

TRANSCRIPT: RUSSELL B. SUGARMON, JR.

Interviewee: Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.

Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter

Interview Date: July 30, 2004

Location: Memphis, TN

Length: 92:20

START OF INTERVIEW

Elizabeth Gritter: This is Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr. on July 30, 2004 in Memphis, Tennessee.

[Transcript resumes at 00:56]

EG: [...]

Russell Sugarmon: Hmm? That's one area, one [...].

EG: Okay.

RS: This guy, the Rev. Gladney, was the coordinator. This is Ward 1, Ward 22, 7022, House District 86. He was one of our leaders out there and he was responsible for--

EG: Rev. Gladney? [...]?

RS: Yeah.

EG: [...]

RS: Hmm?

EG: He was active way back.

RS: Yeah.

EG: He was the president and then [...]

RS: Yeah, and what happens, we, you know, had the printing, the ballot and all that crap, and whatever they raised, Tri-State Bank—. Jesse Turner was our treasurer and he'd run it all through the bank.

EG: In '59 you got some support—

RS: In '59 we were—.

EG: —from Universal Life Insurance.

RS: Well that was volunteer. They let the secretaries stay late and use their equipment.

EG: Yeah, and that saved a bunch of printing, and then—.

RS: Yeah. But we had to pay for printing, you know, on brochures and that sort of stuff. We had to pay rent for headquarters, rent for telephone banks, and that sort of stuff.

EG: [And you had that financed?]

RS: We raised that through—. Yeah, Martin King spoke for a fundraiser.

EG: Oh, okay.

RS: And Daisy Bates did, and at that fundraiser you'd take up a collection.

EG: [...A. Maceo Walker.] He was president of—.

RS: Universal Life.

EG: Yeah, and also the Democratic Club, right?

RS: He was president of the Democratic Club for a few terms.

EG: Okay, because you were the executive director.

RS: Executive director, yeah, and A. W. Willis was secretary. It rotated though. Jesse Turner was—. Do you mind if [take my tie loose]?

EG: Oh, that's okay. [Pause] Oh, I was wondering what the telephones [...].

RS: Oh, that's phoning. [This is the thing they would do...] take those precincts, like we had the phones merged on the route cards, and called down the routes and tried to get somebody to take a route. We were using that to recruit also.

EG: For recruiting people. Okay. [...]

RS: So you could do it by passing the cards out by speakers, or by passing them out through churches, or by calling on the phone. You had all kind of approaches to get people signed up to handle a route wherever they lived.

EG: Okay. So [...]

RS: Yeah. If we had enough materials printed we would leave materials at the barbershops too.

EG: Oh, okay. [...]

RS: Like that red folder, that red brochure, you know, the real, why we-. You know the big-

EG: The one against-

RS: -tabloid-type-.

EG: -the sheriff.

RS: Yeah.

EG: Yeah, yeah.

RS: We would leave those.

EG: Right. [Pause] And then you had different committees of the Democratic Club, membership committees and [...] and I saw an entertainment committee as well.

RS: That was ad hoc. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: After a meeting we could [...]

EG: I saw too that they opened with prayer. How much did that [...]?

RS: Well that was, you know, just opened with a prayer. I mean it wasn't like preaching. There weren't any sermons preached.

EG: Yeah.

RS: I guess it made the—. Because a lot of us were serious churchgoers and that was sort of a—so they felt better about—

EG: Yeah.

RS: —you know, [Satan's work]. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs] So in the church you'd get the ministers' support?

RS: We had support. Well some of the ministers were more—. Some of it, the ministers would endorse us; some of it, they would encourage their congregations from the pulpit. Some of them would speak in campaigns.

EG: Oh, okay.

RS: Take an active outspoken role, and, you know, it depended on the particular minister how much of a role he played.

EG: Okay.

RS: Like H. Ralph Jackson, he was an AME minister and he was always—. He was like Rev. Sharpton was. I mean he could—. There was a minister in Chattanooga that had such a tongue, some woman challenged him at our meeting in Nashville and when he got through she had fainted. She was ill. She shouldn't have been up with her hand on her hip, shaking her finger at him, and when he got through they had to take her back to Memphis in an ambulance to the hospital. [Laughs]

EG: Oh my God, [Laughs] that sort of power.

RS: Vivian—not Vivian Henderson, C. T. Vivian, I think his name was.

EG: Oh!

RS: Do you remember that name?

EG: I've heard that name, yeah.

RS: Oh, man. I think he's in Chicago now, but he was active through his church in Chattanooga, in the Voters Council.

EG: So people in the churches [...] on Sunday [...]

RS: They'd ask whoever was the chair of the women of the church or the men's group if they'd get up and make a speech about it and they'd introduce the candidates and blah, blah, blah.

EG: Did the candidates come?

RS: Sometimes the candidates would come, you know, just let them be introduced.

EG: Oh, be introduced, so it was more [...]

RS: Yeah.

EG: And you met at [...]

RS: We met there for a long time but they finally asked us, you know, they said the housekeeping was getting to be a problem. They'd have to keep it heated at night, you know, for the meeting, and all that sort of thing, so we moved to the CME church on Linden and Lauderdale, Mt. Olive.

EG: Oh, that's where the NAACP meetings were.

RS: That's where the NAACP meets, yeah.

EG: [...] Because the headquarters of the Democratic Club were in your law office, right?

RS: Yeah.

EG: And was the new building built?

RS: The new building was built—. I mean Mutual Federal was open for business the year I came back. A. W. and Ben Hooks had put that together before I got back.

EG: Oh, and that's at 588 [...]

RS: 588 Vance. That was our office and then Mutual Federal and now the NAACP.

EG: I saw a lot of things [...]

RS: Yeah, well that's all us. We wore—

EG: Right.

RS: —different hats.

EG: Yeah. [...]

RS: Any time we had a campaign where we were endorsing and some other group was endorsing the same slate we'd try to have a cooperative [...].

EG: Oh, other black [...]. I wondered too about the Dedicated Citizens Association?

RS: I don't know. Most of those are ad hoc organizations [...].

EG: That was primarily white members, but I asked people who are white that I've interviewed that were in the Dedicated Citizens Association and they don't remember anything about it. [Laughs]

RS: [Laughs] At some point it was there, an ad hoc thing.

EG: It doesn't seem like that was so—.

RS: It's general.

EG: Yeah.

RS: Yeah, it's general.

EG: Right.

RS: They were allies of convenience at the time, I guess.

EG: And then the clubs in Shelby County, the [...] clubs, [...]?

RS: They were individual organizations, yeah, and there may be some active. I don't know. But they were civic, like they were backing the boycott of the commercial but they were more civic, you know. Politics was not the main thrust of what they were doing,—

EG: Was there a [...]

RS: —like neighborhood improvement type things.

EG: —at all?

RS: They met in their respective neighborhoods,—

EG: Okay.

RS: —usually in churches.

EG: Oh.

RS: And then they might have a meeting at LeMoyne College if they wanted—. Like Dr. Branch got them to unify for this fight and I think they were meeting over at LeMoyne College.

EG: Okay.

RS: I'm not sure but I think so.

EG: [And Vance was by Beale.]

RS: Vance parallels Beale Street.

EG: Okay. So that was really kind of the [...]. This letter talks about how your relationship with the executive committee of the Shelby County—

RS: What letter?

EG: —Democratic Club—this letter—what you [...]

RS: Oh, oh, yeah. Let's see. [Pause] Oh, we were trying to get him to speak.

EG: Yeah.

RS: Yeah. We didn't get him because we would have had more information about that. [Pause] Yeah, we were trying to get him to be a speaker.

EG: Yeah, and [...] A. Philip Randolph [...]

RS: Well we were notifying A. Philip Randolph. I think that we had some black union people come in from time to time but I don't remember him.

EG: Okay.

RS: I don't remember him coming.

EG: You were trying to—. Well [...]

RS: Is that early on?

EG: This was '62 [...] and then Jesse Turner [...] of the Democratic Party, and you were too.

RS: Yeah.

EG: [...]

RS: Something like that, yeah.

EG: And then I imagine that was well before [...], right?

RS: Yeah.

EG: [...]

RS: Yeah, it opened up, and after it started opening—. After the '60 election everything changed because we had come from being pariahs to the balance of power.

EG: Yeah, right.

RS: So that sort of—. That's what I was trying to argue with that idiot down there.

EG: Oh. [Laughs]

RS: [Laughs] He said, "We can't finance that." I said, "Hell, we're spending more money this way than we'd ever spend trying to help the economies of those countries, you know, to give their people something to do. [Phone rings; break]

[Technical difficulties; transcript resumes at 13:15]

EG: Do you know what this document was?

RS: Oh, that was just an ad hoc meeting, you know, an agenda for a meeting.

EG: Okay.

RS: It could have been any meeting. We tried to have an agenda, you know, a document, before we got to meetings because things get out of hand if you just, you know, it rambles all over everything.

EG: Right. You don't have a structure.

RS: Yeah.

EG: This document talks about a reorganization in 1958?

RS: [Pause] No, our reorganization was in—.

EG: You said the reorganization was after '59.

RS: [Reading] “The minutes of–.” [Pause] Yeah, because we reorganized after the campaign. Now there might have been a reorganization before that but it wasn’t ward and precinct stuff.

EG: You became executive director of it in ’58?

RS: A. W. was probably the–. ’59 was when most of that stuff got restructured, after that campaign.

EG: Right, but there were–.

RS: We had–. There was a club back in, oh, the early ’50s, but it was just people from all over the city came together in one body, and I don’t even think there were bylaws.

EG: Okay. Were there–? Some of these documents indicate that there were some precinct organizations before ’59, so was that more loosely structured?

RS: Yeah.

EG: [...]

RS: No, I mean–. Yeah, there was really almost no structure, president, secretary or whatever the name of the club was, and its boundaries probably were coterminous with the farthest-away member–

EG: Right.

RS: –[Laughs] from wherever it met.

EG: Yeah, so then–.

RS: Some of them had, like the 48th Ward Civic Club, Frank Kilpatrick, that was like the 48th Ward.

EG: Okay.

RS: Some of them had—. Orange Mound Civic Club; that might have been two or three precincts. Orange Mound [...] which is out near Melrose High School, that area.

EG: So there were a few and some of these precinct clubs were used in the '59 campaign.

RS: And a lot of our precinct clubs had membership out of those civic clubs.

EG: Yeah, right, there was overlapping membership and leadership, yeah. [Pause] Where did you get financing from for those [...]?

RS: On a regular basis we had no financing. We were in it on an ad hoc basis and if we wanted to have an affair we'd raise money. Some of the clubs had budgets and they raised—like had fish fries and stuff like that.

EG: Oh, okay. Did you get financing like from the Kennedy campaign?

RS: Yeah, for—. In the Kennedy campaign what we got was basically through organized labor that the Kennedy campaign asked to work with us and finance our ward efforts and stuff.

EG: How through organized labor?

RS: Well the CIO—the old AFL-CIO?

EG: Yeah.

RS: They had two, the Firestone workers, and there were two or three locals here that were—. See, AFL locals didn't work with us. They were mostly not in sympathy because they were carpenters and bricklayers and all and they—

EG: The national [...]

RS: —were mostly white. Well the AFL national, until they merged, they were much more conservative than the CIO was.

EG: Oh, okay.

RS: So A. Philip Randolph and all of those out of the CIO, the factory production line workers, were the ones that were the leaders on desegregation.

EG: Oh, okay, separate alliances.

RS: Yeah, so that was—. Yeah, the alliance came through. George Holloway was a shop steward at Firestone here.

EG: Okay.

RS: And we had a couple guys who were rubber workers—I mean he was a rubber worker—a couple guys who were meatpackers. We had two or three packing houses here, and those unions were the ones who worked with us politically, here and in Chattanooga too, so they had campaign organizers for their locals and until we came along here they primarily worked in the locals but when we came along they worked with us and they had a guy in Washington who brought enough money for us to get literature printed and all that kind of stuff, [...] headquarters, rented phone banks and that sort of stuff.

EG: Okay, so you could [...] and that was probably during the Kennedy campaign?

RS: That was the Kennedy campaign, yeah. A guy came down from Washington with the money. [Laughs]

EG: Okay.

RS: He was a union man but it was—.

EG: A union man, oh, and then [with the alliances with the Kennedys.]

RS: Yeah, because our folk, you know, in those days—I've got to have that somewhere in there—the bulk of our people in Memphis at that time were either maids or cooks, and masses of them picked and chopped cotton.

EG: Okay.

RS: We had a few doctors, a few lawyers,—

EG: Yeah.

RS: —and that sort of thing, and preachers, but our folk, you know if they took a day off of work—. 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.

EG: Right. So the membership of your club was largely working class, as was the black population in Memphis.

RS: Yeah.

EG: Women were more involved with the grassroots work and then men—

RS: Yeah.

EG: —had more of the leadership roles.

RS: Well the guys, usually you could get men to volunteer to put up signs, you could get them to volunteer to drive, deliver stuff, but the detail—. 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, 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.

EG: Yeah.

RS: It's sort of a functional allocation, and I think that the—. 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—.

EG: [Speak.]

RS: Yeah. That was an interesting part of the culture.

EG: Yeah. Who were some of those strong women?

RS: Well, Jennie Betts was one. You know—.

EG: Oh, uh huh.

RS: What's your impression of her?

EG: Pardon?

RS: I said what was your impression of her? [Laughs]

EG: [...] [Laughs]

RS: And the other one, oh, the thin lady, Ms. Wheeler, she and her husband both.

I mean she was the spokesperson for that, you know. She didn't raise her voice and she didn't speak a lot but she was to the point when she opened her mouth.

EG: Yeah.

RS: The woman who had the heart attack as a result of Vivian Henderson's arguing with her, Willa Mae Williams Walker,—

EG: Oh, okay.

RS: —she was outspoken, Willa—.

EG: I saw her name.

RS: —Walker.

EG: She ran too, right?

RS: Yeah.

EG: For like the executive committee of the Democratic Party.

RS: Yeah. Oh, God. Damn it, I forgot. There was another woman you should have met because her husband was a union organizer—

EG: Oh!

RS: —and they used to go down to Mississippi, which was hard plowing, but she's very articulate and she's still here.

EG: What's her name?

RS: I'm going to try to get you back here. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: Ulterior—.

EG: I will be back.

RS: I mean soon. I'm trying to find—. [Pause] I'm going to tell Maxine [because this woman would be furious that I blanked on her name]. [Pause; break]

EG: Oh, this was—. This is just a listing of one of the [...] You had precinct—. That was one of your committees at the Democratic Club, was precinct organization.

RS: Yeah, they kept a report on, you know, new ones being organized and the ones that were lagging and any kind of [...]

EG: When was this [work]?

RS: That's the one I was—. No. Let me see. I don't know. This looks like—. [Pause] This had to be in the '60s, the early '60s, because Rev. C. F. 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.

EG: Oh, yeah, with like the [...]. Yeah. [...]

RS: He was the first chairman of the Tennessee Voters Council statewide.

EG: Oh, that's right, because the Masons are really big [...], right?

RS: Yeah.

EG: Were you a Mason?

RS: Third degree. That's as low as you can go.

EG: Oh, really? [Laughs]

RS: [Laughs]

EG: I didn't know they had degrees.

RS: That's where you get beat on, you know. That's where "the third degree" came from, I think.

EG: The what?

RS: "The third degree." That's where the police would-. "Getting the third degree" is when you got beat up.

EG: Oh, really?

RS: I said when you got initiated you got beat up, so I got hung at the beat-up level.

EG: Oh my.

RS: [Laughs]

EG: You didn't [go past the third degree]?

RS: Well I just joined because Benny thought I ought to.

EG: Well, Benny, he was-.

RS: He joins everything. He's high up in it, you know.

EG: Yeah, he was in everything too.

RS: Some people are organizational people, you know,—

EG: Yeah.

RS: —and Benny was. I don't think he ever saw an organization he didn't like.

EG: [Laughs]

RS: Except maybe the Klan, you know.

EG: Yeah, yeah. Would you get lists of [...] you would collect that sort of data [...] blacks in government?

RS: [Pause] Hmm. I didn't even know this was not something they couldn't let us have, that they didn't normally let people have. J. T. Lanier—. I don't know why we— probably trying to help get promotions.

EG: Yeah.

RS: [Pause] Charlie Graham, he was one of the people who went to Morehouse with me.

EG: Did he get kicked out? [Laughs]

RS: No, he didn't get kicked out.

EG: Okay. [Laughs]

RS: One of the others who got kicked out wound up as a regional director of the Post Office here, I mean not through any of our influence just on his own ability. I didn't even know he was in the—. I didn't know what happened to any of them till I got out of college.

EG: Yeah.

RS: We went our separate ways after [...]

EG: Did you meet a lot with senators?

RS: Yeah, yeah, Kefauver, Gore, the one that took Kefauver's place, the one who wanted to run for-. Well he ran because he beat Clement.

EG: Oh, Bass?

RS: Ross Bass, yeah.

EG: Yeah.

RS: Kefauver took A. W. and me to lunch in the Senate dining room where we first got introduced to the famous Senate navy bean soup.

EG: Oh, really? [Laughs]

RS: Yeah.

EG: [Pause] Volunteer organizations, that refers to the Volunteer [...] Association?

RS: '61 [Pause] He agreed to appoint A. W. on something. The transit authority. They were setting up a transit authority, I guess.

EG: [That was] controversial, that A. W. was appointed to the transit authority board and [...] and A. Maceo Walker [...].

RS: Oh, I don't know what-. [Laughs] Oh, Maceo might have decided he'd rather be it than A. W.

EG: Yeah. [Laughs]

RS: And I'm sure A. W. didn't have anything to say about it because he was their general counsel, Universal Life Insurance Co., so that was basically his boss, so if Maceo decided he wanted it. [Laughs]

EG: Yeah. [Laughs]

RS: That was in-house between them, you know.

EG: Right, right.

RS: Yeah, that Universal was I think the third-biggest black life insurance company in the country.

EG: Did you work a lot with black businessmen?

RS: There weren't a lot of them to work with; I mean the doctors and the lawyers, professionals, not necessarily businessmen. We had some small shopkeepers and all [...] but most of the black businesses—. Well, the ones around Beale, there were barbecue places there—we can go into one now when we go to lunch—he's got pictures of Sybil Shepherd and some of the locals. I mean they have—. Johnny what's-his-name, there was a barbecue place on Hernando, right off Beale, and people used to come in, people from Hollywood. He had pictures of them, and they stayed out of politics.

EG: Oh, okay.

RS: That was because of the Crump machine because he would harass people unless you were in line, you know. Well, there was a black pharmacist here, the Martins.

EG: Yeah.

RS: And he put detectives—. They said they suspected them of selling drugs, so you got frisked every time you went in there until they finally left and went to Chicago.

EG: Oh, right, in the 1940s.

RS: Yeah.

EG: [...]

RS: So with that kind of atmosphere the black businesspeople tried not to—. It wasn't anything [...] but they tried to stay off the radar.

EG: Yeah. [...] for a precinct club, or—?

RS: Yeah. This might have been put together for a campaign where we were grouping things by some kind of house district, or something like that. Every election we'd have to put together packets. You grouped the—. A senate race overlapped two or three house districts, a state senate race, so we'd put combinations together so that the people knew which districts they lived in, what senate district and blah, blah, blah, because one person might be working for a house district person and a senator and then a county-wide office, so you have to identify the precincts so our folk would know which ones they were talking about when they went door to door.

EG: Were there clubs in all the black precincts?

RS: Most of them. There was our club and there were some others in some of them, like O. Z. Evers, he had something they called the Unity League, and they were basically in Binghampton.

EG: [...]

RS: Hmm?

EG: [...]

RS: There were some—. The center of it was around Evers and that neighborhood, his church and the folk he had immediate relationships with, but some of them were—. And some of them just got organized or met just before elections so they could [get money for] putting up posters [Laughs] from politicians running, you know.

EG: So they could what?

RS: They could raise political money for putting up posters, [Laughs] I mean that was the main reason for some of them to be—. Some of them were legitimate but not citywide.

EG: Oh, so it was just before—ad hoc before the election.

RS: Ours was the only countywide.

EG: Oh, so the politicians would funnel them money?

RS: They wouldn't work with us because they couldn't get the money out of the campaign that they could use for whatever, you know.

EG: Yeah.

RS: A bottle of whiskey or whatever, your own personal use, but ours, we had budgets and we paid people for specific work in a specific place on Election Day.

EG: I saw that Mr. Lockard, he too had his own political club.

RS: Well, Lockard had his so he'd have some leverage independent of us. [...]

That's in his nature. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: Oh, you figured that out, huh?

EG: [...]

RS: Oh, yeah. It's not a one-note town. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: It never has been.

EG: [...] What was the Tennessee Federation of Democratic Leagues?

RS: Let me see. I don't know.

EG: [...]

RS: Is that Lockard's?

EG: This one, yeah.

RS: Oh, that might have been a—. Let me see. Oh, '64. That's early on. That's all local. These are all local people. It sort of faded into the—. H. A. Gilliam, his son hates me to this day.

EG: Really?

RS: Yeah. His son owns a radio station here.

EG: Yeah.

RS: Gilliam was an officer in Universal. He didn't have much stock. The basic stock in Universal, the Walkers, the Olives, and the Willises owned over ninety percent of the stock, or eighty-five percent. They had control, you know.

EG: [...] [Laughs]

RS: I called his father an "Uncle Tom," and I think his father made sure that his son had no—. He doesn't know that. I mean he just knows—. He don't think much of me, and I'm sure that was his father's work. No, they were—. One group was trying to get me out of the campaign. I agreed to run, not to get—. I didn't want a damn job. If I got out and took a job I'd just be selling out, see. I said, "If you want to sell out, you sell out."

EG: With—?

RS: Gilliam, Sr.

EG: He wanted you to take a job somewhere?

RS: The city was going to give me a job to get out of the race. They were going to buy me out of the race.

EG: Oh! In '59?

RS: Yeah, and I wouldn't even talk to them. A. W. and Benny [...]. So Gilliam was—. I said, "Look, I didn't run for the—. I ran [to get us] political power."

EG: Oh, not so you could get a job.

RS: Yeah, and I said, "I'm not going to." I said, "You want to sell out, you sell out," and he's never forgiven me for that. He's dead now, but he still hasn't forgiven me.

[Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: I keep asking the medium, "Have you heard anything from a guy named Gilliam?" [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs] Well I saw that at the rally when King spoke there was some outcry against Uncle Toms, and that was [...].

RS: That was people like Gilliam [...], so.

EG: Was there also like a group of black ministers who endorsed white candidates?

RS: I don't remember any in that election, openly.

EG: Yeah.

RS: There might have been some not openly, because the overwhelming bulk of the black preachers were going with the flow [...]

EG: Yeah, right. Yeah, I saw [...] railed against traitors and Uncle Toms, because there was just such a big move to have people unified.

RS: They sort of steamrolled over those people early.

EG: Yeah. When was this [...]? [...]

RS: That's just—. Yeah. This was a draft, a working draft of a—. I think I've got a printed copy of this.

EG: Yeah.

RS: I was looking through this morning.

EG: I do have a—. This was—. Were you invited to a lot of meetings like this, like from the governor?

RS: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I'm still getting them, not from the governor, but—. I had to call her back, bless her heart. This lady called me yesterday. I called her this morning, Ms. Irma Williams, and she told the receptionist out there that she was the first black woman mayor of Gunnison, Mississippi, and that's where my father grew up. She said they were having a heritage thing and she's trying to get people who left the city, or the town, to come back so that their young people could see that just because they were in Gunnison they could still make a career out of their lives, do something positive with their lives.

EG: Oh, cool. Are you going to go?

RS: I don't know. It depends. I told her I would try. But my father was raised by a farmer, Bob Woods, who had nine hundred acres down there, which is a lot of land in those days for a black farmer to own. He had about twenty mules and in the summertime we'd go down there and ride the mules after they got out of the field. I never learned how to ride a horse but I could ride a mule. There was a blacksmith's shop across the railroad tracks from his house and a guy named [...] used to let me—. He made horseshoes and he designed it and bent it on this anvil, so he'd let me pump the bellows and every now and then he'd let me take a hammer and try to beat some iron into place. But the main attraction there was they had one of those daguerreotype, you know, where you hold two pictures up in this thing—.

EG: Yeah, yeah.

RS: They had, oh, God, it must have been a hundred pictures of the Civil War, Matthew Brady photographs, and I just loved—. I've often thought about that. I wished I had asked him to let me have them when, you know, just asked him, because I used to go over there and just spend hours looking at those pictures too, daguerreotypes. I could go down and spend a week or two down there and there was a dog trot, you know, the house and then the porch and the shed and the kitchen was back in the back, and the first thing you'd hear was the cow being milked in the morning, the milk hitting the bucket. You'd hear the roosters crowing and the milking and then you could smell that bacon being fried or something being fried. It's a great way to wake up. [Laughs]

EG: Yeah. [Laughs] How do you spell the name of the city?

RS: Gunnison, G-u-n-n-i-s-o-n.

EG: Oh, this too just looks like a list of [...] When do you think [...]

RS: These all look like ancient lists. Yeah, this is probably early on. This is probably right after we got organized, because I think the first year we started out with about fifty precincts, and this looks like it.

EG: Okay.

RS: It got up to eighty. We hit a little over a hundred. That would surge sometimes; I would guess the second Kennedy campaign, or Johnson-Goldwater I guess it was.

EG: The Johnson-Goldwater campaign?

RS: Yeah.

EG: That was the high water mark.

RS: That was the high water mark.

EG: Okay.

RS: Some of them would come up and they'd drop by the wayside but we had a backbone of about sixty strong clubs and the rest of them were varying degrees of continuity.

EG: What was the Democratic Voters Council? That was later on?

RS: The Democratic Voters—. Well, no that's the Democratic Club. The Tennessee Voters Council, that might have been—. It was us under some guise, I guess.

EG: Yeah. It seems like that was like in the '70s?

RS: I think that might have been adopted to just—because the Tennessee Voters Council was statewide.

EG: How long did the Tennessee Voters Council last?

RS: I think it's still in operation. It's not as active, but I spoke to a group in Chattanooga about five, six years ago.

EG: Oh, really?

RS: Yeah.

EG: Okay. And this looks like an early list too, of the Tennessee Voters Council.

RS: In Memphis when Harold Ford, Sr. got elected the Ford family—. I mean, you know, they've got more political active and [...] people than we got seats. [Laughs] They sucked all the air out of the political [world] here.

EG: They what?

RS: Sucked all the air out of the—

EG: Oh!

RS: —political [world] here.

EG: Yeah, [with the machine.]

RS: And Herenton is probably the first one who's won against the Ford machine, or in spite of the Ford machine, and that has sort of loosened it up, so.

EG: Yeah.

RS: Let's see, [...], Avon Williams. Well you can tell where they're all from. This is one of the early--

EG: That would be like ['52.]

RS: Yeah, something like that.

EG: When you started.

RS: Yeah. Let's see, these are cities up north, Sevierville, Bristol. Bristol's up on the Virginia border. We were statewide.

EG: Because one of the purposes too was to go in and organize these communities.

RS: And try to get our votes coordinated statewide, you know--

EG: Yeah.

RS: --in statewide elections.

EG: In communities where there was a lower level of political participation, particularly in rural areas [...].

RS: Well the Masons, the Masonic groups, were quite important in some of those rural areas in getting--

EG: Because that was the organization--

RS: --continuity. Yeah.

EG: –[the blacks were in.] And the Shelby County Democratic Club too, you went to like Fayette County and Haywood [...], well the NAACP too [...]

RS: As a matter of fact there's a guy in Fayette County. What the hell's his name? Did you ever read a book called *Our Portion of Hell*? It was written about Tent City in Fayette County.

EG: Oh, no. I should.

RS: How much have you digested? You're a—. Your ambition is to be a historian.

EG: It is [Laughs] and it's like one topic—. This is probably—. Well, I'm keeping in mind that I'm going to write this [...] so I'm asking broader questions.

RS: McFerrin. John McFerrin owned a store up in Fayette County, he may be still around, but his nephew is here practicing law. This hit me last night. I must have talked to him when [...] running for juvenile court. Don't mention this when you talk to him, but I think—. The city's a mess—I gather you've gathered that right now—with taxes and all the crap,—

EG: Yeah, yeah.

RS: –inadequate funding, and the problem is we have two legs of a money stream for government and every state around us has three, and Mississippi has three plus the gambling. We have sales taxes and property taxes and every state around us has sales, property, and income, so if you want to raise a hundred and fifty million dollars here we've got seventy-five million off of sales, seventy-five off of property, they've got a third, a third, and a third and they can do it fifty, fifty, fifty. So we're at past diminishing returns on—. The more we raise sales taxes the more folks go shopping in Kentucky and Mississippi. Wherever they're at the border the next state over they can buy stuff cheaper.

EG: Oh, [...], yeah.

RS: And the more we go up on property taxes in Memphis, Desoto County is the fastest growing county in Mississippi. It pushes people over. So they have a crisis of resources and they won't pass a damn income tax, and I think they're going to have to, because, you know. But the first thing they could do is consolidate government, which probably won't happen for a good while, but they can, I think, consolidate schools but for one thing: Most of the families in the last fifteen years who've moved out of the city into the county moved to get away from the schools, because they have nightmares of their kids getting off the bus in some black gang-type atmosphere. So I think we ought to go back to neighborhood schools and start a policy of pupil-teacher ratios being lowered with the schools serving the poorest income neighborhoods first, and take truancy and delinquency off the teachers' plate and make that a juvenile court responsibility.

EG: Oh, okay.

RS: See, the juvenile court has adult jurisdiction too, for neglect and this sort of thing.

EG: Right.

RS: And the busing, the only kids being bused now anywhere are poor black kids who go to some school that their mamas don't even know how to get there if they wanted to go, or they can't go because they have no transportation because the bus lines aren't that extensive, you know, in terms of getting you all over town. So putting them in neighborhood schools would take away that as an excuse for being involved in your [kids' school], and giving juvenile court the responsibility, because half the teachers have

to deal with parents that want to beat them up, you know, or kids that want to beat them up, in that area. So make juvenile—because they have police power.

EG: Yeah.

RS: So the teachers can teach, and I think if you got that then you might be able to consolidate and have a single source tax base and give the board of education the power [to tax] and let its budget year be first in terms of city and county, like our fiscal year is June. That would give them some priority on whatever revenues and let the other two bodies sweat the damn increases they need.

EG: Yeah, and targeting with the lower ratios [...].

RS: But this juvenile court judge hasn't resigned because he doesn't like anybody who wants to succeed him. First, they started out attacking him. Well we backed him, and after he got in office Shelby County had the highest child support collection rate in the—. They [...] half the child support paid, and that was his whole program, that the mothers need this help, and everything else was sort of secondary. So he organized the juvenile court and it's a much better run organization, and I said well, you know, due process is going to be the next role, because what he's done is [given orders]. At least you know when you get a court docket and this sort of thing, and his contribution happened [...] When I was a young lawyer I'd go to see him about somebody's case—no her, it was a woman then.

EG: Oh, McCain?

RS: McCain.

EG: Yeah.

RS: And they'd say, "Well, she's not here," and you look out the window and see her getting in her car. She just leaves you there. I mean you have no idea. Unless you knew what it was like before this man, you can't say a damn thing about this man, because what he had done is-. [Break; end of side A] -like that city council structure we had in place and never got to use because we had the runoff, the guy-. The commission passed a runoff, which it couldn't do.

EG: Yeah.

RS: The legislature does that thing. So five or six at-large seats and then district seats, so that two or three district people had to be, you know, you'd make the numbers so it took two or three district people [to trust] an at-large to carry anything, but that would make it possible for the at-large people to look beyond the districts.

EG: Right, right, the whole-

RS: The needs of the community as-

EG: -community.

RS: -a whole.

EG: Right.

RS: It would give the districts some protection for getting something articulated because they've got somebody right out of whatever the district is that they could get to [...] people in that district.

EG: It was that way for awhile, right, where there were five district seats and six at-large?

RS: We had it set up.

EG: Yeah, but then it changed to all districts.

RS: What happened was they wanted to go to [all districts] and enough of us said, wait a minute; this is—because all districts is a mess. Then all you can do is trade with each of the district people, “I’ll vote for your thing if you’ll vote for my thing,” and somehow you have to get some officials who can look beyond the parochial needs of the district.

EG: Yeah.

RS: So the at-large thing was designed to keep us as a minority from getting anything, you know.

EG: Oh, right.

RS: With runoffs. You know, with the runoff, you’re guaranteed not to [...] But at this point—. That’s what I’d like to see, if you could get that [system] and see what happens because I think you might then be able to build a constituency that reaches across the individual neighborhood sort of thing.

EG: Going back to an at-large system?

RS: Yeah, an at-large thing.

EG: Yeah.

RS: And those people would probably produce the people who produce the best mayors in the future, a broader view.

EG: Now that things have progressed so much [...]

RS: But if they reorganize the school system, that’s what I think I’d like to see them do and see if it works, because this thing ain’t working very well right now. The mayor called our school board a disgrace and I told somebody I slept better that night than I have in years. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: Because they are. [Laughs]

EG: Yeah, yeah.

RS: They are, and I don't see how some of the good ones stand it.

EG: Yeah, it must be frustrating [to see the way the elected officials are now.]

RS: Oh, God.

EG: To get people in that [...]

RS: It ain't like it used to was. [Laughs]

EG: Yeah. That's one thing I've run across in my interviews about how the decline [in people who hold] public office, in the quality. This looks like an early list too of the Democratic Club.

RS: Yeah. Sawyer's the guy who owned the building we were in, on Vance Ave.

EG: Oh, okay.

RS: His wife is the one who told the janitor to clean out that empty room and all those boxes. She didn't know what it was, and he didn't either. So that's--

EG: That's where all the-- But you said--

RS: What you've got is the flotsam and jetsam of my life in terms of politics.

EG: You said some of it was in [...]

RS: Yeah. Well we sent some up there. Now I don't know what they did with it.

EG: Yeah.

RS: [Pause; reading names] [...] Maybe this-- [...] Gladney [...] Willa Mae Williams-- No, that's the one who had the heart attack [Laughs] after that preacher

jumped on her. [...] Gertrude Turner. George Holloway was a union leader that lived in Klondike. [Continues reading; pause] Yeah, this has to be early, because—.

EG: Yeah, '59.

RS: Yeah, something like that. J. F. Estes is on here and he died early on in this stuff.

EG: [...]

RS: Hmm?

EG: Fayette County [...] What do these things mean, like D-plus and [25]?

RS: Oh, this is a sit-in.

EG: Yeah.

RS: Loitering, disturbing the peace. I don't know. D-plus. I think it may mean dismissed.

EG: Oh, dismissed.

RS: It could be dismissed.

EG: What about [...]?

RS: Where is that?

EG: [...]

RS: That might have been. That's what they wanted to get anyway.

EG: Okay.

RS: But I think we got all of them dismissed. This is the one that—. You see the name at the top of the second page?

EG: Marion Barry? [Laughs]

RS: Yeah. [Laughs]

EG: Oh, and this too. Is this students who were sitting in the front of the bus?

RS: Yeah. Those two are—. Let's see, May 7, 1960, June, July, August, September, October, November.

EG: And you showed me this before, where you kept track of where you were [...] in the campaign.

RS: Oh, yeah.

EG: Is the top number the countdown to the election?

RS: Yeah, the days out.

EG: Yeah.

RS: I had a whole stack of that stuff [where you just paste them] together and you start at Election Day and you work out, you know, day one is Election Day, and then one day less and out to—. If [...] wants ninety days out to start where you start.

EG: Yeah.

RS: And then you have committee functions and calendar [...] on there.

EG: And you did that in '59 and after that?

RS: Yeah.

EG: And you were involved in '58 as the campaign manager for Wilburn, right?

RS: Yeah. Where did you get that?

EG: I found it in the literature. [Laughs]

RS: Okay. Yeah, I helped him.

EG: [Pause] You decided early in 1959 that you were going to [...] a coordinated effort [...]

RS: Yeah. We had printed a little pamphlet, you know, the whole thing, 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, you know.

EG: Oh, when you—.

RS: When we backed him, yeah.

EG: Yeah, yeah.

RS: And 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?

EG: Yeah.

RS: 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.

EG: Did the booklet contain what the organization was about?

RS: I haven’t seen one. It—. Yeah, there was a little preamble and then the offices and the people who manned the offices and the precinct leaders.

EG: You know I found one page of the bylaws of the Democratic Club. No one seems to have it, unfortunately, of like your mission statement and [...]

RS: Yeah, yeah. Do any of them remember it? [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs] That’s what I was going to ask you, if you remember it.

RS: I remember, but—. I mean I can describe—. Well I told you how it was set up.

EG: Yeah, with the—.

RS: Precinct clubs.

EG: Yeah, the executive committee.

RS: Those people were the central committee and the central committee elected the statewide and the countywide officers.

EG: Yeah. [...]

RS: Mm hmm. What election is this one?

EG: [...] the '59 one. [...]

RS: This is a city election.

EG: Yeah. Oh, that there was a [unity ticket] that was [...] in '59 of white candidates.

RS: It might have been, with us?

EG: It was like [...] and Loeb and so forth, so I was wondering if that would have been put out if not for the [...]

RS: That might have been Evers' group.

EG: No, it was done by the Dedicated Citizens Committee.

RS: Well that was an ad hoc committee then, I guess, for–

EG: Yeah. That–

RS: –that election, yeah.

EG: –became the [group that] no one remembers. [Laughs] [...] Democrat Club [...] and the War on Poverty.

RS: Yeah.

EG: [...] headquarters and local groups would come and–

RS: Well Nashville was where we met.

EG: Oh, Nashville was where you met.

RS: Yeah, at Fisk.

EG: Yeah. Did you have a lot of contact with the local [...]

RS: Yeah, we did, in West Tennessee, and Nashville for Middle Tennessee, and Chattanooga and Knoxville.

EG: Oh, and then, so the—.

RS: The urban cities were sort of the hubs.

EG: Those were like the headquarters of the different regions.

RS: Yeah.

EG: And so the local [...]

RS: Jackson, Tennessee was one. Joe Merry, I saw his name on one of those documents. “Special Report.” [Continues reading; pause] This is 1964.

EG: Yeah. Oh, you went to the independence ceremony in Trinidad and Tobago.

RS: Oh, yeah.

EG: That was your [...]

RS: Kennedy, yeah.

EG: Yeah. That must have been cool.

RS: It was cool, but it would have been better—. We flew down on the Columbine, the presidential plane, so the governmental delegation was on the plane. I had a friend I knew before, [Wayburn]. He was part of the official delegation and he had his own itinerary. He had meetings set up with people who were interested in unions. It might have been some of the unions there, I’m not sure. But he had a whole list of things that was off the agenda, and he’d come back and he would go to some fantastic parties. [Laughs] Jump-ups, they called them, you know, where it was so tight you could just jump up and down. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: For us they had—. 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. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: I don't know which one. [Laughs] We saw as much of Trinidad as we could stand through a car window. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: And this other guy, he was coming in, and I said, "Man, don't tell me all this stuff. All I got to see it's what out that damn car window and you're coming in with alcohol on your breath."

EG: [Laughs]

RS: But the British really know—. Pomp and circumstance is second nature to them. The seat of government was in a building in the city on the harbor—what is the name of that thing?—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 it away from the Dutch, you know, Trinidad.

EG: Oh, uh huh.

RS: And you know it just reeked of history, because everything was old,—

EG: Wow.

RS: –and the balcony along the second floor of this building, that’s where we sat the night of the–.

EG: Of the independence ceremony.

RS: Yeah. 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, [...] 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 at midnight and–. No, 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.

EG: Oh, wow.

RS: It was fantastic. [Laughs]

EG: Wow. [Laughs]

RS: I’ll never forget that.

EG: Yeah. It must have been one of the real highlights of the–.

RS: It was. It was like looking at a movie except this was real.

EG: Yeah. [...]

RS: Oh, it’s 12:30. You want to eat?

EG: Oh, okay. Yeah.

[Transcript resumes at 17:25]

EG: I was wondering what the decision making process of the Democratic Club
[...]

RS: Oh, we would do questionnaires about issues. You've seen one of them, I think.

EG: Yeah, yeah.

RS: Well that was prepared, I think, for the state. We did the same thing on local issues, for the local candidates, and they could come in and make a presentation and then our folk would—. They'd nominate and debate and we'd vote.

EG: Would the leadership decide ahead of time who to endorse and then [...]?

RS: No. The central committee did the voting and we prepared that information for the central committee and the people would come and talk. They could come and get to ask questions.

EG: Okay. But you set the agenda.

RS: Yeah.

EG: One of the people [...] ahead of time [...] also anyone who wanted [...]

RS: Yeah, it wasn't—. Nothing was locked in concrete in terms of what the agenda was. We just wanted to have an orderly process of going down [the agenda].

EG: Yeah. The Tennessee Voters Council, what was the decision making process like for that?

RS: It was similar except that we couldn't [have] all the membership assemble like that. They had a general meeting in Nashville two or three times and we'd try to have

a questionnaire response thing and make that available. The major candidates would come and make their presentations.

EG: And then representatives from throughout the state would come to wherever the meeting was.

RS: Yeah.

EG: [And then the representatives would debate and decide–]

RS: By vote, yeah.

EG: –by voting [...]

RS: Yeah.

EG: [...] So that was [...] Did you find that–? You mentioned that in 1960 you used your voting leverage to get [the hiring of the first black deputy sheriff.] Do you think because of your political power you also [were able to influence better police treatment of blacks?]

RS: I'm not really sure because at that point the big issue of police brutality had to do with the sheriffs and some sheriffs' conduct with Emmitt Till. I don't mean Emmitt Till, the guy here, [...] beaten. He ran from them in a pickup truck and they beat him and he died, but the police hadn't–. You have issues about [...] about resisting arrest crap but nothing–. I mean I'm not saying it was reform but the incidents that presented themselves were more with the deputy sheriffs at that point.

EG: [...]–

RS: I don't remember.

EG: –[...] That was when you did the [...]

RS: Something like, yeah, '62, '67. I'm not–. Do you have a copy of that,–

EG: I do. I'll make you a copy

RS: –of whatever that date was? That had happened some time during that sheriff's previous term.

EG: Oh, it was the previous term.

RS: Of that sheriff, see.

EG: Okay. [...] What about [...]

RS: Well we started–. They paid more attention to bringing in policemen, and I think the city followed the county with the signage stuff. The county broke the ice on that, though.

EG: In terms of–?

RS: “White only,” you know restrooms and all that stuff.

EG: Oh, okay, public facilities.

RS: Yeah, and then the sit-ins were happening at the same time, so some of that–. Like the transit authority case, they had started open seating before the case came up, and the same thing on–. I had the county school system but that superintendent said we're busing now, you know. White kids [...] and black kids [...] so we can bus wherever you tell us. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: The airport, that had been filed, and you talked with that guy. He was representing Dobbs House. What's his name?

EG: Prewitt?

RS: Prewitt, yeah.

EG: Well that [...] because I ran across [...] Carl Rowan.

RS: Carl Rowan, that's who it was, yeah. That publicity, they just-. [Phone rings; break]

EG: Do you think if Carl Rowan [...]?

RS: The national publicity-. Well we might have had to go to court. I'm not sure, because I don't think they were as hardnosed as some of the elected officials. I mean the elected officials were worried about their constituency. These people's constituents were travelers, the people they were concerned about, and the reputation of Dobbs House, so.

EG: Oh, [...] the restaurant, yeah. Do you think it was the same group of leaders [...] Democratic Club [...]

RS: NAACP. Different hats, same people.

EG: Do you think that was healthy, to have the same group of leaders?

RS: Well, I mean most of the people with any kind of commitment and abilities were in them, you know. [Laughs] So there was not as much outside option, you know.

EG: Yeah. And then you have-. Well, [...]

RS: And Jesse Turner, he became a squire, a county commissioner, and he rapidly became the finance chairman, and after his first term they all expected him to be the finance chairman. Like, this is Joe Carr. He's the secretary of state for the state of Tennessee, and *Baker v. Carr*—one man, one vote—Charles Baker was the chairman of the Shelby County Commission when Turner was there. So Turner must have been the longest term finance chairman. I don't know of anybody any longer. But he was so respected; it was just a forgone conclusion. They just relied on him, you know.

EG: Wow.

RS: I mean for the county. It's been fucked up ever since he got off. They haven't had anybody with that kind of—. He was a CPA, a banker, and his integrity was beyond touch.

EG: Yeah.

RS: I mean they had a comfortable feeling and I don't think they were prepared for the adjustment. That's why we're so screwed up now. But he was very respected.

EG: You said that there were [...] Shelby County Club some whites did provide [...] like transportation [...]

RS: We had a lot of volunteer drivers and we had a lot of whites who were doing that, and we'd get financial contributions from some of them. But we spent every dime on elections.

EG: [There weren't actually white members?]

RS: In LeMoyne Gardens. Ms.—.

EG: Oh, Valiant.

RS: Margaret Valiant, yeah. She was one. But I mean she was—. Her persona transcended her race. I mean it was not—. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs] [...] What was she doing in LeMoyne Gardens?

RS: I have no idea.

EG: [Laughs]

RS: She came here to run a settlement center called Bethlehem Gardens, which was across the street from the Lutheran Cooperative School, right there at Porter and Walker, right next to Metropolitan Baptist Church. It's now a parking lot. She ran that for awhile and I think when she retired that it was—. It was one of these church supported

charity-type things. I forgot which church it was. It might have been—. It probably was Lutheran. But what her retirement was, that's where she could afford, you know, and it was close to where her roots in the neighborhood were. But in those days, see, because when we were living in LeMoyne Gardens—. My first wife and I lived right across from LeMoyne Gardens on Lenow Ave. and our front door opened up on a strip parking space for the tenants of two of those multifamily buildings and we just parked there. I mean we did things, like we came home from a dance and had been out drinking and dancing and blah, blah, blah, get home, get out of the car, open the front door, go to bed, wake up the next morning, and we had left the windows down and my wallet on the front seat of the car, and it's still there. It was like that. At 10:00 on a Sunday morning I go out there, and I hadn't even missed my wallet till I go out to get in my car and there's my wallet, and I open it and everything's in it. They never touched it. So I mean it was that kind of a—.

EG: [...]

RS: Yeah.

EG: Wow. Well I mean the precinct club [...]

RS: Well the precinct club was in the community, I mean it was of the community, and I would be there any time they wanted me to talk about something, [or one of us would].

EG: Yeah. I really [...] her.

RS: She's quite a lady.

EG: Yeah.

RS: I told you her daughter started out on an oil rig?

EG: Oh, yeah.

RS: That's the one.

EG: Did you find that apathy was a problem [...]?

RS: Not in '59, because that wound up the city, black and white, and for a few elections after '59 we had momentum, and like the precinct clubs—. When we boycotted Main Street we had a picket every, I'd say fifteen to twenty feet, on both sides of Main from Auction to Beale, and it went on all day. Were you here when Vasco was talking about this guy that used to walk with his group from Florida St. over for their time for the picket line and they'd do their picket and then walk all the way back? [Darrow] Mosley was his name. I remember now.

EG: [Darrow] Mosley

RS: On Florida St.

EG: [...]

RS: I'm saying, we had—and the three or four elections following that. We'd put out our ballot and you could go around to the polls and there'd be lines to vote and the only thing that wasn't on the ground was our ballot because people had in it their hands, our sample ballot.

EG: Oh, okay.

RS: I mean we had that kind of community trust, I guess is what you'd call it.

EG: Yeah. What were the biggest challenges of the 1959 election [...] Democratic Club?

RS: I think we overcame every challenge we had because our vote—. You know they stole our damn first effort at ward and precinct stuff. You know, after we got it all

typed up they took it to the headquarters and remember it was stolen the night it was delivered?

EG: Oh, the Beale St., yeah, the—.

RS: That was the first time we had done the precinct routes. We did the same thing but we didn't have the voter registration routes. But I'm convinced that we did all we could do. We got a turnout we couldn't have, you know, it was better than we expected on turnout. The people waited in line till they could vote, and that was 10:30 some places, at night. The white folk did the same thing though. I got about ten thousand more votes than we projected and I lost by twenty-one thousand. [Laughs] That's why I said we won everything but the election. I mean we wound up with a big cadre of people who said, "I'm not ready to quit. Let's do this."

EG: Did you expect such a strong white reaction?

RS: Well we thought there'd be white reaction, but no, I don't think we thought it would be that big a turnout. But they've got the right to turn out. Everybody has the right to turn out. But what it did was it moved us into the position of being people you had to deal with in elections. Nobody took us lightly after that.

EG: Yeah. [...] was it, before then?

RS: Well, I mean the elections were regarded as efforts to encourage folks to register to vote. You'd run somebody [...] and everybody knew that, but we still had a pretty good registration. But that election, after that it was serious.

EG: Yeah. [...]—

RS: Yeah.

EG: —[...]

RS: And 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.

EG: Yeah. [...] you became a model for other communities.

RS: The voter registration first and then some of the campaigning, like the guy, I think it's Rodney Strong, in Atlanta. He was the one I remember most because he was at Morehouse, came up and worked the campaign, and then when he finished Morehouse he went to law school, but he worked in Maynard Jackson's campaign and he took our format with him.

EG: Oh, okay.

RS: I think that's what—. Maybe you can track him down because he should be still practicing law.

EG: In Atlanta?

RS: In Atlanta.

EG: He used the precinct organization?

RS: Yeah, format, yeah. He worked in a ward and precinct while he was here in school with us in our format, so he understood it so he just got copies and took it with him and they adapted it. They probably did better than us because they had more resources that we had at the time. But if you could locate him he could probably tell you.

EG: Okay. R-o-d-n-e-y Strong.

RS: Tell him if he wants to check with me I'll tell him you're pretty. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs] So I can count on you for a good reference.

RS: I can't vouch for what she's going to say about you, [Laughs] but I can--
[Laughs] I'll say the pain is worth it.

EG: [Laughs] I saw too [...]

RS: Yeah, yeah. We didn't try to-- In Nashville we gave them that stuff. [I didn't have much to do with it]. But I think Nashville had sort of an elite feeling about the black population than everywhere else because they had the university system, Fisk, and Tennessee State and all that. Nashville had twenty percent black--[twenty-three maybe now]--black population. I don't know what it is now. It's probably changed a lot.

EG: [So that's what it was back then, twenty percent?]

RS: Something like that. But Meharry, Fisk, and Tennessee State were all there.

EG: Yeah, and I saw two [...] black members of the council [...]

RS: Avon Williams was a senator.

EG: Okay.

RS: There was a woman, a doctor, who was in the legislature.

EG: Who were the Invaders?

RS: Coby Smith.

EG: Yeah, that was the--

RS: That was the guy I told you I could get you--

EG: Yeah, the militant black power group that was around in '59?

RS: Yeah.

EG: Okay, so they were like kind of before their--

RS: Yeah, they were around. I mean the Panthers were here.

EG: In the late '50s?

RS: Yeah, in '59, '50s and '60s, because I know one time we got one of them—in fact he's an ex-Panther now, but he's still here. He's got a master's degree and he's on TV sometimes [...], but—.

EG: So young black men who had a more militant approach?

RS: Yeah. Well, I don't know. We were simpatico. The police had surrounded their house one day and they called me and A. W. and said, "Man, these pigs are all over the place with guns and everything." [...] "No!" So I called the police department and got one of the deputy captains who was familiar with us and he said [...] this was about a traffic ticket, and I said, "Well can you tell them just to freeze it and A. W. and I'll go out there." He said okay so we go there, and I mean if a car had backfired somebody would have started shooting. There was nothing in there but this guy, his wife, two little boys, and one other guy, and they had no weapons. So we told them and said, "Look man, I'll walk with you out to the car." and told the police. So the lieutenant on the scene, he just told them, "Y'all take off," and they started moving out. But if before we got there something had backfired they would have—. You know they'd had all those shootouts in Chicago and two or three other places, and the cops were tight. You know that's where— when they're already uptight and they got this preprogrammed assumption about who these people are.

EG: This family, they were with the Invaders?

RS: Yeah, they were Invaders, but they weren't—.

EG: [...]

RS: Yeah, nothing.

EG: —harmless. [Laughs]

RS: Yeah.

EG: What sort of role did they have in '59?

RS: Nothing as Panthers. Two or three of them were—. Well, actually—. Who went? When was the Miami convention?

EG: '72.

RS: Okay.

EG: [...]

RS: In Miami, yeah.

EG: Yeah.

RS: One of the Panthers was one of our delegates. [Laughs]

EG: Oh, okay. [Laughs]

RS: To Miami.

EG: [...] was talking about that.

RS: And she would not run until I think Bobby Seale told her to go on and run. She called him and talked to him in California. He said, "If they can get you on, you go." [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: That's why I made that expression. I said that convention was a cross section of the country and it scared people to death, [Laughs] because there were welfare mamas, Indians in full regalia, Panthers. [Laughs] God, is that us? "I have seen the enemy, and he is us," to quote Pogo. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: I loved it. [Laughs]

EG: It sounds like a lot of fun. Was it really prevalent, like these charges that in '59 that the NAACP [...]

RS: Well I mean the organization per se didn't have [...] but the leadership was funded [...], as I said.

EG: Yeah, right.

RS: So the people were doing like today, drawing giant broad brush strokes without any discrimination as to [profile and intent], you know.

EG: So, I mean it was the same but it wasn't, you know, [...]

RS: It's like they say it was a communist conspiracy, the NAACP.

EG: Yeah. Did you get that a lot too, that you were a communist?

RS: No, but I used it. I mean the bar association was segregated so when they finally decided to drop the racial exclusion language I never joined, and A. W. never joined. So finally Lucius Burch wrote us and said, "Some of us lost a lot of friends and incurred some scars in this fight and you fellows act like nothing happened. Why don't y'all come on and get active in the bar?" and I said, "Mr. Burch, the big attack on us [for not being in] was we were communist-inspired," and I said, "We got all the subversive labels hung on us we need to. We don't want people [Laughs] to think we're infiltrating the bar, that there are communist infiltrators in the bar. We'd just rather leave y'all [up here]." [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: "We'll do the best we can right here where we are. Thank you." He looked at me. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs] [Did you ever become part of the bar?]

RS: Huh?

EG: [Did you ever join the bar?]

RS: I joined the bar when I became a judge. [Laughs] I mean I figured, you know, hell.

EG: You may as well, yeah. Were—? Well obviously [...] youth committee in the '59 campaign. Was there a youth [presence in the Democratic Club]?

RS: Youth were involved. We didn't have a structured section but I think there were some young ones in all of the precinct clubs. D'Army Bailey and Walter Bailey, they were students at Booker Washington High School then and they would come down and participate and give us hell. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs] [How?]

RS: Just being young and assertive, you know—

EG: You mean more militant?

RS: —and obstreperous. Yeah, they thought, you know, let's tear down the castle. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs]

RS: I said, hell, we ain't got across the drawbridge yet, you know. [Laughs]

EG: Did you find [there were a lot of] generational differences, like the students who sat-in [...]?

RS: Not that interfered with anything, although we were worried—. See, the sit-ins started in the communities where you had dormitory colleges.

EG: Yeah.

RS: That was where they could incubate ideas without any kind of parental influence and involvement, and this city, those kids had to go home at night, and I know a lot of them, their parents were sitting on them. So we wondered if anything would ever happen here, so when what's-his-name, you know, the mayor of Washington, Marion Barry, came back from Tennessee State, he and the president—or he was the president of the student body up there, one—they had a meeting at LeMoyne College and they just pulled—. The student body just went off the campus, in spite of the president's opposition. That's what triggered it, but once it happened they all went. But we wondered if anything [would happen] because of the fact that parents were trying their best to keep their kids from—. They didn't know what would happen because we had a rough police force.

EG: Yeah, yeah.

RS: I mean I don't blame the parents, but we were hoping that they would do it and there wouldn't be any kind of injury to anybody in the process.

EG: Right. [...] said he thought that people who were in the sit-ins were also students who had been involved in the 1959 campaign.

RS: That might have been. I think some of them were. A lot of them were, yeah.

EG: A lot of them were? Yeah.

RS: Was Grace Meacham, was she—?

EG: You know I haven't talked to—.

RS: You've got to come back. See? [You won't have the book completed].

EG: [Laughs] I might—. I don't know [...] I'm waiting to hear from her, so I'm hoping to talk to her before I go.

RS: If you can figure out a window in December I'll try to have a fundraiser over here for you.

EG: Oh. [Laughs]

RS: We'll have a barbecue or something. [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs] I saw too that-. I do hope to talk to her. [I hope it works out.]

RS: And Coby Smith. You could talk with Coby, and maybe Jesse Turner's son. He's an accountant and he was helping his father. He may have some of their records and may be able to tell you a little bit more, because we paid our folks-. At the end we paid them by check. Before they were given receipts and all but we wanted to make sure we could account for every dime that was put into those campaigns, and went out, you know, for the purposes the money was raised for.

EG: Okay. Yeah, Mr. Lockard [...] and so forth. I saw too with '59 that at the same time you're having the election there was Little Rock, [...] was opening up, and Memphis State University was integrated. Did that have any sort of impact on the election?

RS: My wife and Maxine were the two complainants against Memphis State in the graduate school desegregation, and then Northcross, his daughter-. Was that high school? That was-.

EG: Elementary

RS: Elementary, okay. I forgot who the-. But Laurie wound up teaching there for awhile.

EG: Yeah. [...] [Pause] A. Maceo Walker was president but [...] as dedicated as others.

RS: Well, you know, he was running Universal. He helped raise money and when the businesspeople marched he marched, but that wasn't his main, you know.

EG: Right.

RS: I don't mean he was against it. I don't think he was opposed to it.

EG: Right. Lockard mentioned too about how [you went to see Loeb] and Loeb turned his back.

RS: And 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." Armour was—. I mean I respected him. 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."

EG: And you were saying [...] You were saying earlier that [...]

RS: Well I think he was shallow. I mean he was nice, he meant nobody ill will, but he couldn't, if he wanted to, help somebody, [Laughs] except just be nice to talk to, you know.

EG: It seemed like he was more progressive than some others [...]

RS: Oh, some of them were not progressive, yeah.

EG: Yeah. Farris, I saw he was involved [...]

RS: Yeah. Well Farris was a very astute politician.

EG: Okay.

RS: Yeah. I mean we became pretty good friends, but not in the same camp, you know.

EG: And Loeb, [...]

RS: Loeb was a horse's ass.

EG: Yeah. [Laughs]

RS: I told you that he told somebody at the newspaper that he thought I ought to get out because the city wasn't prepared to elect a member of an unpopular minority to be the head of the biggest department in city government, and they called me and asked me and I said, "Well, I think the citizens of Memphis are more enlightened than that, but if that's the way he thinks he ought to get out because he's a member of an unpopular minority too." [Laughs]

EG: [Laughs] Yeah, I read that in the newspaper [...] [Laughs]

RS: [Laughs] I said I think better of people, you know.

EG: Yeah. [...] Fayette County for voter registration.

RS: Yeah. Fayette County, the name I was telling you—. That lawyer. I was saying maybe [...] That name will have some resonance with some—. A lot of our folks have rural connections around Fayette County, Tent City, all that stuff.

EG: Yeah, but that's where too you were telling me you were [...], right?

RS: Yeah.

EG: And that was when you were trying to get—. Was that a voter registration effort?

RS: No, it was a sit-in.

EG: That was a sit-in. They—

RS: At a Rexall—.

EG: —were sitting-in [...]?

RS: Yeah. The Youth Council of the NAACP sat-in at the Rexall drugstore, in the county square.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

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