1959.

Nevertheless, most whites were unfriendly to the Volunteer Ticket. Although Memphis did not have a strong KKK or White Citizens Council chapter, the White Citizens Council chapter in Mississippi sent postcards to Memphis businessmen saying if an African American

was elected to public office that it would boycott their businesses. This move may have had an effect especially on those businesses that dealt with Mississippi customers.[80]

Media Coverage and Post-Crump Politics

The white newspapers played a particularly important role in these years. In this time where television was new and no Internet existed, the newspapers were important public opinion shapers through their editorials and the coverage that they gave, which often was biased. At a time in which Memphis politics was in flux given the death five years earlier of machine boss Edward H. Crump, and with no successor to take his place, the newspapers helped fill in this gap by even working to develop leadership.[81]

Pete Sisson: The *Press-Scimitar* sent a reporter down to my office when I worked for US Rubber Company to try to persuade me run for office in 1959. Then the next city election in 1963, I did run. One of the reasons that the *Press-Scimitar* liked me was that I was the campaign manager for Lewis Talieffero for Congress. He was against Cliff Davis, and Cliff Davis was the seated Congressman and who had been associated with the Crump machine, and we gave him fits. The radio and television wasn't as influential as the two papers back then. The two papers were influential. There was always a big fight to see which paper was going to support what candidate, because they were as political as we were. They liked to get their candidates in to have the influence. The *Press-Scimitar* always supported me. The *Press-Scimitar*'s not here now, but they would support me and the *Commercial Appeal* wouldn't. It was that kind of battle and I had to play my cards the way the game has to be played. After Mr. Crump passed his old

[80] Hollis, interview, 39-40.
[81] Ibid., 42-3; Thomas E. "Pete" Sisson, interview by author, tape recording, Memphis, 25 June 2004, SOHP, 7, 38.

cronies were hanging on as much as they could, and every election there was one pro and one against until they sort of got pushed aside.

Samuel B. Hollis: The editorials in my opinion are not that influential. People who read the editorials usually have their mind made up, or at least not enough people read them. Ed Meeman, editor of the *Press-Scimitar*, plugged Edmund Orgill on the front page every day if he could: and that's where the influence was, on the headline and the front page. Ed Meeman did that a lot, so it was very influential. I guess the editorial position was somewhat influential, because the *Commercial Appeal* was conservative and the *Press-Scimitar* was liberal.

Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr.: Newspaper coverage of the election was very influential. Very much so. We had two newspapers, two daily papers at that time. The *Memphis Press-Scimitar* was strong for Jimmy Moore mainly because his opponent represented, they thought, the old Crump crowd. The *Press-Scimitar* was not only for Jimmy Moore on their editorial page, but they published articles and pictures and went out of their way to help him.[82] I don't think there's any doubt about the effect of the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* on Jimmy's election.

African Americans had different perspectives on the white press, and some benefited from the black press although, according to Vasco Smith, the illiteracy of some African Americans was a reason that the black newspapers were not as influential as white ones. Nonetheless, the black newspapers served as an important voice in the black community. Another important part of the media was Memphis's WDIA, the nation's first radio station with all-black programming.[83]

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[82] Also see Hollis, interview, 11.

[83] Vasco A. Smith, interview by author, transcript, Memphis, 12 July 2004, SOHP, 56-7; DeCosta-Willis, "Between a Rock," 73-74, 76-77; Wright, *Memphis Politics*, 10. On the *Tri-State Defender* and *Memphis World*, see Samuel Shannon, "Tennessee," in *The Black Press in the South, 1865-1979*, ed. Henry L. Suggs (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1983), 339-55; Hugh Davis Graham, *Crisis in Print: Desegregation and the Press in Tennessee* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967). On WDIA, see Louis Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became*

Jennie Betts: The white newspapers didn't do a good job of writing what really happened. Like right now, they don't. I pay very little attention to what the newspapers say, especially about a controversial issue. I like to try to be there for myself so I can get it firsthand, because they'll screw your mind up. The black newspapers like the *Tri-State Defender* and *Memphis World* were pretty much right. They may be late coming out because of them coming out once a week and all that, but they would be accurate about really what happened. I really preferred reading them at that time than reading the *Press-Scimitar* and the *Commercial Appeal*. If a black had accomplished something good, the white newspapers always put it back there near the death notice section, and I thought that ought to be up front if you do something good. If a black did something bad they put it on the front page.[84]

Lillie Wheeler: I don't think much of press coverage now. I didn't think much of it then because it was biased. They're still pretty biased. It's better now, of course, but at that time they were just too biased. The papers would talk about things like if you're not qualified or haven't had this education and this kind of stuff and sometimes they didn't even know what you had. They would make a scene. They would plant a seed and expect it to grow and most times it did. They would say negative things to make you think that this person is not going to do anything for you or they just want something for themselves, want to be in the limelight for themselves or something.

The black newspapers were not as influential as the whites'. A lot of people didn't even get the black newspaper. It wasn't as widespread like daily delivery. The black newspapers still are weekly newspapers, so you are just getting it once a week and then everybody wasn't getting

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the Nation's First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound That Changed America (New York: Pharos Books, 1992); DeCosta-Willis, "Between a Rock," 74-6; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*. Also see Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).

[84] Also see Peters, interview, 38.

it then. Right now we don't have but one paper now, one daily paper. We used to have two. We had the morning paper and the evening paper: the *Commercial Appeal* and *Memphis Press-Scimitar*. The *Press-Scimitar* wasn't quite as bad as the *Commercial Appeal*. They were far from being perfect or good. They were a little more liberal to me than the *Commercial Appeal*. I almost didn't like anything about the *Commercial Appeal*. Usually the name would make me sick. We got to where we didn't read it. For a long time, we wouldn't even read the *Commercial Appeal*. A lot of us just couldn't stand reading it because they weren't telling the truth and they weren't giving good coverage to everybody.

Vasco Smith: Black coverage was okay. Generally, the *Press-Scimitar* was pretty good. The *Commercial Appeal* was thumbs down almost across the board. It was about that time that black radio stations began to get influential in campaigns. Talk shows. WDIA. Blacks didn't bother about television. You had to buy it and it cost a lot of money. Even on black radio, the time was donated really by black radio. WDIA, yeah. You didn't make it exactly political because you didn't want to run them out of business. There are certain FCC rules about giving time but you can buy time. We didn't have money to buy it. Like on talk shows, you just have the people who will call in be the people who are talking for you so you've got thirty minutes of free time. We would do that. Everything was used.

Rallies and Election Time

As the election neared, Daisy Bates, a key leader in the Little Rock Nine effort, spoke at a banquet in support of the Volunteer Ticket, and Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to five thousand at Mason Temple at the Freedom Rally on July 30, 1959, apparently the biggest black rally in Memphis history.[85] *King declared that he "had never seen such enthusiasm at a meeting of*

[85] Jalenak, "Beale Street Politics," 102.

Negroes" and sensed that "something [is] going to take place that never took place before."[86] *He exclaimed, "I am delighted beyond power of words to see such magnificent unity."*[87] *He urged the audience to vote for these candidates "because this election will give impetus for our whole civil rights struggle to every Negro in the United States." By backing the ticket, he said that it would show whites that the "whole Negro race, not just a few agitators, just want to be free."*[88]

One attendee was Lillie Wheeler, who later shared her recollections of King.

Lillie Wheeler: It was good in those early days because he could really get you stirred up, but he believed in peace, everything being peaceful. Being a minister too, we just felt like whatever he said he was telling the truth. So it was good. He knew how to get your attention and hold your attention. So we felt we learned a lot from him.

At the rally, some speakers lambasted "traitorous Uncle Toms." Lillie Wheeler explained that some planned to vote for white candidates or work against black candidates.

LW: The speakers meant that the Uncle Toms just did anything that the white folks said. They just were, we said, back in slavery. They were just still back in slavery time. Just anything whites did, they thought that was what they should do.

By the time of the election, four white candidates were left in the race. Sugarmon figured that he needed 36,000 votes to have a chance at winning, given the heightened voter registration and likely increased white vote due to the candidacy of blacks. Election Day was August 20.

At the campaign headquarters, Sugarmon had planned out strategies for getting people to the polls.

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[86] Burleigh Hines, "5000 Bury Uncle Toms at Rally," *TSD*, 8 August 1959, 1.
[87] Green, "Battling the Plantation Mentality," 319.
[88] Jalenak, "Beale Street Politics," 103.

Lillie Wheeler: Mr. Sugarmon could get the information we needed and give it to us. Then we could go out and get people who had cars that could take people and pick them up and take them to polls and take them home. We also would get people to work at the polls who had learned enough about it to be able to meet people as they came in, not just hand out literature but talk up your candidate and tell them something about your candidate so they would know and could make a good decision on who they were choosing.

Russell B. Sugarmon Jr.: When the election came, the law says if you're in line at the time the polls close you have the right to vote. If you're in line at 7, they can't close the polls. So, the people in line at 7 voted. The police would get behind the last person in line at 7. A lot of wards here didn't close until 10:00 or 10:30 at night. There were lines around the block, black and white. It was the biggest turnout in history--black and white.

Anne W. Shafer was one of the few whites who voted for the black candidates.[89]

Anne W. Shafer: I supported Russell Sugarmon and I supported the other black candidates. I was kind of on the fringe. I wasn't very involved but I did support them. They knew that I supported them. I was just one of those radical whites. I voted for Sugarmon in 1959, and I've voted for the black candidates in every race since they started running. They were all highly qualified, well educated, some of the best of the black community. They wanted to be considered "first-class citizens" in Memphis.

Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr.: Russell Sugarmon got practically no white votes. In turn, it's quite interesting, the two white men got no black votes to speak of. Of course. I'm sure some blacks voted for whites and vice versa, but it was infinitesimal, very polarized. Obviously, the white citizens viewed the possible election of a black man to the city commission as being very

[89] For more on Shafer, see Betts, interview, 11-12.

undesirable. That situation has changed drastically though since then, very gradually, though. It hasn't been anything that's happened overnight.

Jimmy won that race. The white vote between Jimmy Moore and his opponent split right down the middle – 45,000 votes a piece. I remember it. The black vote went all for Moore. He got 25,000 black votes. The blacks voted for Jimmy. They didn't know him particularly, but they didn't want his opponent. Gilliam, our black advisor, had kept telling us, "Don't worry about the black folks. I'll see to that." Sure enough, everything he said panned out because Jimmy got the same black vote that Russell Sugarmon got--practically the same, within a few hundred votes that I remember. I know that Jimmy got most of those same votes that Russell Sugarmon got. The paper published the vote by precinct. We got maybe one hundred precincts, and we knew which were black and which were white. So it was an easy thing to figure out where the votes came from. Jimmy made a great politician, and he was a very honorable member of the city commission.

Sugarmon received 35,237 votes but lost by some 23,000. The other Volunteer Ticket candidates came in second as well. A record 129,870 Memphians cast their ballot--69 percent of citizens registered to vote. These numbers represented a 50 percent increase over the previous record established in 1955. Each black candidate received less than two percent of white votes. In all-white precincts (95-100% white, 67 precincts), 73% of registrants turned out, and in predominately white precincts (60-95% white, 33 precincts), 67% turned out. Sixty-three percent of eligible blacks voted and at least 90 percent cast their ballot for the black-supported candidates. The highest proportion of registered blacks voting prior to 1959 is estimated to be 41 percent. In any previous election, Sugarmon's 35,000 votes would have elected him.[90]

[90] Silver and Moeser, *Separate City*, 95, 97; Jalenak, "Beale Street Politics," 127-8; Wright, *Memphis Politics*, 29-30, 32.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: I told the paper, "We won everything but the election."[91] It was a democratic activity. There were more people expressing themselves than ever. What we won was a politicized group who didn't want to stop. The '59 election put together the cadre that was the heavy infantry for everything we did for 12 or 15 years.

After the election, Sugarmon, Willis, and others restructured the Shelby County Democratic Club, so that it became precinct based and a more powerful political force. African Americans gained political experience working with it. Black leaders emerged from it. White candidates sought its endorsement. Founded in 1936 by insurance executive Dr. Joseph E. Walker, the Democratic club had become a "vestpocket organization" in the words of its former president H. T. Lockard.[92] *After the 1959 election . . .*

RS: That's when we drew up the bylaws, which stated that we had adjoined to achieve certain goals. The club would be organized by precinct. Anybody who lived in a particular precinct who wished to join could have meetings in their precinct and invite interested people from the precinct to come and find out what it was about and what we planned to do. This would achieve some political power. And then, hold an election and elect a chairman, the secretary, and so forth. If there were ten people, the chairman and the secretary would be on our central committee. If there were more than ten, the chairman, the secretary, and one other person would be on the central committee. The central committee would be responsible for electing countywide officers of the club, and the central committee would be responsible for determining what issues should be raised in elections and screen candidates to decide and endorse who we

[91] L. F. Palmer, Jr., "We Won Everything but the Election," *TSD*, 29 Aug. 1959, 9. National coverage included "Memphis Set to Foil Negroes," *New York Post*, 21 August 1959, Schomburg Clipping Files, University of the District of Columbia, Washington D.C.; "Five-Negro Slate Fails in Memphis," *New York Times*, 22 August 1959, 27; "Election Loss Spurs Memphis Negroes to New Rights Fight," *Jet*, 10 September 1959, 6.
[92] H. T. Lockard, interview by author, Memphis, 19 Jul. 2004, typed notes in author's possession.

supported by vote. That's what we set up. I think we had about 35 or 40 precincts initially the next election.

The Volunteer Ticket campaign was clearly a milestone in the black freedom struggle in Memphis. Despite much opposition from whites and intraracial tensions, African Americans were able to surmount these obstacles and conduct a unified campaign for the black candidates overall. They mobilized themselves in an attack against white domination and, in the process, laid the groundwork for future political campaigns and civil rights work. As Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., stated, "We won everything but the election."

Chapter 3: Direct-Action Efforts from 1960 to 1962

Following the Volunteer Ticket campaign of 1959, black Memphians not only pressed forward with formal political action but also embarked on a twenty-month direct action movement that followed the advent of the sit-ins in Memphis by LeMoyne and Owen College students in March 1960. LeMoyne and Owen College were two historically black schools in Memphis. This action followed the rise of sit-ins south-wide, which were kicked off by four North Carolina A & T students on February 1, 1960. The NAACP branch was very involved with the Memphis direct action campaign, and Volunteer Ticket participants turned to protesting as well. The precinct clubs of the Shelby County Democratic Club were used as a communication vehicle for the sit-ins. The sit-ins initially targeted a variety store, then the library, and then spread to other public accommodations in Memphis. Although Memphis did not break into violence, isolated instances of violent treatment occurred. So, what before had been a freedom movement mainly focused on legal and political action now came to be one that encompassed direct action.

The Advent of the Sit-ins in Memphis

Miriam DeCosta-Willis: After I got my master's degree at John Hopkins, I came back to Memphis in 1960. Now, beginning in the late '50s we had a lot of legal suits that were filed by our NAACP lawyers, and the lead attorneys were A. W. Willis, Russell Sugarmon, Benjamin Hooks, and H. T. Lockard. They filed suits, different ones, different suits. A. W. was the lead attorney on *Northcross v. Board of Education*. That was the suit that was filed to desegregate the public schools in Memphis. Okay, that was done in 1960. Leading up to that we had lawsuit after lawsuit after lawsuit. Now, in the spring of 1960, while I was still away at Hopkins, the students were getting tired. They said these lawsuits are taking forever. Yeah, we support the

NAACP, but let's get this thing going. Well, in February the students in Greensboro, North Carolina, sat down at the lunch counter and that ignited the whole student movement.

Here in Memphis, I started teaching at Owen College. The Owen students started the movement here in Memphis on March 18, 1960, when they sat down at one of the lunch counters downtown. They were not arrested. There were about six or seven of them. The next day the students from LeMoyne College and Owen College got together and sat-in at the two libraries, the main library at McLean and Central and then the downtown library. They were arrested. They were taken to jail and they stayed there like overnight. One of the students told me, she said, "I went home. My father was so upset because in the paper they listed the names, addresses, and phone numbers of the students. My father began to get phone calls. He was so upset. He went back to the back of his house, got his shotgun, sat on the front porch with his rifle cocked, and he said, 'I'll be damned, whoever walks in here is going to get shot.'" So, that student movement really got everything stirring up.

Indeed, as Dr. DeCosta-Willis remembered, six to twelve Owen College students sat-in at the whites-only lunch counter at McLellan's variety store downtown on South Main Street on Friday, March 18, 1960. Police officers arrived on the scene, and the store was closed. The students were not served and were not arrested although a Tri-State Defender photographer with the group was detained for thirty minutes for questioning. The next day, thirty-six LeMoyne and Owen College students sat in at the public library. They sat in either at the main branch at Peabody and McLean or Cossitt Library branch downtown, requesting library materials from the desk, taking seats at tables, or thumbing through catalog files and looking at books. They and five editors and photographers from the Tri-State Defender and Memphis World, the two black newspapers in Memphis, were arrested and booked for disorderly conduct, loitering, and

threat of breach of peace. They all made bond and were released late that night or early the next morning. As historian Laurie B. Green notes, "[T]his Saturday event captured the imagination of black Memphians, as word of the sit-ins spread." That afternoon, the NAACP executive committee supported the students with a statement, declaring its "whole-hearted support" of the movement. The NAACP had actually been making plans to do sit-ins but the students had jumped the gun. A mass meeting that night was attended by eighty local ministers, parents of those arrested, and LeMoyne and Owen College students. The president of the NAACP branch, Rev. D. S. Cunningham, presided at the meeting. A few days later, thirty-six of the demonstrators were fined $26 and one was fined $51 on disorderly conduct charges; the judge called their actions "at attempt at mob rule." But, that did not stop the students as they and adults continued to sit-in.[93] *Jennie Betts remembers . . . .*

Jennie Betts: In March, that's when the sit-in movements broke out. Then we would join it. It was quite interesting. I was real young then and very excited; wasn't scared of nothing. It was a bunch of students. The sit-in movements was more or less gathered around the college students. Some adults was in the sit-in movement, like Lorene Thomas, and C. J. Washington was in it, and Ms. Lillie Wheeler. She was in it. Ida Burchfield was in it; Elizabeth Russell. Some of these peoples are dead. There's not very many of us left. I was what you call young, real young then. Yes, I was involved in sitting-in. I loved it. Johnnie Rodgers Turner was in the sit-in movements also, she is now the executive director of the Memphis NAACP. I was one of the first group of students who sat in.

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[93] Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 232-4, the quote is from p. 234; Wesley Pruden, Jr., "Dozen Negroes Stage Sit-In; McLellan's on Main Closes," *CA*, 19 March 1960, A1; Jay Hall, "Judge Sets Bond for Negroes Held after Two Sit-Ins," *CA*, 20 March 1960, A1; "Memphis NAACP Pledges All-Out Supporter to 'Sitters,'" *CA*, 20 March 1960, sec. 1, p. 10; "Sit-In Bailout Is Large Order for 41 Negroes," *CA*, 20 March 1960, sec. 1, p. 10. The mob rule quote is from Wesley Pruden, Jr., "37 Negroes in Library Case Fined, Admonished by Judge," *CA*, 22 March 1960, p. 1.

I was very excited, very hot tempered. I was so hot tempered that Russell Sugarmon moved me off the sit-in and made me a reporter. I remember that well. [Laughter] Yeah, they made me a reporter. What the reporters did, it's like when the police picked the sit-inners up, I'd go call and tell them they had picked them up. They made me an observer because I was too hot tempered. [Laughter.] They'd tell us to be nonviolent. I wanted to fight [Laughter] when it got tough, you know. But I stuck with it. A white gentleman had put his cigarette out on my coat, and that's when I flew up. [Laughter.] When they got me quiet they moved me. I didn't hit him back. I said I was going to hit him, and if he had hit me I was going to hit him back. I'd have felt better but it wouldn't have helped the movement any.

Betts remembers other students who had similar experiences to hers moved to positions such as reporter but she does not ever remember anyone hitting anyone. She remembers people of all economic levels, especially poor and middle-class people participated, and that white Catholics especially, particularly priests, had a presence in the movement.

About sitting in at the library, Betts remembered the following.

Jennie Betts: Well there wasn't nothing in the black library. I was in college and you just couldn't find anything in the black library that we needed. We didn't have computers like we have now. You'd go to the library and do your lessons but you can't do it. There wasn't nothing in the black library. I was arrested from the library. [Laughter.] It's just wrong. After I got arrested, I went back down there and got in jail again, same day; five times in one day.

My parents didn't lose their jobs because of my participation because they was living in Henning, Tennessee, and they lived on their own where they lived. They was farmers for years. My father had his own farm. They farmed soybeans and cotton. Now I did have a friend that her

parents lost theirs because her mother lived on the plantation and she had to go. My parents wasn't pleased with me participating but I did. I went on and did what I wanted to.

The newspapers printed the names, ages, and addresses of the demonstrators who sat-in, so they and their parents were susceptible to being fired from their jobs, and some students were dismissed from their own jobs. Elaine Lee Turner, one of the students who sat-in, remembered that later some of those who sat-in and were arrested had difficulty finding employment in Memphis because of their arrest record; some even had to leave Memphis.[94]

Russell Sugarmon, Jr. was involved in defending the sit-in demonstrators from the very start.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: I think there was a matrix across the nation--but heavily in the South because that's where most of us were--ready when the sit-ins started. Young people started it. My generation had been involved in stuff like voter registration and trying to get people elected. Running people, hoping they could get elected but building up our registration because, as we saw it, there were two prongs at that point--political action and litigation. The sit-ins added a third leg--direct action. It was like somebody threw a light on material that had been soaked with some kind of inflammable matter because it really spread like mad.

What happened was, I think the NAACP was having its annual meeting in Denver--somewhere out West. Lockard was gone. Benny Hooks and I were the only two NAACP-related lawyers in town when they hit. We'd go to the police station and find out who was arrested. They processed them. They processed and processed. It was about three in the morning before we could get them out. They started requiring cash bonds. They had a double

[94] Elaine Lee Turner, interview by Laurie B. Green, tape recording, Memphis, 22 August 1995, BTV; "Five Newsmen Held for Sit-in," *CA*, 20 March 1960, sec. 1, p. 10.

line of police all away around that jail. There must have been 3 or 4000 people--all black people--all around the place with two rings of police keeping them away from the jail.

What happened was, for that first week, we were the two lawyers. They would go somewhere to sit in. Public accommodation places first--the parks, the parks were restricted to whites except one day a week, the museums, the libraries, that sort of thing. We'd be at the police station until two or three in the morning and then be at court at eight, and while we were in the court another wave was going somewhere else. We didn't get home for the whole week. Our wives had to bring clothes. We were bathing in face bowls. [Laughs.] We didn't have any showers in our office. It was a good way to lose weight, though.

That was the first week. After the first week, the other lawyers came who had been in the NAA meeting came back--H. T. Lockard and all and A. W. Willis. That was a pressure cooker. What happened was, when the word got out, they had rallies in the churches. We had to go say something, but anyway. They were raising money in the churches to put up the cash bonds. We couldn't get them out without cash bonds. The bail bond businesses wouldn't write the bonds. The cash bonds were maybe $250. It wasn't as much then as it is now, all misdemeanors. It probably was $50 to $100. Whatever it was, we had to put up cash. My father put a mortgage on his house. Some people posted property so the bank could make loans for the purpose of funding it. People were raising money at church rallies and stuff. They wanted to see a student just out of a jail. They wanted to see a lawyer. You know, just to pump it up. That went on all summer.

The students just *went*. They didn't let the adults know because they didn't want their parents involved. The first thing we knew they were in jail. [Laughter.] I mean after it got going, there was more coordination. But then, we really weren't interested in knowing too soon

because as soon as they went in, some lawyers filed charges against us of barratry and champerty--stirring up litigation. Our bar never did anything about it. It still was filed. But you never knew because some lawyers from the South got disbarred. They got reinstated, but they were in limbo for a good long while. So we didn't want them to be hooking us with a side issue. So we weren't that anxious to be too closely involved with their plans. They had some bright kids doing the sit-ins. They were impressive as a matter of fact. It was like somebody gave a shot of adrenaline to the black population at that time, speed or something. [Laughter.] It was a shot to the system.

With the sit-ins, they'd charge the protestors with disorderly conduct. I never will forget we had two city court judges. One was named Beverly Boushe and the other guy, he wasn't really that memorable. Two things happened. I think the second day we had some kids at one of the libraries. So, Bouche said, "Reverend Hooks, why don't you open up this session with a prayer?" Benny prayed about fifteen minutes. "God, please show this honorable judge that what these people did was the exercise of their constitutional rights." [Laughter.] He's looking, "Oh why did I do this?" By the time he got through, it was like lightning was going to strike in the courtroom.[95] [Laughter.] Another time, they were charged with conspiracy to violate an ordinance about segregation in the parks or something like that. H. T. Lockard had just gotten back to town from the NAACP convention. Boushe says–he gets to reading this charge--"How do you plead?" The door swings open, and he strides down. He had flames coming out of his eyes. Boushe says, "Mr. Lockard, do you want to say something?" He says, "I do." He says, "What?" He says, "There can be no conspiracy to commit a legal act!" Boushe says, "Alright."

[95] This incident may have taken place on May 17, 1960. The *Commercial Appeal* reported that Rev. Hooks opened up the court session with prayer at the invitation of Judge Boushe. "Arrested Negroes LeMoyne Students," *CA*, 18 May 1960, 14.

[Laughter.] He sounded like some god, like Zeus. Voooom! [Laughter.] The force of his voice and the righteousness of his indignation! Wow.

Toward the end of the sit-in movement, they got to where a lot of policemen you could see them sort of understanding. I know one or two even today that, I think, changed visibly--I mean in terms of getting exposed to the sit-ins. They started recognizing that these people were human beings. I mean it didn't happen to everybody. I think some of them did go through some kind of conversion, some kind of Gethsemane.

H. T. Lockard: In 1960, I was in Washington at a meeting that Thurgood Marshall called to discuss strategy and how to handle the sit-in demonstrations. We met, oh, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. The Sunday paper, the Washington paper came out, with the announcement that the sit-ins had gotten off the ground in Memphis. The former mayor of Washington DC was a student at Fisk University, Marion Barry. He came down and inspired some of the students here in Memphis, helped them organize and so forth. They started to sit-in. So we were discussing the North Carolina situation about the sit-ins. They were in jail, and we were discussing strategies for getting them out. I never shall forget--Thurgood said, "Boy, you better get out here and get on back home and go and get those people out of jail." I think I came back, the earliest I could get out was a Monday morning, and they were already in court. The first picture that was taken--I'm not on it. [Pointing to a photograph in his office of lawyers defending the sit-in demonstrators.] That was the second picture. All those fellows on there were lawyers at that time. The prosecutor later said, "You know, all you guys went on to become judges and here I am a poor prosecutor." I said, "Well, you were just on the wrong side of track."

I along with some of the others defended the sit-in demonstrators. I was--I hate to say this--kind of the lead counsel in it. Quite frankly, there were considerable misgivings about getting involved in that even with lawyers. People just displayed hostility toward you. Some of the lawyers, white lawyers, European lawyers. Some of our own people who had what they termed or thought was good job security and felt deep down within that you shouldn't disturb the status quo. Some of the black people thought you should just let things be. It was more the older black people. Younger people I think it was just unanimous were in support.

Whenever King came on with the theory of nonviolence, that's when I and Thurgood Marshall and his group sort of parted company. They tried to keep it subdued, but there was definitely some friction--considerable friction--right in the middle of the sit-in demonstrations. Number one, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund was a defense outfit, just what it said. We were defending people for exercising what we called their rights. Martin King--I don't know this for a fact, but I've heard some stories that are pretty accurate--was raising money. Now my statement that he raised money doesn't carry with it the implication that he used it for himself. I don't know what happened to it. But I do know he was able to raise money in large amounts very quickly. That was kind of foreign to the Legal Defense's way of doing things. We experienced the fact that in a lot of instances in the larger cities Martin King had gone before and collected funds, but he didn't make available funds of any nature to help get the kids out of jail. He was exercising the theories and practices of nonviolence, but it stopped at the coin. He had friends on the NAACP board, real good friends. He was able to get legal counsel for himself, but a lot of people--any number of people--we had to go to their rescue for following King. It wasn't wrong to follow him. They were exercising their rights. But there seemed to be, in my opinion

and Thurgood's opinion and all of our group, a corresponding duty and obligation to come to the rescue and make arrangements to see that these young people were let out.

Recognizing the significance and implications of the sit-ins, Sugarmon and Willis decided that they should "afford an opportunity to each Negro lawyer to identify himself with the yearnings of our people by coming forward in defense of these students."[96] *In a show of support, the ten black lawyers in Memphis defended the students the first day in court, on Monday, March 21.*[97]

The Memphis Freedom Movement

*The sit-ins led Maxine Smith to coordinate what became a 20-month-long movement in which black Memphians tackled every public facility and accommodation; they called it at the time their "freedom movement." The community protested all forms of discrimination--segregated restrooms and lunch counters, lack of employment opportunities, and so on. People of all ages and economic levels participated in the movement. Maxine Smith sat in as did her husband Vasco. In his report on Memphis for the Southern Regional Council in 1964, Benjamin Muse reported, "Some say that Memphis had more sit-*ins *than any other Southern city."*[98] *The freedom movement included daily picketing and sit-ins, weekly freedom marches, a boycott of Main Street stores and their branches, weekly neighborhood freedom rallies, and picket and sit-in schools. After the students initiated the sit-ins on March 18, a mere three days later, the black community approved a boycott of downtown Memphis stores at a mass meeting, where the ten black lawyers who had defended the sit-in demonstrators were given a standing ovation.*[99]

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[96] U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings Held in Memphis*, 111.
[97] The ten lawyers were A. A. Latting, J. F. Estes, C. O. Horton, H. T. Lockard, A. W. Willis, Jr., Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., Benjamin L. Hooks, I. H. Murphy, S. A. Wilbun, and Ben F. Jones.
[98] The SRC, one of the foremost interracial organizations in the South, sponsored fact-finding missions and statistical surveys throughout the South. SRC officials believed that Southerners would conclude segregation was wrong when presented with the facts. Benjamin Muse, *Memphis* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1964), 45.
[99] Jay Hall, "Negro Meeting Votes Boycott," *CA*, 22 March 1960, 15.

Maxine Smith: We stretched our sit-in movement out to public facilities, accommodations, department stores, train, bus, rail, parks, everything. We didn't leave anything unturned. Officials who would turn their backs on us when we tried to negotiate in a civilized way were brought to their knees. Stores on Main Street that we picketed we picketed down to the last brick. [Laughter.] We had different hours and schedules for the sit-ins. It was picketing and sitting-in during those early years, the very early ’60s. Everybody gave whatever talent they had full force: the lawyers, the people, the people who went to jail, the 500 arrests during the sit-in movement. The ministers opened their doors. People gave up job opportunities, but they gave like the widow's mite. It was a crusade really. It was more than a movement.

Johnnie Mae Peters: Main Street was chosen as a target for the boycott because that’s where most people spent their money, downtown. There was a big downtown. Downtown now don’t mean the same thing as it did then because like all the stores were downtown. All the stores you see in the malls, they were all on Main Street back then. It was just stores all up and down there: Lowenstein’s, Goldsmith, Levy’s. All the big-name stores were on Main Street so that’s where people spent their money, but you didn’t have the right to try the clothes on or look at them too much. You know like you’d pick up stuff and hold it up and look at it; they didn’t want you to do that.

I never did go to jail. My children went in the later years but I never went because of the fact you had to have somebody to man the offices, man the telephones, have some food ready for the picketers when they come in, so me and Ms. Laurie Sugarmon stayed back behind a lot and fixed the food for the picketers. I was a volunteer at the NAACP. I was a volunteer for just about anything you need.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: When the direct action started, the NAACP was negotiating

with merchant's associations downtown and so forth. It sort of stalled, so we had a boycott of Main Street. We had a picket about every twenty-five feet on both sides of Main Street. The idea being that if some stores were accessible and others weren't, you couldn't tell how effective the boycott was. We had people with cameras. That helped people not wanting their pictures taken stay off Main Street. The little stores that didn't have lunch counters, didn't have restrooms, they were hurt. We had a picket line from Beale Street to Adams Street on both sides of the street for something like eighteen months or twenty months. There was a store here named Bry's Department Store that went under during that period. No, there weren't any rocks thrown, but there was a power struggle I mean in terms of the financial community being involved. It may not have seemed like a struggle then, but we had a lot of folk making a lot of sacrifice. "Don't buy on Main Street" and that sort of thing and doing it for a protracted period of time.

Vasco Smith: The troops came from the neighborhoods. The more neighborhood organizations you had, the more troops you got. When the movement began, it included all of Main Street with the picketers. Had to have a lot of folks. Sales went down on Main Street 41 percent. The figures that we had at that time were actually published in the papers. The reporter would write that they reached their peak--they're referring to the NAACP--when sales on Main Street had dropped 41 percent for the year.

We were asking for, generally speaking, desegregation of all facilities. See there were signs, black and white in front of the restrooms, the water fountains, you name it. Most humiliating thing you can ever think of. So as far as eating was concerned, that's out of the picture entirely. Some stores, not department stores, some of the ten cents stores, like Woolworths and so forth, had counters, but there would be just a little corner on this counter

kind of here's the front of the counter and around here the side of the counter next to the wall--they let blacks eat there. Humiliating really. You'd rather go hungry than do it. There were many, many other stores but you just mention the fact that if you did that to the big stores, imagine what it did to the small ones. They just evaporated.

Another protestor was businessman Fred L. Davis, who owned his own company. Being an independent black professional gave him a degree of flexibility for participating in the movement; after all, he was not dependent on an employer so he could set his own hours.

Fred L. Davis: We were involved with the picketing of the downtown stores. We'd sit in at the restaurants, the lunch counters in the stores downtown and we'd try to figure out how hot the coffee was going to be if they decided to pour it on us. [Laughter.] They never poured any on me, but some others they did pour on them. They'd call us names, gather around us and taunt. One restaurant took all its stools out, so you couldn't sit down. Nobody could sit down. [Laughter.] Various kind of things. But I think the economic boycott was the thing that got the most reaction. When we shut the money off, people started coming to the table to talk about that. What we did was we had picketers and we marched in front of all the downtown stores and we tried to be sure that nobody black went into those stores to shop. And we're a significant economy, especially at Christmas and Easter.

Everybody had shifts. You know what time you're supposed to show up at your assigned place. We started early in the morning. Hot in the summer and very, very cold in the winter. Those were apparently coordinated by the NAACP. You were assigned to your location and you went. They had meetings, and you knew where you were going to be. They asked for volunteers, and you volunteered, and you were assigned to a location. There were some mass meetings and there were continuing meetings--continuing things going on all during the week or

planning, whatever, at churches and in neighborhoods all over the place. Especially when somebody had to be gotten out of jail. [Laughter.] We had to collect money, take up the collections, put in money so we'd have money to go down and get people out of jail or whatever. The meetings had an atmosphere of resolution and determination. We exulted the people to stay, to not give in and to fight the system; not to let the unjust treatment of blacks prevail and not to participate in that kind of thing; not to be a willing participant and to be used by the system to further their cause in an unjust manner. Singing was the heart of it. That was the heart of it. That created the spirit. We're pretty good at that. [Laughter.] Spirituals are the heart of the black experience. Everybody knows spirituals, and all of us know lots of the same ones. We don't even need a choir. We could do it ourselves and good musicians help. There's a sort of a warm-up time so to speak when everybody just sort of sings. Generally, there was a period of singing first, and then there would be speakers and there would be singing and there would be speakers and then there would be singing and there would be speakers and singing at the same time. [Laughter.]

It was a family thing. Everybody had to understand that we're all in this together. My wife was sometimes picketing with a baby in the stroller. We'd take the children with us sometimes, not all the time, many times. Most times I was out there in the heat and in the cold by myself. But they participated. One time we were involved with education. We picketed the school board. We picketed the city hall, the library, business especially retail. We were impacting all portions of the system. The only bystanders that weren't part of this were the white folk. [Laughter.] Some of them understood, and some of them didn't. For the commercial establishments, we were just primarily interested in cutting off the money stream.

Jennie Betts: We picketed the newspaper. We picketed everything, picketed downtown.

We had shifts for picketing. The older folks helped too. The adults helped, children. We had shifts. We more or less took the afternoon because we'd be in school. The adults took it in the mornings. And people would come down to pay their bill. We told them, "Mail it. Don't cross us. Mail it." Now I'm going to tell you there was an incident: I know a black lady came out and she said she just wanted to pay her bill and when she came out she had a grocery bag. And somebody grabbed her bag because she wasn't supposed to be doing anything but going in and paying her bill, not buying something. We didn't want her to buy. [Laughter]. One of the students grabbed her bag. Then another one came out and she had put a bag in her clothes. [Laughter] We could tell it. We didn't say anything to her.

The protestors also, as Sugarmon mentioned, had cameras which they used to take pictures of people who came in the stores being boycotted. They took pictures as a way of trying to get these people to not make purchases at these stores.

Before the civil rights activists carried out action, Vasco Smith says, they conducted surveys so that they could tell you, for instance, that there was only one black person on Main Street who was a salesperson.

Vasco Smith: Before we ever went into any of this stuff as we were planning on doing, we did surveys. We could tell you that there was only one black person on Main Street that was a salesman, and his name was a Reverend Mack. Reverend Mack sold shoes at the Sample Shoe Store on Main near Beale, but he sold to black customers. He took them in the back. There were certain restrictions in stores. They didn't hurt men as much as they hurt women. Women had to buy hats without trying the damn hats on. If you tried them on, you got to pay for it whether you like it or not. Women bought dresses without trying them on. If a black woman tried on a dress, she polluted it in some way. So she had to buy a dress just looking at it. Back to this salesman.

This was the only man in any retail store above the level of janitor. Can you imagine that? Now, you go into Walgreens, all you see is black people punching cash registers. Nothing like that. Nothing. Nowhere. We had all of our facts ready before we started anything.

Although the movement was nonviolent, not all African Americans adhered to this philosophy, and arrests occurred. By December 1, 1961, there were 318 arrests, 163 convictions, and 155 cases dismissed at the city level in regard to the sit-ins; these are considered low estimates.[100]

Maxine Smith: I never will forget. Before the kids went out, I would always give them this lecture, "You can't be violent. You cannot hit back. You cannot cuss back. You are on a mission, and you have to prove yourselves." I don't know how I did it or how the kids did it. Generally we had almost no violence from 500 arrests. But there was a big, strapping boy. He was about 15 years old. He was in high school. And the hot seat was a Walgreen's. A lot of sailors hung out there, military. Those young white guys--they would pour ketchup on those kids. They would tear their clothes. They would burn them with cigarettes. Once this young fellow--as I say he was big--he jumped up and got three of them and beat the living hell out of them. [Laughter.] And the last they saw, they said, "It was trail dust, Mrs. Smith. Running down Main." But I had to call him in. I had to take him out of the line. I wanted to give him a medal. [Laughter.] But that's discipline.

The core group of NAACP leaders participated in the movement as did other community leaders. Vasco Smith discusses, for instance, a one Frank Kilpatrick.

Vasco Smith: Russell Sugarmon's training--there was Morehouse, Rutgers, Harvard, and Boston College. Well, you can't do much better than that. Russell was, let's say, on one hand

[100] U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings Held in Memphis*, 113.

though he was very young, he was actually one of the senior advisers in the movement. But on the other hand--and this is what I wanted to say about community involvement--here's Frank Kilpatrick in the Forty-Eighth Ward, not too far from here. Frank Kilpatrick had organized the civic club. He was active with the Democratic club. He was active with the NAACP. Frank Kilpatrick did not have a sixth-grade education. But he had the same sort of desires that the rest of us had. He had the same ideas. Frank actually taught me some things that stayed with me for a lifetime. We were very close because the two of us traveled together at night. Now, you say, "Well, why didn't you travel with Maxine?" Well, with me and Maxine both, that's like having two that are fairly heavy going together. You want somebody else with you. But she can perform one function over there, and I can do one over here. Frank was my buddy most of the time at night. We talked going from one meeting to the other. One thing Frank would emphasize to me is this in his own way of saying it: whenever you go to talk to the white power structure, don't ever go by yourself. (By the white power structure, I mean it might be most anybody. Anybody from the mayor, chief of police, businessman, whatever--whoever the power was in that particular situation.) There were two reasons for it. One is you can't trust him, because he might lie on you. Secondly, you can't trust yourself [Laughter] because you might fall in a trap. You need somebody along there to make sure you going to be alright. Now, that sounds crazy, but do you know what. That's damn good logic.

The freedom movement in Memphis operated independently of civil rights activities taking place in other communities in the South.

Vasco Smith: You wanted to know something about the effect of other groups--what happened in other cities and so forth, how did that affect us. It didn't have anything at all to do with us. We didn't bother to try to study what happened here or yonder and there and so forth.

We were always creative enough to determine what would work best for us. That's what we were really concerned about. Now, we knew about everything that was going on everywhere, and we knew those people who were involved in those movements. You name them all the way from Fannie Lou Hamer and Medger Evers, whoever. Rosa Parks. We didn't know her personally until after she became famous. Daisy Bates over in Arkansas. Just whoever. We knew all of them. But what worked in Arkansas wouldn't necessarily work in Memphis. That was I think the key to what was happening here. There were people involved at the top who understood that. Martin Luther King actually was a disciple of nonviolence. King believed in non-violence. To us nonviolence was just another tactic.

As mentioned, people of all ages and economic levels participated in the movement.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: We had meetings at the NAACP office about negotiations that were going on with opening up the stores, lunch counters, restrooms--that sort of thing. The NAACP board was essentially mature people, a lot of retirees. The chairman of the board was a minister. I guess he must've been in his 60s. I can't remember his name. I can see him. He wore glasses. But that board, they were talking about the railroad station restaurant. This was about halfway through the summer that the sit-ins started. One of these people said, "Well, I move we adjourn." [Someone] said, "May I amend that motion?" He said, "Yes, sir." Someone said, "I move we adjourn to the railroad and sit down at the restaurant." So, the whole board went down there and sat in. This was, like, ten-thirty at night. So what they did was they called the police, and the police by this point were getting fairly savvy. The lieutenant came, and the squad car came and looked. They saw what was going on, so they got back in their car. A little bit later here comes the lieutenant. He walked in. He nodded. He nodded. He nodded. He says, "Now our orders are if you want to arrest them, we will arrest them. But you are going to

have to swear out the warrant." He says, "Now you can do that, but that's Maxine Smith. She's so and so. That's Russell Sugarmon. That's Jesse Turner. That's so and so." He said, "That looks like the NAACP leadership. Now, we'll arrest them, but you guys get braced for a suit." [Laughter.] So then they took orders, they served us, and we were all afraid to eat what they served. [Laughter.] "I'm full now." [Laughter.][101] This was in, probably '61, '60–something like that. Whenever our sit-ins started first because it went over a couple of summers, I think.

During the sit-ins, the NAACP tried to negotiate for settlement including with Mayor Henry Loeb. Elected public works commissioner in 1955, Loeb had made a successful campaign for mayor in 1959.

H. T. Lockard: To tell you another little story, this was the negotiation with the then-mayor of Memphis, Henry Loeb. This had to be 1960 because what it was about was the sit-ins. The sit-ins didn't get started until '60. So it was in '60 or '61. Somebody had the bright idea. I don't know who it was. It wasn't me. We ought to go and talk to the mayor. The mayor was an A-H. I said, "Fellows, let's don't go up there and dignify that man. He's going to embarrass us all." I said, "Tell you what. In case he locks you all up, call me and I'll get you out. I'm not going." They went to a meeting. We had five city commissioners, one police, one public works, one finance and administration, and on down. They went to talk to the mayor and the city commission about stepping in and trying to give some relief and all that. I'm told that when they walked in and they were facing the city commission, the mayor turned his chair and scooted all

[101] According to Jesse H. Turner, Sr., after some of the NAACP officials talked with Memphis Police Commissioner Claude Armour, "he decided that they would make the businesses swear out warrants, and of course most of these businesses were hesitant about swearing out warrants. As a result of that, we didn't have as much confrontation on those things, except after the initial shock of the sit-in demonstrations." Jesse H. Turner, Sr., interview by Dr. Anne Trotter and David Yellin, transcript, Memphis, 29 May 1968, Mississippi Valley Collection, Special Collections Department, Ned McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee.

the way to the back of the room, turned his back to the lawyers who were addressing the commission and remained there until they left. I just laughed and laughed.

Yet, despite that, I think two things happened. There was a showing of determination on the part of the minority community, and there was equally affirmative action on the part of the majority community, but in between reason stepped in and was able to get people to talk. We had two people on the city commission. We met with the *Commercial Appeal* paper, the editor, who was a powerful figure in the community. Newspaper editors always are. The police commissioner went down with us. To my surprise and to everybody's surprise, he made this announcement, He said, "I'm a lawyer. Give me something to hang my hat on, and I will enforce the law. Whatever the law is, give me some laws that I can see, and I'm convinced that that's the law, and I'm ready to go." This was Claude Armour.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: Claude Armour is the one who saved the meeting because we were getting ready to walk out and Armour said, "Henry, we owe these people more than that," and he said, "Y'all tell us what you got on your mind." I mean I respected Armour. He said, "I'm a segregationist but first I'm a professional lawman, so whatever that court tells me to do, we are going to do it."

Sugarmon further remembers that some whites supported the movement.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: When we had the picket lines, we had some whites picketing with us. We marched. I know one time, a woman, a lady named Alma Morris, her son was marching. He was marching right behind the daughter of an editor for the *Commercial Appeal*, who resigned his job. When the desegregation order came out, she wrote a letter to the editor saying that she was relieved to see that the Supreme Court finally had righted a great wrong, and she was looking forward to going to school with her black classmates. They wanted him to get

his daughter to retract that. They didn't want to publish the letter. He said, "We raise our kids to express themselves." They finally said, "Look, you either do that or you resign." He resigned, but he went to work with a civil rights commission, I think, later in Atlanta. I believe that's what it was. They were still here then, and she was marching. This was right by Court Square. The Citizens Council had decided to do a countermarch. They were going south on this side. The police made them march on the curbside, and the NAACP were marching on the park side all the way up against the building. This one guy passed whatever her name was and saw she was white. So the next person he ran into was young Morris. He said, "Is she white?" He says, "What do you think I am?" and kept marching. [Laughter.] He stopped marching. His mouth opened. [Laughter.] There are lots of stories like that. They're funny.

As Vasco Smith details below, the movement used creative tactics.

Vasco Smith: We used innovative and creative tactics. For example, at the Goldsmith's Department Store, the main restaurant was on the second floor, and they had escalators to go up to it or you went up by the elevator. Goldsmith's had these big goons who would catch the kids coming up the escalator and bump them up and rough them up a little bit, and they just couldn't get into the restaurant. They'd physically keep them out. But the kids were courteous enough, they were trained well enough, to not actually fight. The guys would fight them and push them around but they wouldn't fight back.

So let me tell you what we did to them, and this was our creative thinking that these guys did. We found out that at the main restaurant in Goldsmith's on the second floor at the rear of the restaurant off the little library on that same floor, there was a door where the cotton men--these were the wealthy men in cotton business on Front Street just a half a block away--were permitted to enter into a private dining room, so that they wouldn't have to wait in the line like

the other people did. We were told where the door was and that the door would open at a certain time, but the men didn't start coming in until twelve o'clock. But the door was open as early as eleven-thirty.

So we assembled again a group of ministers, a group of professional men. All of us were black. We had two presidents of insurance companies there. One was Lieutenant George W. Lee. One was Dr. A. Maceo Walker, the Universal Life Company president who was also bank president, president of Tri-State Bank. We had about eight or ten people of this caliber who had just drifted into the store one by one and who were looking at books in the library and, at a given signal, they would all then move in. We went in through the back door, and there was not a soul in there. There were just no waiters, no nothing. Just set up because it wasn't time for the men to come in. So we all went in and sat down. Nice linen table clothes and so forth.

We were just having a nice time chatting and going on before anyone ever realized we were there. Then suddenly the waitress came through the door and looked at us. [Laughter.] She ran to get somebody else and that one ran to get somebody else, and finally they got the manager and he came in. He said, "You can't do this." We said, "We are doing it though. Bring us the menus." Well, one of the preachers had started drinking water and eating crackers and so, and he said, "I want some food to go with this." Anyway, this was a long drawn-out thing where the man was sweating and we were having a good time. [Laughter.]

So finally Maceo Walker who was the bank president--president of Tri-State Bank--and the president of Universal Life Insurance Company, huge business. This man is a financial magnate in the community. So he told the manager, "Look sir, I'm tired of listening to you." He says, "You go get your boss and bring him in here, and I want to tell him why we're here." This man followed his orders. He went and got the general manager and I can't remember the man's

name. He came in and he said, "You fellas can't do this." Walker said, "Listen to me a minute. I want you to go with us and we're going to look at your books. I'm going to show you that on your books right now you've got an account for me of $25,000, and it started out thirty-five and I paid $10,000 down and I got a balance of twenty-five, and you telling me I can't eat a sandwich in this store?" Well, the man didn't believe him. We go to his office. Walker had just had his whole house redecorated by Goldsmiths. This is true. This is factual. You can use it in the book. This man was so crushed that he had no answer. The only answer they had was to close the room down--the entire restaurant--and it never re-opened again. What I'm saying is: though there were no widespread acts of violence and fire hoses and what have you as you had in other places, we had pressure tactics too and we used them and they were very successful.

The creative activity of the protestors also expanded to attacking the bus system.

Vasco Smith: The streetcars, the transportation system. The kids were bankrupting us. They would arrest them one day, and bless their hearts they'd go back the next day. Take them to jail. [Laughing.] The lawyers had to go get them. We said, "Look this is fine, but we got to find another way to do it." They were really disrupting things, but it really wasn't bringing it to a head. So, we said, "Let's do this. We're going to have four or five, I can't remember specifically now, four or five or maybe six--I don't think it was more than five--groups of well-known individuals, well known to the extent that if they are arrested, the publishing of those names in the papers and on the radio and on television will upset this town. We're going to bring the bus company to its knees." It was already operating on just a thin margin of profit. So we arranged groups. I think my group had five or four in it. There were these different groups that would assemble at one of the major transfer points where people gathered to get on the buses. At different places around town and at a given hour, we were all to board the first bus that came and

to sit on the driver if necessary, as close to the front as possible. My group, and I'll talk about mine I guess because it draws in all of what happened on the others too. I wish I could remember those names. I know it was me, Reverend Netters an outstanding Baptist minister was with us, Mr. [Dodson?] who was a very outstanding labor leader. He worked at International Harvester. I wish I could remember the rest of them. Attorney Sugarmon's wife was at one of the stops. These were very well-known people, adults. My group--I think we were at what's called crosstown, which is the major one. It was Madison and Cleveland, and it was twelve o'clock when we boarded the bus. We sat down. Fortunately, the seats were empty, and we just sat down immediately behind the driver. He was getting ready to pull off when it dawned on him. [Laughter.] It looked like a double take. He looked around and he stopped the bus. He said, "You fellows can't do that." We said, "Well we're pretty comfortable here. What's wrong with it?" Incidentally there also was an observer on every bus who went to the back. All of it was planned--every last bit of it. The observer on my bus was one of the famous Lee girls who got into so much trouble. Elaine Lee I think it was who was on our bus who was the observer.

The driver said, "Well, don't you guys know I'm going to call the police and you're going to be arrested?" We said, "Well, that's what we came here for." "Well, I've got to do it." So finally he was begging, "Please don't y'all." He calls the police. The policeman gets there. He said, "You fellows, I'll explain the law to you but I'm going to have to arrest you if you don't get up. I'll give you a chance." By that time his police radio was on and he was communicating downtown and downtown was listening to him and so forth and so on. Every now and then he'd say, "Well you know they're not moving. Must I arrest them?" or whatever. Then a lieutenant comes and his radio was blaring: "There's a group of them out on Front Street on the corner of so and so that got on such and such a bus." Then, "there's a group so and so. They're all over

town." [Laughter.] They're thinking, "What?" That's all there was on the police radio. They were describing it for them. So, I will admit we were a little bit apprehensive they did not arrest us. The bus driver drove us out to I think it was Breedlove and Jackson. It was out beyond the inner-city, toward the end of his line. Then, we suddenly looked ahead, and I guess there must've been five or six police cars that we could see ahead of us. We said, "Well I guess this is it." Sure enough they were there to meet us. Again they seeing the group, I'm pretty sure they had been instructed if at all possible to not arrest a group like that. Somebody knew that this was not exactly a group that could be arrested without causing difficulty. Okay, then you asked about the mass meetings. We were carried to jail. As we were being booked, others were coming in. [Laughter.] It was not nice being arrested, however. It never was. I never got accustomed to it. You were finger-printed. They took mug shots. In some instances we were strip searched. That's a demeaning sort of thing. Who's going to strip search a preacher? Good gosh. This was again the humiliation. I'm not sure if any of us were strip searched at that particular time but for other things. Our lawyers came to get us. We assembled, I think, down at the NAACP office and made immediate plans for a mass meeting that night. That was all that was on the radio, the arrest and so forth.

The mass meeting wasn't too far from here at Mount Pisgah Church, which is only about seven or eight blocks from where I live here. It's a large CME church. You couldn't get within a block of that church. That's right. They had to have the windows up so that at least the people could get some idea of what was going on inside. That very night plans were made in the church in the mass meeting to boycott the city buses. Nobody would ride the city buses. In less than forty-eight hours, the buses were desegregated. That was one of the beautiful, creative sort of things that we did.

We were doing so many different things simultaneously. We didn't have time to sit around and rejoice about this one because we had half a dozen other things that we were doing at the same time. Again, that's a point that makes it different in Memphis. It was a multi-pronged effort. We were doing lots of different things at the same time. There wasn't enough time to sit around talk about, you know, "Well, we've got 'em." We'd drink a little cheap wine maybe for about thirty minutes and then say, "Okay, what's next?"

The bus system was desegregated in Sept. 1960.[102]

Dr. Miriam DeCosta-Willis points out the crucial behind-the-scenes work of mothers of the movement activists.

Miriam DeCosta-Willis: Now, let me stop just a minute and talk about the women in the movement, like Lessye Sugarmon, Russ's mother, my mother-in-law, whom I adored, Maxine's mother, whom we called Ma'Dear, and women of that generation who were there to take care of our children, to shop, buy groceries, cook our food. We never could have done the work that we did as young mothers without their help. My mother-in-law came in, took my kids, took care of them so I did not have to worry.

Dr. DeCosta-Willis also points out that the times were not all bleak.

Miriam DeCosta-Willis: We had a lot of hard times and times were really rough, all the depression, all the discrimination and all, but people forget the good times that we really had. I remember Maxine and Vasco, their home on Englewood was kind of the headquarters, because Maxine liked to cook and she liked to drink, [Laughs] you know, so she would fix these big Polish sausages. Those were the times that people drank hard liquor, like bourbon and Scotch, and we would lie around on the floor and laugh and talk, and between times strategize about

[102] Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom*, 61.

what to do politically and in civil rights. We would laugh at our jokes and just cut up, and any time anybody came to town, like Vernon Jordan or anybody, Martin Luther King, we would assemble at Maxine's house and just laugh and talk. Martin Luther King, the night before he was assassinated, was sitting there having pillow fights with Andy Young and Ralph Abernathy. People forget that. We were living. We were enjoying life. We were raising kids. We were leading normal lives. But, you know, that part of the history is overcast.

Lockard credits the sit-ins with being the defining thing that led to change in Memphis. Indeed, the sit-ins did spur the desegregation of the library, for instance, in a way that lawsuits had not. For example, Jesse H. Turner had filed a lawsuit for desegregation of the library system in 1958 after being refused a library card by the main branch of the Memphis Public Library at Peabody and McLean. But, not until the sit-ins did the libraries finally integrate: the libraries desegregated in October 1960 with its bathrooms desegregating in September 1961.[103]

H. T. Lockard: All of these lawsuits, I would give credit for the most part, almost exclusively to the sit-ins. The sit-in demonstrations settled everything. The lawsuit root served as a good preamble, a good foundation, but when those young people from high schools and from LeMoyne College, Owen College--. The city police, I think, had called us in and asked us, "Will you all see if you can stop them?" We said, "Mister, honestly, we know no more than you do." They had organized. They had their minds made up. Looking back on it, what they did, they'd be going to the Cossitt Library. Tomorrow we're going to the zoo. Tomorrow we're going. We didn't know. When we knew anything, they were in jail. Some of the powers that

[103] Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom*, 61-63; Steven A. Knowlton, "Memphis Public Library Service to African Americans, 1903-1961: A History of Its Inauguration, Progress, and Desegregation" (master's thesis, University of Memphis, 2015), 92-4.

be asked us if we would try to dissuade them, but in my judgment that disruption that was caused by these students in a large measure contributed to the finale of this whole thing.

On White Opposition

Memphis did not have a strong White Citizens Council chapter. The White Citizens Council consisted of chapters throughout the South with a largely white-collar membership, including civic and business leaders, that advocated for states' rights and segregation. Members used economic intimidation and public harassment to silence civil rights advocates. They contributed to an atmosphere that tolerated and even encouraged violence against African Americans. The Ku Klux Klan also did not have a strong presence in Memphis. Vasco Smith attributes this lack of white opposition to forces wanting economic development of the city and realizing racial difficulties did not go hand in hand with it. Maxine Smith, white businessman John Fisher, and white lawyer Lewis Donelson reason that white leaders were civil in Memphis and would not tolerate violence. Fisher pointed out that, unlike other southern cities, the Freedom Riders came peacefully through Memphis; the Freedom Riders were the group of blacks and whites traveling on buses to make sure they were integrated throughout the South. Although the police force could be repressive toward African Americans, civil rights activists also credit chief of police Claude Armour with maintaining an atmosphere where there was not as much white opposition as there could have been. Armour emphasized to black leaders that he was a segregationist but before that he was a lawman so he was determined to keep the peace.

Vasco Smith: Armour and I were on very good personal terms. Armour would say, "Dr. Vasco." I'd tell him "don't call me that," but he always would. Everybody would call me Vasco. We are first-name people, Maxine and me too. He'd say, "Dr. Vasco, as long as your people are orderly, I'm going to do everything in my power to protect them, and if they get disorderly, I'm

also going to perform my duties and I'm going to put them in jail." That's just the way it was. I could sit down and talk with him and say, "Look Chief, you can stop this damn thing anytime you want to. All you got to do is tell the folks downtown some common-sense statements like 'You're losing it. Why don't you give in?'" He'd say, "Oh, Dr. Vasco, I don't have that much power." I'd say, "Yes, you do." [Laughter.] But he was the person in the white community more responsible for the type of atmosphere that existed. The white thugs knew that they were going to be arrested. The black thugs knew they were going to be arrested. There were times that I wished that somebody would start a fight because I was tired of marching. [Laughter.] Eighteen months is a long time. And the only reason, the only reason that it lasted as long as it did was because nothing ever happened to cause an explosion which would bring the television cameras to Memphis. We couldn't get the publicity that it took to bring about a quick and honorable settlement. This is honestly my point of view only. Eighteen long months was hard. And the mere fact that instead of us wearing down, we wore the others down.

Vasco Smith describes one of his arrests, which involves the threat of police brutality.

Vasco Smith: This happened on the picket line when we were doing the downtown section. I would say that this was beyond the midway point of the twenty months. It was a beautiful late spring or early summer day. It was hot. Mrs. Lorene Thomas was with me and so was Mrs. A. Maceo Walker. We were in front of the Shainberg's Black and White Store. It was sort of quiet. We got to the point that there just weren't many people downtown.

Somebody pointed out to me this white street person who was across the street from us. On this hot day he had on an overcoat and it was pulled up around him. His hat was pulled down, but he was gazing at me. They said, "Vasco, you better keep your eyes on him." I did kind of watch him. Every time I'd look up, he'd be looking directly at me. Then finally he went

in his pocket and pulled out a knife and he pointed at me. I said, "Oh, this is somebody we better watch." I said, "Y'all see the knife?" They said, "Yeah." So, slowly he began to walk toward us from across the street. Of course, I strongly believed in nonviolence. But my picket sign was carried on a stick, and I took the sign off of the stick [Laughter].

We were on a wide sidewalk, and we walked along the outer edge next to the street. He did cross over, but he stayed close to the store. He kept his hand in his pocket with the knife and continued to look me dead in the eye. Of course, I just kept my stick handy. So as he stayed closer to the building, I just sort of followed him with my eyes and as he passed us. When he got a little bit further down, however, he stopped but he didn't show a knife anymore. He kept his hand in his pocket. There was a theater next to the store. I think it was the Strand. When he got to the theater, which was about forty-fifty feet from where we were, he stopped and just decided he'd stay at that point. So I just sort of kept looking in that direction or turned in that direction. I didn't want to turn my back to him.

Fortunately, a motorcycle police officer came by. The police would pretty often come through to see if everything was okay. I just stepped out on the street and in front of him to get him to stop. I said, "Hey, that man over there got a knife in his pocket. He's been threatening me with it." Well, he didn't believe in such a thing. I said, "Well, you talk to the ladies there." They said, "Oh yes, it's in his right pocket." He didn't want to do anything about it. He called the lieutenant. The lieutenant came up, and he didn't want to do much about it. So finally I told him, "Man, look in his pocket." So, he did. He went over and made the guy take his hand out. Sure enough there was this big knife. The two of them--the police officer and the lieutenant--started talking. They're holding him here, just five or ten feet from where we were. They made him come and stand. Then they put their heads together. I said, "Wait a minute, it's me you're

talking about. Let me in" [Laughter]. So they called the captain. The captain comes. Again, they go into this huddling, and I said, "Let me in. Let me in on this." They moved away and they talked. Finally, believe it or not, the captain says, “They are both disturbing the peace. Throw them in the back of the car.” We were both arrested. I mean the women were just hollering and going on, "You can't arrest Vasco." They threw us both in the back of the seat of the car together.

They took us to the police station. This must've been about 11:30 in the morning when we got downtown. Oh, they booked me and everything. Booked him. Both of us. Disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace. I've been disorderly and disturbing the peace, because I didn't want this man to carve me up [Laughter]. Anyway, the captain in my presence, now after they booked us, says, "Lock them up. Put them on the 1:00 docket." That's the trial case at 1:00. Moving us up fast, before anybody else. He said, "I'm going to have them both on the penal farm by 2:00." That's the prison. I said, "Wait a minute, all of you, number one, I'm free to make a phone call, one phone call, and nobody has offered me a phone. I want a telephone. Number two, what's the forfeit on this doggoned thing so I can be free and come to court at one?” He said, "Well, it's $50." I said, "Well, hell, can you change this $100 bill?" [Laughter]. And that is the thing I always did. Every time I thought there was any possibility of being arrested, I'd get a $100 bill. Anyway, then I said, "When I get through with this phone, I want you all to take me right back to the place where you picked me up. You're supposed to do that too. They didn't know what to do with me [Laughter]. And I wasn't making it any easier on them. So I made the phone call and, fortunately, Maxine was there in the office. And, do you know what? They took me back to where they picked me up. I told Maxine, "You get the lawyers and everything together.”

I went home and got sharp. Honey, I dressed up. I mean I was good looking when I walked in there with my black suit, white shirt, black tie on. And here's old buddy over here with the overcoat and that hat on [Laughter]. Maxine had gotten me five lawyers. It was funny. Every time I went to jail they always had four or five lawyers. They knew I'd been wrong a little bit somewhere [Laughter]. I had Ben Hooks, Russell Sugarmon, A.W. Willis. H. T. Lockard was one of them. The fifth one might have been Ben Jones, I'm not sure. I had five lawyers waiting on me at 1:00. So, the judge calls this case up first. The arresting officer had to testify. He said, "Now this boy here." That's me. The judge knew me. Everybody in the courtroom knew me. "This boy here says that that gentleman over yonder." That's the white gentleman in the overcoat [Laughter]. "That that gentleman over there had a knife." And he went on to talk about "this boy" and "that gentleman." Finally, even the judge himself said, "Officer, enough is enough. That's Dr. Vasco Smith. Now don't call him boy anymore." Now that's unusual in a southern court at that time. But it was so ridiculous, honestly. Even the judge got tired of it. After everybody else had talked, the judge said, "Well, I'll tell you what." Now this is where justice comes in. He turned to the white fellow. "Now, you know you were wrong. Here's the knife right here. They took it out of your pocket. You were threatening Dr. Smith. Now, if you ever do that anymore, I'm going to put you under the jail. Case dismissed, both of y'all can go." How about that? [Laughter]. So, he did his little thing to pretend to be chastising him and then dismissed charges against him at the same time.

This story of Vasco Smith is revealing of the miscarriage of justice that African Americans could face in Memphis and elsewhere during this time; here he was clearly threatened but the judge dismissed the charges. And, it shows the ill treatment African Americans could face at the hands of the legal system by the fact that the lawyer derogatorily

called Smith "boy." On a note that may be surprising to some, it also shows, despite the potentiality of police brutality in this case, that African Americans and white police officers could have cooperative relationships. After all, Vasco Smith stated that the police would come by to check on the protests from time to time to make sure they were alright.[104]

Dr. Miriam DeCosta-Willis also had a run-in with police; here she describes an incident of police brutality.

Miriam DeCosta-Willis: What really upset me, even more than my own jailing as a part of my participation in the movement, was what happened to my children. I took my children with me everywhere, to rallies, to meetings, to marches, etcetera, and one day, I guess in the early 60s, we had a mass meeting at Clayborn Temple and it was preparatory to a march later on as a part of the movement. We were in Clayborn Temple and as we came out of the side door the police were there. I had one of my children in a carriage and then the other one, I was holding her hand, and as we came up the steps out of the basement, or whatever, the police maced me and my two little children. I was furious. I said how could they do this to these innocent children? But that didn't stop me. I kept on taking them with me because I wanted them to know that history of oppression.

Outside Memphis the environment was rougher. H. T. Lockard describes a near lynching of him in Haywood County, Tennessee, not far from Memphis.

H. T. Lockard: Going back fifty years or almost fifty years, things were just different. People were losing their lives for nothing in terms of the violence and intimidation and that sort of thing. It just so happened that my make-up was such that I guess you could say, "Well, it

[104] Brandon T. Jett, "'Try My Best To Tone Them Down': Police and African Americans in the Jim Crow South, 1917-1946," dissertation proposal, University of Florida, 2014, copy in author's possession.

can't be any worse. It can't. If I'm taken, if my life has to go for this cause, so will it be." I just willed it. I was going to stay with it. And I did. I don't know whether this is pertinent, but we had a young man who was conducting a voter registration drive in Brownsville, Tennessee. Well, Haywood County was the worst county in the state of Tennessee for race relations. It was tough. Incidentally, you had a majority of black people. But intimidation was as thick as that wall. The NAA sent a man down, Philip Savage in the early, '60, '61, something along in there. All he was doing was encouraging people to register to vote. To make a long story short, he got locked up for that. I was sent by the national office to represent him. It's just unimaginable the hostility that I encountered in that courthouse. The judge was nice and professional. The prosecutor I liked. But there's something about lawyers in this whole thing. They stuck to their ethics. They fought hard, but they stuck to their ethics and common courtesies and all this. But the sheriff, deputies, and all that sort of thing--. For example, I was familiar somewhat with the jail in Brownsville because I was born some nineteen miles from there. So I went on the day the trial was set to the sheriff's office to find out where my client was. He said to me, "Get out of my office, nigger." He said, "I don't know about Savage." Well, I asked somebody, "Well, where's the jail?" He pointed the jail out to me, and I went to the jail. He said, "He's gone to the courthouse." I went back to this sheriff again. He said, "Nigger, didn't I tell you that I don't know where Philip Savage is?" I went upstairs in nearby the courtroom, and there Savage sat. That's an example of how he could have told me where the man was. I won the case.

I was in Brownsville six to eight months ago, and some of the people remembered that day of the trial and the incident and everything. I had heard this before. They told me when the thing was over--we had a mass meeting that night--they said to me, "You can't go home tonight." I said, "What do you mean I can't go home?" Brownsville's sixty some miles from Memphis. I

had a brand new Thunderbird that had 140 miles on it. I was a young buck. [Laughter.] I said, "Oh, I'll go home." They escorted me to some friends' house. We had some drinks and some food and all that. They had me park my car behind this house. They told me the next morning that a posse had formed downstairs in the courthouse and was going, I guess, to lynch me or whatever. And that the sheriff and some of his deputies followed us to these homes. They showed me a different way to go out of town rather. You multiply that times hundred. That's the type of climate that we were in. I was afraid, no doubt about that. I was afraid.

Just because violence was not as severe in Memphis as other southern cities and a degree of civility prevailed does not mean that strong anti-black feelings did not exist. Many whites saw the NAACP leaders as troublemakers.

Hunter Lane: You probably can't conceive of how deep the anti-black feeling was. Most people, and I'm one of them, who were raised out there in what we called the "Golden Ghetto," had very little contact with blacks. I mean we had a maid and there was a guy that came around a couple times a week selling vegetables off a truck. We had no inkling of what went on in the black community, what problems there were. They were just kind of generally conceived as a relatively happy group of people who had adjusted to their station in life. When Maxine and the NAACP leaders became more aggressive, you couldn't ignore them anymore, and there was just great outrage. I mean I belonged to a country club, and these are pretty financially successful people, let's say. You can't imagine the outrage. They would have burned Maxine at the stake if they had had a chance. Now she just really challenged everything. Well the tactic that was used at first by the NAACP, they didn't do any marches but it was all rhetoric. The newspapers covered it pretty thoroughly. But as far as any do-gooders or people--I'm talking about white people--who tried to bring the black community into the twentieth century,

you know, as far as politics and other things, they were just very, very few. Lawyer Lucius Burch was one of them. There were just a very few, though.

Charlie Peete: They were called extremists because that was kind of a new thing for the city of Memphis. They had not had blacks parading in the city before that. They started doing it later on, but I don't know if it really helped the blacks or not, but it did bring the attention to people. It brought the attention to the fact that there were a lot of injustices that needed to be corrected, and it probably helped overall although it was very difficult to go through. Some of the whites' attitudes were very anti-black. It took a long time for some of them to change. But time is a great healer. It's a great healer.

Maxine Smith was a fire devil. I thought she was a segregationist on the other side. She was as mean as she could be. But she has mellowed a great deal. But her perception back in those years was that she was very fiery, very flamboyant. She was the secretary of the NAACP for many years. But she could be a devil. She was so anti-white. She was anti-white. Like there were a lot of anti-blacks, I thought she was anti-white. But she's, again, tempered with the years. Basically it was her rhetoric. Back in those days she didn't care what she said. She came across to me just as kind of inflammable. She came across as a real extremist to me. That was my perception anyhow.

The Smiths were also subject to violent threats as were Vasco Smith's parents.

Maxine Smith: My mother, Georgia Aurel Atkins, was a saint. Oh God, that's another whole personal story. She'd call, "Baby, is everything all right?" I said, "Oh, you've got nothing to worry about." She never interfered. She didn't worry. Now Vasco--. Our parents are a little bit different. Well, the loving and everything is the same. He got arrested a lot of times, and Mama would about have a fit. Mama would worry more. They called Mama and Daddy.

That would upset them. They would threaten us. They would threaten them and tell them what they were going to do. Both of us were Vasco Smiths.

On Ending the Freedom Movement and Compensatory Employment

The Memphis NAACP branch called off the twenty-month demonstration movement on November 14, 1961, after private and public facilities desegregated, including the bus and library systems and "as a result of favorable negotiations with downtown merchants."[105] *Business leaders asked for a settlement, and they and NAACP leaders began negotiations concerning employment and segregated facilities. The Memphis branch officials agreed to halt their protests in return for a pledge by merchants that they would desegregate their eating facilities sometime after the first of the year, which occurred on February 6, 1962. Maxine Smith termed this "D-Day, marking the satisfactory resolution of a 18-month boycott." Twenty-nine branches of ten department stores, including Bry's, Goldsmith's, Lowenstein's, and Sears-Roebuck, desegregated dining facilities, restrooms, and water fountains. Twenty-eight blacks had lunch at least one branch of these stores, and reports indicate that desegregation went smoothly even though the settlement had led to a protest rally by seven hundred members and sympathizers of the newly formed Memphis branch of the White Citizens' Council.*[106]

During the state of negotiation with the businesses between November 1961 and February 1962, NAACP officials sometimes used an intermediary from the Memphis Committee on Community Relations. Established in 1958, the MCCR's charter and constitution was incorporated on January 26, 1959, in which its purposes were listed as calm discussion,

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[105] Memphis Branch NAACP, "Annual Report of Branch Activities-1961," Papers of the NAACP, Group III, box C146, folder: Memphis NAACP 1961-62, Manuscript Division, p. 3; David M. Tucker, *Memphis since Crump* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 120. The quote is from p. 3 of the annual report.

[106] "Memphis Boycott Successful," 6 Feb. 1962, Papers of the NAACP, Group III, box C146, folder: Memphis NAACP 1962, Manuscript Division; Maxine Smith, "Report of Executive Secretary, Jan. 17 – Feb. 6, 1962," Papers of the NAACP, Group III, box C146, folder: Memphis NAACP 1962, Manuscript Division; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 254-5. The quote is from "Memphis Boycott Successful."

preserving order under law, and pursuing happiness and progress for Memphis and its citizens. The MCCR consisted of a voluntary, unofficial, bi-racial group of civic leaders, including ministers, newspaper editors, and public officials. Prominent black leaders such as Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., Vasco Smith, Jesse Turner, A. W. Willis, Jr. and A. Maceo Walker belonged to the MCCR. Smith served as vice president for a time.[107]

Some scholarship on civil rights in Memphis over-emphasizes the role of the MCCR, crediting it as the main force behind desegregation. Yet Vasco Smith says, "A bigger lie never has been told." The purpose of the committee was to preserve social harmony and order. The black community applied the pressure that caused desegregation.

Smith remembers the negotiating meeting with Lowenstein's Department Store officials after the NAACP called off the freedom movement. Lawyer Lucius Burch, who was white, had founded the MCCR, and was later Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s lawyer when he was in Memphis, came along.

Vasco Smith: Lucius Burch was just a fine man, one of the best human beings to ever live, black or white. Jesse Turner went in with Mr. Burch, and I went in with my picket sign still on [Laughter]. So, you can see that the man wasn't too happy to talk to us. But then, with Burch there, we did get a dialogue going. Finally, I saw that I had played my role too. Jesse and Burch were supposed to soften him up a little bit. I was supposed to be evil and mean, and I wasn't going to listen to anything. We planned it that way.

We were discussing employment. They were just saying--and incidentally, this is something we faced over and over again--"Well, it is true that we do not have any blacks above the level of custodian. But right now we don't have any openings. And then of course, there

[107] Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 119-35.

aren't many blacks who can handle these positions," and so forth. Well, Burch's position and Jesse's position was "How soon will you start?" My position was that you already got custodians who can be salesman if you just put them in that position. I used the term "compensatory employment." I made it up on the spot. Because I was saying that we don't need to wait on you to have openings. Hire some that you don't even need. Well, Burch and Jesse disagreed with that, "Now Vasco, that's being too hard." I said, "Well, you going to have some sick, you going to have some that die, you going to have some employees that leave and go to other places. Openings will come about every week in an organization this big. So, if you hire three or four here you don't need, you've got a pool to pull from when the openings do come. So let's say this, you're compensating for what you have not done for the last 200 years. So, let's call this compensatory employment" [Laughter].

When we went back to the second negotiating session, Burch had looked over this matter of compensatory employment. He found that was a pretty good term to use, and he won the man over with the argument [Laughter]. I'm praising him because he was a great man, and he was honest and sincere in what he was doing. The one thing I could say about him also is this: that if it had been necessary to have a person of his magnitude and his race and so forth to participate in the picket line, he would have done it. He's probably the only one. [Laughter.] He was a very great man. But I only wanted to use that example to say that when it became necessary and we felt that it would be beneficial all around to have somebody from the Community Relations Committee come with us to negotiate a settlement, that was done.

School Desegregation

As the freedom movement was going on, school desegregation was taking place. The NAACP branch had filed a lawsuit for desegregation of Memphis city schools. On October 3,

1961, thirteen black children were admitted to four previously all-white schools. A son of civil rights activist A. W. Willis, Jr., Michael Willis, was one of the students. In the largest single mobilization of Memphis police ever, police commissioner Claude Armour assigned 160 police officers to the schools as a precaution against violence. Plainclothes officers were in the school. Armour released a statement, announcing that anyone who crossed the police line with anything in mind other than going to school would be arrested. A press headquarters was set up across the street from the school board offices and relayed information as fast as it came in from the police. The day went by without incident although fifteen white students were withdrawn from school by their parents. U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy called Armour, praising him for his efficient and effective handling of integration of the schools.[108]

Maxine Smith: We had to walk these kids to school. It was amazing. These six-year-old kids. They just had the spirit we had. It was embedded in them. Oh, you could hear muttering nigger this or anything they wanted to say. But Claude Armour, the police director--no nonsense, complete segregationist. He had defied them to do *anything* to those kids and to keep peace. A mandate from the top can be good no matter what the reason is. It's such a long, long story. See, we had filed a school suit by then. The people sitting in the courts, you know, judges, school officials just lying, "We don't have a segregated school system. It just happens that all black teachers and students are in one group of schools and the same for whites."

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: The then-police commissioner was Claude Armour. He'd say, "I'm a segregationist, but before that I'm a professional. I'm a lawman." He says, "Whatever law comes along, I'm going to enforce it." When the order for school desegregation came, he called us in. He kept *us* posted on *his* planning for desegregation. He called us to let us

[108] U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings Held in Memphis*, 85-86; Silver and Moeser, *Separate City*, 97-101; Muse, *Memphis*, 14, 43, 46.

know what his plans were. He said, "We got a list of everybody who's here--Tipton County, Fayette County, DeSoto County, all around, who are active in Klans and Citizens Councils," whatever.[109] He says, "We're calling them all in for a meeting. I'm going to show them exactly where these kids are going. I'm going to show them what schools they're assigned. At what time they're going to be there. I'm going to let them know that if any of them are anywhere near, they're going to jail. We may not keep them, but they're going to have to get out." [Laughter.] He just called them and said, "This is where we're going to be, so this is where you ain't going to be." That's what he told them. So all we had were reporters.

I went with some twins to one of the inner city schools, and the policeman who was assigned there. I could tell I was in trouble when I got to the door because the mother was terrified. I said there's nobody out here but us and some police down the street. By the time we were supposed to go, she was thinking, you could see, that she didn't quite want me to walk out there with her little girl. Somebody rang the door. I opened it. It was a police detective. He said, "I live around the corner from you." She recognized him from the grocery store or something. So he said, "We're assigned to your two daughters." He said, "We've been around the neighborhood. There's no problem, nothing, nobody that doesn't belong here here." He said, "Our instructions are that we can be off duty when you feel like it." [Laughs.] So she finally relaxed and let me take them. That was my experience with it. I don't know how it went the other places, but that's what happened to these two little girls.

Miriam DeCosta-Willis: There had been the Supreme Court decision in 1954 outlawing segregation in the schools, with Thurgood Marshall as the main litigant, the main attorney. We

[109] Founded in May 1866 and reorganized in 1915, the Ku Klux Klan sought to deny African Americans equal rights through violence and intimidation--lynching, murder, bombings, beatings, and so on. The KKK engaged in violent assaults against civil rights workers.

filed suit here, *Northcross v. Board of Education*, and it was agreed between the attorneys and the court that we would reverse the process here. In Little Rock, they started with the high school and moved down the grades, and our attorney said, well, we're going to start with the little first-graders. We'll start with the five- and six-year-olds because surely people will not attack them. The mob would not attack these kids.[110]

So Maxine, Allegra Turner, me, through the NAACP we canvassed. Tennessee had filed something called the Tennessee Pupil Placement Law which meant that you had to be screened before you could be considered as a person to desegregate the schools. That was not the ostensible reason but that was the practical reason. So many parents told us, "No, we don't want our kids involved," but we ended up with a hundred students. For various reasons they were excluded and we finally got thirteen young people, among whom was the son of A. W. Willis, Michael Willis, because we felt that if we're going to be on the firing line we should put our kids also on the firing line. There's that iconic photo of Russell Sugarmon leading a couple of kids into the schools. We didn't have any problem. We happened to have a police commissioner named Claude Armour. He said, "By God, I'm not going to have a Birmingham in this city. We're going to do things peacefully." So he lined up all the policemen and it was a quiet desegregation of schools.

Now the next year, 1961, there were forty-four students, among whom were my and Russell's son, Tarik Sugarmon, Maxine and Vasco's son, Vasco III, and a good friend of ours, a Whalum child, and they desegregated Peabody School and the mothers carried them in. I can remember that, going through lines of policemen with my little, at that point five-year-old,

[110] Nashville, Tennessee, also implemented an incremental school desegregation plan. See Benjamin Houston, *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

carrying him into the school. It was a wonderful experience. I remember that teacher. She was just amazing. She just took Tarik under her wings and nurtured him and it was a good experience. I wrote about that experience, my fear as a parent and my trepidation about putting my child on the sacrificial altar, so to speak, and I have worried about that because some of the kids who were involved did not have pleasant experiences, and they're bitter.

One student who did not have a particularly good experience was Vasco Smith, Jr., the son of Maxine and Vasco Smith; he went by the nickname "Smitty."

Vasco Smith: Our child was in the second year of desegregation in the first grade. He was a first grader the second year. One day, I went to pick him up. His mother was doing something else. He was looking for her car. He wasn't even thinking about my car. He just didn't see it, but I could see him. I'm going to tell you I had some feelings that I remember to this very day. He had been schooled very thoroughly in being able to ignore things that really didn't hurt him--little remarks or whatever that were not kind. Just say that they didn't know any better and forget about it. But I came face to face with it when I picked him up that day. He was across the street diagonally from me, and there were the kids with the little safety patrol who would stop the traffic and let them across the street and so forth. As he was standing there near one of these kids, there was a safety patrol fellow. The fellow kicked Smitty. He was a larger boy. Smitty just moved away from him and the fellow finally kicked him again. Smitty moved a good distance away from him, and he didn't bother him anymore. Then the time came, he finally saw me over there and waved. He was so glad to see me. When he came across the street, he ran to get in the car. We chatted. I said I was glad to see him. Then as we were driving home, I said, "Smitty, tell me something. When the fellow kicked you, how did you feel?" He said, "What fellow?" I said, "Smitty, I know that the boy kicked you." He said, "Yeah, Daddy, he

did." I said, "How did you feel?" He said, "Well, you told me that they don't know any better, and it's just ignorance and for me to just overlook it." I wondered to myself, "Well, what am I doing here?"

So the Kang Ree Academy of Karate had opened, and there were television ads on. So, I guess, a month or two after that, Smitty noticed it. He said, "Daddy, the Kang Ree Academy there. Can I go?" "No, who in the world are you going to"--and then it hit me–hmmm. [Laughter.] So, I pretended, "No, you can't go." Then, we made a bargain a few weeks later when an ad came on. Smitty said, "I want to go." I said, "Well, Smitty, I tell you what. If you bring me good grades this year, at the end of the term, we'll let you spend the summer going to Kang Ree." There were all kinds of things that he'd come home and talk about, this boy who would snatch him up, bump up against him in the hall. He'd report these things to the teachers and so forth, and nobody would do anything about it. "Oh Smitty, don't be a crybaby," or whatever. He'd come home and tell me about it.

Anyway, when the school was out, he said, "Now, Daddy, look at my report card. I got a good one. I got a good one. You said you were going to let me go." I said, "Yeah, Smitty. I believe you have." So, the Kang Ree Academy was on the streetcar line that passed very close to our house. That first week I took him over to meet Kang Ree, nice Korean sort of guy. He said, yeah, he'd like to have Smitty in his class. He said that he thought that he would do well. He was to go two days a week and spend four hours each day. The second or third day, instead of staying four hours, he spent the whole day, eight hours, there. He carried his lunch with him. Then he just told me, "You don't have to take me over there anymore." He'd just catch the bus and go over there. He didn't have to transfer or anything and he could carry his lunch and stay all day. He was six or seven. Anyway, one day I was downtown, and I stopped at the traffic

light. The cop came over to my car and said, "You're Dr. Smith, aren't you?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, you're Smitty's daddy?" I said, "I have a son named Smitty." He said, "Well, he's my instructor in karate." [Laughter.] What!? He had been going all day. This was toward the end of the summer. He went from yellow belt to green belt to something. So, along with the martial arts part of it, they also taught courtesy, that it's not a thing that you just go out and throw around, but it's really for self-defense. Anyway, after about two weeks of school, he came home one day and said, "Daddy, I think you ought to go to school and talk to the principal." I said, "Well, why?" "Well," he said, "This guy that bumped me around all last year. The principal wouldn't do anything about it." The guy was bigger than he was. He said, "He started doing that same thing this year. I went to the principal and told him about it. He said, 'Oh, Smitty you're just a crybaby.'" He said, "Daddy, finally I got tired of it one day, and I split his lip." [Chuckling.] I said, "What did he do?" He said, "Well, he just sort of figured that I got lucky and he really attacked me. Daddy, I split his lip again." He said, "Then the boy decided he couldn't handle me anymore. He went to the principal, and the principal called me in." He said that the principal lectured to him. He told the principal, "Why isn't it that you didn't lecture him all of last year? And now that I know how to take care of myself." [Laughter.] So I got to admit I believe I felt kind of good. [Laughter.]

In conclusion, the years from 1960 to 1962 saw great success in the civil rights movement in Memphis. A freedom movement sparked by the student sit-ins and then coordinated by Maxine Smith of the NAACP branch led to community-wide involvement of people picketing, sitting in, and otherwise protesting the state of segregation and lack of employment opportunities for African Americans in Memphis. Their efforts led to the desegregation of public and private facilities and better employment opportunities. Ongoing legal efforts also resulted in the token

desegregation of the elementary schools in Memphis. To be sure, the movement was not without hardship or challenge. Although the movement was relatively peaceful in Memphis, police brutality, threats, and the condemnation of the civil rights activists by the white public occurred. Nevertheless, black Memphians surmounted these obstacles as they went about their own unique and creative ways of racial advancement.

Chapter 4: Formal Political Efforts from 1960 to 1963

As direct action persisted in Memphis with the twenty-month freedom movement, black Memphians persisted with their formal political activities in addition to legal action. Emboldened by the Volunteer Ticket's success in 1959, they further developed the Shelby County Democratic Club, the black Democratic club that encompassed the city and county, into a powerful electoral force. Black Memphians could only operate on a nonpartisan basis through the NAACP branch but they could act on a partisan basis through the Shelby County Democratic club, and membership and leadership of both organizations overlapped, providing the Memphis black freedom struggle with unity. Black Memphians were increasingly recruited by white politicians for their voting power; for instance, the 1960 John F. Kennedy campaign sought them out. By early 1961, Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., A. W. Willis, Jr., and Jesse Turner were prominent leaders in the Shelby County Democratic Club; it was the most prominent black political organization in the city. There were sixty-five precinct clubs with some having as many as one hundred members. Sugarmon and later Vasco Smith served as executive director of the Democratic club. Benjamin L. Hooks and other black Republicans worked with the Democratic club to work for black candidates in local elections. In addition, black Memphians held the balance of power in elections and, by 1964, began electing candidates of their own to public office.[111]

In the following excerpts, the narrators discuss the unity of the black freedom movement in Memphis.

Miriam DeCosta-Willis: Here in Memphis there was no separation between the civil rights movement and the political struggle. These two went hand in hand, so along with the

[111] Jalenak, "Beale Street Politics," 53-4, 56, 183.

NAACP is the Shelby County Democratic Club. All of us in the NAACP were also leaders of the Shelby County Democratic Club, and vice versa. So, for this reason, the 1959 election in which Russ, Hooks, Love, and Bunton were candidates is, in a way, the beginning of our real civil rights movement. It had started with the lawsuits and all of that but that political movement was really important. My second husband, A. W. Willis, ran for the Shelby County Quarterly Court in 1960. He was defeated. In 1964 he ran for the state legislature and won, becoming thus the first black elected to the Tennessee state legislature since Reconstruction, and he served for two terms. In 1967 he became the first black to run for mayor of this city, and I was his campaign manager.

Maxine Smith: In those days, we could get a *fantastic* turnout. You know, turnout across this country now is so pitifully low. In our last election, primary election, it was less than 25 percent totally. In those days, we could get ninety percent of the black vote out with--no seventy-five percent I'll say--with about ninety to ninety-five percent voting alike. It was complete faith in each other, determination and everything you might want to ascribe that to. And then, I'm working two ways: Nonpartisan, I'm the NAACP volunteer. Politically, we have our Shelby County Democratic Club. Basically it's the same people as far as leadership is concerned.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: We had just come out of that '59 campaign, which was the strongest effort ever made here. There were about twelve or fifteen hundred, maybe two thousand, people who were ready to keep going after that campaign. That was the way we got the momentum. We just kept doing things that helped the momentum. The political group, Shelby County Democratic Club, at its height in 1964, we had 101 precinct clubs and about 7,000 members. It was sort of parallel to the NAACP because that leadership and the NAACP

leadership were fungible--the same down to the precinct levels. We met monthly. The NAACP did, and the Democratic club met monthly. Any issue that affected the black vote or the black community we discussed both places. So what it gave us was a cadre, citywide and county-wide, of people who had some sophisticated insight about issues and probably how it affected our folk. We're missing that now. I know at one point the school system needed funds. The only way you could get funds was to pass an increase in the sales tax, which we knew was the most regressive. But we said, "Our kids need it," and it passed. The black wards carried it. It failed in the white wards. The black vote passed it. I thought that was enlightened. They respected that argument, and they passed it. They knew it was going to cost them, but they wanted the money to go for their kids. I felt good about that, that sort of thing.

The Shelby County Democratic Club convinced some African Americans such as Maxine Smith to switch to the Democratic Party from the Republican Party. Previously, in Memphis politics the Republican Party had been strong among African Americans. Longtime political leader Lt. George W. Lee, for instance, was the Republican leader of the Lincoln League, a group of black Republicans. But its power diminished with the rise of the Shelby County Democratic Club.[112]

Jennie Betts: See Mr. Sugarmon coming back from law school, and Mr. Willis and all of them, they came back with the aim to get us together. We had a Republican Party here too and the leader was Lt. Lee. That's when we broke his eggs. We got him. Memphis was voting half and half. Most of them black folk were voting Republican until Mr. Sugarmon went to the Democratic club having an effect. And they've been voting Democrat ever since. The Shelby

[112] For more information on Lee, see Gritter, *River of Hope*; David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1971).

County Democratic Club was a powerhouse. Particularly the Democratic Club drew more young folks. Lee didn't have any but older people with him.

The 1960 Local Election

Following the success of the 1959 election, African Americans remained mobilized and turned their attention to the 1960 local election, which also proved transformational for the black community.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: What happened, I'll tell you, the next election was 1960 because the politics of it is intricately interwoven with the civil rights thing. Because a lot of our folk wouldn't have been in politics if they didn't see it as a lever for civil rights. We looked at three legs--political action, legal action, and direct action--after we got going once the sit-ins started. All that was part of a process, which was the most useful way to go at a given time for a given objective of what was on the table. The county commission, which is similar to the city commission, had three people elected with portfolios, was up for re-election. They were the last elected vestiges of the old Crump organization. The chairman of it was a guy named David Harsh. Rudolf Jones was one of the commissioners, and then Stanley Dillard, I believe, and the old sheriff Mel Hinds, the sheriff. The liberals had always said they wanted to meet behind closed doors because the black vote was the kiss of death.

So, Lieutenant George W. Lee--he was the Republican leader here--he was conversant with this leadership, the county leadership. He raised the idea, broached it with Jesse Turner, A. Maceo Walker, A. W. Willis, me, Ben Hooks, and a few others. We could consider them. We put some things on them to do before Election Day. That way we can't get double-crossed. Senator Estes Kefauver was up for re-election. We wanted them to agree to do something before election and do it before election. So we met with them. We had printed a little pamphlet, a

booklet about our precinct leaders, and David Harsh had one on his desk when we met with him in the Grand Jury room the next summer when we backed him. He said, “You know, I looked at this thing, and anybody who can put this kind of organization together is going to be hard to stop in this town.” [Laughs] We thought that was a compliment, you know? Because he was an old political pro. His was a legacy of Crump. They were the people, the last surviving members of the old Crump organization. In the booklet was a little preamble and then the offices and the people who manned the offices and the precinct leaders.

Anyway, we had a list of things. We wanted them to remove the "white only" signs from every public building under their control. Kefauver was running for re-election. He was being challenged by a guy named “Tip” Taylor who had run strongly in the governor's race but lost, but he was still big. He was running as a White Citizens Council candidate. You know, he was one of those types. Then start hiring before Election Day black people to nontraditional jobs, like sheriff. They did. But before that happened, we were going to release the ticket that we were supporting through the churches by a letter we wanted the preachers to read the Sunday before Election Day. They agreed. So what happened, the *Commercial Appeal* came out with a big headline, so it leaked, "Jobs for Votes Deal Exposed." We said, "Well, politics is about advancing the interests of your people." They said we met in the basement of the courthouse. We met in the grand jury room of the courthouse. So no basements for us. [Laughter.] Anyway, we said, "Nobody involved in the meeting asked for or is supposed to get a job. These are jobs for people who have *nothing* to do with this process. That's what we intended they do with it." This guy, he called and said, "One of the things Mr. Crump taught me was that in politics, your word is your bond." He said, "We are prepared to live by our commitment if you are prepared to live by yours." I said, “Yeah, we’re prepared.” So, they did and we did. So they

won.

So what that did was, from that day forward, we weren't the kiss of death. We had moved to the middle where you couldn't get a viable campaign going in terms of anything unless you had a chance of getting black support. See we were one third of the vote. So from that day forward, it wasn't [Sugarmon has a negative connotation in his voice] "You got black support." It was: "Can you get black support?" That was the question. It just shifted the dynamics of politics from '60 on.

We did it for two or three things. One, Kefauver carried every precinct in Shelby County then. He hadn't been doing that well before. I'm talking about black precincts. He won. He died two years later, but he won. We got black deputy sheriffs hired. I'll tell you, one of them, when he died, was the jury commissioner of Shelby County. So 1959 and 1960, I think, were the keystone years of what went on for a decade or so. After the '60 election everything changed because we had come from being pariahs to the balance of power. People recognized that you could no longer ignore the black vote. Instead of wanting a secret support they wanted people to know that they had black support, from that election on. It just totally moved us center stage.

One diehard supporter of the Shelby County Democratic Club was a woman by the name of Nellie Martre, who was a precinct leader.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: This was the campaign where we endorsed the old Crump regulars in the county commission provided they do certain things before the election. I got a call in my office saying this lady had been found unconscious in the street outside of a project over there on Crump Boulevard. The only thing she had on was her Democratic club membership card. I recognized her. They described her and all. Her name was Nellie Martre. She was sick. She was out there and passed out in the sun. It was hot--August. So I went over

to the hospital to see her. I said, "Weren't you supposed to be in bed?" She said, "I know, but I'm the precinct leader over here, and these people want to know who we're supporting, and I had to get out there to let them know." I mean that kind of commitment existed in our club. I mean, she was saying that she got up out of her sickbed, trying to get out, endorse, so those people knew who to vote for.

Of all the black leaders, A. W. Willis, Jr., and Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., especially formed a political partnership. Here, Vasco Smith describes their styles.

Vasco Smith: A.W. Willis was a lawyer, but he was actually more inclined toward business than the law. He loved politics. He was the guy who was an organizational genius when it comes to putting together neighborhood organizations, political organizations, voter registration, all that sort of thing. That was a specialty of his and he just loved it. He excelled in that. When we needed to know about how to approach things from a political point of view, A.W. always had the ideas on how to do that. He liked to deal with figures and projections and so forth, politically, because our organization was political. He was small of stature, medium build, and he made a lot of noise. He talked like a street person who had never gone to the fine schools that he went to. In other words, he talked the language of the people, so that anybody from any social strata could understand what he was talking about. I think he did it because he enjoyed doing it. With a crowd of intellectual people, he could also talk with them too. But I think that just this ordinary, everyday of communicating was a thing that he developed. A. W. was a banker. He was a real estate man. He was a lawyer. He was a politician. So he did a lot of things. His father was one of the founders of Universal Life Insurance Company, which was one of the largest black businesses in the United States at that time. So he came from a background of money too. That was a little bit unusual in our group because most of us didn't

have any money. I think that pretty much describes him.

Now Sugarmon. Sugarmon's father was a real estate man. He certainly had an upper-middle-class background. Sugarmon attended Morehouse College. Willis and Sugarmon both attended Booker T. Washington High School here in Memphis, and so did Maxine and so did I. Jesse Turner was from Mississippi, and that's another story. But Russell attended Morehouse College. He attended Rutgers. He attended Harvard University, and he attended Boston University. He was very well educated. Russell does not speak the vernacular that we're talking about. Russell is awfully, very cultured in his way of speaking. It just comes naturally with him. He's just that sort of guy. Law is his main forte. He's now a judge and has been for a number of years. But Russell was interested in the planning also of political activities. He was very good at statistics.

On the Kennedys

Like Vasco Smith, John L. Seigenthaler remembers the dynamic duo of Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., and A. W. Willis, Jr. They all worked together to elect John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960. Seigenthaler, a former reporter for the Tennessean, served as a campaign aide to John F. Kennedy's campaign manager and brother, Robert F. Kennedy. Seigenthaler also refers to the situation in Fayette County, Tennessee, (near Memphis) in which African Americans formed a tent city in 1959 after being evicted from their households for attempting to register to vote.

John L. Seigenthaler: Well most of all I remember Russell Sugarmon. I remember how attractive he was, how intelligent he was, how articulate he was, and how well-informed he was, and added to all that he had a great sense of humor, and it would creep up on you. I found him a great friend. With the passage of time I found him a great and loyal friend. I think that it was

inevitable that he would emerge as one of the leaders in a community where there were a number of people who had the talent to lead. He stood out with me, largely I think because we gee-hawed. We, I think, understood each other. I was from Middle Tennessee, he was from West Tennessee, but he was very much at home in Middle Tennessee.

I thought the partnership of Russell Sugarmon and A. W. Willis was a wonderful partnership because they played off of each other so well. A. W. Willis was sometimes, I thought, Russell's straight man, and I had a great time with both of them. It seemed to me that while Memphis was sort of an amorphous community the two of them sort of stood out as separate and apart from many of the others. They were relatively new, they were young, and really good looking guys, and really well spoken, and beyond that they enjoyed each other. They were a great team. To be with one of them was a joy and to be with both of them was a double joy for me, and I loved the opportunity to work with them. The 1960 campaign, I mean Russell had already made his mark as a political leader and it was clear that he was who he was. I had first sort of waded into west Tennessee because of the tent city I guess in '59. It was during the Eisenhower administration. I can't remember at what point I first intersected with Russell and A. W. but I know the first time I ever saw them they were together and I was suddenly talking to two people, about my own age, I guess, who were so bright and so into politics in ways maybe that journalists aren't, and to talk to them was a learning experience.

If you grow up in the racist South, a son of the racist South, you really don't have that much exposure to people, whether you're white or black. The numbers of black people, even as a journalist, you sat down and talked to were few and far between and even when you did it was most often a journalistic assignment. You were told by the editor to interview this person or that person, so it was always rather formal, and I don't know that I had really had an opportunity to

interact with black people as friends. Now during my upbringing there were always domestic women working in my mother's household, Leila Gray and Bertie Mae Lytle, and I knew them and sometimes they were surrogate mothers and there's a bond there, but it's different to suddenly realize you've got a couple of friends you never knew you had and their interests are not that different from what yours are, and their politics are very close to your own politics, and their interest in the whole area of communications. So, I was really taken.

Russell, I thought, was one of the most attractive politicians I'd ever met, one of the most attractive lawyers I had ever met, and I didn't know much about his law practice except you could tell, you know, when you would talk about pending legislation or pending political problems, he was right on top of it and sometimes ahead of you. As I said before, the two of them were a team and they played off each other beautifully. Occasionally I'd watch them interact with other people and it was almost as if one would begin a sentence and the other could finish it for him. They were on the same wavelength. They were close and they had bonded at some point along the way, and I found that I not only liked them I admired them.

They know it, I know it, and we never discuss it, and still the bonding goes on without ever really discussing it personally. It took a good deal of trust on their part, much more trust on their part than on mine, because they come into it not knowing who this white honky is from Nashville. Yeah, he's working for Bobby Kennedy but he's got that honey-dripping Southern accent and he's out of the same white culture in middle Tennessee and west Tennessee. So the burden of trust was much heavier on their side than it was on mine, and still we bonded and the trust was there from almost the first day.

Sugarmon and Willis mobilized the Shelby County Democratic Club and black community behind the campaign of John F. Kennedy. Seigenthaler recalls their involvement.

John L. Seigenthaler: Russell was not the only black leader that was for Kennedy in Memphis, I think the other leaders began to come around, but he was first. He made the trip to Washington. He knew I was there, and he knew who I was, and he wanted to make the linkage and hoped that it would be beneficial and hoped he would get to meet Bobby Kennedy, and he did, and he made more than one trip to Washington during that campaign. They became good friends and I think Bob admired him in the same way that I did. He was a Tennessee source for me and I stayed in touch with him throughout the whole campaign.

I had talked to Bob Kennedy about why it was important for him to meet these two bright lights from Memphis, and you have to understand, I mean he was a put upon person as the director of that campaign and as the candidate's brother. On the other hand, he understood where Memphis was and he understood just as well that Gov. Buford Ellington had some influence and he understood that as John F. Kennedy was sort of a new face on the national scene–he had run for vice president four years earlier and lost to Kefauver–but new, bright, young people all across the country were inspired by John F. Kennedy, and I told Bob that I thought that both Russell and A. W. were in the Kennedy spirit, and they were, and they were caught up in the candidacy of this attractive, articulate national candidate who had suddenly flashed across the screen.

It was not a cliché in those days, the New Frontier. I mean I think those of us who were in it felt it. Certainly Russell and A. W. thought it meant something more than just a trite phrase that came out of Ted Sorensen's lexicon of speechwriting prose. But they were part of the New Frontier in their own minds and in that campaign and were actively involved in it and, as I say, Robert was put upon, but I think because I was there, and because I thought Memphis was important and worth spending time on, he would take the time, if Russell and A. W. came to

town, to say, “How’s it going? Let’s talk about it,” and we’d have chats and they’d go out reinvigorated and feeling, you know, there are other people down there in Memphis who are for Jack or against Jack but we’ve got this access to his brother, and I think they felt very good about their own position in the campaign.

The Kennedy campaign really brought two dynamic, young leaders into that campaign and they both had lovely, effective wives, and you had a sense that when you had Russell you had two and when you had A. W. you had two more, because their wives were deeply immersed in politics, as wives had to be if they were going to be helpful in this campaign. So it was helpful.

One way that Sugarmon contributed to the campaign was serving as a conduit to black ministers in Memphis in order to persuade them to support Kennedy. Seigenthaler discusses this role and mentions Louis Martin, an African American who was involved in the civil rights division of the Kennedy campaign. The civil rights division operated as part of the Democratic National Committee and worked with other campaign divisions and staff. Its director, Marjorie Lawson, had some contact with Sugarmon. The division’s activities included but were not limited to dissemination of campaign flyers and brochures promoting John F. Kennedy’s civil rights record, commitment to the issue, and contact with African Americans; advising campaign manager Robert F. Kennedy and other campaign staff on civil rights; working with black leaders in the South and the North on behalf of Kennedy; collecting statistics on the black vote and promoting black voter registration; working with the black press to generate positive coverage of Kennedy on civil rights; and publicizing endorsements by celebrities such as singer-actor Harry Belafonte and distinguished intellectuals such as historian John Hope Franklin. The division also worked to make possible a “Kennedy Airlift,” which was a group including black

entertainment, sports, and political figures, such as baseball star Hank Aaron, that dropped in by plane to different cities to campaign for Kennedy."[113]

Seigenthaler also refers to John F. Kennedy's call of sympathy on behalf of a jailed Martin Luther King, Jr.; that call helped turn many black voters south-wide to Kennedy. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been jailed in Atlanta because of his participation in the sit-in movement there. As a result, John F. Kennedy called Coretta Scott King to express his concern and offer to be of help and Robert F. Kennedy interceded with the judge to have King released. Word of these developments spread throughout the black community in part because the Kennedy campaign disseminated to black churches on the Sunday before Election Day a pamphlet to publicize the Kennedys' actions. In this flyer, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., was quoted as saying that he had a suitcase full of votes and was going to "dump them in [Kennedy's] lap."[114]

John L. Seigenthaler: I think from the outset it was clear, particularly if you talked to Louie Martin–who was our best source and who was confiding with Robert Kennedy on a continuing basis–if you talked to Louie Martin about it he made it clear that the key to the black vote is in the black church. He set up a half-dozen people in a number of states who would help, like he would have somebody in Charlotte, somebody in Richmond, but Russell was in Memphis. He was pretty funny about it. He laughed, and he said, "You think I'm religious?"

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[113] This analysis is based on my exploration of the Civil Rights Division Papers, Boxes 140 to 150, of the Democratic National Committee Papers at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts (hereafter JFK). On the airlift, see "Hank Aaron and Bill Bruton Tour for Kennedy," 29 October 1960, News Release, Democratic National Committee Papers, Box 150, folder "Press Releases, Final 10/7/60-11/3/60," JFK; "Kennedy Airlift," n.d., Democratic National Committee Papers, Box 150, folder "Schedules 9/15/60-11/4/60 and undated," JFK; Marjorie Lawson to R. B. Sugarmon, 10 Sept. 1960, and 30 August 1960, Democratic National Committee Papers Box 142, Folder "S 8/15/60-9/27/60), JFK.

[114] This pamphlet listed its officially sponsorship as by "The Freedom Crusade Committee," but it was instigated by the Kennedy campaign. "'No Comment' Nixon versus A Candidate With a Heart, Senator Kennedy: The Case of Martin Luther King," The Freedom Crusade Committee, November 1960, Democratic National Committee Papers, Box 140, folder "Campaign Materials 9/21/60-11/4/60," JFK. For the back story, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*, pbk. ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 351-70.

but he was immediately responsive and wanted to do it, was anxious to do it, because he knew that what Louie Martin had said was true. That's where the political power was, and if he bonded with those ministers and gave them access to the Kennedy campaign–particularly after the call to Coretta King when Daddy King, Martin Luther King, Sr., embraced the Kennedy campaign, it sent a message to black ministers all across the South.

So in talking to Russell, first of all, I didn't know who they were, but I knew he either knew or could sure find out, and he knew that it was an opportunity for him to bring those ministers closer to the Kennedy campaign where their hearts now were, so it really worked beautifully. He was immediately responsive, and I can't remember whether we developed a list. I don't think I ever saw a written list but I know that periodically we would talk during the campaign and he would say, "I talked to this minister," or "I talked to that minister," and he'd bring me up to date on where we were and how enthusiastic it was. So, I mean it was great for us in the campaign to have somebody in a community like that.

Another significant development in the Kennedy campaign in Memphis concerned the actions of Memphian Josephine Burson, a white Jewish woman, for racial equality.

Josephine Burson: I was chair of the women's division of the Kennedy campaign. The whole committee met, men and women, to plan for Lady Bird Johnson's visit here. They said, "Well, Josie, Lady Bird's coming here and you set up an affair for the black women and an affair for the white women so they can all meet her," and I said, "I'm not going to do it." They said, "What do you mean?," and I said, "I'm not going to have two separate affairs. Either we meet together or we don't meet." I said it negates everything that I stand for and certainly this campaign. So they said, "Well, all right, if you can find a place," but they were sure I couldn't find a place that would accommodate black and white and be an integrated affair. Well I went to

our city auditorium, Ellis Auditorium, which had just renovated at that time. They let me have it, and then something that added to it is that my chairman of arrangements, instead of having them put chairs, had it a stand-up affair, [Laughs] so women couldn't sit in little clusters together, which made the mingling even more and so they couldn't segregate themselves into little groups. It was the first integrated affair that they had for women in the city of Memphis, political event, and it was very successful, a huge success. Since then that's just the way you do it.

One of the grassroots activists who campaigned for John F. Kennedy was Shelby County Democratic Club precinct leader Lillie Wheeler. Civil rights activist Vasco Smith later observed that civil rights activists could take community leaders and convert them into political leaders. For instance, Wheeler had been president of the Fourteenth Ward Civic Club. When the Shelby County Democratic Club further got off the ground as a result of the 1959 election, they had people in wards and precincts to head that effort and she became a leader of the Fourteenth Ward Democratic Club in the LeMoyne College area. Wheeler comments on why she supported Kennedy.

Lillie Wheeler: I always had faith in Kennedy because the reason I worked for him so hard was because he didn't seem to be a prejudiced person and he seemed to be fair in what he was doing and not just for one group of people but for everyone. Back in those days, I spent an awful lot of time on political activities. I wasn't working at the time. I was just raising my children. So I could afford to work all day, going out talking to people, older people who weren't working and going door to door and trying to get information that I needed. It was easy to juggle raising children and doing all that political, civil rights activism because that was part of their education. I felt that was part of their education. Took them along with me and told them why I was doing what I was doing. They got very much involved. Yes. When Kennedy

and Nixon were running against each other, my children could talk about Kennedy as much as I could. One of my best friends who worked with me in the civic club was a Republican. I was a Democrat. And he had the Republicans of that ward. I was over the Democrats. Everybody was coming to us for literature and information. He had been in the past kind of the big wheel. But after that election was over, we got very, very close and he became a Democrat.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., and John L. Seigenthaler remember that the work of precinct workers like Lillie Wheeler was so significant and influential that it caught the attention of Robert F. Kennedy.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: People in the fifty to sixty precincts were working through the Democratic club to get the vote out. They had some credibility because the momentum of that August campaign of '59. The August campaign had gotten everybody galvanized, churches, etcetera. We had a huge *depth* of communication ability, because we could get preachers to announce things from their pulpits at that point. Unified. The black vote in Memphis had gone to Eisenhower two-to-one, he got 66 percent four years earlier. The black vote in Memphis went to Kennedy by that same ratio in that election. Robert Kennedy called here election night from Hyannis Port to the Democratic Party headquarters. The party chairman said [Sugarmon whispers], "It's John Kennedy's brother." Everybody got quiet. "Oh," he says, "You want some returns?" He said, "No." "Oh, you want certain precincts." He had a list with every black precinct in town. He wanted to know about 14-1, 14-2, 25-1, 25-2.[115]

John L. Seigenthaler: Bob was in Hyannis Port, and I had said I'm not going to go up; we need to have a party here in D.C. We can't forget the people who've helped us here. They've come in from all over the country. But during the course of the night he called and said,

[115] These numbers refer to the ward number and precinct number within it. For example, Ward 14, precinct 1.

"Do you have the number for Russell, our friend in Memphis?" and I said, "Yes, I do," and he said, "Well I need to call him," and I said fine. I was looking at the returns, as I'm sure he was, and I think it was a call to see if there was going to be enough in Memphis to offset the losses elsewhere in the state, and so that was the point of the call. Afterward I said, "Did you ever talk to Russell Sugarmon that night?" He said, "Yes, I did, and I thanked him for all they did down there," so he remembered vividly and remembered the need to call.

Indeed, the black vote in Memphis went for Kennedy, but the state of Tennessee went for Richard M. Nixon, Kennedy's opponent. Seventy-three percent of African Americans in Memphis and Shelby County voted for Kennedy as opposed to 57 percent who had voted for Eisenhower in 1956 although Tennessee as a whole went to Richard Nixon, Kennedy's opponent. One apparently key factor was Kennedy's support of a $1.25 minimum wage. On November 14, Sugarmon wrote Shelby County Democratic Club members that he passed along congratulations that they received from the president's national headquarters, state headquarters, and local headquarters for a job well done. He wrote that the "campaign you conducted represents the finest effort to date by a Negro political organization in our city' and that he was proud of them and added his personal congratulations. Because of their support for Kennedy, all the precinct leaders received invitations to the inauguration. Sugarmon did not attend the inauguration but a woman named Druzy Anderson did.[116]

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: When Kennedy won, Seigenthaler called, and he said they appreciated what we'd done here for his brother--Robert Kennedy wanted to know if we had any ideas about what they could do to show that appreciation. So, I said, "Most of our folk don't

[116] The quote is from Sugarmon to Democratic Party Headquarters, 14 November 1960, Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., Papers, Box 2, Folder 4, University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee (hereafter MSC). Jalenak, "Beale Street Politics," 143; Jay Hall, "Big Negro Vote Given Kennedy," *CA*, 9 November 1960, p. 5B.

have a lot of money. But I know every one of the precinct leaders would love to have an invitation to the inauguration. They could frame that and show it to their kids and grandkids." He said, "Oh, we'll see what we can do." So this is one of my favorite stories. [Pause]. When the inauguration came, the newspapers had eight or nine names of people invited, and we had about ninety precinct leaders invited. A lady from the Foote Homes had one leg, Druzy Anderson. She was our precinct captain that headed the tenant association. Real "up" person all the time. Very positive. That leg didn't slow her down at all. She took her invitation to the tenant association, and they raised the money and sent her to the inauguration. The Foote Homes is a public housing project. She was a tenant association president. She was our precinct leader. The tenant association raised the money and sent her. Man, this is a lady with a crutch, one leg, and just exuberant. Her whole life was exuberance, and that was just icing on the cake.

John L. Seigenthaler: I remember some of the people came to the ball. I couldn't name names if I had to, but there were maybe twelve inaugural balls and the president went from one to another, to another, to another. I remember I knew where one of the first balls was going to be and that's where my wife and I went, so we could get out and go home and go to bed early. But I do remember that, yes, some came. I don't know how many but some did come. Russell, I'm sure, would remember, but the important thing was the invitation was there and you knew you weren't forgotten and you knew your work was appreciated, and Russell didn't pretend for a moment that everybody he wanted on that list was going to show up. On the other hand he couldn't say that everybody wouldn't show up, you know. But I think we ran the whole list and anybody he said deserved to go we thought deserved to go.

The relationship between black political activists in Memphis with the Kennedys continued into the administration. Seigenthaler, who became administrative assistant to

Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, would use Sugarmon as a point person during the administration and afterward when he wanted to know about what was going on in Memphis. Seigenthaler knew that Robert F. Kennedy thought highly of Sugarmon and Willis—he recognized them as "bright lights" and even would have welcomed them as lawyers in the Justice Department. Sugarmon would contact the Kennedy administration when he thought it could be of help. The Kennedy administration even gave special recognition to Sugarmon by appointing him a special ambassador.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: I went to the independence ceremony in Trinidad and Tobago as a special ambassador for the Kennedy administration. We flew down on the Columbine, the presidential plane, so the governmental delegation was on the plane. About 6:00 in the morning they'd have people waiting to guide us and show us the sugarcane fields. We had an escort from the time we got up till the time we went to sleep, and I don't know whether they were trying to show us things or trying for us not to see things. [Laughter.] I don't know which one. [Laughs.] We saw as much of Trinidad as we could stand through a car window. [Laughter.] But the British: pomp and circumstance is second nature to them. The seat of government was in a building in the city on the harbor where sailing ships used to anchor, and the seat of government for the British colonials down there was a two-story, oh, some kind of sandstone, a red sandstone block building they called the Red House. In the seat where the parliament was going to be they had this old British battle flag that was all perforated with shrapnel shots from the flagship of the British squadron that defeated the Dutch squadron when they took Trinidad away from the Dutch. It just reeked of history, because everything was old, and the balcony along the second floor of this building, that's where we sat the night of the independence ceremony.

The transfer of power was to take place at midnight, whatever it was, so we're out there and it's balmy and the trade winds are blowing across. It was beautiful. They have the band of the Black Watch standing at one side of this flag. There are two flag poles side by side in the square, and the Black Watch is standing on the left hand side of this flag pole and the Trinidad rifles are standing at parade rest on the right hand side of the flag pole. So just before midnight the Black Watch bugler plays a British bugle thing and the Black Watch snap to attention, so then the drums start a slow beat and they start lowering the Union Jack just before midnight and the new flag is going up the other pole and the Black Watch salutes and does some kind of pivot around and they march that slow step off into the darkness to this bagpipe thing. I'll never forget that.

Sugarmon met with Robert F. Kennedy in Washington, D.C., during the administration. Below he refers to the Freedom Rides, when blacks and whites rode in buses together throughout the South in 1961 to test Supreme Court decisions saying that bus segregation was forbidden. They were the recipients of violence as was John L. Seigenthaler who was sent down south by the administration to try to negotiate the safe passage of the Freedom Riders.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: We went to Washington to meet with Robert Kennedy right after they started. Seigenthaler got us on his appointments calendar, and John Kennedy was welcoming, or accepting the credentials of the first ambassador. I think it was Uganda had just gotten independent, one of those African countries, and he had told Seigenthaler that if they wanted they could come over to the White House when he met the ambassador of Uganda. If we wanted pictures he would make some with us then, and we said, well, we appreciate that, we thanked him, but we'd just as soon wait until his administration was over and we'd get them then. [Laughs] So anyway, we didn't get them. Robert Kennedy, he met with us, and he said, "I've listened to you all because we know what you all did and we respect what you all did for

my brother," and he said, "But–." Because at that point they had no conception of the struggle, the character of the resistance to black political involvement in the South, and he said, "What you need to do is go home and get your people up off their asses and get them registered to vote." [Laughs] So anyway, when the Freedom Rides started and John Seigenthaler went down to Birmingham to investigate and got hit on the head–I think he got hit on the head with a pipe–so I called Justice and I said, "This is Russell Sugarmon. Is the attorney general in?" He said, "Yes, he's busy. Can I give him a message?" and I said, "Tell him I'm one of the group that came up from Memphis and he said he appreciated what we had done in Memphis but we needed to tell the rest of the people in the South to get up off their asses," and he said, "Well, what's the message?" and I said, "Tell him they're off their asses." [Laughter.] He said, "I'm going to find him and put him on the phone and you tell him." [Laughs.] He's busy drafting legislation," and I said, "Voting rights?" He said, "Probably." [Laughs.]

John L. Seigenthaler: Well I think that whenever they walked in they got a sense of welcome because we were so happy to see them and because they always were current, not just on Tennessee politics, but on national politics and they understood trends. I mean they had interests far beyond civil rights. They were committed to civil rights but their political interests were pretty eclectic.

Fayette and Haywood Counties

By this time, voting rights activism occurred in Fayette County as well as Haywood County (both near Memphis) that had resulted in the eviction of hundreds of African American sharecroppers who were now living in a tent city. In addition, blacks who attempted to register to vote in those counties also faced the denial of health and banking services as well as the refusal of local merchants to sell to them. Maxine Smith comments on her activism in registering

African American voters living in Fayette and Haywood Counties. The Memphis NAACP branch was also involved in providing food and other provisions for people in these counties.[117]

Maxine Smith: We concentrated our efforts when we were out of Shelby County, to these folks in say Fayette and Haywood counties. They didn't even get to see a *Jet* magazine. Haywood was just as bad. Haywood was majority black population for a long time. That was a threat to the white community--to let them vote. It was all about voting and political power. People then just saw us as liberators almost. They had so much to lose. See, we'd go up there and pep them up and help them go. That gave them not only encouragement, but also that gave them courage.

Maxine Smith does not remember resistance to their efforts although Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., A. W. Willis, Jr., and Ben Hooks were shot at when riding in a car together in through one of these counties; they were not hurt.

Maxine Smith: We must've been crazy because that's the days when they had those shotguns in them pickup trucks and we'd be walking down the street marching. You throw caution to the wind. You don't have sense enough to be cautious. It never entered my mind to be afraid. I guess for people who were afraid we were like deliverers in a sense. People say, "You don't have to." I said, "I do have to do this." "Your husband's doing enough." I said, "What's that got to do with what?" So we did what we were driven to, from deep down for some reason. There's nothing that special about us. Maybe that's where old Crump helped us. We'd never been told we couldn't vote, you know, my generation. We were like, oh gosh, a savior who had come into their towns.

[117] Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 226-30.

On Political Dynamics

During the 1960s, the Memphis NAACP branch and Democratic club continued voter registration efforts in Memphis and Shelby County as well. Black voter registration reached 77,000 in 1963. In March 1963, the Memphis branch added 2,500 registered voters in a campaign conducted at the courthouse when persons came to buy their new automobile tags.[118] *Maxine Smith describes some of these voter registration efforts.*

Maxine Smith: We knocked on doors. We went through churches. The precincts gave us the neighborhood structure, and it also included organizations. Churches were given a program. Greek letter organizations were a group. Everybody was given a goal and a program. We had very active civic clubs in those days that had the same sort of structure in a sense, as a precinct club, that the Shelby County Democratic Club had. They were neighborhood-oriented so we had two shots at the same neighborhood, which one may not have been inclusive of all but close enough. We had labor organizations. We used everything that was organized with a big percent of black citizens.

We had good volunteers of all ages who would come in. Somebody was in charge of transportation, probably, for transporting voters to the polls but also down to the Election Commission to register to vote. Most folks didn't have cars. I think that the Shelby County Democratic Club did a terrific job changing the mindset of people who had been denied, not that they were denied to vote, but they were not really a part of system in a sense as far as determinations or what will be, what we want out of this politician, what do we expect out of our elected officials. I think that it was a good educational process because our people just had not been exposed to politics in that way. Because Crump controlled everything. Schoolteachers

[118] "NAACP Launches New Voter Registration Campaigns," 20 April 1963, Box C146, folder: Memphis NAACP 1963-65, Papers of the NAACP, Group III, MD.

were afraid not to vote what Crump told them to vote. That early leadership, Russell Sugarmon and all our friends, they just weren't going to let that go on. Russ was right out of law school. A. W. Willis was right out of law school. Jesse Turner and Vasco Smith had been classmates in college. Turner had gone and gotten his CPA. He was working at the bank. He was the first black CPA in the state of Tennessee. This is the kind of leadership you had.

Black civil rights activist Johnnie Mae Peters remembers that more women were involved in politics on the grassroots level than men. She recalls that they were, in the terminology of sociologist Belinda Robnett, "bridge leaders" because they connected the candidates with the community through holding parties such as Coke parties, which, as mentioned, consisted of serving Coca Cola and having candidates speak to community members.[119]

Johnnie Mae Peters: We always had more women than we ever had men, going to church and everything else, it's always women. Everybody belonged to church, your minister would cooperate with you. See like every election I used to have a big party in my backyard and the local churches would support it, and we had some of the biggest parties right in my backyard and had all the politicians over. We had all kind of little tea parties. If I have a party in my house I'd have two hundred people in my backyard, because the church would bring the speakers, the chairs, helped furnish the hotdogs. You don't ask the politicians for nothing. We furnish all our own stuff. Back in the '50s and '60s we might have living room Coke parties, you know, we have one at your house, I have one in my house, just in the living room, and you have about twenty people or something like that. We were never trying to raise funds. Most of the politicians had their own fundraisers they would invite us to. These were just parties to get the officials out and get the people together so the people who were running could come talk to

[119] Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).

you. We served little hors d'oeuvres and stuff like that. You always had some men back then helping out. You had more men back in the earlier times that would work with the ladies because their husbands worked with them, their neighbors and all got together and would help sponsor a Coke party, or a barbecue, or anything.

Sugarmon and Jennie Betts also talk about gender dynamics with Betts pointing out tensions that arose.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: Well the guys, usually you could get men to volunteer to put up signs, you could get them to volunteer to drive, deliver stuff. I have a feeling, I'm not sure but I think this is across the South, that the women were used to doing more hands-on work, you know, and they would be like secretaries. All the secretaries were women. I don't think the men trusted their writing or whatnot, to do that type thing. It's sort of a functional allocation. I mean we didn't have any limitations but most of the guys who turned out to be spokesmen were men. We had some women, we had some strong women, but I think they mostly expected men to get out there and speak. That was an interesting part of the culture.

Jennie Betts: Some mens didn't follow our advice because we were women. More or less who was doing it--we had a few mens but it was more women than there were mens that was heading the precincts, clubs. And yeah, they would get mad with us. They had difficulty following a woman. But we kept on. I let them alone. We called them chauvinists. One time one man was so resentful, I gave everybody some literature about voting, a ballot, and all this--see we gave a ballot out--and he said, "You didn't give me no ballot." I told him, "I didn't intend to give you one. Since you're so resentful I thought you knew everything." "Oh, no, you shouldn't have thought like that." I said, "Well that's the impression I got." He said, "No, I want the ballot." I said, "Well I thought you had your own ballot." And so I started giving it to

him and he started acting different towards me. Mens are something else. They are something else; some of them, not all mens.

Black civil rights activist Vasco Smith also talks about the importance of the church in politics and mentions an encounter with renowned gospel composer W. Herbert Brewster, who had been involved in Memphis politics since the days of political giant Robert R. Church, Jr., who had been active from the 1910s until his death in 1952. Smith ran for the Memphis school board in 1963 in an unsuccessful campaign.[120]

Vasco Smith: Blacks recognized importance of endorsing some whites where there was a good candidate and no promise of electing a black to that position anyway. So why not have a good white in that position? But most blacks who were politically alert–most candidates--practically all of them also once they were endorsed by an organization, they'd get a little instruction on how to handle a black church. The first thing you got to do is to get the minister's endorsement. Then if you get his endorsement, you don't go in the church making a speech, you let the minister do it. The congregation would pay much more attention to that pastor than they will to you seeing you for first time.

I had one of the bigger Baptist churches in Memphis--East Trigg Baptist Church. It was pastored by Dr. W. Herbert Brewster. Brewster was a minister who composed a lot of the spirituals. Brewster whenever he'd see me coming in, he'd get up there, mouth full of gold. He'd smile and boy, gold would be shining everywhere. He'd say, "Vasco is back there." I know you must think it's odd people that folk call me Vasco. Almost nobody calls me Dr. Smith. That just almost never was. And very few people call me by my last name. Even the lady who works here calls me Vasco. Now she calls Maxine, Ms. Smith. But he'd say, "Vasco

[120] For more on Brewster and Church, see Gritter, *River of Hope*.

is here. You know, I'm going to have him stand up in a minute. But we've got an agreement between each other." This was after one of my incidents and it made great publicity. He said, "You know, we shook hands on this. I do Vasco's praying for him and Vasco does my cussing for me." [Laughter.] He thought that so funny. That would get everybody all on my side. Pastor likes me, he's telling jokes on him. [Laughter.] They go away telling the joke. But the guy that goes there to that church and decides that he's going to go up in the pulpit, he's going to make a speech, he loses them right fast.

To the contrary of Vasco Smith's statement, Jennie Betts said that they asked some ministers not to endorse candidates because it could hurt their tax status. Also, they knew some ministers were being influenced by money that they were taking in order to get them to endorse certain candidates. Rather, she would be the contact in the church to tell people for whom to vote. Johnnie Mae Peters was another grassroots political activist who utilized the church; she made regular political announcements in her church in the 1950s and 1960s.

Johnnie Mae Peters: I did all the announcements back then, because I've been belonging to my church about fifty years. Back in the '50s and '60s I made the regular announcements. In the '50s and '60s you told these people who you wanted them to vote for. You told them why you wanted them to vote for them, why it was important for you to vote because you don't have any black candidates in these positions, so you need to try to fill some of these slots with some blacks. See you don't have to say that now because you've got blacks in nearly every position now. So back then you were trying to get some blacks because you felt that blacks could be more sensitive to your needs.

The majority of the people involved in these political activities were poor or working class. Sugarmon and Vasco Smith share their memories concerning class dynamics.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: In those days, the bulk of our people in Memphis at that time were either maids or cooks, and masses of them picked and chopped cotton. We had a few doctors, a few lawyers, and that sort of thing, and preachers. That's why we had to pay them because they were losing money, which there was no margin, you know, to take care of needs that weren't insignificant. The membership of your club was largely working class, as was the black population in Memphis. Working class, at the bottom end of the working class. When I first came back to Memphis in the mid-1950s, you could count the number of doctors on one hand that were black; you could count the number of lawyers on one hand that were black. Preachers, and the teachers, and the doctors: there were a few doctors, and I would say that was the top income profession, doctors, then the teachers because they had stable incomes and that sort of thing, and preachers. Some preachers did very well, some preachers got by. And the lawyers; the lawyers did divorces and handled property transfers and estates, stuff like that.

Vasco Smith: The Shelby County Democratic Club just crossed all borders. I can remember the Ballard family in a very poor neighborhood. This man had taken up scrap lumber that you pick up out of the street and neighborhoods like that along by the railroad track. With that lumber he had built onto the side of his house, which was just a little better than a shack. He built a little addition to it that would seat about twenty people, just with wooden benches, just maybe anything that people could sit on. That was his club house. That's what he built it for. He had one of our better clubs. They met on a regular schedule. Then of course you had people from the colleges and so forth who were part of the Democratic club. College professors were members of the club. For example, Dr. A. A. Branch--he was a professor of chemistry at LeMoyne College, LeMoyne-Owen now it is--was very active in both the Shelby County Democratic Club and the Bluff City and Shelby County Council of Civic Clubs.

I was vice president of the Democratic club. I was president at one time. I didn't keep it very long. I tried not to be president of most things because being a dentist, number one, having to support Maxine who was doing all this other and having to keep my office going. I tried to keep from being president, but I kept it for a few years but I don't remember when those years were. Most of the guys who would be president were running for office by that time. That was probably the most active or at least it was part of a very active period of the club. I think I mentioned I was talking to another group about this the other day. The precinct clubs would come together for a monthly meeting of the general organization. At that organization, there was a roll call of a club. Precinct 31-4.[121] There would be representatives there from practically each of these clubs in the monthly meeting. Of course, they would have their own meetings on the precinct level too every month. The troops came from the neighborhoods. The more neighborhood organizations you had, the more troops you got. People were very much interested in this thing. The amazing part is that blacks had never been apart from voting in Memphis. Matter of fact, the Republican Party did everything it could because they were Republicans at one time, the black community was. The Republican Party nationally was in power during a period of our history, and blacks were delegates to the conventions from Memphis–Lieutenant George Lee. He was a lieutenant in World War I incidentally. I can remember him being a delegate and also the Church family, Bob Church family, well-known name.

On the Decision Making Process, Precinct Leadership, and Tennessee Voters Council

The Shelby County Democratic Club would prepare questionnaires about issues that they would send to the various candidates. The candidates would appear before the club to be questioned, and then the club would debate and decide who to endorse.

[121] Thirty-one refers to the ward and four refers to the precinct within the ward.

The club relied on precinct leadership to mobilize its members, get out the vote, and endorse candidates.

Jennie Betts: Yes, I was assistant precinct leader in fourteen, two.[122] My responsibilities were to go from door to door and make sure that the voters know that there is an election, pass out literature, and ask some of them to place a yard sign in their yard. I feel now the voters are not as educated as they were then. We educated the voters back then. I haven't had a candidate to come to my door lately in terms of elections. In '59, the '60s and '70s and the '80s, that was the day. Everybody knew each other. There was good communication. We had Coke [Coca-Cola] parties. That was one of my jobs, to see to get a Coke party here, there, in the neighborhood. When you have a Coke party you're supposed to get some people to be in the home so the candidate can come and talk to them. I even had Coke parties in my home. And I haven't had a Coke party in my home I don't believe since the '70s. I haven't had one since I've been here. No one has asked me.

The black community was interested in elections and when we started the moving out, could move where we want to move, that's when I saw the interest declining. Because when we was in one segment of the city people were very interested. But they don't seem to be interested now. At that time everybody knew Russell Sugarmon. Everybody knew Ben Hooks. And right now if you ask, I'd say, young adults, "Who is Russell Sugarmon?" My son would know him. He know him from me. But now they don't know him.

Our precinct club met every second Tuesday in the month. We had about thirty or forty members in our precinct club. We'd go to the board meetings of the Democratic club. I think we'd go to the board meetings on the first Monday night of the month. We was looking at the

[122] Fourteen refers to the ward and two to the precinct. Precinct clubs were known and called by their ward and precinct numbers.

next candidate, looking at the next mayor, the next governor, whatever's coming up. And we was meeting there, we'd be looking forward to the presidential election. We would let the candidate talk first and then we'd pick them apart with the questions. We let everybody come in, Republican, Democrat, anybody, come in to be interviewed, but they was picked apart. We never discriminated. We let everybody come in. Then after they're gone we'd make our decision who we was going to vote for. Sometimes the decision was kind of hard, who we was going to endorse, because that person had talked to somebody in our meeting. We could tell it.

Another precinct worker was Johnnie Mae Peters.

Johnnie Mae Peters: We were so organized by ward and precincts. We would have like street captains and you could always get a street captain to say, "Let's work this area. You work a street; I'll work a street," and like that, and that's how we really built up voter registration back then. We had good street captains. The younger people would not work as hard as the people did that's in their seventies and eighty years old now. You know, like I'm seventy-seven but back then all those people, you know, that's older now, they worked real hard to accomplish their goal because they was tired of getting on the back of the bus. They was tired of going to the back door. You know you go downtown and buy clothes and you couldn't even try them on. They didn't have any blacks working in the stores and stuff like that, like cashiers or salesmen or something like that. There were just very few people working in those capacities then. See now if you're educated and know what to do or know how to use a computer you can get a job anywhere you want. All you got to do now is be qualified. But it took a lot of blood, sweat, and going to jail for that.

Fred L. Davis: Well, early on starting at around 1959, I came back to Memphis from the military. During that time, Russell Sugarmon was running for public works commissioner.

There were people running for the board of education. We got involved in that movement. We set up the Shelby County Democratic Club: Russell Sugarmon and Benny Hooks and later on Maxine Smith and myself were involved in. We organized the black community in Memphis in support of political power or political force. Political effectiveness is probably the best word to use. The interest ran high. There was a budding interest on the part of, back then, black candidates to run for the state legislature. A. W. Willis, Jr., ran for the state legislature at that time and was elected, became the first black person since Reconstruction to be elected to the state legislature.

I ended up as the treasurer of the club ultimately, and I was on the board of the club. Well, I was treasurer of the club in ’68 and, well, ’65, ’66, ’67. I was treasurer of the club when I ran in 1967 for public office. At that time, I was working in this community. I was a debit insurance agent, going from door to door collecting insurance premiums. What I did was to organize my policyholders in each precinct. I knew everybody, and there were five precincts in this area. I organized the policyholders in each precinct and turned them into a political force. [Laughter.]

You have to understand that at one time this was the second largest black-owned community--where the people owned their homes--to Harlem in the United States. This community was cohesive, and it’s not hard to organize. I’m talking about how it’s not hard to put together because everybody more or less grew up in this area and knew everybody. So it was just a matter of leadership. I had them to the point that I could make five phone calls and contact everybody on every street in the neighborhood because we had block captains and precinct captains and all that. I called the five people who headed the precincts, and they would take it

from there. Our precinct clubs in each precinct did door-to-door organizing. We used our precinct organizations to do voter registration drives.

Lillie Wheeler: I was the ward and precinct leader. My responsibilities were to get everybody together that lived in that ward and then get them involved and get them educated to what was going on. We started out getting registered to vote those who were eligible. I still do that even now. I'm not as active as I used to be, but every election I'm active to some point. I always start with the high school kids who are coming out and old enough and getting them registered. I will take them to downtown if they need to go. We're allowed to bring registration forms now and they can mail them in and get them involved that way. After that then we start on getting them interested in going to polls to vote. I don't think it will be achieved in my day, but I wish that we could get really together and forget about ethnic backgrounds and just work for the good of the city, the state, and the counties, and the national communities.

The Shelby County Democratic Club gave out "volunteer cards" for people to fill out about what they were willing to do for campaigns. When they filled out the card, one strategy was getting the volunteers to talk to everyone they knew about the campaign or providing them with lists of people who were living in that neighborhood in order to reach out to these voters.

Lillie Wheeler: Most times both because I think everyone has influence over five or ten people. Some may say three but I say five to ten. When you talk to that five to ten, tell them to talk to their friends and relatives, then keep it going like a chain. We used to have block clubs within the precinct clubs. You take care of this block and you take care of that block. Everyone wanted their block to be the best.

Some whites were volunteer drivers for the Shelby County Democratic Club, and others gave financial contributions. Others supported the movement in general.

Vasco Smith: Lucius Burch, they just don't come any better than he was. He was white. I just liked to kid him because he would say things so many whites wouldn't say. Early on on the county commission--we'd known each other a long time--he was down there one day speaking about something and he loved hiking. He has hiked from the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains, I guess, all the way up the Cumberland Trail, the Appalachian Trail, all the way to its termination in New England. All the way. He was talking to the county commission one day and the matter of race came up. He said, "I understand what you guys are talking about." He said, "I've hiked Appalachian Trail all the way from its beginning to its termination." He said, "The thing that bothers me is that I don't see any black folk doing that." He says, "I long for the day when after a day's hike and campfires are being built, I can sit down with brethren of all races and share my beans and my bacon with them and we can converse and get to know each other." He says, "Vasco, I don't hear you saying anything about this." I said, "Well, Lucius, we just got used to wall to wall carpeting and you want to carry me back to those rats and roaches." Kidding him really but he was just as serious as he could be about that. He had strong feelings, real strong feelings about race. So you always had some--few, very few. Then you get more and more converted. Nobody pays any attention now to the fact--you probably haven't even noticed this yourself--on television even in commercials and certainly in lots of other circumstances, you see blacks and whites together. Not only that, you are now beginning to see black men and white women together, occasionally. That's right. It's been brought on gradually but a little more every time.

Lillie Wheeler: Some whites gave money to the political club. You know, it takes money to run for office, and we didn't have that kind of money just coming out of our pockets, say, I'm going to run for office and pay my way. So we had to do things to raise money. We

had some that thought enough of us to give donations. We used to sell lemonade and the children would have dances. Where I lived they would have dances at the auditorium in the neighborhood and raise money like that. They took up money in the churches. Back then we used to have meetings at the church along with them praying for the success of a person. We believed in prayer and I still do. We took up money too at churches--have an offering for the candidates.

Building on the success of the Shelby County Democratic Club, Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., and other leaders formed the Tennessee Voters Council, a statewide organization of black political activists, to get the votes of Tennessee African Americans coordinated in statewide elections. The founding took place in 1962. The organization ended up having a similar decision-making process to the Shelby County Democratic Club: its members would give candidates questionnaires and then have them appear before the council before they decided who to endorse.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: When we organized the Tennessee Voters Council, I went through the state county-by-county census to determine which counties did have any significant black populations. So we knew exactly which counties to identify, and we knew exactly what kind of response we hoped to get out in terms of numbers and focused what we did on where people were.

In 1958, we had a governor's race. Edmund Orgill, who had been a mayor of the city, a moderate, was running for governor. Rudy Ojardie, the mayor of Chattanooga, who was close to the unions in Chattanooga, was running for governor. Clifford Allen, who I think was the assessor of Nashville, who had black support in Nashville, was running for governor. Buford Ellington, who was from West Tennessee, was running for governor. So, we endorsed Edmund

Orgill. The Nashville black leadership endorsed Clifford Allen. The Chattanooga black leadership endorsed Rudy Ojardie. Buford Ellington won the primary, which meant he won the governor's race because you counted our vote out of 80,000-100,000 votes cast by blacks.[123] We had cancelled ourselves out. We had cast an effective 7,000 votes.

So in those days, it was easy to do this. We got a list of all the black barbers and beauticians. We got a list of all the blacks in the state. Any other groups we could locate. A.W. Willis basically did this. We mailed out the newspaper clippings of our votes by counties, the big ones. We said, you know, this doesn't make sense. We were fourteen or fifteen or sixteen--whatever percentage it was then of the population of Tennessee. We can't afford just to waste our votes. Nobody in any city knew what people in the other cities were doing in the state. So, if you want to do something about this, we are going to meet at Park Johnson Hall at Fisk. Gave the time, the day, and the place to discuss what we should do. We sent that out. The grandmaster of the Eastern Stars, Rev. Charles F. Williams, lived here, and he sent a copy of that to all of the lodge leadership, Eastern Star and that sort of thing. Rev. Williams was a chaplain and he was the Prince Hall Masonic leader of the state who was instrumental in getting the lodge members across the state involved in the Voters Council. He was the first chairman of the Tennessee Voters Council statewide. So Williams agreed to send a letter to the Prince Hall Masons lodges and the Eastern Stars, which was the women's division. They had groups all over West Tennessee where the black vote was. So we had enough people from every county that had any significant black vote to organize, and we did, and the Goldwater race in 1964 was the high water mark, I think. Because Tennessee had two senators and five Congressmen that were Democrats, and not one of them had a victory margin of less than the black vote we got.

[123] In those days, Democrats dominated Southern politics; whoever won the primary was guaranteed to win the election.

The black vote in Tennessee is located in the five major cities, Memphis, Nashville, Chattanooga, Knoxville, and Jackson, and west of the Tennessee River in fifty-two counties. There were people from fifty-two counties at that meeting. We set up the Tennessee Voters Council. That was the result of that.

Election Day and Black Voting Activities

The organizational techniques of the Shelby County Democratic Club carried over into election time. Vasco Smith and Johnnie Mae Peters recall these developments.

Vasco Smith: There would be a table, a card table, any old thing you could use, with a card file on it of all of the Democrats who were registered to vote in that precinct. As the voters came out of the polling place after having cast their votes, they went to the table and their card and the file was pulled out and put over yonder as having voted. Then about two or two-thirty in afternoon, the volunteers who had another job began to come in. They would look over here to see who had not voted because your other card's over there. They would take cards from here to go and see why they hadn't been there to vote.

They were usually people who were going to come anyhow but you just remind them generally, time to go vote. And it worked. It worked. People just sat there and just didn't believe that volunteers had set this thing up and were doing the work on it. At that time, there was a man named Frank Kilpatrick: in the whole civil rights scheme, he enjoyed working in politics more than anything else. Kilpatrick was not a highly educated person.

I just happened to mention Frank Kilpatrick as one of the members who loved that sort of work. We would ride together, sometimes making three and four different precinct club meetings where we would make talks to get the people to get enthused into the whole business of voter registration, voter education, and voter participation. That was it: registration, education,

and participation. We would ride together night after night. This wasn't just us. This was being done all over town. When I refer to we would do this, I'm talking about the generic "we," the members of club and the leaders themselves. When election time came, we already had audiences set up for candidates to come and make their appeals because the people had been working in ward and precincts all the time. They just changed it from go out and register now to go out and vote.

Johnnie Mae Peters: In the community you had to be organized on the street level, the ward and precinct level, so that you could make sure you communicated to the people in your area. See most folks be piled up at the polls now on Election Day. Every candidate will have some of their folk working for them, and I tell them all the time, we used to be knocking on doors on Election Day to get the folk out. Sometimes we had a car out there and if you need a ride we'll take you. I used to have a babysitting system at my house, because there was like 75-1 over here, 75-7 right there, 75-2 over there, 75-4. Well see if you needed a babysitter we'd have some young ladies here, teenagers, that would keep the children while you go vote or whatever you wanted to do. So see now they don't even have a babysitting system like we did back in the '50s, '60s, and '70s.

The Shelby County Democratic Club endorsed not only black candidates but also white candidates.

Hunter Lane: The year I ran, in 1963, for the city commission there was a really well-organized, effective black political organization. They called it the Shelby County Democratic Club. What happened was a lot of young people like Russell Sugarmon, and there was an A.W. Willis who was a very, very close running mate of his, and well there were all kinds. Jesse Turner was another one. Maxine Smith, there were all kind of names that became household

words later on. They put together this organization, the Shelby County Democratic Club. In the first place they had a lot of smart people organizing, and they had put together a ward and precinct organization. Instead of getting money on the front end from candidates, you know, in order to endorse them, which is what the preachers did and a lot of people did, they interviewed candidates and then made a decision and then you were expected to help with their campaigning expenses. I ran for mayor in 1967, so I dealt with them on two separate elections, and I didn't detect any under-the-table dealings, you know, it was a straight deal.

By 1963 they were highly organized. If you got their endorsement, which I was fortunate to get, mainly because my opponent was an old Crump guy and he had no racial sensitivity at all. [Laughter.] He didn't like blacks generally. I think I won by about forty thousand votes. I don't know how many were cast, but the forty thousand, you could identify them as black votes if you wanted to look at it that way. The Shelby County Democratic Club lasted for years. They never were allied with any other group but they had fellow travelers and people who thought the same way, Lucius Burch being one of them.

I was interviewed by the Shelby County Democratic Club when I ran. They were fairly new, and I was brand new, so I just went down and they talked to me about my qualifications and then they talked to me about my attitudes, you know. I don't think they were thoroughly satisfied but they were looking for anybody to unseat the guy I ran against, so sort of by default I got their endorsement. Then after I was elected I would hear from Sugarmon mainly, because I knew him, and others wanting to know, "When are you going to take some action here?"

Had it not been for political success I don't know how long it would have taken to--probably we would never have had any voluntary desegregation of any extent. Well of course you've got to put it in the national context too. The civil rights movement in the '50s was just

getting started. I don't know when the lunchroom sit-ins were but they were the first ones I can remember here, at the lunch counter. Yeah, the civil rights movement and the political movement were really closely tied in. I mean the people who were working for equality, they realized they had to get it as a practical matter through politics, either electing their own people or supporting people who would help them when they got elected. I can't think of anybody who was involved in the civil rights movement who wasn't involved in the political movement. Like I say, as long as they weren't able to elect anybody or to influence any elected people they were just voices crying in the wilderness. They were just a lot of sound and fury down there but no clout.

Lane even called white politicians after 1963 "fools" who did not pay attention to the club because they could deliver votes. Lane thought, however, that the actual effect on the white candidates in regard to civil rights measures was limited. Here he discusses the city commission.

Hunter Lane: I was a prime example. I got more black support in that race, in fact they elected me, but I wasn't any fiery leader. I didn't really expound in public much on the fairness of desegregation. I didn't say much about it and I think most people who were in public office didn't. It was kind of like political suicide to get too far out there. There were very few people in the white community who liked the idea. Most of them were violently opposed to the idea. So I guess to the extent of my involvement initially was keeping in touch with black leaders and kind of knowing where they were coming from and understanding their position on things. They had been denied so long, been screwed over so long, that they were naturally bitter, really even guys like Sugarmon and Willis and others like that. They were real bitter and they didn't want to wait around much longer.

A fellow city commissioner was Pete Sisson, who was elected in 1963 and appeared before the Shelby County Democratic Club.

Pete Sisson: The black vote was beginning to feel its oats, and they weren't controlling, but they were almost controlling. A white candidate with some black votes would win. The Shelby County Democratic Club carried a lot of influence because they would put out a ballot at election time and they would put it out in the black churches. They could energize a pretty good vote. Now they were very influential.

Another politician supported by the Shelby County Democratic Club was William N. Morris, Jr., who became elected sheriff of Shelby County in 1964 and later was elected mayor of Shelby County. As the sheriff, he further integrated the police department by making sure that black police officers could patrol white neighborhoods (before they just patrolled black neighborhoods) and that black police officers could arrest whites (before they could just arrest African Americans). So his support by the club led to substantial civil rights gains.

William N. Morris, Jr.: You would go before that club and they would ask you questions and you'd make promises when you could and they would decide whether they supported you. I think I had their support almost all of my, for thirty years, or whatever, as well as all the other black organizations in town. And I had labor support, and then I had good media support. But it was because I guess I became the first chief executive who believed in consensus building. To me that meant more than patronizing. It meant getting people around the table and talking about what our needs are. I did that in every community in Memphis. I went to more churches than the local parish priest. I was in churches; I was in schools; I was in people's homes. And I had programs that dealt with getting kids off the street. When I was a sheriff out in the county we reduced the juvenile crime rate to the lowest level ever recorded of the total

percentage of crimes, to eleven percent of the total crimes. It was because we were out there, we were taking up kids and going home and asking their mom and dad why they're out here doing this, and if they didn't have a satisfactory answer, I'd take them to court for contributing to the negligence of their children.

Johnnie Mae Peters remembers that figures that the Democratic club supported, such as Bill Morris, would give jobs to African Americans.

Johnnie Mae Peters: So it was like everything you got you had to put up some energy for it, so at that time everybody went to civic club meetings and Democrat Club meetings because there was things they needed in the community and that was the only way you could get them, to get people elected who would be sensitive to your needs. Back in the '50s and '60s they would give each person who was a member so many names out of your precinct and ask you to be responsible for calling all these members that's in your precinct. This was with the Democratic Club and the civic club, just about everybody. They want you to call them and make sure those people get out and go vote.

When you belonged to the Democrat Club, see, Willis, Sugarmon and all them could tell you, "We can deliver you so many votes," because they were organized. That's how come it worked so well because of the fact all of us was working under an umbrella, you know with the Democrat Club, and all of us was working under an umbrella with the civic clubs. So then all these different leaders working together, that could make you get just about anything you wanted because they were all working together, until in the later years, like up in the '70s, when different people decided they want to be the leader. You know, people decide, "I want to be a leader," so they started moving out of their communities, and that's what made you have different groups working in different areas.

See, everybody was working on one thing to achieve a certain goal. You know we have the NAACP meeting every fourth Sunday. You have a Democrat Club meeting on a certain time, you know. You have your civic club meeting, like our civic club meeting was last night. Every fourth Monday is the Walker Holmes Civic Club meeting. Other areas might meet on a different day, but they would have a council of civic clubs where all the civic club presidents would go to a meeting once a month, so that's what made you be like under an umbrella because you were working with groups. People don't work as well now as they did then.

See different groups would endorse different candidates, and especially if you knew a candidate that was going to help the black community in any way, then blacks supported the white candidates. That meant that if you supported the white candidates you could always ask them to give people a job. You see what I'm saying? Even if it wasn't the job you wanted. Like Bill Morris, he was going to have so many policemen. Okay, M. A. Hinds, he was going to hire so many, and it's always some black person who worked in politics could get people jobs, whoever had the power to hire them. So that's the way that went.

Vasco Smith was a county commissioner. When he was a county commissioner each county commissioner had three jobs. Vasco would always give me all three of his jobs and that would mean I could get three children a job to work during the summer. Same way with city council; city councilmen might have ten jobs. If you know I can help you get elected you're going to give me some applications so some of the children in this neighborhood can get a job because you want their parents to go and vote for you and campaign for other people to vote for you. Just like now, I wanted these streets out here blacktopped because they haven't been blacktopped in forty years. I got on the city council that we need this area blacktopped. We haven't had it blacktopped in forty years, and you've blacktopped all over there, and all down

there, and all over yonder, but you're passing us up. We want some of this money spent in our neighborhood. So that's how it go.

What made the Shelby County Democrat Club powerful back in the '50s and '60s, it was because you was under an umbrella of leaders, and people believed in these leaders and they voted the way these leaders would say. Because they would have all the candidates to come and talk to you then they would pick out the candidates they felt that was going to do the best job and help the black community. So then what they did was recommended these people, like for governor or whatever they needed, the county commissioners, city council, and all that stuff. They recommended who the best people was for sheriff and stuff like that. And that sheriff would answer to these leaders because they know they control the black vote.

In conclusion, during the early 1960s, the black community displayed amazing unity and success in their political efforts. They mobilized their forces into the Shelby County Democratic Club and the Tennessee Voters Council, two organizations dedicated to using the black vote as leverage for civil rights and other political gains. They utilized existing community organizations, and they endorsed both black and white candidates who seemed most promising for meeting their needs. Their efforts laid the foundation for future gains to come.

Chapter 5: Civil Rights Developments from 1962 to 1969

Black Memphians were not willing to stop their activism even with the success of the direct action movement of 1960 and 1961 that desegregated public facilities and opened up employment opportunities for African Americans. They pressed forward in protest movements as well as continued their sustained political action. The mid-1960s saw the first election of black elected officials since the late nineteenth century. Sadly, the end of the decade was marred by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the city who had come to show his support for striking sanitation workers. Yet, the workers received a settlement, and the next year the Black Monday movement resulted in educational gains for black Memphians.

On Protests

Below Maxine Smith refers to the 1962 settlement ending the twenty-month direct action movement in Memphis. Shortly thereafter, she traveled with her husband Vasco Smith to Jackson, Mississippi, where he had been called to speak at a meeting of the NAACP branch. That night, Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers was murdered. Maxine Smith was the last person to see and touch Medgar Evers.

Maxine Smith: And, with the promises, we just didn't ask for enough with the bathrooms, the water fountains, the dining rooms, everything. Employment, but we just got token. It was very token. So, that's why we had to go back. I'll tell you when we went back: it was right after Medgar Evers died because we got fired up. We were there. I hugged Medgar. I said, "I'm so proud of you." I just hugged him. I said, "Don't let anything stop you." He never got home after that. In '63, after that, instead of just picketing the stores, we took the picket lines all through the stores, rode the escalators. They were scared to arrest us by then because the cops wouldn't get us unless they filed charges.

Businessperson Fred L. Davis details another protest that occurred after 1962.

Fred L. Davis: Five insurance agents and I went out to the fairgrounds one Sunday. Tuesday was the day for black folk. [Laughter.] We went out there one Sunday to the fairgrounds. At first, they didn't pay much attention to us. Then, we started to try to buy tickets. The ticket person said they couldn't sell us tickets. We said, "Why?" He said, "Because this is not your day." I said, "Any day is our day." "Well, come back on Tuesday." "We work on Tuesday. Today is Sunday. We're off Sunday." So, they called the administrative office to see if she could sell us tickets. They said, "No." We'd go to the next one and try to buy the tickets to another ride. One person almost did. Then they backed off, and finally they asked us to leave. We said we wouldn't leave. Then they called the police to try to get us to leave. The regular patrol car came. He couldn't persuade us to leave. Then he called the sergeant, and we wouldn't leave. The sergeant called the captain, and the captain and higher officials came out. By that time, a crowd had gathered around us, a rather menacing-looking crowd. The crowd said, "You don't have to put them out. We'll put them out." The police had to stay there to protect us. [Laughter.] They ultimately arrested us and took us down. The word got out in the community that we were in jail. About five or six lawyers came down there to get us out and ultimately got us out. With court time they postponed it two or three times. Every time we spoke with the court, they postponed it. Then they had to either do one or two things, either jail us or open the fairgrounds. Finally they didn't jail us so they opened the fairgrounds. That was '63, '64, something like that.

Vasco Smith details attempts to integrate shopping centers after 1962.

Vasco Smith: After we had done the things downtown, downtown was dead. The stores closed and never re-opened. The shopping centers were just beginning to take over. They had

not become these mammoth shopping centers. They were relatively small shopping centers with maybe five or six stores or something like that. We had a long discussion. We discussed it a long time before we decided whether we would go into shopping centers. Some felt that they were more difficult to do because there were many entrances. There were many driveways coming in from off that street and off this street and what have you.

But I kept insisting it was time to do something about the shopping centers because the eighteen-month boycott had broken the habit of shopping downtown, and people just didn't go anymore. That's what killed downtown. They started going to shopping centers. The habit was stopped. In other words, black and white people had cultivated new places to shop. That's what we told them all the time--the city fathers, the people who owned the shops, and so forth--the longer you put this off, the less likelihood you will have of these people coming back again once it’s over. That's really what happened. Anyway, we argued about the possibility of the difficulties of these shopping centers--the multiple entrances and so forth. Where I was trying to get them to go was McLemore and Bellevue. There were four corners with shops and so forth. They said, "Well, you going to take one corner?" I said, "We don't have to take one corner, we're going to take all four corners." Anyway, we said we were going to do it. The people by that time had become accustomed to expecting to cooperate with the movements by the NAACP because the successes had been proven. It turned out to be much easier than anybody ever thought.

The results were amazing. The best example I can give for success, when the armored car came on Saturday afternoon to get the receipts from a large grocery store--a member of a large chain of grocery stores--instead of coming out with bundles of money, they had a little paper sack in their hand with about not enough money to fill my fist. That’s true. The people

just didn't go in there. They had no customers. [Laughter] For that day, they had had not over two or three customers. That was accomplished in one week. Now that was such a strong, powerful blow that the merchants were angry. They didn't believe it was going to happen. That was one of the major arrests that I had.

The kids after school, the school kids, would come up to join in the protests. High schoolers, and even some few grammar school kids. They wanted to be a part of it. I just happened to be with the kids that day. They said, "These kids are singing too loud." They were singing freedom songs, like, "Before I Be a Slave I'll be Buried in my Grave." All that sort of thing. Then the police officer started arguing with me. One word to another. Before I realized it, I had been thrown to the ground, my hands were handcuffed behind me, my legs were shackled, and the kids were hollering and screaming, "Turn him a loose." My son was there. My son had kicked one of the officers. He was only nine or ten years old. Anyway, they decided they were going to arrest me. I asked what the charges were. They said, "You don't need to know no damn charges. We're arresting you and taking you downtown."

Now a remarkable thing happened. There was a guy in town that participated in most things. You didn't have to call him. Just when something started and he heard about it, he'd show up. His name was Crittenden, Joe Crittenden. He was black. But anyway, he always shows up. Wherever the NAACP was involved in anything and he heard about it, he came. So, he had been there two or three days. This wasn't his first day. As I was put in the car and they were getting ready to pull off, he told them, "Wait a minute." I had seen him take his dark shades off and throw them on the ground by the car. I wondered why he was doing that. He told the officers, "Stop, you can't go now. This guy doesn't have his glasses. He can't see without his glasses." They said, "We don't give a damn." He said, "Hell, I give a damn." He started a big

argument with them, and they arrested him too.

I thought that he was arguing mighty vigorously, and I really didn't see the point. They just decided, "Well, you're talking so damn much. We're going to arrest you too." They threw him in the back of the car. I later realized that he actually saved my life that day. One of the two officers that arrested me was the most vicious officer on the force and the most racist officer on the force and had been known to maim any number of individuals. In the car, he called me every vicious name that you can think of. You black this and you black that, but the difference was every time he called me one, I called him a white one. [Laughter.] He reached over and took his shotgun off the rack. He said, "I hope you realize that if I didn't have this witness here, I'd be blowing your brains out." I only put that in to say this, when people say there was no violence during the freedom movement, there was all kinds of violence.

My arrest caused unrest in the community, to the extent that the storeowners readily agreed the very next day or so to meet with us and bring about a settlement. The settlement was total and complete. Every business in the community agreed to our terms. When we got ready to go to the next shopping center, Lamar Airways Shopping Center, it's a large shopping center, we decided to go a different way. We got the names of every store in the area, and there must've been--including those in the shopping center and the adjacent areas and so forth--oh, fifteen or twenty stores at least. We just wrote the storeowners a letter saying that we were going to meet at a certain church on a certain date at a certain time to discuss with them their hiring policies and that we were requesting their presence there. They came. They were mad as hell. They did not like blacks ordering them to be there, which is basically what we did. We never had to picket or do anything. When they left that meeting, they knew what we were going to do next. All of them were in moves to cooperate with our demands. From that point on, it was never

necessary in a shopping center to do any marching or picketing or anything else of that kind. It was just to let them know that their businesses had been surveyed. It didn't make any difference. We'd surveyed their businesses and checked on it, and there were no blacks employed in any positions and so on and so on and so on. We'd like for them to meet with us, and they met. [Laughter.]

On the Memphis Committee on Community Relations

One biracial committee that worked for peaceful race relations in the city was the Memphis Committee on Community Relations. Its members organized themselves into committees to study racial problems with black members generally arguing for a faster pace of desegregation than its white members. It worked on behinds-the-scenes negotiations for desegregation.[124]

Vasco Smith, at one time vice president of the MCCR, gives his views on the organization.

Vasco Smith: Actually the role of the Memphis Committee on Community Relations was not a role that put pressure on anybody to do anything. The pressure came from eighteen months of marching and picketing and boycotting. You saw these things visible downtown, but there were hundreds of people behind them also who were organizing and working on the community level and so forth. The Community Relations Committee's been saying, "Why don't you stop?" This I can say, and I don't mind you printing it. Not one white person on the Memphis--and I was vice president as you said—on the Committee on Community Relations ever said, "It's time for those folks to give in down there. We're going down to talk to them." They never said that. What they said to us was, "Why don't you folks stop and let the

[124] Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 120-22, 133.

community settle down a little bit?" Even your most highly-thought-of ministers from the white community on this group never said, "It's wrong what they're doing and we're going to demand that they stop." They merely said to us, "Our congregation is suffering because so many of our businesspeople have businesses that are hurting, and we wish you'd stop." Well that ain't no damn reason to ask us to stop. What I'm saying is their participation was not in bringing about the pressure on the business community that it took to cause them to give in. Their role, as they saw it, was to ask us to call in the troops. As I said I'll debate that to the bitter end. It doesn't make any difference. Any of those who are living today, I'll look them right in the face and tell them.

This is the way the MCCR was used. You see we were on Main Street eighteen months. We were not just picketing for lunch counters, restrooms, and so forth. We included the whole bit, employment and so forth. Bry's Department Store, which was the biggest one in town, closed down and never re-opened. We recognized the fact that, in some cases, the relationship between our group and the heads of these businesses and so forth were not the best in the world. There were some of them who were ready to give in, but they'd rather do it through an intermediary than to do it directly with us. I think that that's the best description that I can give you of the role that the Memphis Committee on Community Relations played. After the boycott itself stopped, we were in the negotiating state.[125]

The Committee on Community Relations served a purpose for our good. There were some, Lewis Donelson, I think, for example, participated in the negotiations of the motion picture theaters. I think. Now I'm not sure. Whatever it was he was to do, he did well. But that had nothing to do with the pressure that brought the movement to the point where you could sit

[125] See chapter 3 for an example of how the MCCR was used to negotiate.

down and talk about settling it. None of them ever went to jail. None of them ever marched. None of them ever was on a picket line. That's alright. They did serve a purpose, and they served it well. But they didn't have a damned thing to do with applying the pressure that brought the man to his knees, where he was willing to talk.

White lawyer Lewis Donelson gives a different perspective on the MCCR.

Lewis Donelson: I served on the Community Relations Committee. That was a wonderful committee and a major achievement, which a lot of people have forgotten about. It's been lost because of the King assassination that we really were the only city in the South to desegregate without violence. The Community Relations Committee was chaired by Dr. Hollis Price and Dr. Paul Tudor Jones, who was my own minister and a fairly close personal friend. We had the committee and the idea was very skillfully conceived because we had both white newspaper editors--not some designee, but both editors served on the committee--and the managers of all three of the TV stations served on the committee. The agreement was that we wouldn't announce anything we were going to do until after it was done, and the press observed that. Vasco Smith and I co-chaired the committee to integrate the restaurants, and we did it all and then the next morning, "Yesterday the restaurants were integrated." So you didn't have a lot of troublemakers standing around doing things and so on.

We went about that work by contacting the various leaders in each area. We talked to the people. At that time the most visible restaurants were the ones at Goldsmith's, and at Loewenstein's, and at Gerber's, and then in the Peabody Hotel, and so forth, and so we contacted them and said, "Look, it's time we integrate," and most of them said yes. We had important people calling them and they would listen to you. See, names were never published. I mean they were not hidden but the names were never published. The press never published the names,

and it was evenly divided between blacks and whites. So I called up all the restaurants and told them, "Look, the time has come to integrate and this is the day we're going to do it. Will you accept the people when they come?" I said, "There will be two couples, one black and one white, and they'll ask to be seated together, and there'll be a plainclothesman there who will keep the peace if there's any problem. Then there'll be some members of our committee who'll be there." That's what we did on that one.

We didn't have any segregationists on our committee. The white members were all people who were known to be supportive of what we were trying to accomplish so the relations on the committee were excellent. I'd never met Vasco before I served with him on the committee, but his wife was Maxine Smith. Jesse Turner, Sr., was on the committee and a good many black ministers. Dr. Hollis Price, of course, was a minister himself and he was president of LeMoyne College. On the committee they had Rabbi James Wax of the Jewish temple and they had the dean at St. Mary's Cathedral, and they had a Methodist minister. I don't think we had any Baptist participants. We probably had several black Baptist ministers but no white Baptist ministers on the committee. But, as I say, Judge Wellford was on the committee with me. I think maybe there were two or three other Republicans on the committee. It was a committee that some of our Democrat politicos, you might say, ducked, didn't want to serve on it. I was not involved in recruiting the committee or anything like that, and I know I got on the committee because of Paul Tudor. [Laughter.] Harry Wellford did too. We were both in his church.

The committee was formed to accomplish legal desegregation without violence. It was formed for that purpose. Basically our message was that the law now requires this. It's time we move into the modern era. Memphis can never progress if we're not going to deal with this

situation and move on. Look at what other cities are doing and how they're getting it done. It was mainly, you know, justice and economics. That was the main argument. Of course each time we did it we got good support from the papers, Memphis is doing this great step forward and so on, and so it gained momentum as it went along.

One area that the MCCR worked on was movie theater desegregation in 1962. Vasco Smith and Lucius Burch headed a committee that met with theater owners and worked out a way to desegregate the movie theaters secretly. First, Smith selected a black couple to desegregate the Malco Theater. The next week two more black couples were sent. The other theaters then were desegregated without any newspaper publicity. Apparently no untoward incidents took place beyond the story that Smith details below.[126]

Vasco Smith: At some point during the movie theater desegregation, I can vaguely remember that some person from the Memphis Community Relations Commission did help in the discussions with the theater owners. As I recall, there was no difficulty in getting cooperation from them. It was a matter of trying to remove their fears of what might happen in these dark rooms. Let's say that blacks go in for the first time, and there's a group of whites who might want to beat them up, or just whatever. It was just a situation that it lent itself to some degree of concern. It was about not whether they *ought* to do it, but how *could* they do it without having great difficulties. I imagine they were concerned about their businesses. If there was some unfortunate incident to happen in this theater, then people might stop going there or whatever.

I do know, for example, with some theater owners, or at least one in particular I know, it was agreed that, for this fellow, that maybe just two black couples would go before announcing

[126] Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 122.

to the public at all. "Would you go along with maybe just sending a couple this time, we'll have policemen stationed. Nobody will know that they're there." I mean that sort of thing. It was really a spirit of cooperation more than forcing, but the forcing had already been done. So the fellow that I worked with was Dick Lightman. Now that's the Malco Theaters, and they have the largest chain of theaters in the South. They've got just dozens and dozens of them. They will now build these theaters where they have fourteen or fifteen screens.

His major concern was the large drive-in that's on the edge of a black community. He knew that once it was announced that particular drive-in was desegregated as of a certain date, there could be any type of mixtures of black and whites all over the thing. They could be mixed from one end to the other. How should he handle it? I told him I didn't know anything about drive-ins. I haven't ever been to one in my life. [Laughter.] He said, well, he wasn't afraid so much of any conflicts between blacks and whites because they were in their automobiles. They really didn't have much business knowing whether the person around them was black or white, but he said the thing that he was concerned about was the conduct of the individuals in the cars. [Laughter.] Well, I didn't know what he was talking about. But it seems that that's where the lovers go sometimes. I said, "Oh, man, that's ain't no problem." He said, "Well, it can be a problem." He said, "Well, would you do one thing for me?" I said, "Yeah, I'd be glad to." He said, "On this first night that we do it, would you be available where I can call you if I need you." I said, "Mr. Lightman, I'd be glad to do anything on earth that you want me to do. We want to see this thing be a success just like you want to see it." He said, "Well, that's all I need to know." He said, "You just be at home, and I'll call you if I need you."

Sure enough. We had company that night. The phone rang. I guess it was not late, not over nine, nine-thirty, ten o'clock something like that, and it was Mr. Lightman. He's a gentle

sort of person. He said, "Dr. Smith, this is Dick Lightman." I said, "Mr. Lightman, what is your problem? I'm glad to help." He said, "Well, Dr. Smith, I don't know how to tell you this." [Laughter]. "Go ahead, tell me Mr. Lightman." He said, "Well, there is this Negro couple. Dr. Smith, the car is right down front, and it's not too far from the screen. Right in the center of things." He said, "Dr. Smith, they going all the way and folk can see them." I said, "What do you mean all the way?" [Laughter.] I still didn't understand. When it hit me, I could visualize. [Laughter]. I said, "Mr. Lightman, have you ever had a problem to resemble this one at all?" He said, "Well, not quite, but yeah, maybe not on that location, but yeah." He said, "We have that problem. That's one of the things you have with outdoor theaters." I said, "Mr. Lightman, let me tell you exactly what to do. Do whatever you would do if that couple was white. I don't know what it is you do. *Whatever* you do, don't discriminate. Do the same thing." [Laughter.] Do you know what? He was happy to hear it. I said, "Whatever it is, there'll be no discussion of discrimination or anything else. Just handle it the same way you always do." [Laughter.] He thanked me, and we talk about that now when I see him. [Laughter.]

On Park Desegregation

In addition to movie theaters, ongoing park segregation represented another area of concern for black Memphians. Because of an NAACP lawsuit, the park commission adopted a gradual park desegregation plan that would take ten years before full integration.[127]

Vasco Smith: Now, there were a lot of peculiar things that happened in different situations. For example, we had a lawsuit on the parks and playgrounds. The swimming pools closed before they would have to allow blacks to swim. They just closed them down. You see, for example, the zoo. There was one day a week that blacks went to the zoo. There was a sign

[127] Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom*, 83.

saying that this was the colored day, and whites didn't come in. [Laughter.] Of course, some of the parks were large, like the fairgrounds, amusement parks over here. Now there was a certain schedule for park desegregation. These three parks would open and then later, these, more and more and more, until finally you get them all. The three parks to be opened at first were the Spanish American War Veterans, the Army Park, and the Navy Park. Now, we'd never heard of them. [Laughter.] So we decided to get in our cars and go see these parks that they had opened. You're not going to believe this. The Spanish American Park is across the street from the fairgrounds. It's about fifty feet wide and at that time it was about fifty feet long, and there was a statue of a Spanish American War veteran and that was it. That was the park. [Laughter]. Now since that time, it may be just a little bit bigger, not much, not much. It isn't a park. [Laughter.] Then the other ones, there was I think, at the corner of Calhoun and Second Street--it's a block from the civil rights museum--. There is at this corner on one side of the corner there was a piece of vacant ground, just a little larger than this room. Basically, the title meant this: the Army park was on that side and the Navy park was on that side and each one of them had a seat in them about the size of that couch. That was it. So these were the parks that were desegregated at first. That's right.

While local Judge Marion Boyd and the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled the gradual park desegregation was constitutional, A. W. Willis, Jr., Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., and the rest of the NAACP legal team appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court in the case called Watson v. City of Memphis. In 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the plan was unconstitutional. White lawyer Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr., represented the losing side.[128]

[128] Ibid., 83-4.

Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr.: In 1963 I represented the city of Memphis through the City of Memphis Park Commission in a case that went to the Supreme Court of the United States from Memphis called Watson against the City of Memphis. I argued that case for two days in the Supreme Court in Washington. Chief Justice Earl Warren was still presiding. I still have my brief that I filed in the Supreme Court. I remember arguing that case before Chief Justice Warren and the other members of the Supreme Court for two days. The Court reversed the Sixth Circuit and held that the city of Memphis was obliged to finish the desegregation process that we'd already started without further delay. That was the simple answer to it.

We were trying to delay it because of the tense situation that existed in Memphis at the time. I was very active from a legal standpoint representing the city in some cases and the park commission in others and several counties around Memphis. It was my view from the beginning that if the federal courts attempted to go too fast, we would very likely have another revolution. I thought it was going to take considerable time to acclimate the southern people to the fact that the courts have now held that segregation is unlawful. It was my firm view that the courts had to go slow, otherwise we would have another civil war or another revolution. That's how strongly this thing hit the South all of a sudden. I tried to do it in stair-step form and introduce these changes, drastic as they were, as slowly as possible. I think that's what saved the country from another revolution. Of course, we did have a good deal of riots and bloodshed, but it was minor compared to what we had in 1861. So I represented school boards in West Tennessee; I represented white voters in West Tennessee, the Memphis Street Railway, city of Memphis, the Memphis Park Commission, you name it. I've been in the forefront of this legal situation that was created by the 1954 decision in the Brown case.

Hunter Lane, city commissioner at the time, talks about the role of the city commission in park desegregation, saying that it had "absolute power" over the matter although certainly the U.S. Supreme Court could dictate the pace. Lane mentions his fellow city commissioner Jimmy Moore, who had been elected with black support, as not standing in the way of these efforts.

Hunter Lane: When it came to matters like segregation we had to decide. I remember I came out for desegregating the city swimming pools. Next to busing that was the most violent reaction I got. [Laughter.] I got all these calls. I'll never forget. It's almost ludicrous. "Do you know all those niggers have venereal disease? You're going to let your children get in there? I bet you belong to some country club," which I did at the time. [Laughter.] But I didn't advertise that. You know, they were really, truly upset about the medical effects of white kids swimming with blacks. But it was done and the same thing happened. Whites by and large quit going to public pools. Jimmy Moore, the guy I described as good old Jimmy, the ex-jock and Hollywood actor, this is one area where he got involved and they worked it out and he didn't stand in the way of it. He could have but he didn't. Within the departments we were directly responsible for we had the power to desegregate or not. So when the swimming pools were desegregated, I didn't follow it but I don't think many white kids went there anymore. I got a call one night about 10:00, some drunk lady, "You know they're going to transmit all these sexually transmitted diseases." [Laughter.] She was worried about the water in the pools contaminating the swimmers.

The NAACP was a constant presence and did put pressure on. I mean they had other fish to fry, they had other things they were working on, but they were very vigilant. They had to use pretty strong tactics a lot. They were pretty well ignored. More than ignored, they were despised by a lot of the white people. They just thought Maxine Smith was the dragon lady.

[Laughter] She was the worst person in town, in the eyes of many whites, many prominent whites. She was the devil incarnate. She had a lot of help but she was the spokesman and she was high profile. That's why they were down on her so badly.

Most of these things--and this is just an observation--the things that you went ahead and did it and knew you were going to have a lot of outcry but rather than do it gradually; the blacks weren't going to have that, and the whites were going to just as unhappy if you did it gradually than if you did it in one fell swoop. So this gradualism wasn't a good idea with anything, really.

On James Meredith

In the meantime, black Memphians stayed connected with national developments. In 1962, for instance, James Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi. Before he traveled to Oxford, Mississippi, he spent time in Memphis.

Vasco Smith: Maxine danced with James Meredith. A.W. Willis was one of the NAA's lawyers who was helping to handle his case to get in down there at Ole Miss. Of course, Thurgood Marshall, out of the Washington office of the NAACP, was the chief lawyer on the case. It was pretty much understood that getting him on the campus would be very difficult. The U.S. marshals wanted him to come to Memphis and to remain hidden here [Laughter] until the hour came to take him. They were going to take him to Ole Miss that afternoon late and get him on the campus and in the dormitory. It was a Sunday.

He came to Memphis, oh, three or four nights. He was around town here, I guess, about a weekend. Maxine was taking him to lunch. At that time, we socialized a whole lot. He went to parties with us and everything. [Laughter.] Then we went out to dinner about three or four o'clock that afternoon, and about five maybe, the marshals found out where we were. Somebody at home or in the neighborhood that we'd left word with told them where we would be. The two

U.S. marshals came to get him. They had a plane out of the airport to take him to Ole Miss. He was as calm a person as you have ever seen. He prefaced most of his remarks with the term "Well." You'd say, "Hey, what about so and so and so?" "Well, uh, it's this way or that way or whatever." He was just calm and so forth. So when they came for him, he looked up. They said, "We're ready to go Mr. Meredith." He said, "Well, I'm ready." [Laughter.] I can guarantee you within two hours after that the television was covered with news. That campus was just like a battlefield. Gun shots. The National Guard was called out. In the midst of it all, he was sleeping in his room. They put FBI agents with him to accompany him at all times. The only thing he wanted them to do was for them to get out of his room so he could rest. [Laughter.] He was a very unusual guy.

Four years later, Meredith started his March Against Fear, a march that he intended to take place from Memphis to Jackson, Mississippi, in order to encourage African Americans to register to vote and to combat racial discrimination in Mississippi.[129]

Vasco Smith: Then after his Ole Miss experience, after he finished college a few years later, James Meredith came back and said he wanted to have his second march, which was going to be his March Against Fear. Maxine and I didn't know anything about it until that Sunday morning we read in the paper that he was supposed to start that march at eight or eight-thirty from the lobby of the Peabody Hotel downtown. So, we got in our car and ran down there and said, "Man, what are you doing?" He had already started. He had on his helmet and a walking stick, and I think it was just himself and one other person. He was heading down toward the highway. [Laughter.]

We said, "What you doing man?" He said, "Well, I'm starting my march." "We're going

[129] For the definitive account of the March Against Fear, see Aram Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014).

to march with you." He really didn't seem too anxious to have too many people with him. But we insisted, and more people joined as the thing went through town. Plus the radio was talking about it, the TV, and everything. He walked to the Mississippi state line. We brought him back to town. I think he stayed at the Peabody. Then the next morning, we took him to the point where he had stopped the march, so he could pick it up again. That's the way he had planned on doing it. He would march or walk until sundown, and then somebody would pick him up. Then the next day he'd take him back to that point. He'd continue on from there.

We had intended to go back and get him, but he was shot the second day on the highway. He wasn't killed. He was shot. I never saw anything like this when we went out. We didn't go to the hospital that night. We went to the hospital the next day. It looks to me like he was at the Bowld Hospital. I'm not sure. I think that's where he was. I'm almost certain he was at Bowld. This is twenty-four hours after he was shot. Every major civil rights leader in the United States was in the hallway or in his room. Roy Wilkins from the NAACP. Whitney Young from the Urban League. Stokeley Carmichael, Rap Brown, Cleveland Sellers. Stokeley was the chairman of SNCC at that time. The police department in this city was really upset because there were all these guys here. If anything would happen, it would really cause a major riot. A schedule was made out very quickly where each one of them was assigned to speak at a mass meeting that night because mass meetings were being held all over town. I mean there were huge groups of people everywhere you looked. At one of the large Baptist churches, I was emcee that night. Maybe Maxine would be at another one. Russell Sugarmon at another one and so forth. Those leaders would just rotate going from church to church to speak. Afterwards they were to hold a strategy session at the Lorraine Motel. Dr. King was there incidentally, and also Floyd McKissick from CORE [the Congress of Racial Equality] was there. Everybody was there.

Everybody was there.

They all assembled up in the office at the Lorraine Motel. That little office is no longer there now. It was where the entrance is to the building, but this was on the second story. I went down and this guy Ernest Withers, who was a photographer, who now has a book of pictures on the movement, went with me. We just sort of sat around with the guys and listened to the discussion and so forth. This one wanted to do this, and this one wanted to do that. They argued and they fussed, and they argued and fussed. Most of it had to do with strategy and whether to move ahead with the march now because Meredith did not want them to move ahead with it. He wanted them to wait until he got out of the hospital. This was *his* thing. [Laughter.] If they wanted to do it, they could follow him. Anyway, that's the sort of thing it was.

It was hot in there, and I told Withers, "Hey man, I'm going downstairs to get some air." So the two of us went downstairs. There were a few people downstairs, not many. But there were police officers around the place. They were nervous, itchy. A strange looking car pulled up. It was a coupe, just a two-seater. There were two black guys in there. The cops all came to attention right quickly. These guys pulled in near the door and parked. They got out of their car and went around to the trunk, opened up the trunk, and instead of taking out suitcases, they took out guns. When they did that, the cops jumped. These were the boldest guys you'd ever seen. The cops said, "You can't have these." The cops said, "The law says you can't carry concealed weapons." They said, "We ain't concealing a damn thing." [Laughter.] “Here's the gun.” Suddenly, the cops didn't know what to say. They said, "Well, let's see. Are they loaded? You can't carry a loaded one?" They said, "They aren't loaded. Look in them, fool." They looked in them, and they weren't. They said, “If you want to see the bullets, here they are.” They pulled out a handful of bullets, and these cops just didn't know how to handle these two men. They

didn't know. The guys said, "Take your damn hands off. We are not breaking the law." They looked strange. We knew they weren't from around here. The cops called for the superior officer to come. He came, and the guys said, "You're the boss, huh? What you going to do to us?" They gave him hell too. Finally, they called an inspector who was about the highest officer on duty that night. I remember his name well. It was an Inspector Houston. White guy. Houston parked his big, long Lincoln out in the center of the street, walked over to see what was going on. Houston did a strange thing. He walked over to the officers and said, "What you guys so upset about?" They said, "Well, they've got guns and so forth." These two fellows looked at him and said, "So you're the big guy. What the hell are you going to do?" He surprised them. He said, "Gentlemen, do you mind if I ask you a question or two?" They said, "Nah, go ahead." He said, "I understand that the guns are not loaded." They said, "They're not." "What are you planning on doing?" They said, "It's none of your business." He said, "Well, you're not breaking any laws. You seem like fine citizens." He said, "Welcome to Memphis." Then the guys didn't seem to hardly know what to do. They were expecting a confrontation. Finally they got their bags and went on in to register with their rifles. I told Withers, "Let's go look at the car license and see where they're from." The license said Bogalusa, Louisiana, and that was the home seat for the Deacons for Defense and Justice. You may not have ever heard of them. These were guys down in Bogalusa, Louisiana, who openly carried guns to defy the law in order to keep them from beating up their women and children. Their organization was well known, but this was our first experience of seeing the Deacons for Defense and Justice. Though they did not tell anybody what their mission was, they came here with the purpose in mind--we only found out later--to make sure that nothing happened to Meredith. They were not arrested. We'd never seen anything like it. They knew what their rights were, and they pushed it right to the very edge.

The Deacons for Defense and Justice were known all over the country. Everybody knew about them. It was just sort of like a tale about these very brave men who defied the law, and the law was on their side. They never smiled the whole time. They were just sour-looking, mean-looking. That was the last organization that had sent representatives to Memphis, so that completed the civil rights circle.

On the Pivotal Year of 1964

Another development that black Memphians connected with was Freedom Summer, when black and white college students traveled in 1964 to Mississippi in order to engage in civil rights activism there. Sadly, three of these workers, Andrew Goodman, Mickey Schwerner, and James Chaney, were murdered. Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., recounts how they were remembered at the 1964 Democratic National Convention as well as the famous testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer, the grassroots activist in Mississippi turned organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In 1964, Hamer helped found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which made an unsuccessful challenge to the Mississippi Democratic regulars at the convention.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.: When the 1964 Democratic National Convention started, the bodies of Andrew Goodman, Mickey Schwerner, and James Chaney had been dug up. The Atlantic City convention hall opened out onto the boardwalk. The convention, I think, was in August. It was a hot summer. You could open that door, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was challenging the Mississippi regulars under Ross Barnett [the former governor of Mississippi]. The Alabama Freedom Democratic Party was challenging the Alabama regulars who were led by Bull Connor [the brutal police chief who ordered firehoses on youth protestors in Birmingham]. A woman from Mississippi, Fannie Lou Hamer, was testifying before the Rules Committee, which was chaired by one of Mayor Richard Daley's powers from

Chicago--you know, hard-nosed powers. She's testifying for about four straight days. When the convention recessed at night, there was this hubbub inside, and when they got outside, they had a wire fence along the boardwalk, with the students on one side, and there were paths for the delegates to leave both ways on the other. There were people in Vietnam-era fatigues and shorts and sandals. They had three charcoal faces of Goodman, Schwerner, and Cheney above them. [Emotional pause. Sugarmon chokes up.] It was like somebody turned down the volume. As soon as the people came outside and saw those three faces, it went dead silent. That was my first exposure to guerilla theater. It was wham! It hit them.

But anyway, with Ms. Hamer, she had told them that they had locked her up and stripped her. The sheriff got tired of her refusing to sign a confession saying that she had been paid by some Communist organizers to encourage blacks to vote. They wanted to discredit the movement. He finally told her, "I'm tired of this. So in the morning we're going to dump you in the river." At that point in history, she would've been foolish not to have taken that seriously. She said she prayed, she cried. She cried and she prayed. When the sun started coming up, she said, "Well, Fannie Lou, you haven't lived all this time for nothing. If you're going to die, you might as well die for something." When she walked into that room, you know, she didn't die. What happened though was it's rare that you get tested to find out whether you believe what you say you believe. She did. She got tested. You could tell when she was in the room, she wasn't in there long before everybody in the room was looking at her. She had that kind of power, a sense of sureness about her.

The New York Times reported in April 1964 that Memphis "has made more progress toward desegregation with less strife than any other major city in the Deep South."[130] However,

[130] John Herbers, "Integration Gains in Memphis; Biracial Leadership Takes Hold," *New York Times*, 5 Apr. 1964, Schomburg Clipping Files, University of the District of Columbia, Washington DC.

Memphis NAACP leader Jesse Turner remarked that same year that while Memphis had made unusual civil rights progress in comparison with other Deep South cities, much of the desegregation had only been token and halfhearted.[131] *Hunter Lane, city commissioner at the time, admits that he engaged in token efforts on behalf of African Americans.*

Hunter Lane: When I was in office I hired a black building inspector. I put a black funeral director on some board, board of adjustment or something, and I hired a couple of others, but I admit it was tokenism. I wanted to pay my dues for their support. I didn't look too hard to find people to fill jobs like that.

Nevertheless, civil rights gains continued to occur.

John T. Fisher: I built a new building for a car dealership in 1964 and about a year before I built it I was called on by the NAACP, by Maxine Smith as a matter of fact, who I didn't really know at that time, and she talked to me about the restrooms in that new building. In the plans, to the extent that they had been drawn--they weren't finished, but they were all sketched out--there were in fact colored restrooms and white restrooms in that building. That was just the way the world was. You didn't set out to do it. For me to build it different than that was to be different. What I was doing was ordinary and to be expected and well accepted. Maxine was there with about three or four other people, I don't remember who they were and she doesn't either, but she looked me square in the eye and talked to me very straightforward. I didn't invite Maxine to come. I guess she knew that we were doing it because we had put a sign up that we were fixing to do that. Anyway, it was not uncommon knowledge so she could have found out lots of different ways, but I had nothing to do with inviting her there. She talked then in a very articulate fashion as a well-educated, direct somebody would do. She said it in a very

[131] Muse, *Memphis*, 25.

straightforward way that made sense: that this is not the way the world is going, that we've got to break down the barriers and we've got to start with these designated separators, and it's just offensive to me to go someplace and I'm supposed to look for the colored ladies' room instead of the white ladies' room. The way she described that is exactly what I would feel if I was in that spot, so that's what made the difference. I appreciated that and I acknowledged that then and now, and that made me take her seriously. So I asked her to let me consider what she had asked me to do. Her only request was, "Don't build separate facilities," and I said, "Let me think about it," because I knew it would be different. I anticipated that the acceptance by the people that worked for me would not be high, and I was right. But the blacks all stayed quiet and didn't make a motion or a sound when I told them what I was going to do, and almost to the person the white staff complained. Well I didn't tell the staff first. I decided to do what she said, and I decided to do it because that seemed like the right thing to do. If that's the direction the world is going, I don't want to be left out. So I called her back and told her that we would honor her request, we would do that, and that's really all I said to her. Then I told my staff. I didn't want to tell the staff first because I didn't want to debate it. It's a done deal. But, I never had an incident over it. It worked out fine over the years.

The year 1964 was the high-water mark for the Shelby County Democratic Club with 101 precinct clubs and some 7,000 members. It also was a year of unprecedented black political achievement. Black Memphians including businessperson Fred L. Davis mobilized behind the candidacy of A. W. Willis for the state legislature. He won in a close election, becoming the first black state representative in the twentieth century in Tennessee. The Shelby County Democratic Club also supported the successful election of H. T. Lockard. Elected to the Shelby County Quarterly Court, he became the first African American to win local office in the twentieth

century. Black Memphians also held the balance of power in elections. The Tennessee Voters Council provided the structure for the black vote to carry the balance of power in the presidential and senatorial races. Locally, black Memphians cast 99 percent of their ballots for Democratic candidates, which resulted in the defeat of the entire Republican slate that espoused the Barry Goldwater philosophy. They put in office an all-Democratic delegation to the state legislature as well as ousted the incumbent Congressman in favor of one supportive of integration. Black voter registration was higher in Tennessee than anywhere in the South, with some 70 percent of eligible blacks on the rolls and the greatest number being in Memphis.[132]

Maxine Smith: Frank Clement was governor. We had supported him statewide. He won with 100,000 black votes which gave him more than enough margin. Alright, the year of the Civil Rights Act, '64, he decided to run for the U.S. Congress. Ross Bass who represented our district was one of the three or four whites who voted for the Civil Rights Act. Clement decided to run for this seat. In his politicking, he said, "Now, had I been there"–now, he's speaking to the white community, not thinking about the 100,000 black folks who made him governor--"If I had been your congressman, I wouldn't have voted for the Civil Rights Act." So, he *didn't make it*. We weren't tied to anybody. Nobody's ever offered me or offered us as a group pay offs.

[132] "Analysis of the Negro Votes in Shelby County Received by Democratic Nominees, November 3, 1964," box 1, folder 7, Sugarmon Papers, Special Collections; Mingo Scott, *The Negro in Tennessee Politics and Governmental Affairs, 1865-1965* (Nashville: Rich Printing Company, 1964), 187-95; Norman L. Parks, "Tennessee Politics since Kefauver and Reece: A 'Generalist' View," *Journal of Politics* 28, no. 1 (February, 1966): 144-168; Tucker, *Memphis since Crump*, 145; Maxine A. Smith, "Annual Report of Memphis Branch NAACP, 1964," p. 8-9, Papers of the NAACP, Group III, box C146, folder: Memphis NAACP 1963 to 1965, Manuscript Division.

One white candidate supported by African Americans was William N. Morris, Jr., who took major steps to comply with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned employment discrimination based on race or sex as well as banned segregation in public accommodations.

William N. Morris, Jr.: The Civil Rights Act was activated in July 1964. I was elected in August of '64 and became the first sheriff of a large metropolitan area to be looking at the issue of making the changes in compliance with the Civil Rights Act. It was quite interesting for me, coming from a rural north Mississippi town where I grew up in a very poor environment and had a different attitude about blacks at that point because I had always been friendly towards blacks and they'd been my friends. But when I became the sheriff I was thirty-one and had never been in law enforcement but I was a very active individual in the community and I understood the community's multicultural situation. And knowing that I was elected by the total community, and when I ran my campaign I got a good feel for the accountability situation toward being equal to all people.

So I walked in the office the first day and they had colored water fountains, white and colored, and that to me was abominable, so I changed that the first day. I looked at the records and I looked at the employment situation and women doing equal jobs to men were being paid sixty percent of the same amount of money, so I began to make a transition there. But the biggest issue, along with many others that we dealt with, was the fact that we had a number of black deputies who were there and could only arrest black people, and that had been the policy until September 1 when I went into office. Black officers could arrest black people, and they generally were seen only in black communities. So I made a decision that day to deal with that issue and we accomplished that. It turned out to be not very difficult at all because I handpicked the most racist, white deputies that we could come up with and brought them into my office. We

sat down and we talked about how to do something historical and how to give real leadership and become a great humanitarian in the process, and that is to adopt one of the black officers to be their partner in the squad car and accept the responsibility of introducing that black officer to the white culture, because those black officers never would have thought about going into a white restaurant, you know, at that point, and particularly going into white neighborhoods to either serve a paper, or go to make an arrest, or go into the suburbs of Memphis and the white community to go into the restaurants as a black officer. They just didn't do that. Certainly none had given a ticket or arrested a white person. These people, every one of the white officers that I selected, to me made one of the greatest contributions of my administration in that they accepted the responsibility and every one of them became an absolute leader. Their lives changed. Their whole lives changed, because they became friends with these black officers. Within thirty days after we began the process the black officers were being invited to come over to their house to meet the family and have a barbecue out back, and that was part of the plan. You know the whole deal is I reminded them the badge that they wore was the same badge that everybody else wore, and the message behind that was, you represent me, the sheriff. You are a deputy sheriff and as such you are the sheriff, which makes you a powerful influence in the community.

So we took it from there and as we went through the process those who disagreed with our policies we were able to let them find work elsewhere. Over a period of two years we were able to transcend the old good ol' boy network, untrained, basically, law enforcement agency to one that was becoming professional and people were hired for qualifications not political influence, and all of that. Women were getting equal pay and we were treating everybody the same. We had a situation where we had rules about no gratuities and what have you, and I boosted the salaries, got the salaries up to accommodate the needs of the law enforcement. But

the whole thing was, I thought, that the sheriff's department became a lightning rod, if you would, for right and for equal opportunity and equal treatment.

On H. T. Lockard, Josephine Burson, and Governor Buford Ellington

Two years later, in 1966, African Americans continued to see major political gains through electing supportive whites to office as well as witnessed the continuing election of African Americans and their appointment as public officials as well. H. T. Lockard's black political club played a role in these matters, helping elect Buford Ellington to the governorship that year.

H. T. Lockard: My group, the Ninth District Democratic Club, oh, we had a nice membership, a nice membership. I was at the height of my influence during that time, and above all else I would say the way that my relationship with people and all, people kind of gravitated to me and what I stood for. So I would say any one meeting that we held we could count on forty or fifty people. We came up with eighteen thousand votes for Ellington in '66. The opponent was John Jay Hooker. The majority of the African Americans were for Hooker, but because of the totality of my presence and what the candidate stood for, we came up with eighteen thousand votes.

Ellington appointed H. T. Lockard as his administrative assistant, so Lockard became the first African American in Tennessee history in the governor's cabinet. Ellington also appointed Memphian Josephine Burson as Commissioner for Employment Security. She was the first Jewish person and first woman to be appointed to the cabinet of a Tennessee governor.

Josephine Burson: At one time in his political career Ellington had described himself as an old fashioned segregationist. When he asked me to become part of his cabinet I said, "I can't associate myself with anything like that," and he said that was a mistake and he said, "I have

realized it and I don't feel that way anymore." When he was governor he had H. T. Lockard so he was the first governor who had a black man in his cabinet. So H. T. was in his cabinet, and he did many other progressive things and he gave me a free hand. I was in what was then called employment security and he never stopped me with anything that I wanted to do, and I had established very good relationships with the people in Washington; the funding came from the Department of Labor. I helped launch Government, Recruitment, Employment, and Training, and the name is what it actually was. We did a lot of training. We recruited minorities for employment in my department. I was cooperative in doing things that we could do through my department, training for minorities and hiring a lot of minorities in state government. That had not been done before.

I'm Jewish and I could not take any kind of position of being discriminatory, just from my own heritage and my own family history. It just was not in me. I mean I just couldn't do that. When H. T. was appointed, when Ellington appointed him to the cabinet, there was, you know, a lot of coverage and a lot of comment. He was the first black man in the cabinet ever. H. T. was in the cabinet at the same time as me, and H. T. and I were good friends. One day we were talking and I said, "H. T., people are making such a big to-do over you." He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well do you know that I'm the first Jewish person to be in the governor's cabinet." He said, "You are?" They just took it for granted that we had a whole history of involvement, which we didn't. Anyway, things did move during that period, and I think for the better.

H. T. Lockard: [Lockard points to a picture of Buford Ellington hanging on his office wall]. That was my boss for four years. I worked in the governor's cabinet. I didn't seek it. He asked me to serve. I met with him on several occasions. I said, "How can I be of help?" I had it very well understood that I could not and would not have any inferior role in the campaign. It'd

have to be up front just like everybody else. He assured me that they would. He was impressed beyond measure. I found out all this later. The first night we met we met at the Peabody Hotel in 1966. I had learned by that time that you never go meet with a politician alone. You take somebody with you. So, I took seven or eight people. So the meeting was over. I said to one of the staff people, "Where's the whiskey?" "Shhh," he said. "The governor doesn't drink." I said, “Well I do." They told the governor that. He said, "I like that man." I didn't hear that, but I heard it later. In my younger years, I liked to chase skirts around. So I picked up a phone. I just made a phone call. I called this young lady. I said, "Let's go and drink some beer." I didn't even know that they had their ears strained. The meeting was over. She said, "Okay." She said, "What shall I wear?" I said, "Wear something short and tight." They told the governor that. Later in the campaign, he started to call me "short and tight." What the hell is he talking about? Finally, somebody said, "Didn't you call somebody when you were in Memphis?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, so and so told him what you had to say."

He was elected in 1966, and he asked me to serve in the cabinet. When they asked me, I was just flabbergasted. Not knowing the protocol of that thing, when the governor-elect calls you and all that, you drop everything. He called me and said, "H. T., I want you to come up here." I said, "I'm busy I can't come the day you want." Somebody called me up and said, "Don't you know you don't turn the governor down?" I said, "Well, I was busy, and I couldn't go." To make a long story short, we got along fine. When we went into the campaign, I said, "When you ran before, you said you were an old-fashioned segregationist." Very quickly he said, "Times have changed, and the wise men change with the time.” I said, "Can you say that publicly?" On his opening night, he asked each cabinet member to make contributions to his speech. I wrote out some lines, and that was the first applause he got.

I was in his cabinet four years. I was the liaison principally with the parole board, the whole prison system. I was his eyes, I guess you could say, at the prison meetings. I went with the board. I met with the board right then and there and gave him the benefit of my observations on recommendations. The board made recommendations to him for parole or not many pardons, time cuts, and so forth and so on. I made a condensation of that action and had it for him to read. Then I was able to elaborate on it because I was there. He helped a lot of small counties who were economically deprived in federal funds. He had good contact in Washington. I helped small communities, rural counties write proposals to get federal funds like for water, for roads. Ellington had so much contact in Washington. He would just say to me, "I've got some people who need some money to do this, that and the other." He said, "Take them to Washington and see Congressman" so and so. I just would make the plane reservations. We'd all go to Washington and of course he had called ahead. It was very obvious. The Congressman or senator or whoever it was involved would just bring their staff in and they would just literally walk the application all the way through. So in a week, ten-days time the money would be coming down. Now I enjoyed that. I really enjoyed that. The Watergate was my headquarters. I loved the Watergate. I could entertain friends and all that. That was fun. I made speeches all over the state.

After finishing with the cabinet, I came back to Memphis, and I threw a big party. I think I had about a thousand people. I had it at a nightclub. I had some real good goodies. This was my announcement that I was back home ready to engage in the practice of law.

More on Black Political Power

The mid-1960s also saw the mobilization of lawyers behind African American Benjamin L. Hooks for judge, including white lawyer Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr., who had battled the NAACP

in lawsuits, and an important change in city government. A key structural change occurred in 1967 when the city government changed from a commission form to mayor-council form as a result of the work of Program of Progress, which was backed by various white leaders, the Shelby County Democrat Club, and the Memphis NAACP branch. This change ensured black representation through the creation of all-black districts. In 1967, three blacks became members of the city council, a major victory, one of which was Fred L. Davis. That year, A. W. Willis, Jr., made an unsuccessful bid for mayor.[133]

Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr.: The governor appointed Ben Hooks as the first black judge in Memphis. He finished an unexpired term of his predecessor. He came up for re-election a couple years later. I was fairly active in the bar association then. The bar, then as now, was active in trying to select good judges. Judge Hooks sent the word out, at least the bar learned that he was not going to run. I was appointed along with a lawyer named Jack Petree to go see Judge Hooks and see if we could talk him into running because it was our view that he was doing a good job. It was essential that we have not only blacks but good blacks on the bench. So Mr. Petree and I went down and talked to Judge Hooks and he told us that he wasn't going to run because he couldn't be elected. At that time there was only maybe thirty-five or forty percent blacks in Shelby County. If a popular white man ran against him, he probably couldn't get elected. We asked him not to decide finally about that. We went out and got all of the former members or presidents of the Memphis and Shelby County Bar Association. All the living members of the bar association signed a petition urging Judge Hooks to stand for election. We

[133] Lewis Donelson, a member of POP and a prominent New Guard Republican, says that the Shelby County Democrat Club and the New Guard Republicans were the two most powerful political forces in Memphis by this time. Donelson, interview. On POP, see Jonathan I. Wax, "Program of Progress: The Recent Change in the Form of Government in Memphis," Part 1, *WTHSP* 23 (1969): 81-109; Jonathan I. Wax, "Program of Progress: The Recent Change in the Form of Government in Memphis Part 2," *WTHSP* 24 (1970): 74-96; Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice*.

took that to him and showed it to him. He was amazed. He said, "I can't believe this." He changed his mind. He ran and he had no opposition. We told him we didn't think he'd have any opposition once it's published that every living former president of the Memphis and Shelby County Bar Association endorsed him. Nobody ran against him. So that was another watershed you might say. His successor was Odell Horton, who was our first black federal judge who incidentally was from my hometown, Bolivar, which is sixty miles east of Memphis.

I'm telling you this to show how this race situation has evolved to the point where in Memphis and Shelby County today we've got a black mayor. We've got a black city mayor and we've got a black county mayor. The city council is majority black, seven to six. The county commission is still majority white because since this desegregation started following the *Brown* case the whites have left Memphis in droves and gone into Shelby County. That's one reason the white population of Memphis has gone down so much is so many of them have left and moved out into the county. The Memphis public school system now I believe is close to ninety percent black. Whereas the county system is probably not over twenty or thirty percent black. I'm not sure about that percentage, but I know the city of Memphis school system is approaching ninety percent if not there. That has resulted in a proliferation of private schools in Memphis and Shelby County, so that I would say a majority of the white students are in private schools now, maybe not a majority but pretty close to it.

In 1967, Fred L. Davis won election to the city council from a predominately white district.

Fred L. Davis: We had a lot of people in the white community campaigning for us in the white community. I had been out there a while. A lot of people believed in me. There were particularly two people who really took a lead with that, George Lapides and Jimmy Jalenak--

both Jewish--who really decided to be my campaign coordinators in the white community. Jimmy is a principal in one of the largest law firms now in Memphis. George is a sports fan. He is the sports editor for TV station WRVG here in Memphis. But at the time, George was working for the *Commercial Appeal* as the sports editor. Jimmy was a junior law associate. They found me. I was already running. They heard about it. They said, "We want to help you." They thought the other people running were bad. They believed in the same kinds of things that we did, and this was a way for them to put it into action--help me get elected. Their support was a*bsolutely critical.* I don't think without their support I would've been elected. I eventually became the first black to be chairman of the council.

On the 1968 Sanitation Strike

Despite the victories of the mid-1960s, Maxine Smith remembers that the black community got complacent. She remembers what really brought people back into activism was the cause of the sanitation workers. Beset with low pay, poor working conditions, and the lack of union representation, they went on strike in a campaign that garnered national attention. Tragically, on April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the city supporting the sanitation workers, was shot dead.

Vasco and Maxine Smith had been acquaintances of Martin Luther King Jr. and were invited to go to dinner with Dr. King at Rev. Billy Kyle's house on the night of his death but King was shot before the dinner could happen.

Vasco Smith: I was finishing my last patient, and Maxine was driving down toward the Lorraine Motel to just sort of join maybe a couple of cars, leave her car there maybe even and just get in the other car and just go on out to the place, and I'd meet them out there. When news came to me that he had been shot, and then, I guess, ten minutes later the call came to say that he

was dead, I knew that things were going to happen. I quickly finished my work and tried to find Maxine, but she was not near a phone. She was--as I said--on the way down to the motel, and I also wanted to try locate my son because I felt that there would really be some rioting in this town. Within an hour, hour and a half, buildings started burning. By nightfall there was a curfew getting everybody off the street by a certain time. But where I live this area was not tightly curfewed. We actually got in our car and went to be with some friends who were white incidentally, the Hornbergs. They were one of the few white families that was close to the movement. Somebody else called--another white couple that was friendly with us--and said they were going over there. Then the Hornbergs called us and said, "Why don't you come over here?" because everybody was just upset, and nobody was resting that night. So we went over there, but the point is we were able to freely move around the neighborhoods that were either white or mixed, but in the black neighborhoods it was a tight curfew. Guys were being arrested right and left. The town was burning. People were very upset. A lot of people were very seriously upset about what had happened. There were some opportunists who just wanted to raise hell anyhow. We've had some fairly bad times.

Thomas Prewitt shares another side of the story of the assassination and the strike: the refusal of Henry Loeb to recognize the garbage worker's union.

Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr.: The city of Memphis form of government was changed in '67, and I was very active in the election of Mayor Loeb in 1967. I wrote some of his speeches and I advised him on legal matters. Within a few days after he was elected, the garbage union struck and withheld their services. Of course, that turned into a national affair. Growing out of that Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis. I was very active as an advisor to Mayor Loeb because right off the bat we were confronted with this garbage strike. It went from bad to

worse. The National Guard was patrolling Memphis at the time King was killed because of widespread looting and rioting in Memphis. I advised Mayor Loeb the law of Tennessee as any lawyer would have to do. There was no question about what was Tennessee law. It was illegal for any employee to strike against a governmental agency. The opinion of Supreme Court, I know, cited Franklin D. Roosevelt as an authority for the proposition that in a democracy it's unheard of for public employees to strike, that their remedy was a ballot box in a democracy. That's still the law in Tennessee. Of course it's sort of like the law of India when Mahatma Gandhi was protesting against it. To my knowledge the legislature has never really acted on that. I know there's no question about it.

Loeb was a very strong-minded man. He said, "I'll never recognize them." Dr. King came to Memphis to lead a march, I believe it was, a few days before his death. That resulted in a riot. Of course, I think we already had the National Guard patrolling at that time. But King had to escape with his life then. I know the mayor asked me to try to assemble black leaders in Memphis. I along with Odell Horton, who was the health director for the city of Memphis, arranged to have a meeting at LeMoyne-Owen College that night that this first march of King broke up into a riot. We wanted to get the black leaders to go on TV and exhort the blacks to peace, that this looting and rioting won't get you anywhere. That was our aim--to try to bring calm to this situation. I remember driving to Judge Ben Hooks's home and picking him up and taking him to Lemoyne-Owen College for this meeting with other black leaders. I know Dr. Hollis Price was there. He was president of LeMoyne and several black leaders were there including Jesse Turner, Sr., who was president of the local black bank and very influential. I know Judge Hooks' wife didn't want him to go with me because of the riots and she was fearful for us driving. There was a curfew on. No cars on the road. But I had special permission from

the police department. They had my license number and knew where I was going. So Judge Hooks and I went over to LeMoyne and we had this meeting with the black leaders. They were very much concerned. I remember Jesse Turner coming into the meeting all bloody. He says, "The cops have beaten me with clubs and I was just trying to calm the situation down." He was angry obviously. He said, "Why should I go on air and exhort people to peace when they damn near killed me." I remember that very vividly. But at any rate, several of them did go on television later that night to urge everybody to be peaceful, stop the looting and the violence that was going on. It might have had some effect. But at any rate within a day or two, King came back to Memphis and led a march. I remember I was at home that night before, the night before he was killed, and I had my radio on, and King was making his mountaintop speech to a group of blacks at one of the big churches. I can remember him vividly saying, "I've been to the mountaintop and I've seen over the other side and I know where I'm going." It was prophetic. He was prophesizing his own demise in that very vivid language that he was very good at. Twenty-four hours later he was dead. I remember learning about it right away. He was shot at the Lorraine Motel. After that, we not only had riots in Memphis but all over the country. The blacks were rioting.

I reached the conclusion that the mayor had no choice, this thing had to be settled. President Lyndon Johnson was still president, and he sent a mediator down from Washington, and I've forgotten his name, but Jim Manire and I sat in a conference with union leaders, two or three of them. We spent a whole night down at the Claridge Hotel. This man from Washington who was sent down as mediator was one of sharpest people I ever knew. If he hadn't been there I don't think we could've come to any resolution at all. But he was absolutely magnificent. I know I took two C reports with me to that meeting and I would read from the opinion of the

courts saying the strikes are illegal. These labor men might as well have been talking to the moon. They weren't interested in whether it was legal or illegal. They say unjust laws. At any rate, we were able to settle it as a result of an all-night meeting.

After that H. A. Gilliam [an African American friend of Prewitt's] sent me a copy, and I still have it in a file in my office, of a letter which Martin Luther King had written to the ministers of Birmingham, Alabama. King had led a march in Birmingham, and they put him in jail. He wrote this from jail. The letter was typed out. It was about a ten- or eleven-page letter. It was what I thought one of the finest pieces of prose I had ever read. It had been written about four years prior, hadn't gotten much publicity. I don't know that I'd ever heard of it. But Gilliam sent me a copy of it, and I still got his letter. It was a magnificent essay really, very convincing in his logic. I know that changed my views. It had a tremendous effect on me–that letter that Gilliam sent me from Martin Luther King. I think that the whole South, the white South, has changed dramatically.

Memphis was rocked with violence, like other cities, after the assassination and a curfew was set in place.

Lillie Wheeler: When they started looting and stuff and burning, I didn't believe in that. Everybody wasn't doing it. It was just some. But it did make everybody pretty angry and everybody I think felt like doing something. So I prayed. The one thing that I did do when Dr. King died was they put a boycott on, and my youngest son was working at one of the hospitals and he got off at eleven. There was no way I was going to let a young black boy try to come home after eleven when the boycott was on because he would be shot just because he was black. That was one time I defied the curfew, but like I say, God has been with me all the time. I was out after eleven. I went and got him. I took on the United States Army for the son. Like I say I

don't bother anybody but when I'm mistreated or you mistreat my child, you will hear from me. I said they'd better not stop me and they didn't and I passed on through. It was quite frightening. I was afraid for him because he was young. He was in school and he was working at night to help save for his college.

White Memphian John T. Fisher knew Mayor Loeb and worked to repair race relations in the city following the assassination.

John T. Fisher: The sanitation strike began in February of '68, because I was out of Memphis when I first saw it in the newspaper, a little square that said it just started. Really I got involved in that because of the church. I'm Episcopalian, and three other Episcopalians telephoned me and said, "We want to go and visit with the mayor, and we know you know him because you grew up next door to him. Would you get us a date with the mayor, with Henry Loeb?" I said yes, so I called Henry and made a date and we went to see him. It was probably in early March we went to see Henry, and it was kind of an extraordinary encounter because he was so adamant that he was right and the people couldn't strike, and he was probably legally correct.

Legally the people did not have the right to strike, because they were municipal employees. Leadership-wise he was taking a blind eye to what was going on in the city. He'd been a PT boat captain, so he was used to taking charge, used to giving commands, and used to being responsible, but he didn't see this encounter that way. I was sort of surprised at the lack of inquiry that he gave us. He did all the telling to us about what was going on. Later the next week the same group told me that they were going to go see Jim Lawson, who was a spokesman for the sanitation workers, a black Methodist minister, at Centenary United Methodist Church. They asked me if I wanted to go with them to go see him, and I said yes, and I went to see him. That was equally as extraordinary a visit because Jim is well educated; he's not from the South;

he talked back to me in a way that, I wasn't uncomfortable with it, but I just was very conscious of the fact that I'd really never encountered that in Memphis. In talking to black males who grew up in Memphis there's sort of a deference to me as a white person, especially a white person like a car dealership owner or something, but Jim Lawson didn't do that. Jim was not the least bit arrogant or pushing back, it's just that he didn't have any of those characteristics. I thought of it as just talking to another colleague because he didn't have any of that. He was quiet spoken, he was well educated, and he's still probably the best preacher I ever heard. I began to go to his church after King was killed. I'd go to my church for Sunday school and go to Jim Lawson's church for the 11:00 sermon often for several years until he left.

So that was a very different experience, and while we were there a guy named Ralph Jackson, who was another black minister, came in and he had been maced on Lee Street by a policeman. He was just irate over that and we had an interesting talk about that. As we left Jim Lawson said, "I want to tell you all something. We've had a lot of people come to see us and talk to us, talk to me, and all of them have come to tell us what we ought to do: 'This is what we think that you should do. We're sympathetic, but we think you should do this or that.'" He said, "You all are the first group that has come to listen to what it is we had to say, to see why we do what we do and what we want."

So that sort of hooked me into the whole process. I began to be curious and to meet people that were in that group. My wife ended up with another friend of hers in the first march of Dr. King, which people are surprised that I wasn't in the march but she was. I wouldn't know how to create an atmosphere in the community like that one. It's not theatrically reproducible. When the community gets that scared and has that much emotion and that many people feel so strongly about issues it's almost like a combat zone.

I had people on my street in East Memphis physically afraid that black people were going to come out and march down the street, which was highly unlikely and never did happen, but they thought it might happen. So it became very electric in that sense. I got to know different people and got to talking to them and knew a lot of black ministers involved in the sanitation strike through the church really. Then the unthinkable happens and you think it can't get worse and suddenly it's a lot worse, King has been shot, and that all took place between late February and April 4. It wasn't a long period of time.

After King's death, I got involved with putting on an assembly called Memphis Cares. We ended up putting it on at an old football stadium called the E. H. Crump Stadium. It became a civic endeavor process, and everybody helped. The park commission put a speakers' platform on the football field with a microphone and stuff to go into the speakers that are in the stadium. Another group went out and did that. Each of these groups is working independent; there's no headquarters to call back to. There was no place to report back to because under curfew we couldn't stay and do anything.

Twelve thousand people came to the Memphis Cares, and everybody agrees it was half black and half white. And the stands were evenly dispersed. There weren't blacks in a section or something. It was very much integrated, and there was no difficulty, none. The eight speakers were me; Bishop John Vanderhorst; Tommy Powell, a labor leader; Tom O'Brien, who ran an advertising company; E.W. Reed, a doctor; there was a school teacher; Mary Lawson, who was a school teacher. Her name was Mary Collier when she spoke, and she later married a guy named Lawson. She was there. Jim Lawson and Ben Hooks. We met about 1:30, I guess. I've forgotten what the time frame was, but people spoke longer than they were supposed to, not a long time, but somewhat longer. It was supposed to be three minutes and they spoke seven or

something like that. There was a wide variety of speakers. It had lots of repercussions. It affected our business. My phone would ring with threatening phone calls. My children were harassed at school as a result of what I did. So yeah, it had lots of repercussions. I don't say it with resentment; that's just the way it was. Would I do it again? Yeah, I'd do it again. We didn't sell quite as many cars after that as we had before. That did kind of change itself back around, but there were people who weren't going to come there. There were personal friends that we had that the wives told my wife, "We can't come to your house anymore. My husband won't let me come to your house." Now that's another southern sort of trait: my husband says I can't come to your house anymore. All the ones that I know about that did that have all apologized. It took them a long time to apologize, but they have since initiated the apology and said, "I want you to know when I told you that, that I'm sorry I said that. We're both sorry we did that." And I was often given credit for seeing the world that was coming, which they didn't. I regret that I didn't use my time with Jim Lawson to meet Martin Luther King.

After King's assassination, I got in the car and went to the R.S. Lewis Funeral Home, which is where King's body had been taken. I was in the R.S. Lewis Funeral Home when King's body had been prepared for burial in an open casket, which was brought from the back room to the front room. Later *Esquire* magazine wrote a story about that process and said there were no white people present, but that wasn't true because I was there. I was the only white person present, but I was there.

Most of the business leaders wanted the problem to go away. I was back in Henry Loeb's office on the Saturday morning after King had been killed on Thursday night and I got to see him take phone calls. When we were there he took a stack of letters and shook them in our face to say he had this support, and I got to look at some of the letters and I know where the support, the

sort of white conservative country club group, came from. But lots of them telephoned him and told him that he had done a bad job by letting King get killed. It should never have gotten that far. They all withdrew their support. I even heard people say, "I'm not sorry it happened; I'm just sorry it happened here." I've never seen a more dejected human being than Henry Loeb that day, because he had done what he thought was right. He'd obviously relied on the people for support because I had seen that first hand. But then they pulled the rug out from under him. He left Memphis. He served out his term and moved to Arkansas.

Morris, later mayor of Shelby County, recalls the negative economic impact that the assassination had.

William N. Morris, Jr.: Then of course when the sanitation strike came up it was obvious to me then that it was a black and white issue there, and that the leadership in the city wanted to continue doing business in the same old way. In the sanitation department, without getting into all the details, people had been working in all conditions of weather and what have you without having the proper gear to protect themselves, in all kind of cold weather, hot weather. Safety equipment was not available. Training was not available, even to the point of where in that department we started a volunteer program of teaching people to read and write, you know, volunteers through the Jaycees and other organizations to teach people in the sanitation department, because they couldn't tell whether they were getting paid the right amount or not and didn't know whether they were getting the right change when they'd get their checks. So it was a very terrible situation, I thought, in terms of the indignities, if you would, of the ignorance of what to do and treatment. But anyhow the strike took place, and it ended up creating a national situation, and it appeared to me that organized labor was to be the catalyst for trying to move these changes. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal

Employees (AFSCME) was in town and the leadership in AFSCME, they took charge with the national organization and then they recruited other labor organizations as well as the SCLC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to try to give them momentum. It was a do or die situation, frankly, for them, and they were willing to go to the wall to try to make the changes.

By 1967 I had been re-elected sheriff for a two-year term for the first time. I was very happy about that. But the situation continued to be worse as far as the city was concerned, and then of course the assassination took place. I was involved in creating the curfews and working with the city and incorporating our effort with the state of Tennessee when they sent the National Guard in, and what have you. It was some very trying times.

King's death had a major economic impact. I think that there was a fear factor in terms of new businesses looking at Memphis as a place to locate because it was a city where there was a lot of labor problems, union problems. And industry that wanted to have a new location would not look at Memphis because if they needed a two hundred employee situation, if they were going to build furniture or whatever they were going to build, the first thing that would happen in their mindset was that they'd get into Memphis and somebody would come in and want to unionize, and then the employees would tell them how to run their business. So that became a real big negative for us for a long period of time. We saw companies leave Memphis because of that.

On Black Mondays

While the assassination of Dr. King was a shock to the black community in Memphis, the next year, they started a major campaign called the Black Monday movement in order to speed up the process of school integration. The Memphis NAACP, recognizing that schools' funding depended on average daily attendance, asked students to stay home from school on Monday.

October 13, 1969, was the first Black Monday. Forty-seven percent of the city school children, 62,518 black pupils, stayed out of school. The movement included five Black Mondays, with 68,000 being absent at its height. On two of the Black Mondays, around 675 black teachers stayed away from school in support of the movement.[134] *On November 21, the Board of Education and NAACP reached an agreement, effectively ending Black Mondays.*

Vasco Smith: The suit to desegregate the city schools had been in court just forever. Some of the most prominent people in this town sat on the witness chair and said with their hands upraised and their hands on the Bible that it was purely coincidental that black students attended schools where only blacks went and that white students just incidentally all went to the white schools with white students. It was just a coincidence that at the schools for white students, there were only white teachers. It was coincidence that there were only black teachers at these schools with black students. And that it was not designed and there was no intent whatsoever to segregate. [Laughing] Finally when the decree was handed down, after going up and down the courts and all that sort of thing, they settled on a gradual desegregation thing where I think it was only thirteen black students that first year were assigned to schools. It was a vicious sort of thing with two first graders at this school and then two over yonder and two over there and whatever. It was awful. The kids were mistreated. The lights were kept on in the schools twenty-four hours a day because they were afraid the schools were going to be bombed at night. There were police guards at the schools day and night. The NAACP had done just a tremendous job, first of all, in canvassing neighborhoods to even get students that the parents would permit to attend because, you know, who wants to let their child do that.

The Black Mondays, that's where we started really. Maxine and Laurie, that's the same

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[134] Willie W. Herenton, *A Historical Study of School Desegregation in the Memphis City Schools, 1954-1970* (Ph.D. diss., Southern Illinois University, 1971), 90.

Sugarmon that went to Memphis State with Maxine to attempt to register. They were just thinking about, talking about how slowly desegregation was going and how slow the school board was to move to elevate teachers to administrative positions and so forth. They decided that they would make certain demands to the school board to see what the school board would do about it. Of course, they had been making demands all the time and nothing would happen. The same thing was this time--nothing would happen. There were no blacks above the level of principal, none on the intervening levels on up to superintendent, no black superintendent. I believe that there were no blacks on the school board at that time. I think that's so, and to get them on would require a change in the method by which they were elected. School board members, I think, at that time were all elected at large and from certain slots, and a black just couldn't win one of those positions. They were citywide positions. Anyway, they decided after many discussions of different ways that they could make an impression that they would really take a long risk. The schools are funded on the basis of average daily attendance. That's ADA. That if there were some way that they could legally reduce the figures on average daily attendance without any difficulties occurring. That was when they decided that they could ask all the black kids to stay out of school one day each week.

If they could ask the parents to cooperate, that it would really bring about dramatic changes, but they also realized that this was risky. If you are asking kids to stay out of school, they can get in trouble, all kinds of trouble. You could be accused of contributing to delinquency of minors, all sorts of things. Of course, this was again an NAACP project. It was carried to the NAACP board. The board agreed to it. They began workshops for kids from the different schools telling them what they wanted to do and why they wanted to do it. Amazingly enough, the kids got the message. Then they went to the male principals and asked them if they would

stay out of school on this particular day. Of course, they got great resistance there. You ought to hear Dr. Willie Herenton, who was a principal at that time, talk about this and how these two little bitty women had these men just trembling because they were afraid to even think about risking their positions to do something like this. They had all kinds of excuses. The only principal who agreed to participate in the Black Mondays is a fellow who's now the mayor of the city, Herenton. So they decided that on a certain Monday they would start their movement, and that they would call it Black Monday.

As a result the administration decided that they'd better have some talks with these leaders of this movement. Out of this came the setting up of the mechanism for electing black school board members, for promoting black school teachers into administrative positions and so forth and eventually electing a black superintendent. That again was an NAACP movement.

Miriam DeCosta-Willis: Now we began desegregation of the schools in the early ’60s and it was supposed to go grade by grade by grade. It moved very slowly, eventually we sped it up, but still there had been no major changes at the upper levels, in administration, in the supervisors, in the principals. So in the summer of 1969 Maxine, who had been executive secretary of the NAACP then for about six or seven years, and me, I was chair of the NAACP’s education committee, we came together with other activists and drew up a list of demands, among which we wanted equal representation on the school board, on the upper levels of the administrators, superintendent, faculty members, principals, etcetera. We asked certain things, like what is the percentage of white teachers, of black teachers? How many new teachers were hired this year? We had a whole list of things. We wanted information and we also had certain demands.

We got no response. Actually I think in July we asked for information. Since we got no reply, in September we made demands. We were sick and tired of the fact that all of the experienced and trained, highly educated black teachers were taken out to the suburbs, out east. Meantime they brought into our predominantly black schools their inexperienced white teachers, and we were sick of this imbalance so we made demands. They finally gave us the information; they refused our demands; they said, well, you know, we'll think about having some this and that, and whatever, make some changes down the road. Well, we were upset. We said it's time to speed things up. So in early October we emptied the schools on Thursday and Friday. We said we're going to boycott the schools.

Now, we got good support, good support. The ministers, the labor leaders, the political leaders and all, I mean we emptied the schools of black students: still no reaction from the school board. So then we decided we needed to ratchet it up. We're going to have Black Monday. So we had that Thursday, Friday. Black Monday we were asking all the students and teachers to boycott the schools, not to go to work. We also were asking that people generally in the black community not go to work, and you could imagine how people were very upset when their maids were not coming to work, [Laughs] when the people who cleaned their yards and the garbage workers were not coming. So we ratcheted it up. I think something like sixty thousand students stayed home.

I need to back up a little bit, because in 1966, ironically, having been denied entrance to Memphis State College, I was hired as the first black faculty member, so I was teaching at Memphis State College in 1969. I too did not go to my classes, and when I came back to class I explained--because I was teaching Spanish--I explained in Spanish what we were trying to do

with the Black Mondays, so they could not accuse me of being derelict with my professional duties. We also wore black armbands, a sign of mourning, etcetera. They still didn't respond.

We had a series of Black Mondays for a month. We had about four or five of them. Meantime, we were getting money, raising funds, telling people not to go to work, having meetings, having mass rallies, etc. I remember one particular meeting at Parkway Gardens Church. We had all of the activists and many of the teachers and I was speaking, Maxine was speaking. There was a tall, nice looking, slender man at the back. We were trying to get all the teachers to stay away from schools on the Black Mondays. We were trying to get the principals to stay away. This man was standing in the back. Maxine and I were [Laughs] really into preaching at that point, you know, "We gotta keep this thing going." He came to the front, he said, "My name is Willie Herenton, I am assistant principal, and it is disgraceful that these two short, wiry, feisty, black women are leading the movement and black men are not standing up." Wow. That electrified the audience. [Laughs.] So there were moments like that, and of course there was the moment when I was giving the Black Power sign [Laughs] in that iconic photograph. Yeah, we were determined.

Now, when there was still no attention paid to our demands we decided to go one step further and hit this community where it really hurt, in the pocketbook. We were getting ready to call a boycott of every institution in this city that was owned--Fedex, if it existed then, etcetera--and at that point pressure was brought and they said, "Well, we have to do something." They acceded to some of our demands. They named two, I forgot what they called them, not official board of education members but volunteers or something, and then they promised that at the next election a black would be elected to the board of education, or appointed to the board of education. So we got some of our demands; others we did not get. I was not living in Memphis

at the time of the busing situation that was the further push to desegregate the schools. But the Black Monday was generally successful.

The first black school superintendent would be Willie Herenton, who later became mayor of Memphis. When later asked what her greatest accomplishment was, Maxine Smith said she was most proud of having a black superintendent because "[i]t was bigger than a superintendent. It was recognition of black leadership, ability of blacks. That was symbolic of the recognition of the ability of blacks." Indeed black Memphians had gone a long way from trying to elect black candidates in 1959 to finally doing so in 1964 to having African Americans be in powerful positions like superintendent. Despite the assassination of Dr. King, the 1960s had also seen increased integration as black Memphians participated in their own civil rights struggle and also stayed connected with national civil rights developments as well.

Conclusion

The years after 1969 saw more African Americans won public office including Maxine Smith to the school board in 1971 as the first black woman elected to public office locally, and Vasco Smith to the county commission in 1974 as the first African American elected to an at-large district. The Harold Ford family became a dominant force in local politics with Harold Ford, Sr., elected as Memphis's first black Congressman in 1974 and as the first black Congressman from Tennessee. Yet, only two African Americans won positions citywide by 1991 because of the run-off law and ongoing racial tensions. It took the repeal of the run-off law that year for the city's first black mayor, Willie Herenton, to be elected. At least sixty-six Memphis lawmakers, judges, council members, and public employees faced corruption charges from 2000 to 2007, casting a negative light on black and white city officials. Herenton stepped down as mayor in 2009 and made an unsuccessful bid for Congress. A C Wharton was elected the first African American mayor of Shelby County in 2002, and he stayed in the office until 2009 when he successfully ran to be Memphis's mayor. In the 2000s, it was common for black men and women to hold the majority of the seats on the city council and school board. In contrast to previous years, when whites ensured that no African Americans became public officials, they now often had to choose which black candidate to elect.[135]

[135] Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice*, 193-5; Pohlmann and Kirby, *Racial Politics*; Walter Leavy, "New Black Mayors Take Charge; 'A New Beginning' in Memphis, a Big Victory in Cincinnati," *Ebony* 47, no. 5 (Mar. 1992): 106-10; Jacinthia Jones, "Herenton Stays Strong in Black Precincts--Chumney, Morris Split Vote in Majority-White Areas," *CA*, 11 Oct. 2007, p. A1; Tom Charlier, "Memphis Mayor Willie W. Herenton Seized a Record Fifth Term Thursday, but He Won It with His Lowest Support Level Ever," *CA*, 5 Oct. 2007, p. A1; Jacinthia Jones, "Three-way Race Provides Plurality for Incumbent," *CA*, 5 Oct. 2007, p. A1; Blake Fontenay, "Coming Apart at The Polls--Election Results Seen as Crucial--Whoever Wins the Hotly Contested City Races, There Will Be Healing To Do," *CA*, 30 Sept. 2007, p. V1; "A Crossroads for Mayor Herenton," *CA*, 6 Oct. 2007, p. A10; Chris Peck, "Why a Candidate's Past Matters," *CA*, 30 Sept. 2007, p. V4.

Busing was implemented in 1973 to much outcry in an attempt to speed up the pace of school desegregation. Nevertheless, in 2010, Memphis public schools remained overwhelmingly black while county schools continued to be predominately white. African Americans made up a majority of the city population, and whites made up a majority of the county population. African Americans both entered white-collar professions and graduated from high school and college in increasing numbers and lived in poverty and were affected by crime in numbers disproportionate to their population. In 2006, the city was the metropolitan area with the highest violent crime rate in the United States. In 2011, city school board members Tomeka Hart and Martavious Jones, part of a new generation of black political activists in Memphis, spearheaded the initiative to merge the city and county school systems in order to better educational opportunities for black schoolchildren. The merger, the largest consolidation of school districts in U.S. history, took place in 2013. The election of Barack Obama as the first black president was a milestone for civil rights activists in Memphis and elsewhere. In 2008, the majority of Memphis and Shelby County voters threw their support behind Obama.[136]

In this conclusion, the oral history subjects, most interviewed in the early 2000s, reflect on the changes that they have seen in their lifetime. In accordance with the "long civil rights movement," the activism of many civil rights figures remained ongoing. Despite her retirement from the school board and NAACP in 1995, Maxine Smith remained active including with voter registration drives. Jennie Betts continued to recruit African Americans and whites to be NAACP

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[136] Pohlmann and Kirby, *Racial Politics*, 179-83, 198, 200; Thomas Jordan, "Voting along Racial Lines a Habit That's Hard to Break," *CA*, 30 Jun. 2002, p. A1; Sam Dillon, "Merger of Memphis and County School Districts Revives Race and Class Challenges," *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/06/education/merger-of-memphis-and-county-school-districts-revives-challenges.html?pagewanted=all [accessed 16 May 2012]; Zack McMillan, "Official Tally Is in: Obama Took 63.4 Percent of Shelby County Vote," *CA*, 17 Nov. 2008, www.commercialappeal.com [accessed 12 Dec. 2008]; Jimmie Covington, "Census Snapshot--Poverty High Despite Gains," *CA*, 29 Jan. 2004, p. B2; U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary Files 3, Memphis, www.census.gov [accessed 23 Oct. 2004]; Peck, "Why a Candidate's Past Matters."

members. Johnnie Mae Peters remained involved in her community, assisting people in need of community resources. Others saw advances of the movement firsthand: H. T. Lockard and Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., both rose from being lawyers to being judges, reflecting the gains in black political positions nationwide.

In these excerpts, the narrators assess the current gains and look back at the past. As mentioned, Maxine Smith points to Willie Herenton's being named superintendent of Memphis City Schools in 1979 as her greatest accomplishment.

Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr.: So in that election in 1959, Russell Sugarmon, the black man, was not elected, but for the first time he polled a very substantial vote. I said that there were about thirty to forty percent blacks in Memphis. Now, it's sixty percent black and growing, and the balance is of white and some Asians and Hispanics. You can see how the city has been transformed since 1962, going from thirty-three percent blacks to over sixty percent today. So that has been the start of it, 1959. Then since that time, blacks have registered to vote in ever-increasing numbers. We still had three white Congressman up until I think it was about 1975 when Harold Ford Sr., a black man, was elected from Memphis, the first black Congressman. Since that time, we've always had a black Congressman who's represented the predominant district in Memphis because we're carved up into three districts now. The other two only partially comprise those districts.

Maxine Smith: But another thing people often ask is what is your greatest accomplishment in the civil rights struggle? I would quickly say at some point and I still would say it: Willie Herenton. It has nothing to do with Willie Herenton who is now mayor but becoming superintendent, a black man being recognized as *head* of *something*. Well, I say me, it's all those who came out on Black Mondays, you know, I coordinated it. But it couldn't be me,

Maxine is insignificant. It's been an interesting journey and all this comes back to in a great sense, voter registration.

Hunter Lane: I know the Shelby County Democratic Club no longer exists. It was an interim, you know, it was born out of necessity, but now there's no need for it. There's still the rednecks, a lot of them, and they'll never vote for a black candidate, but there are a lot of people now that examine the candidates regardless of their race. Many times here it's which black are we going to elect, this one or this one. And you know people are, particularly people who have to deal with government, they're pragmatic about things like that. We want to get on the winning team [Laughter] so if we ever need anything, you know. So I think that we've turned the corner. I can't imagine any way there's going to be a turning back the pages. In the first place you got a majority black population now.

I know there's a lot of latent racism around, even among people that are enlightened people. It's pretty ingrained. But, that's the down side. The upside is it's not nearly as bad as it was when Sugarmon was running for office. There they voted against Sugarmon because he was black. As I said earlier, now it's a question of choosing between two black candidates. People accommodate to things. They may not like it. You know, it's a matter of the heart too. You can listen to all the sermons. It's a personal thing sooner or later. Of course your personal views have to be shaped by things that happen and people who make speeches about it, and advocate it, but it all comes down to conviction.

There's certainly more affluent blacks now than there were in the '60s. I mean there's some pretty wealthy, in the entertainment field and a lot of other fields for that matter. There are many, many more black lawyers. I mean there are tons, and mostly pretty competent, from what I've seen, pretty competent. Of course the main change is black members of elected bodies. I

mean you look at the elective and appointive offices they're practically all black now, which white people bitch about that, but the fact of the matter is [Laughter] their time has come, as far as I'm concerned. There've been some crooks, but not many, not any more than there were in white government. They've had one councilman who was on the take. That was his only occasion. They taped the pitch, the hit, and he went to jail for about a year. Now he's back on the city council and actually he's one of the most effective councilmen. He's plenty smart. He didn't handle extortion very well, but he's generally a pretty smart guy. But blacks are the head of the Memphis, Light Gas and Water, the executive director of the housing authority, you name it, every major appointive office. The sole difference is the airport authority. They've got a white chairman and I think a majority of white members, but that's about the lone authority that hasn't gotten predominantly black.

Busing and White Flight

Without a doubt, busing was a very contentious issue in the years after 1969. In the below excerpts, the narrators share their views of busing, which was implemented in 1973.

Jennie Betts: At that time I felt busing was the only thing we could do because the courts had said to the powers to be to desegregate the schools and they wouldn't do it, so Judge McRae had no other choice but to do what he did--to order busing. Had they done what they asked them to do, we would never had busing. I was bused all the time to school because I was raised in the rural area. I was bused then to school, and they're still being bused, even where I came from. I was used to busing so it wasn't a problem for me. I think the people that was reared in the city had more problem with busing than I had with it, because they had been used to walking to school. Busing was a hot issue. That was one of the hottest issues.

Fred L. Davis: I was on the city council when busing started in Memphis. The mayor at the time decided that that was the law, and he backed it. There was protesting in the white community. The busing thing caused problems for a lot of people, but there was not the kind of violence that took place in Memphis that took place in other cities.

Lewis Donelson: Busing had another tremendously evil influence in my opinion. It greatly decreased parental support for the schools. Because when you lived down on Vance Avenue and your child is going to a school out in Raleigh, say, you can't get out there. You have little interest in the school. The whole thing so much accelerated the lack of interest of the parents in the school, and their building one-on-one relationships with the teacher, and follow up what the student was doing and all. It really had a very pernicious effect. The law of unintended results is very strong. The Supreme Court never thought that this was going to destroy the neighborhood school, but it did in the South. That was a huge setback.

Hunter Lane: I did run again in 1971 for the school board, and I was elected to the school board, to my everlasting regret. [Laughter.] Because '73 was the year that busing went into effect, and we really, boy, I mean, it was hell on wheels, as one of our people called it. It was really terrible. A lot of strain, because, you know, we had a lot of differing attitudes about it. And it was in the federal court. Busing was almost universally unpopular. A lot of black people didn't like it because before busing they could send their kids to one school and the older ones could escort the younger ones and look after them in the afternoon after school, and after busing everything got split up. They'd have three kids in one school and two in another. It interrupted their system. But on the other hand, we had to have busing in Memphis because we didn't have any racially mixed neighborhoods, one or two, maybe, but busing was the only solution, as bad as it was from a practical standpoint.

I wasn't particularly for it, but we agreed on a plan which the court approved and then we had to implement the plan. There were a lot of pretty mean people who were against busing. The mayor for example, the guy that succeeded Henry Loeb, cut off the school board's gasoline for the buses. We got the gasoline from the city. Of course he was immediately hauled into court and told he better not do that. That was Wyeth Chandler. He was a boyhood friend of mine, and still a friend, but he was very conservative and racially, well, bigoted wouldn't be too strong a word [Laughter] for Chandler. He received no black support to speak of when he ran for mayor, so he didn't have any allegiance and he was a very practical, hardnosed politician. He catered to the anti-busing people. Everybody did. I mean [Laughter] people running for dogcatcher would always work the anti-busing thing in there.

There are several reasons why busing was so unpopular. One is that it took white kids out of their nice East Memphis schools and transported them to the ghetto schools. That was number one, I'd say. Number two was that, well it was just a total change in the educational system. There was some merit to that. I don't think of myself as a liberal, maybe on the liberal end of moderate, I guess, but I was for busing because it was an ordained thing by the federal court, but we all could see the problems involved. It was very expensive. That was a factor. And, let's see. What were some of the other problems with busing? Well it just generally just upset the apple cart. But I will say that busing was the only way we could have a desegregated school system in Memphis. By the way the new school board was elected from districts, so we did have black representation, including the executive director of the NAACP, Maxine Smith. [Laughter.] Of course the NAACP was suing the school board. She had a clear conflict of interest, but she just brushed that off. It didn't bother her. [Laughter.] Nobody ever called her on it.

So the busing order, the "Z Plan," they called it, because it was to be the last plan that was going to go into effect. That went on virtually for the whole time I was on the school board, four years. We spent very little time dealing with curriculum and teacher improvement and all the things that the school board's empowered to do. Well, I had a cross burned in my yard--a little cross, but [Laughter] I got the message--by these anti-bus people. They would do things like get an old bus and burn it, and they buried a bus one time. They were, you know, Ku Klux Klan-type folks. They weren't all thugs either, by any means. There were a lot of so-called decent people who were just violently against it. A lot of it was racial hatred or racial dislike, so that was certainly a factor. They truly believed that black children did not have the intellect as compared to white children, that sort of thing, and that they were dirty and that they were unruly.

I think the first year when busing went into effect about fifty thousand white students left the system out of I think a total of a hundred and forty thousand students, black and white. All these segregation academies cropped up, churches mostly. Even the Hebrew Academy [Laughter] expanded big time in order to accommodate people who were bailing out of the system, so to that extent busing didn't work. It wasn't really a mixture. The public schools now, I don't know what the percentage is. Over eighty percent are black students. Most of the segregation academies fell by the wayside after a while. Cost was a factor. A lot of people moved out of the county. That was another thing. They moved to Fayette County, Tennessee, right to the east, and DeSoto County, Mississippi.

Busing was the original impetus for white flight. Then it just continued. People got down there and found taxes were lower. All their contemporaries, their peers, were down there and they had the power, just like a little Memphis in the '50s. So it just kept building. Now

DeSoto County is one of the fastest-growing counties. Of course Tunica County's just transformed since they got the gambling.

Charlie Peete: School busing to me was a very expensive way to try and equalize the schools, very expensive. Overall I think it has not helped at all. I think any time you try to force a group of people to do something they don't want to do it's going to hurt. Forced school busing did not help education. A lot of these high minded liberals thought it would but it never did. It was just a very painful and a very expensive way to try and equalize the races.

The Rise of Black Public Officials

As mentioned, Maxine Smith and Vasco Smith were both elected to public office in the 1970s. Below they talk about their campaigns and times in office.

Maxine Smith: I had no intentions of running. We led the boycotts and everything. See, we boycotted the schools. But I never had *any* idea that I would run for school board. Finally, somebody started saying, "Maxine, we got to put our best foot forward." Somebody leaked it to the paper that I was running. I was to have my kick off that night. I had my announcement. The news was on the radio. I had a heart attack that day, the day I was to announce to have my campaign open. I'm lying in the hospital. I had formally announced. The love I felt. I'll never forget people. I really have a love affair with humanity. People think I'm mean and evil and when I have to be, I can be. Of course, the school board didn't like me because I'm a member of the board. They thought that I was a *spy*. The executive secretary of the NAACP being on the school board, you know, tried to find reasons to have me legally taken off, but they couldn't.

Vasco Smith: Maxine had a heart attack on the day that she announced for the school board. See, Maxine was taken to the hospital and she was given strict orders to stay in bed.

People came together and organized. They rented a campaign headquarters up here on Airways Boulevard next to the Handy Theater. They staffed it. They had furniture in it. They got together the literature, the handbills, everything else. Maxine made one appearance. I have the picture somewhere here. They had gotten a truck, a large long truck, parked it on a vacant lot and they used the truck bed for a platform for the speakers. They decorated it. She was so happy to get out of the house. There was just a crowd that you could never imagine. I have never seen a campaign run so smoothly. They had full-time staff there doing all the things that you do in a campaign. Basically the young people did primarily the same thing that adults did but usually in the company of another adult or other adults. But you could sometimes find that they would make up a little singing group to attract people. An Orange Mound group of kids in Maxine's campaign did this on their own. They wrote a song about Maxine. She probably remembers that. They made dresses so they looked alike. Wherever they could get a group of people together they performed for them like at rallies. It was very creative and unique. Maxine made one appearance during her *entire* campaign, one public appearance. Volunteers opened her headquarters, got her literature, put up her signs, made the radio announcements, did everything. And yet, she kicked the hell out of her opposition.

In response to the question if she felt unaccepted on the school board, Maxine Smith exclaimed, "I've never let anybody not accept me. They couldn't mistreat me because we were equals. I just would get frustrated because I couldn't get a majority vote for most of the things I wanted. Memphis responds to crisis rather than being creative." She did remember opposition, however, from one member of the school board.

Maxine Smith: God, he hated black folks, and we sat next to each other on the school board. Seats are alphabetical by name. But he was too mean like I'd say, "Bring me a cup of

coffee." He wouldn't even bring me a cup of coffee. He was president of the John Birch Society. He was a raging segregationist on the school board. I was so glad he got beat by a black guy. [Laughter.]

School board member Hunter Lane responds to the question of whether working relationships were good between the black and white members of the school board.

Hunter Lane: Well, in some cases more than others. The conservatives on the school board you could say absolutely not. They were enemies really. Frances Coe and I, and I forget who the third sort of moderate was, yeah, it was a marriage of convenience, you know. Not only did we get along with them because we thought their cause was a lot fairer than the conservatives thought it was, but, you know, the liberals were intelligent people. They were more open-minded than the conservatives were.

Vasco Smith remembers his campaign for county commission and his influential black-white coalition. He remembered that he did not feel any prejudice from white members of the county commission. He also reflected, "It's amazing how many small towns in the South that are not majority black that have black mayors." Yet, he said that he thought more opportunities were available for whites in nonpolitical positions. For instance, an African American with sterling credentials was more likely to get a job in politics than business than a white person with the same qualifications.

Vasco Smith: When I was elected to the county commission, this was the first time that a commissioner was elected from a truly at large position--that's the entire county. My headquarters, white and black, number one. Number two, people of all classes in the county including, I think they called themselves, the Mobilizers. This is one of the black power groups. Long hair. Now they did their work differently however from the others. Anyway, I raised more

money than I thought I ever would. But most of the work was done voluntarily. The biggest amount of money went into buying campaign materials. The Mobilizers were these bad-looking black power dudes with their hair all the up way up yonder and that sort of stuff. The Mobilizers didn't come on work until the other group, whoever it might be, volunteers again, manned my campaign headquarters and did all the work. But these guys came to work about nine or nine-thirty at night when everybody else had gone. They got themselves a pick-up truck that they used every night. Around here we used to use posters on the telephone poles and light poles. Everywhere you go, you see them. Well, these guys would take a truck of my signs and they'd let a tall guy stand on the bed of the truck. The first thing he did was take down everybody else's sign. Then the second thing they did was reach up and put mine up so high that nobody else could get to it. [Laughter.] I had visitors coming to Memphis. They'd say, "What's all these pictures of yours around town?" This is two and three years after my campaign was over. [Laughter.]

As gruff as I can be at times, I created something down there that we had never had in the county government: I created a very influential black and white coalition. Now I think there were eleven people on the county commission. I'm not sure. Well, there were I think at any given time for most of the period I was there, the numbers grew quickly to maybe at least four blacks. With four votes black, three votes white, you got a good coalition there. With that coalition, I was able to get a sixty-three million dollar hospital built over the opposition of most white people in the city of Memphis because they looked on it, they couldn't understand when I said that we can make this the finest hospital of its kind in the United States. They just didn't believe it. They didn't intend to vote for it, the majority didn't. The majority whites didn't want to see it. But I convinced [Mark White]. [Mark] helped me convince [John Doe]. And we

ended up with the right number of votes. [Mark] was chairman and [Mark] cast the deciding vote and when he did, boy, people couldn't believe it. His daughter, his twin daughters had their babies born at the MED.[137]

It's the formerly old city hospital, but it has the only accredited trauma center within five hundred miles or so. This was my slogan: if you're in an accident and you're seriously hurt, just find enough breath to lean up there and touch the driver on his shoulder and say [whispers], "Take me to the MED." I had people saying that around town. Not only trauma center, we got a newborn center. Actress Cybill Shepherd came from California to have her baby at the MED because it is only facility of its kind in this entire area, in many states, where if a woman is likely to have trouble with this birth she can be taken care of ahead of time. Our newborn center is one of best in country. We have a burn center. Now if you get badly burned, you don't have to go to Houston, Texas, which is the closest burn center there is to Memphis. I thought that that was probably the most outstanding thing that I was able to get done.

In 1994, I decided before the qualifying date was about to come up that I did not want to run again for the county commission. I had just decided that I didn't want to be down there. I just decided the best thing to do was decline to run again. Nice editorials were printed and pictures and all, that sort of stuff. The only reason I ever gave was a white woman who was very good looking, a relatively young looking woman who was a reporter--. Everybody wanted to know why is it I wouldn't run again. Finally, she saw that I wasn't going to say anything about that. I just quit. I didn't have many reasons. She leaned over and whispered in my ear and said, "It's time." And that's the excuse I gave. It's time. People can't argue with you about that. But I have no regrets about any of those things.

[137] Mr. Smith did not want the real names of politicians used so I used pseudonyms.

Thomas E. "Pete" Sisson was chairman of the county commission in the 1970s and he, in contrast to before when black commissioners sat on one side and the white commissioners on the other, mixed it up so blacks and whites were intermixed.

Pete Sisson: The blacks would all sit in one place and the whites in another and then the cameras would come up and they'd focus on that. So when I was chairman I decided we're going to one, two, and have in between. It worked pretty good. Now the newspapers made fun of me. But I wanted the commission to intermingle. I didn't want this racial thing back and forth. If you could intermingle then you hear everybody's views.

Lillie Wheeler, who worked to support the restoration of voting rights for felons, also supported black public officials in campaigns. She supported Harold Ford, Jr., who was a member of Congress from Memphis from 1997 to 2007.

Lillie Wheeler: Almost anything Maxine Smith said we just kind of went for it because we know she was going to go in and do a lot of work into her background and research and stuff. Then she could really speak for us. Mayor Herenton when he became the first black mayor in 1991, I was very heavily involved with that campaign and I still worked for Harold Ford, Sr., when he became the first congressman and every year after that that he ran and Harold Ford, Jr. I worked in his campaign. But at this time I had gotten older and wasn't getting around as much. But I would still always do my voter registration and stuff like that and take people to the poll. There were some whites that I really had faith in and worked hard for too.

Wheeler reflects on whether having blacks in public office has been positive toward improving race relations as do the following narrators.

Lillie Wheeler: Somewhat. But there's still a lot of people resentful. We have a black mayor, we have a black police director, and we have a black county mayor now. A lot of the

leadership is black now and I still think they're being resented by whites and even some of us. Not because of race but just because we have some of that resentment that you have to do this for *me* and not the community. That can get in the way of progress sometimes. But I think a lot of people now would tell you Mayor Herenton has not done *anything* and that's the word they use, not for blacks, just whites. But those who have worked for him and those that know the city well know that a lot of streets were not paved before he was mayor. A lot of things weren't done before he got to be mayor. So far the city has always ended in the black, not bankrupt like the county. He's the mayor, and when he ran, he didn't say he was running for black folks. He said, "I'm running for all of the people in Memphis. I want to be mayor for everybody." That's what he has done. Some don't think he's done enough and some think he hasn't done anything. I think some of it is jealousy and some of it is resentment because they think he has power and they don't. I butt heads with him sometimes but not about that. He's a hard worker. I didn't want him to run this time but not because he wasn't doing a good job. It was a lot of hard work and you get kicked in the behind for trying to do good. I said you just have had enough and I have prayed too much. I've got too many scars on me. He said but it's going to be all right.

Lewis Donelson: I think it's improved race relations a great deal. They're far from perfect still but they've been improved on a great deal. I think it's improved, you might say, race relations to an extent that it's pretty much now no one--really very few people, very few people--openly talk racist in the white community, and that's been a help. It has also drawn out more black people to be involved in the political process, which may be a mixed blessing but it should be good. On the other hand the disturbing thing has been that although we've elected two pretty good mayors some of our other black elected officials have been pretty bad, not only in the fact that they're probably far more racist than they ought to be, but more importantly some of them

are just not really able to make an intelligent decision on a complex issue. That's a racist statement--we got some whites like that too. Of course it's hard to get people to run. It's the sorriest job, a thankless job. I was on the council during the sanitation strike and I can tell you it was really bad. But the quality of our white Republican officials has gone down. I always think about the fact that A.W. Willis, a bright man, able man, successful businessman--but he got defeated for the state legislature by a black that didn't know his way to the bathroom. After two terms he lost to a black that was just totally worthless. I say that the problem with the community in Memphis right now is that the blacks are in the majority and they act like they're the minority, and the whites are in the minority and they act like they're in the majority. The truth of it is that we need to know as white people that we are in the minority and how to deal with that. But the blacks also need to know that now that they're the majority they have to be more responsible. When you're in the minority and you're getting whipped all the time it doesn't really matter what you do because you don't have any power. When you have power you've got responsibility. That's been disturbing to me. The quality of our elected officials, both black and white, anyone will tell you that the original Memphis city council was so superior to the one we have today and the ones we've had in recent years that there's no comparison between them, in the quality of the people, both black and white, and it's also true the quality of our legislators has gone down.

But I would say in sum total it's a good thing--not so much a good thing; it was an absolutely necessary thing. Really we have had some adverse results as well, and we have got to, you might say, grow up and get more mature about it all, and that's still to come. Part of the problem is of course that so many of the young people are so totally ill-informed. Thomas Jefferson would be horrified at the people we let vote today. [Laughter.] But I'll say it has to be

for the best. It had to come. It had to be done, no matter how hard it was and no matter what the adverse affects were, it had to be done. Well the real benefits are we got a real black middle class in Memphis, a real middle class, lots of them. Unfortunately most of them are out in East Memphis or out in Germantown, the ones that have moved up the scale. But that's a major, major, major impact on the community and it's an important element in the community. If they would take a little more leadership--they've sort of, I would say, turned it over to the black politicians, and most of them don't mind indulging in a little, you know, demagoguery. The same thing is true in the Republican Party. You can't get by with demagoguery as a white Democrat but you can get by with demagoguery as a white Republican, and you can sure get by with demagoguery as a black Democrat. Well that's my view. It's sad but necessary, and I hope we can move on. A C Wharton is a very able man and he got elected at a time when we still had a majority electorate that was white, a real interesting fact.

Samuel B. Hollis: I think it's getting to be more and more accepted. I hear people knocking Willie Herenton now and then because he's black, and I've got one lifelong friend that just won't ever change. I mean, a nigger's a nigger. I mean I don't usually use that word, but that's just the way they think and they're not ever going to change. As far as my friend is concerned, he grew up in the lumber business and all the blacks he knew were these sawmill workers that were ignorant and would get drunk on payday and they'd come borrow money the next day, and that's his image of a black person. We're getting more and more middle-class blacks in this community who have responsible positions in companies, and lawyers and doctors, so I think that's moving in the right direction. A few friends, particularly some that are originally from Mississippi that came out of the Mississippi culture and have moved to

Memphis, have experienced a change of consciousness as a result of seeing blacks in political office and holding positions of leadership.

Hunter Lane: You asked me whether the presence of blacks in public office helps. Yeah, I'd say. For me familiarity doesn't always breed contempt; familiarity helps. Fortunately the majority of the black elected people have done a pretty good job. There's been precious little scandal, that sort of thing. I don't think there's any more negative feeling about black councilmen as there are with whites. When you're in public office you expect a lot more negative comments than you do positive, because it's only the controversial things that really get anybody's attention. All the good work just kind of sails through. So, yeah, I'd say that their presence has definitely been a plus, and it's helped the civil rights movement. Before blacks had a chance to be elected they didn't have any voice, I mean direct voice.

William N. Morris, Jr.: Well I think we have some awfully qualified, competent black officials. The expectations for the black officials I think has been greater than those expectations of white officials, more often than not. The same thing has happened in Africa. You know apartheid comes along and they get a black leader. And Mandela comes along and everybody there in Africa thought now we're going to have schools for everybody, houses for everybody, and all of that. I think that's a parallel to what we have here, that blacks expected black leadership to all of a sudden convert the wealth of the community and a chicken in every pot for the black community, you know, jobs for everybody. While a lot of that has happened, it is not limitless in terms of ability. There's not a pot that grows the money. The money has to be created and there's just so much money.

Charlie Peete: Your judges, and the city council is now, the last few years, has been majority black. Now the county commission is still majority white, but that could change. But

the blacks have taken over the mayor's job. Willie Herenton has been mayor almost fourteen years. I don't think Memphis will ever have a white mayor. But the blacks have definitely taken over as far as mayor, county mayor, city council, and eventually they'll take over the county commission, and you'll see a lot of whites move out, are moving out now, to Desoto County, Mississippi, Tipton County, Fayette County. They're moving out for a variety of reasons but also the tax in Memphis is driving a lot of them out. I think that the whites have accepted the increase in black public officials, and if they don't want to accept it then they move. I think the whites that are here right now in Shelby County are more or less accepting it, and they go along with it, but some of the more militant whites have moved.

Improving Race Relations Today

When asked what should be done about the vexing question of how to improve race relations today, the narrators had a variety of responses.

Lillie Wheeler: It's hard to say because now this generation seems to think that older people don't know anything, and we let people run over us and that we can't tell them anything. Everybody seems to be more into self than community. The old days weren't good, but there were a lot of good things about the way we acted during the old days that young people could really profit from. So I think that would be good if they would use their education to kind of turn things a different way instead of thinking that everything has to be "I said this" and "me, myself, and I because I want this" and rather think of what's good for everybody.

William N. Morris, Jr.: We don't have but an hour in terms of this interview, but it is obvious to me that somewhere along the line we have to do a better job of convincing the community of the adequate investment in our school system to educate our kids in a way that's productive. When I say that I understand full well that there's so many, such a high percentage,

of kids that come to school from a home environment of broken homes where there is a single parent situation, and because of the lack of income, job availability, training of the parent, there is not a high level of expectation for children. There are many, and there are thousands, of kids in public schools that are more obedient to their gang buddies than they are trying to deal with a home situation where there is no home, basically. They just have a place to hang out. That influence is so great that it translates into community crime, community disorder, far beyond the scope of law enforcement to deal with it. Add drugs to that, add prostitution to that, and I'm talking about teenage prostitution at twelve and thirteen years of age. The promiscuity, the morality level has diminished dramatically since the '60s. We thought things were bad in the '60s, but it had to do with equality, but now it is a license now. So many people want license or freedom to do whatever, even in-your-face type attitude. How many of our shopping centers have been destroyed because of the abuse of those shopping centers by kids, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years old, just moving up and down the hallways? It changes the dynamics in these shopping centers, and I know two major centers that were built in the last two decades, major investments, that have both gone out of business. There are some sections of our community where not long ago, ten years ago, that were thriving, exciting, new-growth areas in southeast Shelby County and now all of a sudden they're calling them "the hood."

We have theaters you're afraid to let your kids go to because they're going to get accosted, and it's many times not safe for girls to go because they're mistreated. The guys hang around, and the language that they use, and the physical abuse, the intimidation that takes place; we didn't have all of that, even though we had problems forty, fifty years ago, almost fifty years ago when you're talking about late '50s and early '60s. So with all the civil rights freedom that we've had, and civil rights activist Ben Hooks is a very good friend of mine, and Ben and I've

talked many, many times and we kind of grew up politically together over the years, he and his wonderful wife. I suspect that Ben Hooks would say the same thing that I'm saying, is that we've unleashed a whole lot of anger, as far as the black community, and a lot of the translation of that is that there's an expectation of something for nothing. And we created the Great Society in the Johnson administration where we started sending down help, and help ultimately became a crutch for so many. In other words, the training to get jobs that would replace the assistance was never put into place. Even though many African Americans are working today and doing extremely well, there's an attitude, I think, among many in our public school system today that there's not much to look forward to, even though everybody wants to ultimately go to college and get good jobs. But for the masses, they feel hopeless. The average age of our college student at our university today is twenty-seven. So what's happened, what happens to all those kids that are nineteen or twenty coming out of high school, at eighteen, nineteen years of age, what happens from then and twenty-seven?

There's too many that are not making it, and the number of kids who start high school, the percentage who finish is getting lower and lower and lower and lower, and the truancy situation. Now, you asked me the question: what would you do about it? If I had an answer to that it would be worth a lot of money, because a lot of wonderful, social scientists and what have you have tried to figure out how to deal with the trend that's taking place, and I don't know the answer to that. I mean we have local governments that are sitting here now today in a situation where it costs more and more money to provide the services that are demanded by a constituency who do not produce revenue to get those services.

I mean eighty-five to ninety percent of the kids who go to school have a free breakfast when they get there. Who pays for that? We have daycare for thousands and thousands of kids

free. No, paid for by somebody else but available to low-income people. We have a housing situation, lack of housing, and housing is provided, low-income loans, and so on. We even have people who expect to have their utilities, the power company gives them free electricity, but who's going to pay for that? Other people do. We have people, free education, but somebody has to pay for it. We're not putting enough people back into the economic mainstream to produce adequate revenue to pay for the services that are being provided.

So at some time in point you add the fact that where in Washington they're spending five hundred billion dollars, maybe a trillion dollars, dealing with problems in other parts of the world. Then you filter on down, you see what's happening to housing, and education, and health, without controlling the healthcare costs, and we're providing healthcare for all the people in Shelby County who cannot provide for themselves, even small businesses with Medicare, and then our public hospitals, and somebody has to produce the revenue to pay for that. You just can't issue more money and pull leaves off the trees and pay for it. And our tax rate continues to go up, and the people who are on a fixed income who have worked all their lives to have what they have, now they have a taxing environment that is negative to them because people who are on fixed incomes are expected to pay for those kids in school, and their free lunches, and all that goes with all of that. The system becomes very unfair after awhile.

So there are not any quick fixes at all. Then we have added to that, the newest dimension, is illegal immigration of adding tens of thousands and millions of illegal immigrants, and legal immigrants as well, to the mix of the employment pool to a point of where a much larger segment of our lower-income African-American community are finding themselves more difficult to get a work situation that pays them enough to get off welfare.

If you look in our community today where the building trade used to be dominated by African Americans, you know, whether it was pouring foundations or brick laying and all that, now it's the Hispanics. What happened to those people who were in the trades in the African-American community?

So are things better today than they were fifty years ago? I think our country in trying to do good failed to control in a way to support the changes adequately to make the civil rights thing a productive move. I mean just opening the door to equal rights without opportunity didn't make any sense to me.

While Bill Morris pointed to questions of morality, welfare, and taxes, Maxine Smith referenced comedian Bill Cosby's controversial speech to the NAACP in 2004 commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education *decision in which he blasted the black community for out-of-wedlock pregnancies, shooting, and lack of education, saying the community needed to pull itself up by its bootstraps.*[138] *Maxine Smith advocated what he said along with continuing to fight the system of racism and injustice.*

Maxine Smith: Bill Cosby told the truth. Somebody may have said it a little nicer. I happened to be sitting on the front row, right in front of Bill Cosby when he said all that. See, these are the blessings I've had. That was a part of *Brown*. *Brown* '54. That was the 50th anniversary. We just commemorated *Brown* because it ain't ready to be celebrated. The promises of *Brown* have not been met yet. I was there as chairman of the NAACP national education committee looking right at him. He was very blunt. He didn't pull any punches. I cannot sit on my tail as a black mama, whatever mama-ing I've done is probably over, and stay

[138] Bill Cosby, "Address at the NAACP on the 50th Anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education," delivered 17 May 2004, Constitution Hall, Washington D.C., American Rhetoric, http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/billcosbypoundcakespeech.htm, accessed 8 January 2016.

dependent on welfare. All those systems have impacts. Although we came out of evil and cruel system, are we going to stay there? Because that system ain't going to pick us up out of it. We got to pick up ourselves. My mama was poor. The year my daddy died, we wouldn't have had a turkey for Thanksgiving and might not have had one anyway if we hadn't won one with a nickel chance. She had to get out and go to work. Most black folks came up poor. Vasco's father and mother didn't have a sixth grade education between the two of them. That's the story of most black folk of my age anyway. We fought to make it better. We tried to give our kids everything. The level of leadership that should've come out of the '50s, '60s. They're out buying their homes in the suburbs. There's nothing wrong with that. We want them to do that. But we gave them too much. We didn't give them the equipment for war. We gave them things in too many instances. So we've got to keep fighting the system while it still smothers, but we got to fight ourselves. We've got to elevate ourselves. I feel very strongly about that. So we've got to depend on our own where-with-all and continue to fight the evils that make this situation like it is.

Dr. Miriam DeCosta-Willis and John L. Seigenthaler, both interviewed in 2013, pointed to the intersection of race and poverty as a continuing obstacle to racial justice. Indeed in 2010, 27.4 percent of African Americans were poor, compared to 9.9 percent of non-Hispanic whites.[139] *Seigenthaler's remarks foreshadowed the violent protests concerning the shooting of black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014.*

Miriam DeCosta-Willis: We have not yet addressed the problem of poverty in Memphis, and the gap between the very wealthy and the very poor is widening and I wonder

[139] National Poverty Center, "Poverty in the United States: Frequently Asked Questions," University of Michigan, http://npc.umich.edu/poverty/, accessed 8 January 2016.

when, when we will address that. When I look at education and the recent merger of the city and the county and see the specter of the suburban communities creating separate school boards and systems, it angers me. [Sighs.] You know, sometimes I wonder, why did we sacrifice so damned much for a community that does not understand or appreciate that African Americans have created the culture that this city stands on? I mean, what do people come here for? For our culture, for our black music, for our black art, for our black writing, for our literature, all of that, the way we talk, the way we dress, our mannerisms, our cuisine. There's Paula Deen making a fortune off of what black cooks did in her restaurant, and it infuriates me. When are we going to be given credit for what we have done?

Yeah, okay, we elected a black president and I guess I registered two hundred people for that, and we thought, I guess I hoped, it was something, and I see the way he's treated with such disrespect, and it infuriates me. How long does it take? How long does it take for Americans to realize the contributions that African Americans have made to this country? Well, as long as I can live, as long as I have breath, as long as I have brains, I will keep telling the story. Hope? Yeah, I have hope. I'm optimistic. But, you know, I see the Neo-Nazis. I see the fascists. I see the homophobics. I see the sexists, the misogynists. How long? How long? That is my word, how long?

John L. Seigenthaler: You know racial injustice has been with us since those first boats landed on the East Coast with Africans kidnapped and brought to this country against their will, put into first indentured servitude and then slavery. You're part of a country that fights a civil war to put it behind you, and a brief period of reconstruction and you're right back into segregation that, while it's not slavery, in a very real sense people are enslaved by the economics of it. Then you go through the civil rights movement and Lyndon Johnson, who started out

believing in segregation, in 1964 and 1965 gives us two bills that for the first time since Reconstruction give us hope, and then Barack Obama, fifty years later, is elected and sort of is the consummate example of what that hope can mean.[140] If a black person can be elected president it would fulfill the promise of hope. Still it hasn't happened and we're still nervous whenever we talk about it, and you can get into family discussions and you find in some of your closest relatives there are still fragments of those racist attitudes that persist, and then you try to look at your own life and say: I know it was there. Is there some piece of it still there that I'm not aware of? Is there some way I still look at "them" differently than I look at "us," and you know there probably is.

Now it's not the only prejudice in the world. It's not the only thing that drags us down. I mean attitudes about sex and homosexuality, attitudes about immigrants, foreign-born people ripping off the system. I mean I can tick off, if asked, ten areas where invidious discrimination still exists, at least in the minds of a substantial segment of the population. But this one is the one. That's the curse. That's the curse that challenges the hope. The curse of race, we invited it the day that first boat load of kidnapped Africans landed on the East Coast and were cast into servitude and then into slavery. Yeah, we've come a long way and we've put an awful lot behind us, but it's still there. It's still there. It's more difficult to find now that Barack Obama is President of the United States and he and Michelle and their two girls sleep at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue every night. I remember exactly fifty years before he was elected Robert Kennedy said in an international interview, "Fifty years from now there will be a black president." He couldn't have known it but he said it. That's a verbatim quote. He said it. But he would not have wanted

[140] He refers to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which eliminated racial discrimination in employment and in public accommodations, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which eliminated voting restrictions so most eligible African Americans in the South could register to vote.

any of us to believe that racism was erased by that. The potential for a race riot any place in America where poverty intersects with color is there. The possibility of poverty is still there.

I remember–and this is what pollutes the river of hope. This is what pollutes the river of hope in my mind. During the civil rights movement, and certainly during Robert Kennedy's campaign in 1968, political leaders, and in that campaign he made a poignant point of saying unless we solve the intersection of poverty and race, there can't be hope. He said it, it was said by Lyndon Johnson, eloquently, in 1964 when the law was passed, political leaders said it, and a hurricane strikes New Orleans forty-something years after they've warned us, a roof of a building is lifted off, and you look in with a bird's eye view and suddenly you see the people there in that building. The lifting of that roof, and this is not original with me, it's like picking a scab off a running sore. There it is, right there in that room, in that auditorium, in those beds, that intersection of race and poverty is still there, so we won't solve the problem of race as long as there is that economic disability and that economic disadvantage that drags a segment of the population down makes it more difficult for them to get an education. As long as we have people who are forced, most often because of race, to live in public housing projects where crime festers and where injustice festers, where black on black violence festers. I think that there is a river of hope out there but it is polluted by the intersection of poverty and race and it won't be a river of real hope until you can eliminate poverty and separate it from the fact that too many people of color are caught in that trap.

There are going to be violent incidents and some of them are going to involve whites and blacks, and we're not above another race riot, or a series of race riots, or a wave of race riots somewhere. The seeds are planted and they're deep and we think they're gone but they're not gone. To focus on individual cases is to miss the larger question of that intersection of poverty

and race that still makes it difficult for them to get along and for those of us who are white to get over it. It takes more than hope to end that intersection. You just can't say, "I have a dream," to make the dream work. There has to be something done to say, in every one of these housing projects, there's going to be a major effort to remove the element of race that puts black people there more often than it puts people of other colors, and that's the reality.

I think Robert Kennedy, when he thought about changing Bedford-Stuyvesant, which was at that time the worst hellhole of poverty in this country, when he went in the Mississippi Delta and saw children with distended bellies, he understood that it was not just that they were black; it was that they were poor black. Sure, there are white people who are poor too, and a lot of this came up, but it was so easy to get beyond it. It was so simple to get beyond it because I was not deprived of an education, or some poor white person was not deprived of an education, was not deprived of a job, it was not said when he or she went in the military, "There are certain jobs you can't do because we don't think you're qualified." I went in the military before President Truman desegregated the military and I was a control tower operator, sitting up on top of a hangar. No black person could get up there. We worried about whether they could handle air control traffic. Silly, crazy, nuts. "Oh, they don't really want it." Can you believe we ever said, "Black people don't really want an education. They're not comfortable with an education." Listen. I've heard some crazy things in my life and too many times I didn't challenge them, and until there are people challenging the intersection of poverty and race that river of hope's going to be polluted.

White Jewish woman Helen Wax, who was more than 90 when interviewed in 2004, shared her perspectives on gains and limits of the movement.

Helen Wax: Today when I go into a restaurant and see blacks and whites who work together coming in and having lunch together I think, little do you know. I've been in department stores where like somebody worked there before and came back, and a black young man and a white woman throw their arms around one another, you know, they're glad to see one another. I still get a twinge and think little do you know what went into you reaching that stage. Forty years ago that wouldn't have happened. You wouldn't have had blacks and whites eating at the same table in a Chinese restaurant. [Laughs.]

Now, we have a black mayor, we have black judges; so I'm not aware of what the problems are today. They keep saying there are still these serious problems but I'm not aware of it today. The change has been unbelievable from the time my husband and I came to Memphis in the 1940s. Of course now the population is more than half black, of the city proper, because the white flight was terrific when they opened up the housing and all, and the school situation was terrible. We had that mentality here, and all these–I hate to say it, but it's true–these conservative churches started these church schools. That started the withdrawal of whites from the public schools. The Catholics always had their own schools see, so they didn't have to open them. But all these white churches, and I don't mean the biggest, finest churches in town. I don't want to use the wrong kind of terminology. I call them conservative. Every church had its own school and all the white children went to the church schools. Then people moved out, the people who could afford it. Our city is divided. They didn't get much better schools but they moved their children out. See that's what destroyed the schools. I mean the churches are still segregated as far as that goes. We've desegregated every time except Sunday morning. I still say people have a right to worship together, to live together, do whatever they want together. They don't have a right to deliberately keep others out but they have a right to associate with

who they want to associate with. You have friends; you have things in common, so you associate with them. You don't go out in the street and pull somebody in and say, "Be my friend." [Laughs]

While persisting problems dealing with poverty, racism, and discrimination exist, in many respects the changes from and as a result of the 1950s and 1960s have been remarkable. African Americans are now in public office and have better jobs and job opportunities than they did then. As Helen Wax points out, the mere fact that blacks and whites can intermingle and associate with one another in public places is significant. Gone is the day of "for colored" and "for white" signs. These gains were made possible by the courageous civil rights veterans whose movement indeed signified one of the most remarkable transformations in U.S. history.

Appendix: Brief Biographies of Oral History Subjects

All transcripts and recordings are located in both the Everett Cook Collection of the Memphis and Shelby County Public Library and Information System and the Southern Oral History Program collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. All interviews were solely conducted by Elizabeth Gritter and done in Memphis, Tennessee, with the exception of the interview of John L. Seigenthaler, which was done in Nashville, Tennessee, as well as the 9 October 2000 interview of Vasco Smith, which was also conducted by Calvin Turley.

Jennie Mary Betts
Jennie Mary Betts, who was African American, was born on June 30, 1937, in Henning, Tennessee. She received her associate degree in education from Owen College in 1961. After serving as a clerk in the tax assessor office, she worked as a special education teacher for Memphis City Schools from 1979 to 2004. She participated in the Memphis sit-in movement and was a member of the Memphis NAACP branch and the Shelby County Democratic Club. (Interview, 28 June 2004).

Josephine Burson
Josephine Burson, who was white, was born on December 23, 1915, in Memphis, Tennessee. She was the first Jewish person and first woman to be appointed to the cabinet of a Tennessee governor when Governor Buford Ellington appointed her his Commissioner for Employment Security in 1967. She was a national vice president and a longtime speaker of Hadassah, a national organization of Jewish women as well as involved in numerous other causes. (Interview, 28 July 2004).

Fred L. Davis
Fred L. Davis, who is African American, was born on May 8, 1934, in Memphis, Tennessee. He received his bachelor's degree in business administration from Tennessee State University in 1957, and he operated the Fred L. Davis Insurance Agency in 1967. The agency was one of the first African American-owned agencies in the South. He was elected to the Memphis City Council in 1967 and became its first black chairmen in 1972. He has been involved in numerous civic activities and has supported the Black Lives Matter movement. (Interview, 11 October 2000).

Miriam DeCosta-Willis
Dr. Miriam DeCosta-Willis, who is African American, was born on November 1, 1934, in Florence, Alabama. She received her bachelor's degree from Wellesley College and her Ph.D. in Romance Languages from John Hopkins in 1967. She was the first black faculty member at the University of Memphis and also taught at Howard University, LeMoyne-Owen College, George Mason University, and the University of Maryland. She is the author of several books. (Interview, August 8, 2013).

Lewis R. Donelson III
Lewis R. Donelson III, who is white, was born on October 9, 1917, in Memphis, Tennessee. He received his bachelor's from Southwestern (now Rhodes College) in Memphis in 1938 and received his law degree from Georgetown University in 1941. He has worked as a lawyer and served as a member of the Memphis City Council from 1968 to 1972 as well as Tennessee Commissioner of Finance and Administration from 1979 to 1981. (Interview, 25 June 2004).

John T. Fisher
John T. Fisher, who was white, was born on February 10, 1934, in Memphis, Tennessee. After receiving his bachelor's degree in commerce from the University of Virginia, he served in the U.S. Marine Corps in Japan from 1956 to 1958. He became president of the John T. Fisher Motor Company in Memphis in 1958 and worked there until 1978. He later served as executive director of the MED Foundation of the Regional Medical Center at Memphis. He was a long-time member of St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral. (Interview, 16 June 2004).

Samuel B. Hollis
Samuel B. Hollis, who is white, was born on December 6, 1929, in Memphis, Tennessee. He received his bachelor's degree in commerce from Washington and Lee University. He served as executive assistant to Mayor Edmund Orgill of Memphis from 1958 to 1960 and then went into real estate until 1968. He was secretary of Plough Inc. from 1968 to 1970 and served as president of the Federal Compress and Warehouse Company from 1970 to 1997. (Interview, 14 June 2004).

James Hunter Lane
Hunter Lane, who was white, was born on July 6, 1929, in Memphis, Tennessee. He received his bachelor's degree in history in 1951 and law degree in 1953 from Washington and Lee University. After that, he was on active duty for the Marine Corps from 1953 to 1955. He practiced law for forty-two years and served as a city commissioner of Memphis from 1964 to 1967 as well as on the Memphis Board of Education from 1971 to 1974. He was appointed to the Memphis Housing Authority Board in 1992. (Interviews, 15 June 2004 and 14 July 2004).

Hosea T. "H. T." Lockard
H. T. Lockard, who was African American, was born on June 24, 1920, in Lauderdale County , Tennessee. He received his bachelor's degree in social sciences from LeMoyne College in 1947 and his law degree from Lincoln University Law School in June 1950. He served in the Army Medical Corps from 1942 to 1945 and worked as a lawyer from 1951 to 1965 as well as served on the Shelby County Quarterly Court (the county commission) from 1964 to 1966. He was the first black cabinet member in Tennessee as administrative assistant to Governor Buford Ellington from 1967 to 1971, and he served as a judge in Memphis from 1975 to 1994. (Interviews, 10 October 2000, and 29 July 2004).

William N. Morris, Jr.
William N. Morris, Jr., who is white, was born on September 29, 1932, in Armory, Mississippi. He received his associate's degree from Itawamba Junior College in Fulton, Mississippi, and studied history and journalism for three semesters at the University of Memphis. He served in the U.S. Army from 1954 to 1956 and three terms as Shelby County Sheriff from 1964 to 1970.

He was Shelby County Mayor from 1978 to 1994, receiving an average of 83 percent of the vote for his election bids. (Interview, 24 June 2004).

Charles S. Peete, Jr.
Charles S. Peete, Jr., who was white, was born on May 13, 1939, in Memphis, Tennessee. He received his bachelor's degree in history from the University of Memphis in 1965. He worked as a high school history teacher in the Shelby County school system from 1967 to 1980 and in the payroll department at Kemmons Wilson, Inc., from 1980 to 2000. He ran the Dutch Treat luncheons for thirty-five years, which consisted of monthly political luncheons consisting of a speaker or speakers and a question and answer session with the audience. (Interview, 22 June 2004).

Johnnie Mae Peters
Johnnie Mae Peters, who was African American, was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on February 3, 1927. She worked as a school crossing guard for the Memphis Police Department and Sheriff's Department, from 1962 to 1982 as well as a cashier for Mitchell High School for those same years. She was active in civic, political, and activist causes including as a member of the Memphis branch of the NAACP and the Shelby County Democratic Club. (Interview, 29 June 2004).

Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr.
Thomas R. Prewitt, Sr., who is white, was born in Bolivar, Tennessee, on February 18, 1923. He attended the University of Tennessee at Martin and received his law degree from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 1948. He served in the Army Air Corps from 1943 to 1945. He worked as a lawyer for more than fifty-six years including service as an assistant counsel to the Senate investigating committee of Senator Joseph McCarthy from April 14 to June 30, 1954, which encompassed the Army-McCarthy hearings. His position was neutral. (Interview, 18 June 2004).

John L. Seigenthaler
John L. Seigenthaler, who was white, was born in Nashville, Tennessee, on July 27, 1927. He worked as a reporter for the *Tennessean* and then as administrative assistant to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy during the John F. Kennedy administration. He became editor of the *Tennessean* in 1962, its publisher in 1973, and its chairman in 1982 before retiring as chairman emeritus in 1991. Seigenthaler was also founding editorial director of *USA Today*. He was a staunch defender of First Amendment rights. (Interview, 29 July 2013).

Anne Whalen Shafer
Anne Whalen Shafer, who was white, was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on August 22, 1923. She received her bachelor's degree in community development and community service from the University of Memphis in 1982, following education at the University of Tennessee Junior College at Martin from 1946 to 1948. She held a variety of occupational and civic positions, including as president of the Memphis chapter of the League of Women Voters from 1958 to 1961 and head of the Memphis City Beautiful Commission from 1964 to 1966. (Interview, 28 June 2004).

Thomas E. "Pete" Sisson
Pete Sisson, who was white, was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on August 28, 1927. He graduated from the University of Memphis in 1950 with a bachelor's degree in science and received his law degree there in 1960. He served as Memphis city commissioner of public works from 1963 to 1967 and on the Shelby County Quarterly Court from 1972 to 1998. He also worked as a lawyer and headed TESCO properties, which manages and develops apartments. (Interview, 25 June 2004).

Maxine Atkins Smith
Maxine Atkins Smith, who was African American, was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on October 31, 1929. She became the leading civil rights figure in Memphis, Tennessee, having served as executive director of the Memphis NAACP branch from 1961 to 1995. She also served on the Memphis city school board from 1971 to 1995. She received her A.B. in Biology from Spelman College in 1949 and her master's degree in French from Middlebury College in 1950. (Interviews, 9 October 2000, 26 July 2004).

Vasco A. Smith
The husband of Maxine Atkins Smith, Dr. Vasco Albert Smith, who was African American, was born in Harvard, Arkansas, on August 24, 1920. He received his bachelor's degree in chemistry from LeMoyne College in 1941 and his professional degree in dentistry from Meharry Medical College in Nashville in 1945. He served as a U.S. Air Force captain at Scott Air Force base (outside St. Louis) from 1953 to 1955. He worked as a dentist from 1946 to 1953 and 1955 to 1995 and as a Shelby County commissioner from 1973 to 1994. He was active in the Memphis branch of the NAACP as well as the Shelby County Democratic Club. (Interviews, 9 October 2000, 10 October 2000, 12 October 2000, 12 July 2004).

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.
Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., who is African American, was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on May 11, 1929. He received his bachelor's degree from Rutgers University in 1950 and his law degree from Harvard Law School in 1953. He served in the Army from 1953 to 1955. He worked as a lawyer in Memphis including as a founding partner of one of the first interracial firms in the South, Ratner, Sugarmon, Lucas, Willis, and Caldwell. He served in the Tennessee State Senate from 1966 to 1968 and as a judge in Memphis from 1987 to 2006. He was an active member of the Memphis branch of the NAACP. (Interviews, 13 October 2000, 30 July 2004, 13 June 2007).

Helen G. Wax
Helen G. Wax, who was white, was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on May 15, 1915. She was married to the late Rabbi James A. Wax, a prominent clergyman in Memphis who embraced civil rights. She received her bachelor's degree in political science from Goucher College in 1937. She worked as secretary to the director of B'nai, B'rith from 1940 to 1942 and as acting executive director of the National Federation of Temple Youth from 1942 to 1944. (Interview, 17 June 2004).

Lillie Jones Wheeler

Lillie J. Wheeler, who is African American, was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on August 12, 1928. She received her associate's degree in business from Henderson Business College in 1957. She served as the LeMoyne Gardens Day Care Center director from about 1962 to 1965 and as center director for Head Start from 1965 to 1995. She was active as a member of the Memphis branch of the NAACP and as a precinct leader for the Shelby County Democratic Club. (Interview, 28 June 2004).

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