

TRANSCRIPT: JOHN T. FISHER

Interviewee: John T. Fisher
Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter
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Length: One audio file, approximately 92 minutes (the oral history was transcribed from a digitized audio file and also is available on audio cassette)

Transcriptionist's Note: When the time is noted in brackets it indicates an inaudible passage. This symbol indicates the spelling is uncertain: [sp?].

START OF INTERVIEW

John Fisher: --plug that in?

Elizabeth Gritter: I got it set, so.

JF: You got it plugged in, okay.

EG: Yeah. I haven't used this equipment before very much so I'll be glancing at it from time to time.

JF: Okay.

EG: If you would just tell me about your activism in the '50s and '60s. It's a broad question.

JF: I went to public school in Memphis. I went to what's called the campus school, which is the grammar school at the University of Memphis. Back in my day it

was Memphis State College. It only had one school which was the educational school, the training school as we called it, which was where all the classes had one or two student teachers in them all the time. That's where I went from 1940 to 1948, grades one through eight. Then I left there and went to Woodberry Forest, a school in Orange, Virginia, and was there for four years from '48 to '52, graduated from there and went to the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia. Left there, and went into the Marine Corps. In my day everybody went into the military, but this is a long time ago. My college class is '56, so I'm five years in front of Jim Jalenak really.

EG: Oh, sure.

JF: Then I left the Marine Corps and came back to Memphis to a family business and I worked for the same employer for forty-one and a half years.

EG: Wow.

JF: 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've been 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.

My first real experience with that came about 1962, '63 something like that. I built a new car dealership--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 in 1964--or 1962, let's say, or '63, somewhere in there, beforehand. 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. Not to do that--. 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. She is a, as I've subsequently learned, she talked then in a very articulate fashion as a well educated, direct somebody would do. And 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 do that. Don't build separate facilities," and I said, "Let me think about it," because I knew it would be different. I had no idea what--. 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. But I called her back and--. Well I didn't tell the staff first. I spent my two days and 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. That's what we built and subsequently--. The only difficulty I ever recall was we had a larger room for car

mechanics, and they're the ones that had more interaction because they change clothes to uniforms and stuff that they used to fix cars with, and there was more interaction than just an ordinary restroom. They're the ones who raised the most pressure back to me. But it didn't turn out--. I never had an incident over it. It worked out fine over the years.

But that started me in the--. That was my first encounter with civil rights. Subsequently the car dealership received an invitation to bid on furnishing some cars--I don't remember whether it was twenty cars or forty cars or fifty cars, but it was more than five or ten--to what was called the Delta Ministry Project. Have you ever heard of that?

EG: No, I haven't.

JF: All right, the Delta Ministry Project took place in Coahoma County, Mississippi, which is Clarksdale. I put it to my staff to respond to the bid and to the person that--part of my staff, the ones that dealt with that area--and they didn't want to do it. They said, "Just throw it in the waste basket. You don't want to do that. That's all black folks. You don't want to do that. It's all people down there moving around in the South." I said, "That's not a good enough reason not to. It's a perfectly logical thing, coming to us, and my response would be to answer it. If you don't want to answer it you've got to give me a good reason not to answer it, because I'm going to answer the letter, just what do I say? If we make the decision we're not going to do it because it's black folks, that's what I'll write and tell them we're not going to do, but I'm not going to write that letter." So we ended up--. As far as I know I was the only one that bid. I don't know if anybody else bid, but we got it. So that put all of us involved in dealing with people who were in the South, and most of them were white and most of them were

young. There were black people involved in it in some cases. One of the things my staff told me was, "You're going to lose some cars," and we did. We lost two. They never showed up. It turns out the National Council of Churches in Christ on Riverside Drive in New York City, who leased the cars, paid for the two cars that were lost, so that was of no economic consequence to me. But it did put you with a different group of clients than we were used to dealing with. We were used to selling cars in Clarksdale but we sold them to the plantation owners, not the people out running voter registration. We knew what they were doing.

EG: That's right.

JF: So that was my second encounter with civil rights. Then the one that made Jim Jalenak think of me, and the one that puts me in the Memphis [Mississippi Valley] Collection [at University of Memphis], was the sanitation strike. 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. Some friends--. And 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. My memory's--. I don't have a calendar from those days. I kick myself for not having it, but I don't. I've kept one ever since but I don't have one for '68. [Laughter] But 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.

EG: He was what correct?

JF: Legally.

EG: Uh huh.

JF: Legally the people did not have the right to strike, because they were municipal employees. Jim could tell you more of the legal merits of that case. I don't look at it from a legal standpoint. Leadership-wise he was taking a blind eye to what was going on in the city. He'd been a PT boat captain, as you undoubtedly know, 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 enquiry 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'm not--. I wasn't uncomfortable with it, but I just was very conscious of the fact that I'd really never encountered that in Memphis. Memphis black males don't have that sort of--. He grew up in Ohio and he didn't have any of the black mentality. A lot of it's still here, sort of a one-down-ness or something. I'm not sure what it is.

EG: What do you mean by "black mentality?"

JF: 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. He just talked to me like I'm talking--. I thought of it as just talking to another colleague because he didn't have any of that. But he was quiet spoken, he was well educated, and he's still probably the best preacher I ever heard. I don't mean that for the circuit kind of preaching but for the incisiveness of what he had to say in the pulpit, because 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 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, Jim said, "I want to tell you all something. You all are the first group--. 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. The whole thing took on--. I wouldn't know how to create an atmosphere in the community like that one. It's not--. It's almost--. 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.

EG: You mean in terms of what it was like among the white and black community in '68?

JF: Mm hmm.

EG: Oh, wow.

JF: 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 people involved in the sanitation, 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. It really is the whole month of March, some of February, and some of April. At the place where I go to church which is on Poplar, St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, there was a previously scheduled meeting of the Memphis Ministers Association, and it had to do with taking some action with respect to the political situation in Memphis to do with the sanitation strike. The meeting had been scheduled for some time. There were some--.

[Spoken to third person] Just stick it right in that corner, please. Thank you very much; appreciate it.

Unknown Male: I thank you.

JF: Okay, thank you. So it had been scheduled for some time and they all came. From that meeting some of the people that had done the preparation work for some documents to share with the group in that meeting did so as the process happened, and

this took place the morning after King was killed. King was killed on Thursday night, and this meeting takes place at 8:00 on Friday morning. I was a member of--I call it the Vestry. It's called the Chapter actually in a Cathedral, but I was a member of that group, and I got a phone call to come and be present because of the tensions, so I was there to be present. That's the meeting that the ministers decided to go and call the mayor. You may have seen some photographs of a young--not young, but kind of a short minister--carrying a cross down the street with all these people behind him. They went to the mayor's office, and I would guess probably a third of them went to the mayor's office. The other two thirds, marching was not their deal and they just didn't do it. So that was when--.

EG: Did you go to the mayor's office?

JF: No, because I'm not a member of that group.

EG: Oh, right, you were just present at the meeting.

JF: I was present because I was a member of the St. Mary's Cathedral board, just the host where they were meeting.

EG: Okay.

JF: I was with the bishop of Tennessee at the time, John Vanderhorst, and we watched them walk out. His name is spelled Vanderhorst, v-a-n-d-e-r-h-o-r-s-t. It's pronounced "van draw."

EG: Okay.

JF: I don't know why. We talked about making some kind of statement in response to what had happened in Memphis, and later I got with some other people and we pinned it down, for instance, that night, that was a Friday, Friday night about--actually

early Saturday morning--I was down with the bishop at the Peabody Hotel meeting Jim Lawson. The bishop and Jim Lawson agreed to sort of host and lead an assembly of invited Memphians to come and speak. I went to see the director of fire and police on Friday before we met with Jim Lawson that night.

EG: Who was that?

JF: That was Frank Holloman. Frank Holloman was the director of fire and police and I went to see Frank. I'd known him, not very well, and I told him what we were going to do and he just thought that was a terrible idea. He said, "You can't do that. It's too risky." It turned out that I thought we'd need a permit or something to do it, but we didn't. But also I'm not much of a civil disobedience person. I'm willing to do that but that's just not my--. I can't claim any real civil disobedience stuff. [Laughter] I was not there to do this in defiance, but I do remember Frank trying to persuade me not to do it, and I'm in the room with him, just the two of us in the room, and I finally told him, I said, "Frank, unless you tell me no we're going to do it." And I stood up and literally backed up to the door, looked him square in the eye, saying, "If you don't--. I'm leaving here to go and plan on conducting this assembly somewhere. I don't know where, but somewhere."

So once Jim Lawson and the bishop made their agreement to both be present and both take part, then the next morning, Saturday, I got on the telephone to begin to call people. One of them I called was the head of the board of education who had a room and stuff. On Saturday it couldn't be opened, so we had typewriters and stuff like that. So we met over at the board of education, and I remember there were about eight committees, and they were all on newsprint around the room, one to find a program, one

to get the speakers, one to print a program, one to arrange for a site, one to do some publicity, because we're going to meet the next day. This idea was formed on Friday, it's put together and initiated and the first action took place on Saturday, and the assembly is to take place on Sunday, and we're under curfew, and there's no budget. That to me is the fascinating part of what took place, was to get these people together. There was about half white and half black in the room, and it was a black man that coined the term, "Memphis Cares," which is what the assembly was called.

It was scheduled--. I thought it was going to take place in the big football stadium, in the Liberty Bowl, when the group left, but the group went to the Liberty Bowl to try and get it and discovered that the army was all camped inside the Liberty Bowl to keep them from being visible to the populace. Only people in airplanes could see them. And they also had the restroom facilities and dressing room facilities and stuff in the stadium to help accommodate that group of men that's out there. That's not available; it's occupied. So they end up at an old football stadium called E.H. Crump Stadium. So we go to the E.H. Crump Stadium, and I learn that we were going to Crump Stadium the evening before, on Saturday night, because one of the committees was to do the publicity.

What's really interesting is to go out and do something like this with no budget. It changes everything. It's so spontaneous you don't have time to talk about it. That's the interesting dynamic, is you go to TV stations and ask them to run these spots and to film them, and you don't ever talk about budgets or approvals and stuff. You go to this one station, ask them to film them, and not only film but make copies for the other three stations in town, and they did.

EG: Wow.

JF: 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. When they rolled up their newsprint--that's why I don't have the newsprint. Each of them rolled up their own newsprint and walked out the door and we didn't see them again as a group. There was no place to report back to because under curfew we couldn't stay and do anything. So that meeting broke up, I don't know, about--it started about noontime and broke up maybe 4:00. As you can imagine, lots of people got lots of different ideas, so it's a very talkative group.

There were eight speakers, and we met about 1:30, I guess, and they were supposed to--. I've forgotten what the time frame was, but it lasted longer--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, over half of which are deceased. But there were all kinds--. In the eight people there were different frameworks. I was the first speaker, and I think that either Jim Lawson--I think Jim Lawson was the last one. Ben Hooks was a speaker. But that's what put me on the radar screen of Jim Jalenak, is my photographs in the newspaper, and I got written up as being one of the instigators of that, which I was, of that process. 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.

EG: How did it affect your business?

JF: 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. And also got to know--. I regret that I didn't use my time with Jim Lawson to meet Martin Luther King.

After we left the cathedral and they marched to the mayor's office, I got in the car and went looking for Jim Lawson and went to the R.S. Lewis Funeral Home, which is where the 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.

That's the kind of thing that took place in those days. At the same time that that happened I was chairman of the board of St. Mary's Episcopal School for Girls, which is out in East Memphis. It's out near--. The Henry Loeb house is directly across the street from St. Mary's School. We were doing a fund drive to build a new building and there was one lady in the school who didn't like what I had done. She went to the bishop of

Tennessee and tried to have me removed from the school board. I was chairman of the board and she tried to have me not just not be chairman, but removed from the school board, which he wouldn't do. So there were lots of tensions going on then. But I got to meet a lot of people and I gained a lot of respect from the black community which still pays off. There are black people that I don't even know that talk to me about that, that came to Memphis Cares. Only twelve thousand people came, and there's a lot more people in Memphis than that. But that's what put me on the map race-wise.

The Tuesday after the assassination--the assassination was Thursday--the Tuesday afterwards the city is still under--. Remember there was a big march here on Monday. I've forgotten what the focus of that march was on Monday, but there was a big march in Memphis on Monday after King was killed. And then on Tuesday the Rotary Club meets, and I was not a member of the Rotary Club, but two of us were invited to put together this program to come and speak to the Rotary Club about it. I was not at the time very happy with what I'd said in my speech, and I didn't know what I'd said really, except for my notes, and I still have my notes. I've since gotten--. My son for Christmas one year gave me a tape that he got from the University of Memphis of the program, and my speech wasn't as bad as I thought it was.

EG: That's good. [Laughter]

JF: But when I got to speak to the Rotary Club and made my mind up that I was going to speak more incisively to the Rotary Club than I had done [in] Crump stadium, and I was not--. I didn't think I was vociferous or anything, but I guess twenty people got up and walked out on me. So if you try to tell the truth, it's going to be painful. I've often thought about the Rotary Club motto, and I don't know what it is, but it has to do

with telling the truth and something about making friends. What I would say, if I tell the truth today I'm not going to make any friends. That's just not where we are. So I got a big write-up in the newspaper for that.

EG: You said there were twelve thousand people who came to the Memphis Cares?

JF: Mm hmm.

EG: Was it mostly black, mostly white, or a mix?

JF: Everybody agrees it was half and half.

EG: Half and half, okay.

JF: And the stands were evenly dispersed. There weren't blacks in a section or something.

EG: Okay. It was integrated.

JF: It was very much integrated, and there was no difficulty, none.

EG: And who were the eight speakers?

JF: 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; [Pause] Mary Lawson, who was a school teacher. Her name was Mary Collier when she spoke, C-o-l-l-i-e-r, and she later married a guy named Lawson. She was there. Jim Lawson and Ben Hooks--how many is that?

EG: I think that's eight.

JF: That's eight.

EG: It's interesting to me how you took a stand as a business leader. How did you--? What was your sense of what other businessmen's sense of civil rights was,

where they stood on civil rights from the mid-'60s, or 1962 onward, when you first had this experience? Because in some of the civil rights literature I found that businessmen have been more supportive of civil rights than other occupational groups, but on the other hand I found literature that says the opposite.

JF: Well, most of them 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, that the letters 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. And they all withdrew their support. I've never seen a more dejected human being than Henry Loeb that day, because he had done what he thought was right and thought he could rely--. 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. His wife is Mary Gregg, who I've known all my life. I saw her not long ago in Forest City and she was very pleasant. If you have the chance to visit with her it would be productive, but I can see why Mary won't do it.

EG: Yeah, I can too. Do you think the businessmen's rejection of Loeb after King's murder dealt with moral reasons, or they realized that the assassination was bad for business and the city's image?

JF: That's what they thought, bad for business.

EG: Yeah, but at first they thought--.

JF: I even heard people say, “I’m not sorry it happened; I’m just sorry it happened here.”

EG: Yeah. You talked about Maxine Smith and how she persuaded you to build the building without the colored and white facilities. What did she say to you that made you change the way you thought about things?

JF: I’ve forgotten exactly what she said, but she said it in a very 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 arbitrary--not arbitrary--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. When I talk to people and they say, “What made you do this and that?”--. One of my children, I think my son, in a speech someplace to do with something made this statement about me. He said, “What you got to watch out for Dad is if you want him to tell you the truth that’s what he’s going to do. So if you don’t want to hear the truth, don’t ask him the question.” That probably is an oversimplification, but that really is--. I didn’t invite Maxine to come. I don’t even know how she--. I guess she knew that we were doing it because we had put a sign up that we were fixing to do that, because we had brought the property and the girls’ school was still on it and I think we had some kind of modest sign that we had bought it, or something like 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.

And then subsequently in--I've no inside knowledge--but subsequently I was then chairman of the board of St. Mary's School and we had an inquiry from one of the public school board members about a black insurance executive in town who wanted to know if we would entertain an application for his daughter to attend school. That got some discussion and a negative answer went back. I remember my discomfort at that because I didn't think it was right, but there again I'm not a civil disobedience kind of person, and we met as a group and the whole group consensus was no, because we were trying to raise money to build this school building. I mean you can talk about it forever, but the answer went back no.

EG: You said you were uncomfortable with it, but did you vote no as well?

JF: No, I voted--. We didn't really vote. It was kind of a clear consensus. But no, I encouraged them to take it. I said if that's what they wanted to do, let's take it. Part of the argument was that this isn't the way to do it, for us to get with another board member and kind of set this--. And I wasn't dissuaded by--I mean I still think that's a reasonable perspective, is for us to go out and engineer this child to come to our school and it's not--. I'm not sure that's what we're supposed to do. I knew what the racial climate was in Memphis when that was going on. I grew up in it. So I wasn't totally put out about that, and also I didn't know what it would do to our fundraising effort for the school building. But at any rate we didn't do it.

Some months later, maybe three months later, the headmaster called me and said, "In the mail this morning I received an application for this child to be admitted to the school and I have it in my hand." Well that's different. So I remember convening a board meeting--well, that's not quite true--convening an assembly of the members of the

board. It was not a board meeting, but we did meet at the school and the headmaster came in to tell us about the application. He had it in his hand and we got to look at it and talk about what we were going to do about it. I think there were twenty-one people present. That's my memory. They really wanted it to go away, the whole process to go away. So they didn't know--. They kept wanting the headmaster to find some way to duck it. My position as chairman was, I said, "All right, if any of you want to give the headmaster instructions then you've got to make a motion. If you make a motion we'll open a board meeting." No, I don't want to record it. I don't want to be the one in the minute book for making it. Well, if you're going to give him any instructions, you got to go on the record. I don't why I thought of that. I don't what led me to that sort of decision to do with the matter at that point. After two and a half hours of discussion the headmaster finally stood up and said, "If you aren't going to give me instructions, then I'll do what I ordinarily do," and walked out of the room, and that ended the assembly. We never did open the minute book, because no one ever chose to make a motion for us to vote on. But another guy and I who were there were talking afterwards, and we said that if anyone had made a motion to do something the motion would have passed nineteen to two, because nobody--. They all wanted it to go away, and if they'd had to vote, they'd vote: do whatever you need to do to not let her in here.

I've often wondered if those other encounters in my life didn't have something to do with the way that worked out, because after King was killed and I was at the R.S. Lewis Funeral Home the insurance executive was present with the child that morning, and he was telling me that she was headed for the school the next week or so to take the

entrance exams. The headmaster said after it was over, "I hope her test scores are clear," because St. Mary's is a--. Do you know St. Mary's School, ever heard of it?

EG: No.

JF: Well it's a very academically oriented--. It's the academically oriented school in town and it's very demanding, so there's no assurance that she's for that school. There's lots of kids that are not--. That school's not for everybody. They expect too much, and they push too hard, and they get the most merit scholars in town, and all that kind of stuff. All the students go to college, and they all go to good colleges, so it really is the academic institution. So the child did well. The child tested well and the child did well in the school. The unhappy part of that event is that later after graduating from college, the child was in Houston living, doing something, and she committed suicide. But that's been a profound lesson back to me because how do any of us know what the pressures are for that child to come in and be the one to integrate that school.

EG: Yeah. So she did come and integrate it?

JF: Mm hmm. After that all the other private schools integrated.

EG: She was the first one in a private school to integrate in Memphis. How did that experience go for her?

JF: Well we thought it was going reasonably well. We thought it was going well. She had lots of interaction with white people. But see, I don't have any idea what her home neighborhood life was like. I don't understand how black children [blamed? 41:32] her [for?] going off with all these white children. I don't know what that was like. But it made a profound impression upon me when she killed herself.

EG: Did you have any evidence at all that that was related?

JF: No. I don't think so, but I don't know the family history all that well. I do know it made me awfully glad--. It made me content that we had not sent back a yes.

EG: To the admission for the--?

JF: It made me content that we had not sent back a yes, we'd even sent back a no, and they applied anyway, so we're not implicated in the fact that she came to that school. Her family chose to do that.

EG: Oh, that you didn't engineer it, that she ended up applying for it.

JF: I was just as happy that we did not engineer it.

EG: Yeah, definitely. I've heard from talking with other people in some of my own research that school desegregation here and busing just seemed to be the issue that inflamed people more than any other.

JF: As a result of that my wife and I made a decision about 1970, which is two years after the assassination, that we would like for our children to know there was more in the world than Memphis. So I made a deal with some of my work colleagues that they would run the car dealership and pay my salary for a year's sabbatical. I tried to take that year's sabbatical in 1971 but I had too many commitments to do it and I couldn't do it until 1972. Jim Lawson, a black Methodist minister, in the process of looking at some papers I had written, looking for something to do for the year's sabbatical--. And I really thought that I would go as an instructor on staff at some university and teach one course. But I wanted to go with a group of people, be within an instruction framework where other people, where families, are doing things, and Jim Lawson wrote a letter to a man named Eugene Carson Blake [sp?]. Eugene Carson Blake was then the general secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland. As a result of that letter to

Gene Blake I was invited to join the staff at the World Council in Geneva. So in 1972 in the summer we sold our house and moved to Switzerland, stayed there a year.

EG: Do you think you would have done that if there hadn't been as much racial turmoil?

JF: No.

EG: Was that experience what you hoped for?

JF: Yeah. I tell people I really don't know why I went, but I got what I went for. I add to that, I didn't get to stay long enough. I went for one year; I would have like to have stayed for three.

EG: Yeah. What were you looking for and how did you get it?

JF: Well I wanted to be in a different environment than the economic environment of selling cars, and I went over there and the guy over there running the place said, "I can tell from what you've written that what you really want to do is to work for a group. We got church and society, which is the social issues to do with the way the world works and stuff, and interaction between church and society, the church and the people, around the world, and that's what you want to do. So we want to fulfill you with what you want to do. So how about you working half time for church and society, but we need you to work in the finance office, to do some work for us in the finance office, because we don't get much outside help in the finance office." So I said, "Okay, I'll spend half time in the finance office, half time in church and society."

And church and society was what I--it was a fulfilling job that I got to do. It turned out that we got the money together for a conference on technology and interacting with society and the church. A guy named Ernest Schumacher wrote a book, *Small Is*

Beautiful, and he presented his first paper for *Small Is Beautiful* at that conference. It later became a bestseller. I was in charge of running that conference. I was the convener of that conference, so I had to write people all over the world. I would write letters and send them up to translation, and translate into Spanish and Russian and Chinese and all kinds of languages, and send the letters out. I'd sign them and send them out and a response would come back and I had to send the response back up to translation and they'd translate back into English and send it back. Of course lots of colleagues in Geneva were bilingual. They spoke more than one language, but I didn't. French I could get by in but that's all. I couldn't do anything in French. But I did get to run that conference and I enjoyed doing that.

But what was more interesting was that that August--we got there July 4--and that August the assembly met, the World Council governing board met, and passed a resolution to divest themselves from any--no investments in South Africa, no investments in apartheid companies, companies that invested in apartheid. And when I got back to Geneva my boss in the finance office said, "John T., I want you to implement that resolution, and I said, [Break in recording] --heavy in endowment money. They won't accept it because the need in the world is too great. But in carrying out project work they have cash funds on hand that they do some investments with, and they had at the time three investment banks: one in Boston; one in New York; and one in Geneva. It just happened that I knew the senior partner, by chance, of the one in Geneva. So I went to Terry and said, "This is my charge. Would you get somebody to help me do this on a worldwide scale?" and he said yes. So first we did four countries: the United States, the one I knew the best; then we did England, one of the Scandinavian countries, and I think

France, or maybe it was Switzerland. I think France. Anyway we did four [47:38]. All we really did was make a list of names of what not to invest in. People kept wanting to make this issue emotional and I kept trying to resist that. If you do that all we're going to do is get in arguments and fight. The trick is to write a letter to our banker and say, "Don't buy these stocks." That's not emotional. They'll know where it came from but they don't have to get involved in it and they either take the instruction or not.

So the trick for us was to go back and find companies to make up the list. The most productive resource to do that was the yellow pages of the telephone book from South Africa, where we went and found all these companies. One of my rules was if a name gets on the list we have to have some document in the file, something written, to justify it. So if the company would write and say, "Why is my name on the list?" go to the file and pull out the yellow pages page and photocopy it and say, "This is why you're on the list," or to get their annual report. It turned out we had lots of paperwork. We had lots and lots and lots of paperwork. We had groups all over the world to send us bales of stuff so what we had to do was interpret it. We ended up doing twelve--. The World Council maintained cash reserves in twelve currencies.

EG: Wow.

JF: In twelve different currencies in twelve different countries, so we did twelve different stock markets. So we wrote four of them before Christmas and I did the other eight after Christmas. And before I left the goal was--because I left in August or something--the goal was to finish the project, which I did. It turns out that I enjoyed the work for church and society the most but all my standing in-house came from the work I did in finance, because everybody wanted to make this emotional and I would never let

them make it emotional. It's not unlike me running the board meeting where I said, "You got to make a motion." We're not going to let this get into a long drawn out shouting match. That really is the way I ran that and one of my encounters I remember was up in a group called [Pause]--is it Combat Racism or something? At any rate, this guy that worked in that took a roll of these papers and said, "You've got to take these and take them to that banker and stuff them up his you know what," and I said, "No, I don't." And he said, "Yeah, you do, because you work for God now and you've got to follow this mission." I said, "No, I don't. I work for Frank Northam down in the finance office, and my goal is to write a letter to these banks and that's what I'm interested in. That's what I'm going to do, and I'm not going to tell him that. If I tell him that, he'll just tell us to close our account. That's what I'd do." And it turned out that one bank did tell us to close the account and the other two banks took the instructions and said, "Okay, if you have any of those we'll sell them and we won't buy them again, and you just maintain the list with us," so we did.

EG: So you did have impact on the banks and businesses.

JF: Oh, they all knew why we--. They all knew where the instruction came from.

EG: Yeah. One question that I think of that's more a philosophical question: why do you think that there would be an existence of a segregated society, and that one group would subordinate another, and why there would be so much resistance to a change when it's just a social construction?

JF: Slavery. I've got that in mind.

EG: Yeah, the historical legacy of slavery.

JF: The historical legacy passed down. The old adage in the South was a nigger's like a duck; he ain't got no soul. And that was the way lots and lots of people hung their hats and believed in the slavery days. The enslaved African American was property and was in bondage and was not viewed in the human brotherhood principle at all. That's where I think it came from.

EG: Yeah. You said you grew up next to Henry Loeb. Did you hang out a lot with him?

JF: Mm mm. He was older than I was.

EG: Okay.

JF: I don't know how old. Let's say--he was active in the Second World War as a PT boat captain and the Second World War is when I went away to Woodberry Forest. That would make Henry at least ten or twelve, fourteen, years older than I am.

EG: From your perspective of being his neighbor, do you have any insights into his character?

JF: Mm mm. I just knew and would see him across the fence, and he was an older guy. The big difference that I remember was that Henry had a brother, William, who is also deceased, and he was in a wheelchair, and for reasons that I have never fully understood about the family is that Henry and William split. Henry's son could tell you more about that. I can't tell you anything about that. I just know it happened. They were not that way when I knew them, they were together, but Billy was kind of scary because he was in a wheelchair all the time. He would take his BB gun in the backyard and shoot birds out of the trees with his BB gun, out of his wheelchair. I didn't really know them very well, but I knew he would remember me as a neighbor the same way I remembered

him as a neighbor. So when I called his office I thought he would take the call, and he did.

EG: Before you had your moment of racial consciousness in 1962, were you aware of the civil rights activities taking place in Memphis, or did they have any sort of impact on you?

JF: I wasn't aware of any that were taking place. 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.

EG: That's interesting. What I'm thinking about focusing my master's thesis on is the 1959 city election in Memphis in which Loeb ran for mayor and Russell Sugarmon and Ben Hooks ran for positions. Looking at the press coverage of that and the rhetoric, all the white politicians are saying, "Race relations are peaceful and they're fine here--

JF: That's exactly right.

EG: --and harmonious."

JF: Memphis took a lot of pride in that. So people like me, I just--1959 is when I married. 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.

EG: And you didn't have contact with black people at that time, so this was something that the white community thought--.

JF: I can remember the first time I invited--actually it was Ben Hooks. Ben and Frances came to my house for dinner one night, and that was the first time that a black person had ever--not been in my house, because they had been taking care of my house all my life, black servants--but the first time that I'd had a black person sit at my dinner table as a guest. That was an emotional event for me because it was so different.

EG: When was this?

JF: That was probably '68.

EG: Do you think that--? It's hard for me, growing up in Michigan originally and the North, to imagine what it was like back then, but it's important to have a sense, because to me when thinking about how blacks were segregated and only admitted one day to the zoo and so forth, I think how can whites think that things were peaceful and harmonious, but if you--.

JF: The general mood that was put out by the establishment, whoever that is, whoever sort of puts this word out, is that we're not going to have any trouble here because the black people in Memphis are content.

EG: Yeah, and that's all that was in the newspaper coverage. Were you aware at all of the Freedom Movement downtown where they boycotted Main Street?

JF: Mm hmm. I was aware of it. But that wasn't until when?

EG: That was 1960 and '61. Did you hear any businesspeople talking about that as having any sort of impact on their business?

JF: Just the ones who were being boycotted, which as I remember was Goldsmith's Department Store.

EG: Yeah. What were they saying about that?

JF: Well I don't recall hearing anybody particularly sympathetic with the people who were boycotting the stores. They thought they were troublemakers. And you're doing that, but you represent a minority of the population because all the people you say you're trying to do this for like it the way it is. The inference being, the zoo never came up as an entity in my consciousness, but I mean the same word is that the African American can't go to the zoo on Tuesday. As I recall that's the day they--.

EG: I think so, yeah. Interesting. And you were saying that in 1964 when you leased the cars to the black population, and it was in Mississippi, and that was during the Freedom Summer, right?

JF: That's right.

EG: What was that like?

JF: Well I found it kind of interesting because I got to meet these people that were very different from me. I got to see firsthand people I had been reading about in the newspaper and in *Life* magazine. Some of them would come in the car and I'd get to at least meet them, and talk to them, and, "How's it going?" and have them tell me a story or something. So I had some contact with a group that I would not have otherwise had any contact with, because the idea of getting in a car and going to Mississippi and having some kind of interaction with them was not one of my choices. To have them bring the car to Memphis to do something with, or come pick up one, or come and bring one back for service, that's mechanical and it has to be done, and here they are and I'm curious,

and so I'd get to talk to them. But it never occurred to me to go to Mississippi and talk to them. That just wasn't the way it was done. That just wasn't the way the thought worked.

EG: Did other business leaders--? What was their reaction to you lending out the cars to blacks in '64? Did you feel any animosity, or was there acceptance, or did they--?

JF: I didn't--maybe light animosity, but it wasn't so much animosity as, "I don't understand you. I don't understand why you'd do that. What makes you do that? Why would you do that? None of us do that. Why would you do that?" It was almost like, the only thing I really got from them was a sort of underlying thing of, "Are you trying to teach me something?" which I truly was not, and I never had much trouble with that because I knew I wasn't. I wasn't doing that to teach somebody anything. I was doing that because I got the letter. I convened the school board in that kind of meeting because I was the chairman. And we had this event that for us to do nothing wasn't going to take us anywhere, and for us to sit on our hands, all kinds of things could happen, so the thing to do is to take it up and address it frontally. When we convened the group together, most of them didn't know we had the application. They didn't know what they were coming for, because we met right away. That's more reflective of what I think is my general managerial type style.

EG: Right, sure. What do you think--? One thing I've discovered from living here and from my studies is how racially polarized Memphis still is today. What do you see as the differences and similarities--well two questions: what do you see as the differences and similarities between Memphis back then and Memphis now, and also what you think could be done to make things more harmonious and less polarized?

JF: Oh, to make it more harmonious and less polarized would be to have a more productively engaged black population. Memphis is very heavily black. I don't know what the percentages are, but let's say it's half and half. I don't know. Most of the affluent--. If you want to fix Memphis schools, to me it's not very complicated. It really can't be done, it's unthinkable, but get rid of the private schools. When my day was with the private schools, we were an insignificant proportion of the student body, so whether the private school was there or not there, it wasn't going to make any real difference. But the white flight has been such that there are many more private schools today than there were when I was at St. Mary's school, and the whole environment [1:02:38]. So what's happened is all the affluence has left the public school system. Public schools are predominantly black; they're predominantly fatherless families; the male's not in the family; the income level is poverty and the person's [1:02:59] is working so he's not going to be home when the kid comes home, and the kid's not going to be very--. To me it's just a disaster. The way I know to fix it is if you didn't have--. If everybody went to public school and the parents, the affluent parents, who go by the private schools, wouldn't permit that to happen in their schools and they'd all get engaged with the PTAs and do what families do with schools and straighten it out. So the thing that you've got too much of today is there's a whole segment of population that is mostly isolated economically, but the high proportion of that is African American, so it becomes both a racial problem as well as an economic problem.

Then see in Memphis back in--. My sister married a cotton farmer in Clarksdale, Mississippi. In 1950 when she married him, he had about eighteen--as I recall it--about eighteen hundred acres, and on the eighteen hundred acres he had a hundred houses with

families in them, with farm workers and children, and just put a house. By 1970 he had eight. That's the cotton picker and mechanization of farming in the Delta. So it took a lot fewer people to raise the cotton crop than had been done when you hoe the weeds out and you pick the cotton by hand. So when that happened the families had to go. They left, and where'd they go? They came to Memphis. So Memphis picks up this significantly large population of uneducated, unskilled black people, but the ones in that group that had some vision, some desire, some drive, they kept going. They went to Chicago or Toledo or Detroit and got them a good job. But the ones who stayed here--.

So now you're faced with a Memphis tax base problem, for instance, that's different from a city like Sacramento which doesn't have a race problem, or Omaha, Nebraska, that doesn't have a race problem. They kind of spread the tax base out on everybody. Everybody pays their fair share of picking up the garbage and stuff. Not in Memphis. We don't have fair share paying for our services and stuff. We've got a huge segment of the population that live in such substandard houses that the property taxes they pay are nothing compared to what I pay. But they need the same police service, fire service, they need all these services. And it's not just a few more people, it's a lot more. It's a lot more people. And so when Memphis tries to pick itself up and join the world of big cities, it's pretty hard because you don't have the economic structure to do that. My view of Memphis is that it's the most populated small town in America. There are lots of cities that have fewer people than we do. All my business colleagues think that I'm being negative about Memphis when I say that, but I don't see it as a negative thing. I see it as really trying to understand it. I'm surprised that the baseball team and the Grizzlies, the

basketball team, do as well as they do, because we don't have enough people to pay an eighty-dollar ticket.

EG: Yeah. Do you think the rise of black elected officials has made a positive difference toward race relations here?

JF: Yeah, race relations, no question it has. Whether it makes a positive direction on getting the job done from a white, from my managerial perspective--.

EG: Economics?

JF: We live in different cultures, and I see it as okay, we've got to go--this is part of the journey that we must take to get to some peaceful stance, because the white people can't do it. What really is wrong right now is the African Americans have the political power and the whites have all the economic power. That's what it is.

EG: Ah, okay. I did a paper and looked at how black political power has been looked at through time by historians, and one of them talked about Memphis in the late 1960s, and his hypothesis was that a city would modernize and be better economically the better that race relations were. And so he found that with Atlanta, that was a modern industrial center, but Birmingham was very behind in terms of race relations and also an antiquated economy. But I think with Memphis he thought it was pretty modern, but he wrote it in the late 1960s. It's kind of interesting to look at that argument now, given what you just said, about how things are still economically behind for blacks and that it's still, like you said, a small town and [1:08:31].

JF: My general view of that that's troublesome--and I have no evidence to indicate that it's correct--is that--. My own bias is that too many blacks, when they get some affluence, do the same thing whites do: they move out. They move out to where I

live and buy them a nice house, and that's the end of their--. If they get delivered then they come out there and make up a small percentage of the population in a sense, of being an African American community, but they don't want anymore to do with the low income group than anybody else. Sometimes it's harder to get them to be socially conscious on an economic basis.

EG: Yeah. There's an intersection between race and class that's really interesting.

JF: They fought so hard to get out that the last thing they want to do is to do anything back down there.

EG: What did you mean by that?

JF: Well the whole vision was to succeed and to move out. What I'm talking about is economic. If you don't have the economics straight, you can't do that. It's not some hypothetical economic argument. If you don't have enough money, you're not going to move to a nice house. So if you do that, you work so hard to get out there, the last thing you want to do is re-engage yourself with where you left.

EG: Right. You've had a lot of involvement with the church. Have you found that church members are more racially progressive than other people?

JF: Yes.

EG: Yes. It seems like Memphis does have a strong church community of people, church leaders who are active.

JF: Memphis has a strong church community. If you've not seen it before, you can get one of these.

EG: Ah.

JF: It will tell you how strong Memphis is on giving compared to other cities. I'm convinced it has to do with the church. That's a good book. [EG's note: I think he was referring to some sort of local church directory.] I'll tell you where you can get one.

EG: Okay.

JF: Well, you can get one there. This is the only one I've got or I'd give it to you.

EG: Okay. Let's see here.

JF: But it will tell you all about--. There's a study about giving patterns in Memphis, and Memphis is real strong Southern Baptist, and they take missions seriously. They put their money up for it.

EG: I saw they were just in town for a convention, the Southern Baptists.

JF: Mm hmm.

EG: How did people view Maxine Smith and Russell Sugarmon and Ben Hooks in the 1960s? What did white people think of them?

JF: At a distance.

EG: Yeah.

JF: They often would think Maxine is too outspoken. Most white people in Memphis would not know how well educated she is, that she went to Middlebury--is it Middlebury?--College.

EG: Yeah.

JF: The one in Vermont. She's fluent in French, which is why she went to Middlebury. That's a language school. But mostly they'd see her when she asked for things. Her visibility came by serving on the city school board. She was a city of Memphis board of education member. She would do things to try to equalize stuff for the

racism, and a lot of people criticized her and said what she was doing was wrong. But what she was doing, in my view looking back at it, is she never had the kind of success that you think you're going to have because every school out there was like the public school I went to. Back in my day the public school was all white. My school was all white. The PTA was alive and well and the parents were engaged in athletics and all kind of stuff. Parents would bring you to school and pick you up. But now you go to an inner city black school and neither parent can come to pick you up, if you've got two parents.

EG: Right.

JF: So they start one down to start with.

EG: Yeah. Do you think some of that had to do also with sexism, that people were surprised that it was a woman who was so aggressive?

JF: I don't think so.

EG: No?

JF: I think it was just that she used her mind, and she's got plenty of sense. She's bound to go find these ways that people thought, well to do that she's being uppity. The fact that she was a woman doing it I think made little difference. A lot of people would see that differently.

EG: You said that a lot of your friends have apologized to you for dropping you for your racial stances. Do you find that other whites you know have experienced changes in their attitudes towards race, looking back now at the '60s and '50s they can see that things were wrong?

JF: Mm hmm.

EG: Yeah. In terms of business again, some of the literature on Memphis and civil rights makes kind of business leaders out to be heroes of Memphis, or that they were kind of real for desegregation and so forth, but from talking to you it seems like business leaders weren't willing to--except for some people like you--to stick their neck out; they were more for maintaining the status quo, or doing what was best for the business in terms of--.

JF: Well I think that in Memphis as far as giving away ground before you start a battle, that's where Memphis succeeded best. These different business people you talk about would be viewed in the main, I think, as progressive because they did do things to integrate.

EG: Oh, okay.

JF: They did do things like getting rid of the zoo day at the point where they needed to do it. They didn't do it out of the goodness of their heart, but they were savvy enough to say, "We need to change this."

EG: You think that because they saw that this is what the future was heading toward, or that there was this fear that if they didn't do that they would be boycotted or Memphis would break in violence?

JF: Well, yeah. Most of it, it wasn't where the world was going; it was the fear of what the disruptive activity might be if--. It's easier to give up this ground than it would be to defend it in going to some--doing in the beginning graciously what you're going to do in the end anyway.

EG: Yeah. Was it--?

JF: Memphis did a good job of that. And the political attitude here was very pragmatic in that sense. So if someone wants to label them as progressive, I would take no issue with that, because they would be viewed as progressive.

EG: This report by the Southern Regional Council by Benjamin Muse, which was written in 1964, talks about his view. He thought Memphis had made more progress toward desegregation than any other city in the South with less strife.

JF: Well frankly the night that King was killed there was significant violence in cities across America, but there wasn't in Memphis.

EG: Yeah. That's what I heard from somebody else, and I wasn't aware of that.

JF: And I know why. Ben Hooks and Jim Lawson both got on television within hours after his assassination and told Memphis to cool it. You don't see this stuff in other cities. I've never seen that footage again but I'm sure it's--. I'm confident that those speeches are out at the University of Memphis. There's tons of TV footage at the University of Memphis. In fact you don't have time in your life to look at it.

EG: To look at it all, yeah.

JF: It's too much. But Ben Hooks and Jim Lawson were the two people who went to bat and said no, cool it.

EG: With business desegregating was this sense of what was going to happen or this fear of disruption caused by their awareness of what was taking place in other cities like Birmingham or because they were aware of the activities of the NAACP here and their efforts to boycott, or a combination?

JF: I think that the moral sensibilities of the people I'm talking about, that I would view as progressive as a group, for instance when I did this thing at Crump stadium I got

support. The TV stations gave us the ads, and the park commission gave us the space. Later we got a bill from the park commission but we wrote back and said, "We don't have any budget, and don't feel bad because nobody else got paid either." So in that sense I think that the sensibilities of the people here, in my view, would not have been tolerant of Birmingham.

EG: In terms of the civility of it and not allowing violence?

JF: The fire hoses on people is not part of the game. That was beyond what they would--. All kinds of people here would have stepped in and said, "You're not going to do that." Henry Loeb was no Bull Connor.

EG: Yeah. That was something--. When I was here a few years ago I talked to Maxine and Vasco Smith and Russell Sugarmon, and I remember Maxine Smith, I asked her why was Memphis relatively peaceful compared to other cities, and she said you had the cream of the crop here in terms of black and white leaders, and she didn't think white leaders would allow that.

JF: I think she's right.

EG: And you don't see here either the activity of the Ku Klux Klan or the White Citizens Council. Why do you think that is? You think it relates to the same sort of sensibility, that it would be bad for business?

JF: I would give a lot of credit to the strength of the churches in Memphis, the same thing that you will find in this book. The church involvement in Memphis is very strong, and there isn't any way to keep your church activity or synagogue activity or temple activity consistent with the fire hoses on those children.

EG: I see Memphis--. What I've been learning is very contradictory in many ways. On the one hand it seems like there wasn't as much violence; that it was relatively peaceful compared to other cities; people were civil; but on the other hand there was the sanitation strike, the outbreak of violence, and such opposition to school desegregation. Why do you think that there was so much opposition to school desegregation and not as much to these other issues like desegregation of the parks or black voting power?

JF: I think it's the same thing that the way neighborhoods change. You can integrate a neighborhood and it doesn't present any big problem. But when the balance starts to change, that's when the white flight takes place. I don't know what the percentages are, but when a certain amount of neighborhood that was formerly white gets to be sufficiently minority, that's when the whites start to leave. When the first black moves in the neighborhood no white leaves, but if it starts to change the neighborhood, that's when the flight happens. So I think that's the--. They didn't want the--. When I lived in Geneva my children walked to school. When I lived in East Memphis my son walked to school, a public school. That's the best of all worlds. There isn't any better world than walking to school. When you start busing these kids it puts all kinds of anxieties and tensions and you lose--. Parents have no ties with the school where that child's gone. There's all kinds of things wrong with busing children. There's no evidence I've seen to indicate that it has some beneficial outcome.

EG: In stepping back even before busing I know that there was really token school integration here, so why would there be opposition--? Well I guess I'm thinking--. Well they had to do the busing because there was such token school integration--

JF: Uh huh.

EG: --so, yeah. So apart from busing, why do you think there would be this opposition to this, or that people would want to have gradual school desegregation instead of--?

JF: Because it was less painful. That's why. I'm not sure what you--. The busing is a real dilemma. It has all sorts of logical basis in law of what you have to do to make things equal, but I don't think there's any--. I don't see any evidence to indicate that busing had this laudatory effect on our society and the contribution to the way we grew up and helped make us live a better way. I don't see that. We spent a lot of money on it. We hired a lot of people that--. The people driving the buses and stuff are not properly trained, lots of difficulty with that.

EG: Yeah. It's very complicated.

JF: It helped undermine the schools to do with parents.

EG: So you were against busing?

JF: Well, not so much. If that's what we needed to do then I accept that, but I'm not persuaded in hindsight that that was one of our better moments. If someone thinks so then tell me why. I'd be curious to listen to somebody say how Memphis has benefited from this, why our children in our neighborhoods are stronger and healthier because we used busing. I haven't studied enough so I'm not prepared to take too many shots at it. It's just that I don't have any confidence that it has had a big payoff for us. But I'm really not engaged with it, so I'm not prepared to assert that very strongly. I've not heard it debated. I need to hear it debated some.

EG: Yeah. Do you remember anything at all about the 1959 city election?

JF: No, except that I had a friend that ran for some kind of office then in 1959, and I remember voting for Henry Loeb in 1959. That was still the commission form of government. We didn't go to the city council form until January of '68. The city council had only been sitting for three months when King was killed. That was part of the political difficulty.

EG: That's interesting. I didn't realize that that was so soon after the city changed.

JF: That fall we had all the elections and my recall is that January 1 all this--. It is what it is, and all of it's well recorded somewhere. But my view of it is that all of the activity took place as much as a year and a half or two years before to change the form of government and start the process and the votes and whatever to do that, and once you got the form of government change to take effect you still had to go through the political process to fill the slots and all that stuff. My memory of that first city council, the one in January of '68, it probably had three out of fifteen black members, maybe three out of thirteen. Now it's majority black.

EG: Pardon?

JF: Now it's majority black.

EG: Yeah. Did you find that people respected the black councilmen, or that people talked a lot about how this was a change, that there were blacks in public office?

JF: Oh, yeah, I do think that--. Well the first thing that they got was they got to know them, and they got to know them in some working way, which made a difference, and not in some more tokenism way that they're used to. So you're doing things differently because they view the world differently than you do, and they still do. It's

still a problem. A lot of black people, and even some of these black politicians who make mistakes, I'm convinced that when you get these economic deals that turn out to be prison term type stuff that they really believed that's what the whites had been doing all the time. They really believe that. They really believe that the whites go out to the country club and sit around and talk to each other and make all these deals, and in that part they're right. That is how networking works. But the whites know how to do the power and not break the law and the blacks aren't sophisticated enough to do that. They haven't learned how to do that yet. Some have, but not--. That's why--. The others see it and say, "Well I haven't been doing anything that y'all haven't been doing all the time." I've heard that statement before. And I want to say, well, then you don't know how it goes on, because the people that you're talking about, they don't do what lets them get caught in jail like you're fixing to go do. They don't do that. The outcome looks to you like what you did, but that's not what they're doing. So you've got two different cultural views.

EG: How strong was labor here in the 1960s?

JF: I wouldn't say labor here has ever been very strong. You had a Firestone plant that had a labor union. You had an International Harvester plant that had a labor union. But there wasn't a lot of union--. Big union labor here has been the trades: carpenters, electricians, things like that. For instance today the largest employer in the county is Fed Ex, a huge employer. They're not unionized.

EG: And what did you think too of the newspaper coverage here in the '60s of civil rights activities or covering African Americans?

JF: Well my view of it at the time was, and I have sort of a bias, because the editor in those days was Frank Ahlgren [Sr.] In my grammar school grade was Frank Ahlgren, Jr., so I knew the family well and he was a personal friend and I would go to his house and stuff for the day and so on, so I got to know his dad real well. So I sort of had a personal bias on kind of liking the Ahlgren family, thinking they would do a good job. So I'm not much of a critic of the paper.

EG: Yeah, sure.

JF: But that's because of the personal bias.

EG: Right [Laughter], sure. Was there anything else that you wanted to talk about or that we haven't discussed that you think--?

JF: No, mostly I've tried to talk about what I think you wanted to hear about, so.

EG: Oh, okay!

JF: No, I don't have anything to--.

EG: Is there anything that I haven't brought up that you think is significant?

JF: I don't think so.

EG: I guess, you said you thought that the people in the church were more racially progressive than other people. Did you find that across denominations or in your particular church?

JF: Across denominations.

EG: Across denominations.

JF: I think the church influence in Memphis, in the white community for instance --I don't know the black community that well--but in the white--. Because the most divided time we've got in town is Sunday morning between the churches. There are not

many integrated churches. There are white churches that have black members and there are black churches that have white members but they're miniscule in percentages.

EG: Yeah, right.

JF: It's just not--. The church is really divided. But from my view of the white church, my mother grew up a Southern Baptist. I grew up a Methodist and became an Episcopalian, but I'm associated with people across the board in churches. It wouldn't--. I think it's the church that let the board convening that we had about this racial student coming in the school for it not to get out of hand. Nobody walked out. Everybody stays in the game with the school. Nobody over-pushes the deal about trying to tell the headmaster--. They were not above doing something wicked, but they [1:30:18] at church. St. Mary's School at that time was housed in the Church of the Holy Communion, the church building across the street from Henry Loeb's house, so all that, in my view, ties it all together more. I think Memphis would have been much offended if anybody had tried to put fire hoses on people. What happened in Birmingham to me is--. And there are no incidents in Memphis of any real note with the Freedom Riders.

EG: Yeah. And they came through Memphis?

JF: Mm hmm.

EG: Oh, that's interesting. How do you see--you've talked about this a little bit-- Memphis as different and similar than the rest of the South?

JF: The biggest thing I think the difference is is the churches.

EG: Okay.

JF: But I'm biased on that score because I'm active with church groups.

EG: Yeah, the extent of the influence of churches in Memphis.

JF: Mm hmm. I mean it was the church that took me to Henry Loeb's office. It was the church that set up Memphis Cares. The whole cadre of the people that organized Memphis Cares once we decided to do it and had so little time to do it, the whole interaction of that process was all tied together by the church. The group that went to call on Henry Loeb goes under the guise of the cross, even the Jewish rabbis following the cross.

EG: And so it seems too that your spirituality definitely was a factor in what made you become more of a civil rights activist.

JF: I don't believe there's any question about that.

EG: Yeah, certainly. I think I've exhausted all my questions. [Laughter]

JF: Well you've got my phone number.

EG: Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

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