

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Depression

Personal Experience

O H 1260

MCCULLOUGH WILLIAMS

Interviewed

by

John Parker

on

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P. This is an interview with McCullough Williams for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Depression Experience of Blacks, by John Parker, on July 17, 1989, at 1.15 in the afternoon

Mr Williams, could you tell me some of your earliest recollections of your parents and your childhood experiences?

W Yes, my dad came to Youngstown in 1920 from Coitsville, Pennsylvania He was originally from Florence, South Carolina He was an orphan and, as a teenager, left Florence to go to work in the mills over in Coitsville He came to Youngstown on Christmas day of 1920 to visit, and discovered they were hiring in the steel mills He was immediately hired in the Carnegie Illinois Mill of US Steel He began working there. He lived with Robert Price, who was known as Price the Barber, who had a barber shop, very prominent barber shop, and Turkish bath in the basement of the old Tod House Hotel The square of downtown Youngstown, that had began in 1902. Those years, each one of the prominent clients of Bob Price would come in, and they had their names engraved on the shaving mug They had their private mug and private brushes, and so forth The Turkish bath was a part of the service that was rendered My dad became a foster son of the Price family, and after working the Carnegie Illinois, he also worked part-time at the Keith Alby Theater, which was the predecessor of the old Palace Theater on the square in downtown Youngstown

P About how old was he at the time?

W Pardon?

P About how old was he at that time?

W My dad was seventeen when he came to Youngstown in 1920 So, probably, he would have been about nineteen or twenty when he started working at the Keith Alby He also worked part-time at the Prince Clothing Company on West Federal Street This was in the mid 1920's My dad was a very ambitious person, very industrious Working at the Prince Clothing Company, he washed and waxed the car of one of the executives -- Herb Prince He liked the way that he took care of his car and passed the word along to the other executives of Prince, and my dad took care of all of the cars of the executives of Prince and the Prince brothers There were a number of Prince brothers that had stores in this area -- Warren, Ohio, and they had stores over in Pennsylvania. A number of clothing stores It was one of the leading men's clothing stores in this area He had more cars than he could handle So, then he needed space So, he leased a parking lot on West Boardman Street. From there, he opened an auto laundry He started his business officially in 1927 at 333 West Boardman Street, Youngstown, Ohio He operated and expanded He operated an auto wash car wash at the corner of Walnut and East Front Street. He operated another one

on West Front Street adjoining the one on West Boardman Street. He operated this business until 1961 -- for thirty-five years. Until he sold out to the downtown garage. After selling out to the downtown garage, he bought out the Liberty Poolroom over on West Federal Street. He built it and called it the Town Shine and Billiard Parlor. From there, he opened a Town Shine stand in the Metropolitan Bank building. There is one still being operated there today. He opened the first one there. He also opened another one -- Town Shine on West Federal Street where the WRTA transportation center is now located.

P That is on Fifth and Commerce?

W No, that is right on Federal, West Federal Plaza it is called now. He did that until he retired. We purchased the Monroe Park Cemetery in 1965, and he managed the Monroe Park Cemetery. That is where Marilyn Monroe, the movie star's, father is buried. My dad did that until retirement and, of course, he passed in August. He helped me out and assisted me. He died August 25, 1983.

P He was busy in a lot of ventures. What associations did he belong to during the 1920's?

W He joined the Centenary United Methodist Church in 1922. That was probably the only organization that he belonged to in the 1920's. But in the early, and probably the late 1920's, he became a member of the Yea 'Mens Club. The Yea 'Mena Club was about a group of six or eight black entrepreneurs who presented the major black bands throughout the country -- orchestras, I should, not bands - - and brought them to Youngstown. In the summer they used Idora Park. They brought Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Cat Calaway, Lionel Hampton. All of the major black bands were brought here during those years. In the winter months, they used the new Elm ballroom, which was located at that time on Elm Street, which is now Youngstown State University property. That was sort of an exciting thing in those years.

P We are talking the 1920's and 1930's, right?

W 1920's and 1930's. Late 1920's and through the 1930's.

P What does Yea 'Mens Club stand for?

W Yea Men! I do not know. Just a term they used. I do not know the meaning of it. It is a good question. I never asked. There are several members still living, in fact, probably two. Clarence King, who lives on Glenwood. Clarence was the successor to the Yea 'Mens Club when the club disbanded. He continued presenting the major outstanding black bands.

P Well, even though black bands were appearing at Idora, were blacks able to go

there and enjoy them?

W Yeah They were told when blacks had the facility Those years, blacks could only go to Idora Park when it was Kiddie's Day for kids, sponsored by one of the local businesses like Schwebel's, or different groups had Kiddie's day and blacks were welcome to attend Idora Park They could go to Idora Park The Masonic Lodge had a day at Idora Park annually, they could go there, they had all of the facilities They could use all of the facilities in that day

P In other words, they could only go there when there was private sponsorship that had taken over the park for the day?

W Yes, that is correct In those years

P You mentioned Clarence King King was one of them Can you remember who the other one is?

W Yeah, the other one is Paul Scott

P Paul Scott?

W Yeah Clarence and Paul, I think, are the only two surviving members

P How did he finance his business endeavors?

W Pardon?

P How did he finance his business endeavors?

W My dad? Well, in those years, it did not take a lot of money It took more initiative and energy than cash, because we were just going through the depression There was very little money, so he compensated by his ambition and energy The few dollars that he was able to save while working, as I mentioned, he had a number of jobs -- he worked in the mill, at Keith Alby, he worked as a shipping clerk at the Prince Company He had three jobs that was keeping him busy Of course, my mother came here from Shreveport, Louisiana My mother came here in 1923 She came here because my great-aunt, who was her father's sister, moved here in 1918 from Texas They built a home, a beautiful structure on Cleveland Street -- 334 Cleveland Street -- in 1919 I own the facility today It is a marvelous construction She worked for a private family. She worked for the Stuart family He was the superintendent of North Side Hospital She worked for that family for many, many years

P This is your great-aunt or your mother that you are talking about?

W My mother's aunt Her name was Eva Pickman. My mother married my dad in 1925 My aunt's husband, who also came here from Texas, worked as a waiter He was the head waiter at Yankee Lake He was well known in waiting circles That was a prominent position in those years for blacks, to be a head waiter.

[recording is faulty and sound stops]

P where the home was located

W Although I was born on Cleveland Street -- I was born on 334 Cleveland Street -- I do not remember those early years there because we moved from Cleveland Street when I was just a tot, to Oakland Avenue, where we lived next door to Jim Lateer But the years I do remember very vividly were from 1930, when we moved on West Earl Avenue We moved on 408 West Earl Avenue in 1930 That home, today, is still in the family

I can remember -- this is probably one of the things that influenced me into going into funeral service because, I guess, I really did not have an understanding of my mother's death I was six years old, and as I was growing up people were always saying how attractive, how lovely, and how kind my mother was So, I wondered if my mother was such a nice lady, then why would she have to die and leave three small children during the Depression? Those years, the bodies were laid out in a home. We laid her out in our living room That was where they had the wake, where the members of the family stayed up all night Of course, the children went to bed, and they stayed up all night with the body The neighbors would, of course, come pay their respects

One of the main reasons that I grew older and became involved in the funeral business was, when I look back, I can understand why they brought the remains of my mother to the house and had the wake there, and had a repose there, because they did this with all the people in the neighborhood There was a transportation problem in those years Very few people owned automobiles Very few people had telephones So transportation and communication was not as wide as it is today So it was a lot easier if somebody lived in the neighborhood, if somebody passed, take the remains home and the people in the neighborhood would have an opportunity to share the grieving with the family There, again, the fact that we were limited, we were not very mobile, meant that other than the church and your neighbors, your knowledge of things that went on in other places in the city was probably very little.

So, I say that in itself, I was taken to the hospital when my mother was dying and she spoke to me before she died She did, my two sisters and I I remember my dad bringing us back home and coming back later in the day to tell us that, I guess it was the most difficult thing for him to do, to share with us, and inform us that our mother died We were not really aware of what was going on when we went to the hospital to see her that night Early that morning we had the minister from the church I guess I really wanted to know more about death I guess the thought never left me when I was in the ninth grade at Preston Junior

## High School

We had a civics teacher who asked each student to write about their future vocation. I thought that I could play football and baseball all my life and never have to grow up. I was really surprised to learn, as a thirteen year old that one of these days I was going to have to make a living. I decided that there were several things that interested me. One was that I thought I might want to be a journalist. I thought I might want to be a lawyer, thought maybe I would like to be a football coach. I thought maybe I would like to be a mortician. I went through a process of elimination. The black lawyers that I knew in town in those years did not look very prominent to me. In fact, I did not realize it, most people did not have cars, and the fact that they did not have automobiles was not very impressive.

Then, I knew of only one black journalist. Through the years I was a reader of Buckeye Review. I read the Buckeye Review and the Pittsburgh Courier. In addition to the Youngstown Telegram and the Youngstown Vindicator. The black journalist lived on my street. His name was Carl Burns Harvey, who succeeded his wife as a reporter for the Youngstown Vindicator. The Vindicator column, in those years -- this column was extended to 1951 -- it was called "Local Colored News." All of the affairs of the black community -- the colored community, as it was known then -- were all listed in this column. Deaths, weddings, social events, church activities, advertisements were all listed in this one column. I respected Mr. Harvey, but I was un-impressed with him, as far as me pursuing journalism. I knew no black football coaches, or black coaches of any nature in those years. Then I decided to explore and interview the funeral directors.

So I interviewed Jamerson, L. C. Underwood and Amos. They were all very impressive. They were dressed very well. They drove limousines, enjoyed the good reputation of the community. They were very impressive. None of them encouraged me to go into the funeral business. Each one gave a reason why I should not pursue it. But, believing that they lived well, and that they were successful, I was attracted. And I decided that I would become a mortician. I wrote and received information as to what the requirements were and I received the material. Then I began perusing, and I started saying, "I am going to be a mortician." So I pursued from that day, from the ninth grade on.

P Was your father involved in funeral homes prior to your getting into it?

W My father?

P Yes

W No. No, that is what I mentioned earlier. My father was doing other in the auto laundry business and the parking lot business. But he was uninvolved in the funeral business. He helped me after I got started, of course. After I graduated from South High School, I enrolled in Ohio State University and in those years,

the teen years, I went on to embalming college. I graduated from the Cleveland College of Mortuary Science. Served my internship at the House of Willis in Cleveland, Ohio. It was the largest black funeral home in the state. The largest funeral home in the state of Ohio. Then, when I graduated from college, I came back to Youngstown.

P You mentioned being born at home, this was fairly common back then. You also said that people were laid out at home. How did they convey them to the cemetery, and how did they go about making arrangements for a cemetery plot? Were all of the cemeteries open, or just particular ones, or what?

W Good question. The cemeteries were all segregated until, probably, the early 1960's. There were certain cemeteries that blacks could not be buried in, and there were others where they could be buried, if there were black sections. Probably was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the cemeteries changed policy. Although, I remember Tod Cemetery, around 1961, when I took a family up to select a grave, the family wanted to know why they could not bury in another section. So, then I asked the sexton and he said they could. They could be buried anywhere they wanted to. That was the new sexton at the cemetery, and they did. But we have had trouble since. We have had trouble in the last ten years, where we had a cemetery that would not permit a family to be buried, and selecting a plot open in the cemetery.

P How, at that time, did they go about getting a plot?

W Well, simple. Routinely, the funeral director would send his limousine over to pick up the family, bring the family over to the funeral home. At the funeral home, they would complete the arrangements for the service, in this case L. C. Underwood Funeral Home served my mother. My dad went over and made the selection and the arrangements with the Underwood Funeral Home, and took care of the cemetery. My dad purchased five graves at Tod Cemetery in those years, which would take care of the total family. My mother, my dad, my two sisters, and myself. Of course, we have used these graves for my mother, my dad, my great-grandmother, who came from Louisiana to Youngstown, and died here in 1946. She was buried by the Lenton Funeral Home. Then, my aunt died in 1961 in Youngstown, and then her husband died -- my uncle -- in 1973.

P What would be, for instance, the cost for five plots at that time?

W Well, I know this. When I started in business in 1951, the cost of a grave, including the opening and closing of the grave in Tod Cemetery, was \$65. Today the same grave will cost you \$395. So, I would assume that my dad paid, probably, in those days, around \$25. \$20 or \$25 a grave, five graves.

P You mentioned that the neighborhood would come to the wake at the home and

pay their respects, and stay there overnight. What about the practices of the funeral home? You said that the ambulance came from the funeral home and took the cadaver to the funeral home. What did they do at the funeral home, then? Was the body in the casket when it was at the wake

W Oh, sure. You see, my mother died in the hospital. In fact, my mother died in the sanatorium, the TB [tuberculosis] sanatorium. My mother was taken from the sanatorium, after she passed, to the Underwood Funeral Home. There she was embalmed and prepared. Then the casket was selected when my dad went up, with my aunt, to complete the arrangements. They, of course, dressed and casketed her, and brought her back to the family house, 408 West Earl Avenue, and later stayed in the living room. Of course, the day of the service, the cam to the house and removed my mother's remains, and to take the family with them. The funeral coach was there, as well as the family car. We were all taken to the church, which was Centenary United Methodist Church, up here on Belmont Avenue. Then, it was down here on Arlington Street. That was where the funeral service was held. From there, the funeral cortege was taken to Tod Cemetery for the interment.

P Did people within the church or community volunteer their cars, because you mentioned there were very few that owned cars for funeral corteges and things like that?

W. Of course, a few people did. It has always been a custom, and still is. People with cars volunteer cars for funerals. It is a custom. It has been a continued custom among all ethnic groups.

P Would it depend on the day? Would they hold off funerals until, say, Saturdays, or something like that? I realize most religious groups do not bury on Sundays or on their holy day.

W. Correct.

P But would they hold off until evening, say, or work time? Since we are in a town, that was basically shift-oriented; there would be a little bit different arrangements.

W I would think in those years, what was normally done, it was common for the body to be held out at least a week and longer. They did a number of things. The work situation would influence the service. Families living out of town, there was only one means of getting here in those years, and that was rail, traveling by train, which took several days. So if someone was coming from out of town, other than in the immediate vicinity, out of Cleveland or someplace else, it was train. A short distance may have been bus. That would influence the time of the service.



- P What about the people who were indigent? Would the community contribute, or what? What about the funeral directors?
- W Yes, or course, if you remember, we had an epidemic of influenza, and also typhoid fever
- P What years were those?
- W Those were back in the early 1920's 1918 and early 1920's There were a lot of indigents that were buried, and the city provided the graves, the cemetery, and paid the funeral director a very minimal sum, probably ten dollars, to handle it There was not much money made by funeral directors in those years, under those circumstances Today, it is not much better, as far as indigent are concerned The city of Youngstown will provide \$300 for the funeral director to conduct the service They will pay for the cremation. The state of Ohio currently will supplement the funeral service to the extent of \$500 There is a bill under legislature to increase this to \$1,000 \$250 for children under twelve. Then it will be \$500 for children under twelve. For stillborns and children under twelve, \$250
- P I am talking not during times of the epidemic, but particularly from 1930 to 1940, when you had an economic downturn There was not money available, and the city was not really too interested in being bothered, and if they were, how did people in the neighborhood contribute? What kind of caskets were they using at that time?
- W Well, most of the caskets that we used in those years were cloth caskets They were wood, cloth-covered caskets They were half couches, flat tops
- P What do you mean by those terms?
- W Okay, flat top was a very inexpensive casket. It was strictly a flat, two-piece lid
- P What kind of materials would they normally be made of?
- W It was embossed fabric, a plush-type of fabric
- P Was that placed over wood or metal?
- W Over wood They were all wood; many types of wood construction The hinge cap was a little bit better, it raised up and you could hold the top up. And, of course, the half couches were better They would flair out, the half couch They used those kinds of caskets, in those years, mostly flat tops or hinge caps But the used, for a number of years, what they called senior citizens

- P My question is, though, was there much contribution made by the neighbors?
- W No, the neighbors were not able to. The only contribution made by neighbors were flowers. The neighbors would bring food. The neighbors did not have money themselves.
- P Did they still conduct wakes in the home, or had this custom lapsed?
- W This custom has been phased out. This custom, when I started in business in 1951, no longer existed. I have had requests through the years where we have taken the remains home, and had the body displayed at home, but this is not really a custom. A custom that was discontinued, I would probably say, somewhere in the late 1930's or early 1940's -- before the war.
- P Why, would you hypothesize, was that custom discontinued? It seems to be something that would have been held on to. Was it a fracture in the neighborhood by the economic stress?
- W Well, I think a couple of things happened. The automotive industry was more productive. More people had access to cars in the 1930's. After the mid 1930's, people started buying cars. Cars became more productive in 1938, 1939, and 1940, 1941, 1942. So, more people became mobile. Then, I think the trend was that the facilities at the funeral home were more accommodating than they were at the house. So the trend changed. They started going to the funeral home. Funeral homes were starting to get larger, with more spacious facilities. Amos was the firm. His new funeral establishment on the corner of Foster Street in 1940, it was a really elaborate type thing. Of course, it had a nice facility that he built in the 1920's. Probably the late 1920's, he built this new place.
- P You mentioned Tod Cemetery. Was that the only cemetery that was open to blacks at that time?
- W. No, there was Mount Hope Park. That was open to blacks.
- P Where was that?
- W That was on the Sharon line? That was out on the east side. Another one called McGuffey Heights. Then there is Belmont Park. Belmont Park was open to the old black settlers -- the old black families that had been here for years, but they were still segregated. Well, maybe they were not at Belmont. They just did not have a lot of blacks up on Belmont in those years. Most people went to Mount Hope or Tod. Basically, because the city had a contract with Tod. They buried indigents up at Tod. They buried indigents in Mount Hope.
- P So, blacks could go where the indigents could go.

W Yes, well, it was a trend. Somebody in the family was buried there, somebody that had a paying service in the family, they would follow. They would say okay if John was buried at Tod, then

P You mentioned the changes with the coming of the car and its effect on the funeral industry. How has it affected where blacks lived, where they could work, and so forth? The time that you were talking about, the 1920's, it was basically trolley cars and foot express

W Well, of course, remember there were not many blacks here. In 1900, there were 44,885 blacks in Youngstown. In 1910, there were 79,066, which was a percentage increase of seventy-six percent. In 1920, there were 132,000

P Now, this was the total population?

W Total population. Oh, wait a minute, I am sorry. Let me take that back. Let us go back. In 1900, there were 915 blacks in Youngstown. In 1930, there were 14,000

P That is a major increase

W In 1940, there was 14,615

P So, there was a major increase between 1900 and 1930

W Yes, the increase in the black population started in 1915. Black migration started in 1915. It increased because of the immigration law during World War I. They would not permit the European immigrants to come into the country. So, when looking for employees, the only place they could tap was the black market -- blacks from the South

P How did they go about doing that? How would they go about informing the blacks that there was work available, and inducing them to come?

W Well, they advertised. For example, my father-in-law was living in Richmond, Virginia. He was a custodian at the Y W C A. He read a magazine, and they had an ad advertising. He came to Youngstown on his day off. They hired him at Sheet & Tube. He sent back for my mother-in-law and their daughter, for them to come to Youngstown. He found a rooming house for people where families come to stay, couples to live. It was a big house. So, that was what he did. He moved here. This was in the 1920's, after World War I.

P What was his experience? You said he went to work. Did he go to work for Sheet & Tube or US Steel?

W He worked for Sheet & Tube He must have worked there for about 40 years

P. What was his experience during the Depression years?

W Well, my father-in-law was a real unusual person

P By the way, what was his name?

W David E Fleming He was a World War I veteran He served in the United States Army He received a lot of awards and things He was just a real good community person He was just a fine person Let us see, he was a treat churchman Probably the finest churchman I ever met in my life But, there was an interesting thing Here is a letter from his commanding officer, dated April 3, 1919 -- commendations that the commanding the commanding officer, before his departure for the states, desires to thank him for his uniform, industry, attention to business, and conduct To write cheerfully to commend you to anyone wanting the services of an honest, intelligent and trustworthy boy He was a man, but still a boy That was a recommendation that describes the type of person that he really was.

P What was the year that he came to Youngstown?

W. Let us see, when did he come to Youngstown? I am looking at his obituary He came in 1922, from Petersburg He worked for forty years at the Sheet & Tube He retired in 1963 He was in the Army He served overseas, he served in France He ended up being the first black to be appointed to the board of the central Y M C A in Youngstown

P That was approximately when? At that time, was there still a separate black Y M C A ?

W Yeah, there was a separate black Y.M C A until 1963 He was appointed to the board of management in 1963 The Y M C A did not merge until 1973

P In 1973?

W That is right 1973 Not too long ago

P No The Y M.C A was segregated My understand was that one of the few places that blacks, prior to 1965, could go in the south, and get a meal and a place to stay was at the black Y M C A 's

W That is what I understand

P This is just what people have told me

W Most cities has black Y M.C.A 's The white Y M C A was off limits You could not even go in the white one

P Do you remember going to the movies in the 1920's and 1930's?

W Yeah, I remember going to the movies in the 1940's I remember going to the movies in the late 1930's and 1940's I remember as late as 1945, going to the State Theater They charged you ten cents less for the ticket, and they gave you a ticket to sit in the balcony The blacks had to sit in the balcony all those years Every theater downtown by the Scranton, you were confined to sit in the balcony They opened the theater up on Glenwood Avenue called the Foster Theater I think it is now some X-rated type thing, but the Foster Theater opened up there, and my sisters and I went in the day time with just kids This had to be the early 1940's, or around 1940 We went to the Foster, and they made us sit in the very first row That was where they sat blacks, in the very first row I remember my sister coming home, it must have been the late 1930's or early 1940's I had not heard the work segregation before My older sister came home and told my dad that we were segregated in the theater He told us that we could not go back there anymore

I also know that, in the 1930's, off all the local swimming facilities in Youngstown, the parks and playgrounds, you could not use any of these swimming facilities They had a black pool out on the east side called the Lincoln Park Pool They had two Lincoln Park pools out there They had the one at Kirkmere, which is the nice pool. Then they had one with a bathhouse that they used for iceskating, with no bottom in it, with sand, rocks, and glass That was the black pool. That was where blacks swam You could play tennis on the tennis courts They had tennis courts at the Lincoln pool So, even the city facilities were segregated in those years. Could not go to the South side pool -- we were not allowed to swim over there The north side pool, we could not swim In fact, it was after World War II, it was around 1948 or 1949, that Nate Jones, who is now a federal judge, lead a group of the NAACP youth council -- Ross was one of them, too -- to swim at the North side pool They were run out of there with rocks and bats and bricks, trying to integrate the pool That is why I was determined that they were not going to that pool this year, because I can remember when blacks could not swim in there

P Did you have a bike when you were a kid?

W Pardon?

P Did you have a bicycle?

W Bicycle? No I rode a bicycle, but I never owned a bicycle The only thing my dad never bought me was a bike. I do not understand why, because I always wanted a bike My dad did not buy me a bike I used to rent a bike. On

Sundays there was a place on the corner of Kenmore and Glenwood Avenue. It was a gas station owned by a fellow named Clark. His daughters had bikes. They would rent their bikes. I would ride down to the parking lot and ride all over town on a rented bike. In fact, when I went to Ohio State University, some friends of mine and I opened a bike rental shop at Ohio State, our freshman year down there. We rented bikes. But, any way, I never owned a bike. But I did ride a bike.

P Did you do any roller skating?

W Sure, I roller skated. Fact of the matter is, I would take the dime that my dad would give me to catch the bus and I would roller skate from West Earl Avenue to 333 West Boardman Street. I would roller skate downtown. I would put the dime in my pocket and skate downtown.

P What about just walking places? Did you do much walking around the town?

W Oh, yes. We walked to Idora Park, to Mill Creek Park. Particularly Mill Creek Park. We spent a lot of time walking to the park. When you were kids, that was all you did was walk.

P You mentioned that you played a lot of football and baseball. Where did you play?

W When I first started playing baseball, I played at the Saint Louis playground. Nick Johnson was our first baseball instructor. He was the playground director. Then Floyd Hanes, I played under him. Saint Louis, that was a black playground, across from Dr. Perry's house on St. Louis Avenue. It was a very poor facility. When I became a member of the Park and Recreation Commission in 1955, I was able to get the facility closed and new facility built on Earl Avenue. The Chicago Avenue playground is not on West Earl Avenue. We started building that in 1957. No, 1956. I think they completed it in 1957.

P Your father remarried?

W Yes. My dad remarried a couple times after my mother died. Twice.

P When did he remarry the first time?

W The first time my dad remarried was in 1937.

P So, how were you cared for from the time your mother died until then? Was that your aunt?

W Okay. There was a couple that my dad had come and live with us. Reverend

and Mrs. Spencer. They came in and took care of us [They were] very nice people. Then when my dad remarried, they left. My dad and my step-mother separated about three years later, in 1940. They divorced. My dad, my sisters and I were together from that point on. His third marriage occurred after my sister and I were in college. We were adults.

P: You know, it is hard to ask you what a typical day was like during this period of time. Had you started school already when your mother died?

W: Yes, I was in school. I had started school when my mother died. In fact, I remember they had given me a mental test, they called it in those years, it was an aptitude test, to determine whether or not I was equipped to begin school when I was five. My birthday was in November and school started in September. I passed the aptitude test to begin school at the age of five. I remember my mother taking me to the Board of Education to take that test. This was, of course, probably around July or August.

P: Was that for kindergarten or first grade?

W: There were not any kindergartens -- first grade. No pre-schools, no kindergartens. When I started Delason School, we had to bring our own tin cups to school because they did not have drinking fountains. They had to pump the water into the buckets and they had a dipper. Bring the water in and dip into the cups during recess.

P: Can you remember in the first grade, when you first went to school, what was like that first day?

W: I do not remember the first day. I do remember the first grade. I had a teacher -- her name was Miss Peterson. Of course, in those years, to be employed in the Youngstown School System, in the elementary schools, you had to be first a woman. Second, you had to be single. They did not permit women to marry. That went on for years. I do not think they changed that ruling until sometime late in the 1940's or early 1950's. 1960's?

P: I cannot remember the superintendent who was in the 1960's. It was thirty-eight years they had that.

W: Well, anyway, I do remember my first grade teacher. I do remember my first grade teacher. I do remember that when my mother died. I do remember the day. And my principal, Alice Brown, I remember her very well. A little lady, she had an arm the size of Popeye. I guess because she used that paddle. I deserved it. Any time I got paddled at school, I deserved it.

P: What would a typical day be like when you were in school? What time did you

get up? What did you eat? What did you do?

W I am sure that in getting up in the morning, we had cereal for breakfast. That was usually what you did in those years. Milk and cereal. I guess Wheaties, probably "The breakfast of champions." Our favorite cereal. I have always been an early riser, about 6:00. I would face the sun many, many days for many years at 6:00. I would get up at 5:30, easy, and play tennis at six on weekdays. So, I am an early riser. I would get up early and go to school. I guess my responsibility was, really, to wake my sisters up. I always got them up to go to school. Through high school, I did. I was always the alarm clock. When I had three children, I did the same thing. I was always getting the kids up to go to school. [laughter]

P What was your dad doing in these years when you had Reverend and Mrs. Spencer taking care of you, after this period of time? What was your dad doing as far as business? Was he spending a lot of time with his business?

W He spent a lot of time down at the business. Running a business in those years, even in these years, is a lot of time for the owner. There are a lot of different things involved in running a business. He was a very good businessman. He put in a lot of hours. He was an early riser. He was up early in the morning, he was gone down to the parking lot to open the business up, make sure the men were there. He had to go back and close up in the evening. He would come home in the evening. Of course, in the evenings we were doing homework or playing with each other because we were very limited as to the radio programs that were on during the week. There was no television. There were not any other kind of activities. What was a social life like?

P What kind of books did you read?

W The books that we read were the books that we had in school. They were books about history. We did our math, did our English. In those years, I remember, there was a lot of compositions -- a lot of writing. We had some real good teachers. They did their homework. Kids do not even do homework. I had an opportunity to participate in sports. Played basketball or football or baseball, depending on the season. I always come in after dinner. After dinner, you came in and did your homework. Then you would go to bed. Like I said, the radio, during the week, whatever program went off at nine o'clock or earlier. I guess that nine o'clock was a good time to go to bed, anyway. We probably went to bed at nine o'clock. There was not anything else to do.

P What about picnics or things like that? Did you do much of that?

W Oh, yeah. There were a lot of picnics. We enjoyed picnics. A lot of family picnics. Picnics always represented good food, and meeting friends and running



and playing. Most of the picnics we had were at Slippery Rock pavilion at Mill Creek Park. Slippery Rock was the place that most people gathered. A very convenient facility.

P Were these family reunion-type things or church?

W Not family reunion-type things. Just picnics that different clubs or friends would have. Our church groups would have a picnic, they would have it at Slippery Rock Pavilion.

P When did your dad first get a car of his own? Or did he have one?

W My dad always had a car as long as I can remember. He has always had an automobile. So I would venture to say that my dad had a car, certainly, before I was born. I think that is a very accurate statement. I would think of my dad probably driving a car around 1920, 1922, 1923. I would imagine that shortly after he came here and got a job, I know he had a car.

P Would you take that car and use it for visiting, or just Sunday driving?

W Oh, my dad took the car for visits, for visiting friends. I guess that is why we got to know quite a few people, because we were more mobile than a lot of the other families on the street. We could travel. Many of the families on the street did not have cars. And so they were limited in transportation. In fact, the church on Chicago Avenue, the bishop Norman Wagner, his grandparents founded the church on Chicago Avenue, which is not Mount Calvary. Mount Calvary Pentecostal Church, on the corner of Regent and Oak Hill. That church founded on Chicago, and they did not have a car in the family. They walked to church. They spent a lot of time, most of their social activities were in church. That was his mother and his father, and his aunts and uncles, and grandparents. He came later, of course. The later generation. We used to go to that church to visit. We would get home on our porch of our house and we could hear the music and the preaching and programs that they were having at that church seemed to be real interesting. We always used to go over to the Christmas and Easter programs. They always had an instrumental over there. The music was very stimulating.

P When you were growing up, were most of your classes almost totally black, in the elementary, or were they pretty well mixed?

W Very few blacks. Very few blacks that were attending Delason School when I was attending Delason School. I would probably think that the black population of kids at Delason School probably numbered less than 25. So, we had several hundred children in school. We were a real minority. Very few blacks went to Delason. There were not many blacks in Princeton. When I went to Princeton

School, we were as much a minority in Princeton as we were in Delason. When I went to South High School, in my graduating class, there was only sixteen blacks.

P What year was that?

W 1945. Out of four hundred and some students, thirteen girls and three boys. That was in 1945.

P Do you find the competition in school at kind of a level playing field? Academic and sports-wise.

W Sports-wise? Well, sports-wise, I had one problem. That is that I wanted to play quarterback, because I played quarterback in football. I went to South High School and said, "I want to play quarterback." Blacks just did not play quarterback in the city in those years.

P Well, Jim Lateer.

W In those years, he was the quarterback, but with the type of formation that they used in those years, it was a question whether he was a quarterback or not. We have discussed this. I would tell him that he was playing when the ball was round. I played when it was oval. He was classified as a quarterback then, but it depends on the system that was used. He would not be a quarterback by today's system, the system that we played in the 1940's. But as it was, of course, the story was that I wanted to play quarterback and the coach said that I would play halfback. "You are too fast to play quarterback," the coach said. So, they started me as a halfback. There was an injury to the quarterback. When the quarterback was injured, they asked for the second string quarterback. He was chicken. He looked like Mr. America, but he had no heart. He said, "Gee, that means me." He tried to hide. He said, "That means me," and I said, "Yes, Webster, that is you." He said, "I am afraid to go in." I jumped off the bench and ran in as the quarterback. The first string quarterback was out for the season, and I was more than a capable replacement.

P Was that 1943?

W 1944. I was more than a capable replacement. We won the championship. I had another year of eligibility playing football. I could have played the 1945 season. They wanted me to come back. I had enough credits to graduate. I thought about my situation and decided I would graduate. I graduated and I enrolled in Ohio State -- immediately after graduation. I graduated in June, and I was a freshman at Ohio State University in July of 1945.

P Did you find much difference between living in Youngstown and living in

Columbus?

W Yes, a lot of differences. The prejudices that I was exposed to in Columbus, I did not realize existed in Youngstown. All of them were there, but I did not realize that until I came back later. When I attended Ohio State in 1945, if you were black, you could not live on campus. They had no dormitory facilities for blacks. You could not eat off campus, because they discriminated in all eating places. So, I lived in a private home on Eleventh Avenue. It was authorized by the university for black male students. You could eat on campus in the campus dining facilities because they discriminated off campus. If we went to a place like White Castle, or any of those places, they would give your food in a bag and you would take it out.

I went to the restaurant on the corner of the street where I was living the second day I was there. A group of went down to eat and they did not bring us sodas. So, we finally knocked on the table. Well, they brought some water and silverware first. They would not come out and bring a menu, so we knocked on the table. The next thing a police officer approached us, came in. He said that they did not want to serve us, and if we would leave peacefully, we would not have any problems. We left. We had a number of those experiences.

P What about your previous experience in Youngstown? You mentioned the segregation in the theaters. Did you go to restaurants around here?

W We did not go to any restaurants. There were very few restaurants, they were all downtown. We did not go to any neighborhood restaurants or anything like that. We just had not been exposed to any restaurants so we did not have any experience until late. It was not until the 1950's that I came back. I graduated college. Some restaurants on Boardman Street, we found out that they would not serve us. Or they had two menus, one double priced for blacks, and one priced for whites. So we had that experience.

P What about food markets and grocery stores, and clothing stores and places like that? Tell me about how it worked, say, from about 1935 on, as you remember it.

W As I remember, we had no problem with grocery stores. Grocery stores were always kind and receptive to the blacks. There was a big store on the corner of Earl and Hillman Street. They were always very kind to the customers. Very nice. Very polite. The people who owned the stores were always very polite. There was a Sam Aaron store on Saint Louis Avenue.

P What about the Aarons?

W That was there supermarket. Centry Foods. The same thing was true there. They were always kind.

P Are these Jewish grocers that you are talking about?

W The Aarons were Jewish. Sam Aaron stores were Jewish stores. But the other big one, Zimmermans, was not. They were Protestants. They had a clean store. I can remember growing up as a kid, the people waiting in the stores were always nice to you. At Zimmerman's, I do not even remember any unkind or derogatory words being used toward the kids, even. It never happened. There was an Isaly Dairy Store that sold ice cream on the corner of Warren and Hillman. The Bloom Drug Store on Hillman, and a White Drug Store. All of these places, we would go in there as kids, as black kids, and nobody said anything to us in a derogatory fashion, as I can remember.

The only thing that I can remember in my younger day that I was discriminated against, was that I had a German youngster living across the street. A German family across the street named Burnside, about directly across the street from us on Earl Avenue. Frankie Burnside and I were buddies. We played every day. I went to Frankie's house and Frankie came in my house. My best buddy, Frankie Burnside. We lived in Wick neighborhood. One day Frankie had a party. I guess I was about eight or nine years old. I see all the kids dressing up and going to Frankie's party. We had a wall in front of our house. I am sitting on the wall. Frankie's mother called him home before noon and said, "Frank, you have to come home and clean up and get changed." So he went home to get cleaned up. Then I see all of these kids going to Frankie's party. I am wondering why. Frankie and I had not had any problems, so why did they not invite me. So, I asked the lady who was taking care of us, Mrs. Spencer. I said, "Why am I not invited to Frankie's party?" [She said], "Because you are colored." As I remember, there were not any colored kids invited to Frankie's party. It hurt me as a kid. I remember that, that made a difference.

P That is kind of strange, considering you went back and forth.

W We played in each other's yard every day [We were] just good buddies. I would go to his house, he would go to my house, no problems. We were living on Crandall Avenue and my younger son, Sterling, was friends with a white youngster in his class. Very good friends. The youngster invited him to come down to his house to play after school. Sterling was not down there too long and he came back. I said, "What is the matter, Sterling?" The boy had to go to bed. Obviously, he could not play. Four or five o'clock in the afternoon, kids are not going to bed. I said, "You cannot go to play at his house anymore." [He said], "Why?" He knows now. Of course, after he got older, he understood why Billy could not play with him. Billy's parents did not know that Billy was going to be asking a black youngster to come home. At Harding School, there were only four black youngsters in the school. The parents were not aware of it, I am sure. Three were my kids, and one was Bishop Field's son. There were only four black kids that attended the Harding School in those years. The 1960's, early 1960's.

P You mentioned that you lived in a mixed neighborhood when you were growing up. I have been told that there were just three areas of Youngstown where housing was available for blacks. Several people, including you, have mentioned that when you initially came here, you lived with some other family for a period of time before you could find a place to live on your own.

W Right. Well, of course, I guess in my dad's case, it was probably a matter of finding a place. But on the south side of Youngstown, black families could only live on certain streets. You lived on Myrtle Avenue, you lived on Kenmore, you lived on Cleveland. Then you moved up to Earl Avenue, Chicago, Saint Louis, and that was it. There were a couple of families on LaCleda, and that is between Glenwood and Oak Hill on Market. Those were the only streets where, you were black, you could buy.

P What about other places in town that were available?

W Oh, there were not many. Most blacks lived on the east side. There were not too many blacks on the south side. They lived on the lower south side, on High Street. They lived on Plum Street. They lived on Woodland Avenue. They all lived in that area. But most blacks lived on the north side. In those years, they lived on Foster Street, Covington Street, Scott Street. There was a belt from West Federal street up to Madison Avenue. Madison was the end. Blacks could not live north of Madison. I was the second black to buy a house north of Madison in 1951. The other blacks that owned a house, the Rivers, they had a house on Owens Street, which was a black street. Saint Elizabeth's purchased that property and bought them this house on Belmont, and sold it to them. It permitted them to be the first black family north of Madison. I was the second. I bought mine for a funeral home.

P This is going back to the 1920's. You have probably read and heard an awful lot about the Ku Klux Klan, and how active they were in Youngstown.

W Yeah.

P Did your dad have any personal experiences with them?

W. No. He never had any experiences. My dad had no experiences with the Klan. Neither did any of my other relatives. I knew nothing of the Klan, other than what I read. Most of the things I heard were about Niles. The experiences were, of black people here, they could not go in or about Niles, Ohio, after dark.

P You touched a little bit on your father-in-law being very active in the church. Your dad, obviously, was active in the church. Could you tell me a little bit about the role they played by the black church in three areas. one, what they did as far

as civil rights in this area. What they did as far as facilitating the intrigue of black people from the south during periods of immigration. And then what their role has been as far as leadership in general of the black community.

W Well, the black church, of course, was not only a spiritual institution for black folks, but it was the social institution for black people. If it were not for the activities of the church, I do not know what black people would do. The black church had programs where the young blacks would be attracted to attend. Musical programs, oratorical programs. It was an attraction. There was not anything else available. [tape ends here]

End of Interview