YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Farrell Race Relations Project

Farrell Race Relations -- 1960's

O. H. 514

ROGER WINSTON

Interviewed

by

Ronald J. Rice

on

October 1, 1980

ROGER S. WINSTON

Roger S. Winston was born in Sharon, Pennsylvania on September 8, 1943. Winston has lived most of his life in Farrell except for three years of active duty in the U. S. Army from 1961-1964. Winston is married and has two children, Daryl and Kennya, ages fourteen and eleven respectively.

Winston has mixed feelings about his growing up in Farrell. He attended Farrell High School and was active in athletics, but spent most of his time outside of school running with street gangs. Winston graduated from high school in 1961 and enlisted in the Army from 1961 until 1964.

After being discharged from the Army Winston returned to Farrell and got a part-time job while attending college at Youngstown State University. While going to school Winston dropped out to get married and start a family. After working at various jobs Winston returned to college full-time and graduated in 1973 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Sociology. In 1975 he went to work for the Farrell Redevelopment Authority as a deputy director and has remained working there until today. Winston's chief interests besides work is spending time with his family at home.

Winston was president and vice-president of the Black Youth Action Committee in Farrell during the late 1960's and he had a direct involvement with the city's racial unrest. He feels the city of Farrell had racial problems, but not nearly as intense or severe as most outsiders believe. Winston believes the black

youths in Farrell were less violent than in other cities because they had no real hatred of the whites in Farrell since they were all friends and neighbors. Winston's views on the racial problems of Farrell in the 1960's are different in comparison to other Farrell residents.

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INTERVIEWEE: ROGER WINSTON

INTERVIEWER: Ronald J. Rice

SUBJECT: Racial tension, Black Youth Action Committee, causes of rioting

DATE: October 1, 1980

R: This is an interview with Mr. Roger Winston for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the racial tensions and rioting during the 1960's in Farrell, Pennsylvania, by Ronald J. Rice at 1923 Shady Drive, Farrell, Pensylvania, on October 1, 1980, at 6:00 in the evening.

Okay, Mr. Winston, to begin with could you tell us a little bit about what your childhood was like and what you remember about your parents and growing up?

W: Well, in terms of childhood I came from a family whereby there were four children involved, myself being the youngest boy. There were three boys and one girl. There was no father in the home. As I recall, my grandmother, whose home we grew up in, was much more the dominant force when I think in terms of placing the so-called father image. She was definitely the authority figure in the home. I don't feel that overall it had a tremendous effect in terms of my own childhood development to the extent that gangs were a very dominant feature. You had to take on those masculine traits to somehow survive within our concepts of what we called the macho thing.

R: Okay, you grew up in Farrell then with your grandparent. You say the gangs were the prominent thing just like groups of kids hanging out?

W: Right, in Farrell there were maybe like four dominant groups which we called gangs; but for the most part they were

really guys who just lived in one area and kind of socialized together and somehow became indentified as a gang and somewhat operated within that gang type concept.

R: Just a close-knit bunch of friends.

W: That is right.

R: What do you remember about school? What was school like in Farrell?

W: School, I really didn't find it to be a problem. For the most part I did resent the fact that I never felt highly motivated toward learning. School was like a task and my biggest task was somehow to get there. Normally it was a thing of surviving . . . Well, I just went through the day. I wasn't what you would call an aggressive student; I wasn't a great student. I don't think I had any big problems like a learning disability. But just that I do recognize the fact now that I had no great desires towards academics. The main thing was to get through the school day. Again, the hardest chore was really just to get there.

R: What was a typical day like for you in high school?

W: I had it tougher than most, and I don't think it was typical for students in that era. But what occurred earlier in eighth or ninth grade was the fact that my grandmother was deceased. She had operated a restaurant. To maintain that livelihood for the family, my mother had to continue maintaining the restaurant, which was separate from our home. My mother and my sister lived in the restaurant, which was like four blocks from our home. I grew up back at the old homestead which was a three-story, brick building with myself and two older brothers. The problems that occurred there were the fact that my older brother got himself involved in a burglary and he was also sentenced to do time. He was no longer in the home. Then my brother Raymond, who is in between, developed a mental illness, and he went to a mental institution shortly thereafter. I resisted the idea of leaving that home. As it happened, a normal day for me toward ninth and twelfth grade was the fact of getting myself up and off to school which normally meant no breakfast, and if I was fortunate I would steal two candy bars or so from the restaurant. What we had to do was we had to eat at the restaurant; there was no food in the home itself which was four blocks away. So I had to somehow show my own resistance or rebellion toward the family by really roughing it. Normally what would happen at the restaurant, my big thing was to cook two hamburgers a day and drink a bottle of pop, and if I was lucky I could steal those two candy bars and that would get

me through the morning as far as breakfast. I was fortunate too to the extent that there was a school program whereby those who were considered low income or on public assistance, could work in the cafeteria and get a free lunch. That was a tremendous help. So I never really had to bend and perhaps lose my status of rebellion so as to ask my mother for lunch money. I had the two candy bars in the morning, a free lunch in school, and my two hamburgers in the evening.

R: You mean after school?

W: After school, right.

R: Most of your time you spent working in the restaurant?

W: Not really. Well, initially during the time my grandmother was alive, we did split the time between the four of us, working in the restaurant. But later when I got into more of this rebellion type of attitude, I spent very little time around the restaurant other than just eating and moving on. Most of it was away from the house in gangs. But surprisingly I was much more into sports. I never got involved in either smoking or drinking, and girls was the biggest thing. That was the other part of it, to be cool in that era you had to play the girls; so that was my biggest status playing the broads and to play sports.

R: Did you play any sports in high school?

W: Now, I tried, but again I just never gave that little bit extra. I do feel that I was a decent athlete , but I was never pushed, and I never pushed myself. As a matter of fact, Farrell went to state in 1959 and 1960, and I competed against all their superstars. I always felt competitive, and my reputation around the class or the school was the fact I was decent but perhaps not coachable.

R: What year did you graduate from high school?

W: 1961.

R: 1961, and where did you go from there?

W: I went to the service. I left in August of 1961 and I stayed the full three years. I was discharged in 1964.

R: You went into what branch?

W: U. S. Army, and I went into the so-called medical corps as a specialist, which was probably an experience also because of the fact that I had never really been out of the States.

But as it happened I did do my last two years in Germany. It was really quite an experience.

R: Okay, when you got out of the service what direction did your life head then?

W: At the time I came back to Farrell, and I was much closer to my parents at that point--at this time my mother had remarried and my stepfather was in the picture. For the most part I had matured and was much more helpful in terms of the family. Then also I did take a job as an orderly at the Farrell Osteopathic Hospital, and this gave me my spending money. I was living at home and didn't have any great expenses. Between the two, working at the restaurant and at the hospital, I had a great life because I was still single and in terms of social life I was available at that point.

R: When did you decide to go to college at Youngstown?

W: I decided early on possibly within a year when I came out of the service. Again, I think it was the case where I was not being mature and ready to go to school at that time. I really wanted something better, but I really didn't know what I wanted. I did make the attempt, and I ended up taking evening classes. I think I finished the one quarter. As a matter of fact, what happened here was that I got married just prior to dropping out of school. So really, I think, in essence I used it probably as an excuse to get married since the school had become secondary and I had to take on all kinds of responsibilities. I think the truth of the matter was that I really wasn't doing that good and really wasn't that highly motivated. It probably was a wise move on my part later to drop out at that point because what happens if you have a low accumulation or whatever you are dead later if you ever wake up.

R: Right.

W: So I think my true awakening came four or five years later.

R: Then you started back on a regular basis?

W: Right. I got married in the latter part of 1966. Then we spent two and a half years or so out in Illinois. Then we moved back to Farrell. In the latter part of 1969 or early part of 1970 I started taking courses at Penn State, and I had accumulated quite a few hours at Penn State. Also, I was employed at Sharon Steel. They were good also because they did allow me to work a schedule so that I could take these classes at Penn State. As it worked out I think I had maybe like close to two years or so to go. I did terminate my employment with Sharon Steel, and went to Youngstown full-time and graduated around June of 1973.

R: Okay, and where do you work now?

W: I'm working now for the Farrell Redevelopment Authority in the position of deputy director.

R: Did you receive any kind of special training for this, most of it on the job?

W: Right. For the most part it has been on the job but to a great extent just having a sociological background which was my major at Youngstown . . . and then also having lived in the area and in the neighborhood, the local trends, the power groups, et cetera. It just has been a tremendous asset. To me it made it a lot easier to fit into the groove. Otherwise, I would have to come and try to identify trends, the power structure . . .

R: You lived and grew up here so . . .

W: It made it a lot easier.

R: Right.

W: But then I found out too that there were some major drawbacks to even try to do this type of work locally. What happens to a large extent is that people who tend to know you or assume that they know you tend to ask for things that are above and beyond your capabilities or even marginal things; yet they feel they have the right to approach you on that level; it really creates a lot of problems because you have to tell them no at some point. A lot of people just don't identify with the fact that you have a job to do.

R: Living here has both sides. It is nice to know everything, but everybody demands a lot more from you.

W: Right, exactly.

R: What are some of your chief interests besides work? I know you work in the family.

W: Surprisingly--I think this happened because of the job--I'm much more introverted because the job requires a great deal of public contact and constantly I feel like I'm on stage. Either here at the office or if you go shopping or if you go to a restaurant or to the church or et cetera, sooner or later it comes back to your job. Somebody calls you on the side and says,"Hey, look what about this?" et cetera. I find it very frustrating, and I think what is happening in the last couple of years or so, I'm totally oriented towards staying home. I have the two fireplaces up and down. I'm fascinated with fireplaces. I mean it's just a matter of throwing logs on the damn thing.

R: That is why it is relaxing.

W: That is right, exactly. I feel like I said, pretty introverted, like all hell at this point. I find it relaxing to just get away. I'm fortunate that the house is large enough for this to happen.

R: Okay, I would like to get back to the early 1960's if we can. What was it like in Farrell say in the early 1960's, in 1962, 1963? What do you remember most about it?

W: People were very content. I recall the loud music when you walked on the street. There didn't seem to be really any frustrations. It was just that people enjoyed themselves. There were jobs that were available; they had money and cars, new cars, no real complaints at all. It seemed to be a really relaxed atmosphere. There were no concerns at that period in terms of War in Vietnam; that was almost secondary to any real interest in that point, but no real problems then. People were very relaxed as I recall. The clubs and drinking . . . basically I recall that feature was strictly a social life, no hassles.

R: Things were pretty easygoing then?

W: Yes, exactly.

R: Okay, how did you feel back about some of the minority leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King in the 1960's? Do you remember anything about him?

W: Okay, in the early 1960's--I'm saying early on, say when I came out of the service and all--I had very little knowledge of the so-called civil rights movement or the leadership. I couldn't give you any perspective on the NAACP's (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) philosophy versus Urban League, et cetera. I was totally foreign to it until perhaps late 1960's--I mean 1968, 1969--where I took on more of an interest at that point at least in terms of reading and being more conscious of what was developing nationally on the news and those types of things.

R: Could you sense it sort of building in Farrell, maybe like people becoming more aware as time went on? Usually things seem to start like on the east coast and the west coast and work their way into the country. Some people felt that awareness was growing through the 1960's.

W: I think that was what motivated my interest just to the fact that there was much more discussion on it. As a matter of fact, I think early on in that period that at least it was an issue. Prior to that it was like an injustice, but again, what can you do about it? I think gradually between

1965 and 1969 somewhere in there it became an issue whereby people felt that they had a right to disagree, and this was being discussed on that level. Then I think also the civil rights movement had much more play in the news media. I think it was at a point too where you really couldn't mistake it even if you were totally adverse to it and you had no problems or if it was an all white community. I think to some extent we were all forced to be caught up in it.

R: Right. Could you see the tensions growing between black and white in Farrell?

W: No, not really. Farrell is unique. I think it has been my experience as one of the problems that our group had. I think maybe a lot of it is happening at this point that I can identify myself, the fact that there were four of us who were initiated into what we called the black culture--the Black Youth Action Committee. Those who initiated this organization, they were all conscious of the racial developments and social injustice and what have you, but the real pitfall of that was the fact that Farrell was the type of community whereby it was small enough and we were in that age group where we all grew up with white neighbors and white friends in school. I don't think that race was ever an act of that subject or the fact of us being black was never a dominant or major thing.

R: You feel Farrell was much more integrated than . . .

W: Well, at least it had the overtures of integration. As a matter of fact, I think what happened was that we hadn't any problems with our own identity even though at that point we really didn't recognize the fact that we didn't have an identity. We did have a problem with the fact that Farrell was okay just in terms of the facts: Thatwe had a lot of good times in Farrell, and those "times" tend to overshadow any real problems that might have been occurring. I think a lot of blacks in my age group, if they were honest, would admit to the fact that we were just totally naive about our own blackness. Just in terms of the overall dominant things, in all our neighborhoods we all had white friends; we played together; we fought together. For the most part the dominant thing in Farrell was to play sports, so you always had white guys that you played with. You won together; you cried together; you lost together from little league up. I think that this had a major effect on our attitude towards racism and how you deal with it. I think there is one other problem that really affected the black cultural center, in retrospect, is the fact that we all had that reality that we couldn't now turn around and say, "Hey all you white bastards," or "You white racists," because we knew right down the line in our own

hearts that we knew a lot of good white dudes and some white dudes that we really hadn't any problems with, and that we had white teachers and instructors who all at some point played a major role in our lives. I think it was very hard for us to identify with the total concept of white racism. We tried to use it, but I really don't think it had a fire for effect. Nor did it have an effect on those we were trying to use it on. I think we really fantasized on being "The Black Panthers", but they came up in more unique circumstances than what we were used to in Farrell. I don't think we ever meshed the two together. I think we really had a problem with that because it is easy to hate when you can identify the problem, but we couldn't identify the problem here because for example, I could say, "Hey, look, he's a good dude." As an instructor he wasn't like that. We could never get a consensus on any white dude that you wanted to call a white racist unless it was just blatant. See, now that was the other problem was: That racism, more and more, is just not a blatant, overt act. It is much more difficult to identify so that you can have some focal point and we had a real problem with that; we didn't know it. In retrospect it seemed to be true. We couldn't identify any of these bad guys if we wanted.

R: There was some violence in the late 1960's; I think it was the summer of 1969. Am I correct?

W: Right.

R: Could you see things building up to it? Were there any incidents that you can recall or certain situations that caused people to become angry or upset?

W: I honestly feel that from the time our group came into being that one of our goals was really to incite some major incidents locally and if it had to be a riot, fine. But right up until this thing occurred I don't think there was any major incident that we can lay claim to that made it eventful. The only thing I tend to recall and that did bring it on, was there was a meeting, and I wasn't privy to the meeting--t h a t I wasn't available. We were to go out and set a few houses on fire that Sunday; it was on a Sunday night; it was warm out; it was nice. As we rallied that night there were maybe eight guys, myself included. We all put on dark slacks and dark shirts, the whole bit. That was our scheme, which was to go out and set a few fires. But what had happened because so many people were sitting out . . . It was just an open atmosphere; it was on a Sunday night; people were out enjoying themselves; there were a lot of activities on the street. Somehow I think this fever caught on. There was just something big going on and either we better get with it or . . .

R: Snowball . . .

W: I think this had a snowball effect, right. Just the fact that people started to sense that there was something going on. I think when the first one or two fire trucks showed up with the red lights and you heard sirens and police in the area, I think it just heightened whatever these feelings were at that point. Mainly there was no incident to precipitate a riot per se. I think what happened too was that the word went out rapidly that there was a riot going on in Farrell. I think it was just that kind of a fever, the tempo they had--the upper neighborhoods--and shouting to the community that there was a riot in Farrel without any real basis for it actually happening. Normally there have been incidents: cases of police brutality or if somebody gets shot, if there is a shooting, if there is a robbery with some police involvement and whatever, we never had that. I was totally shocked. I had to stay up late that evening. I went to work that morning and I got off at 3:00 p.m. and heard that there was a riot in Farrell. I said, "Honey, there is a riot going on." This happened and that happened, the police, the fire trucks, et cetera. I was close to the action, and all of a sudden we had a riot and I was the last to find out.

R: There wasn't much discrimination then in such things as housing or jobs and pay?

W: Oh definitely, yes. We had all the symptoms of racism in terms of the blacks not being in any upgraded type of positions.

R: In city government?

W: Right, city government. There was no black representation on council or any key departments. Even on the employment level, the blacks were mostly workers, laborers, nothing in terms of the management or even foreman types of positions. So I had to feel bringing all those things together collectovely that Farrell definitely in terms of blacks had a problem, just in terms of the fact that opportunities weren't available for any upward mobility. Nor did we have any blacks we could look up to as so-called leadership models, at least within the white sectors. There were guys within the black sectors that we could identify with because they were super cool; they had the biggest car or they ran numbers or were into drugs; but just in terms of your normal models we had a problem. I always had a problem with religion or ministers, but that was probably our biggy--you know if you had a minister you could do it; if that was the case, I didn't. They were probably the only ones who were acceptable in terms of the models, I guess.

R: Was there any movement by any groups that you know--white or black--that would try to better things in the mid-1960's, as things were becoming more aware?

W: Yes, as a matter of fact we had the two groups, and I was not knowledgeable on what they were all about, but we had the Urban League which is national and then also the NAACP which is national. Perhaps as they understood it they made some viable attempts, but I never made any overt efforts, on my part, to learn what they were all about or to enter membership or whatever. But they were here, and I assume that they were working for the common good.

R: Do you think then that the majority of the people didn't want that concern about the Urban League?

W: Yes, because I think that what it was that those groups tend to have, the stigma of being so-called middle-class blacks . . . As a matter of fact, another big pitch from our black cultural center was the fact that we represent the grass roots; we are the true blacks. These other guys were perhaps what we considered the "Uncle Toms" at that time. I've since learned better. But at that point it was very easy for us to label them as "Uncle Toms" and concede to the establishment whereby we represent the grass roots and we make the demands on the establishment; we don't compromise; it is either-or.

R: That summer was a hot summer and tempers did soar and there was some violence and some sporadic burnings and stuff like that. Once it all happened, how close were you to it and was your life affected by it at all?

W: Yes, as a matter of fact, I was affected in the reverse just to the extent that I did feel that our organization, the Black Youth Action Committee, that we had geared ourselves towards confrontation. As a matter of fact, we wanted confrontation, not quite knowing how to deliver that confrontation, but it had to be a prime goal to show that we had strength within the black community. My rude awakening came two or three days into this so-called riot situation. I recall again I was on day turn. I got off at 3:00. I had walked up Lee Avenue to the corner of Market Avenue and Staunton Street where a lot of the guys tended to hang out. Right across Staunton Street there was a car that was on fire and nobody had any real concern about it. I mean there were twenty or thirty people around in the area, and they were just talking. It was just another day. All of a sudden I felt shaken; I'm watching a car burn and I'm thinking to myself, the damn thing might explode; there could be danger or whatever. But my whole problem with that incident as I recall back to it was the fact that I recognized then that we had lost total control. In essence, if you start it right,

you assume you are going to be in control of what is going to happen or the outcome of the participance. But I recognized then that we had no control over this riot. That was when I really had a guilty reaction just to the extent that this is what we kind of motivated ourselves toward yet we had no damn solutions.

R: Was your intent to gain attention? Were all of your outlets trying to go through city council? Were all of your avenues cut off and the only way you had to go was intention to . . .

W: Not really. I think a lot of it just came to the group itself in being immature in terms of knowing what we wanted or how we should go about to achieve these things. It is very easy for a group who just wants to demand, to incite, to show rebellion because it was nothing for us to blow into a council meeting until we disrupted the damn thing, or a school board meeting and just be disruptive. Our channels in terms of communicating with the so-called power system was always open. All we had to know was when was there a meeting. We were well received by school principals or mayor, et cetera, not well received but the point being that we could negotiate and sit down and discuss the thing.

R: Would they do something now or would they just listen and say, "Okay, okay," and put everybody off?

W: Well, no, a lot of that that happened too was in retrospect because I realize now that government just can't move overnight and do these types of changes. Now a lot of times too there has to be a certain amount of negotiations. What we wanted really was confrontation. So even if there was an atmosphere whereby perhaps there was a little give and take, of course, merits an improvement; I think that we could set the stage where that couldn't be permitted, the point being that we would come strictly to intimidate; like anybody, if you don't have the ability to intimidate, it is very quick to turn somebody off. You know, they will resist. I think that we actually initiated an atmosphere to the powers that we had to show or save some face . . . It was just a matter of time before confrontation would have erupted. But as it happened this damn thing here, this so-called riot, occurred first. I'm not using that as hindsight, but I think just our tactics alone didn't allow any positive things to develop.

R: Would you call it a riot?

W: No.

R: Would you classify it as a riot?

W: No, no. I think it was probably the biggest joke that happened in the state in 1969 mainly just because of the simple reason that there were no issues, which really made it worse for anybody to get any real grips on. If it is a case of police brutality perhaps you can plea to the common courts and certify charges. See, that is my problem in terms of calling it a riot because with any riot, one of the things I have picked up upon is that you have to have a focus. But when that occurred in Farrel, there was totally no focus. There was no incident that could justify that having occurred at that given time. All of a sudden it was so spontaneous, so they decided to call it a riot. I think the term they threw out was civil disorder, so whatever that means . . . okay, fine, we will call it civil disorder because we burned some things; some houses got burned. The firemen came down to turn on the water hydrants to put out the fires and we turned the water hydrants off. So we can call it a civil disturbance. I guess we were justified on that basis, but a riot I think is really gutsy. Then probably if they would have chosen to call it anything but a riot, the thing probably would have never lasted past Monday. But having these connotations like what you were saying, giving it that snowball, everybody started reacting to the fact that there was a riot.

R: Well, if you had to look back and compare what had happened that summer with the rest of the country at that time, would you say it was not that much the same as what was going on in the rest of the country?

W: Right. To me it was just totally out of context with what was occurring when you look at the riots that occurred in Detroit, Chicago, parts of the south, and wherever, because a lot of times when the blacks hit the streets in those areas there was legitimate injustice in that community. Again, if you took a study like they did with the so-called Kenner Commission Reports, there was so much obvious injustice in a lot of those communities. I think if Farrell had the same type of study it would have shown different types of problems; injustice to some extent, but I think to a larger extent problems more so than injustice. Now these in terms of the fact that there are certain things that you could do and also they do them in situations where you feel relaxed even as a blind. I think to the large extent if that is the reverse then I would term it injustice. I don't think injustice is a good term for it to be used toward Farrell.

R: Was there a different atmosphere in Farrell? Were you fearful of your safety at any time at all that summer?

W: Not really. Surprisingly not. I don't think anybody at least within our group felt any real threats by the powers . . . Our families, I don't think, received any threats as I recall it. The one guy did report that somebody burned a cross on his front porch or his front yard. He was from within the group, and he was black. Personally, I have never felt threatened from it.

R: How do you feel about the idea that some people believe that they would classify what happened in Farrell as a riot, and they would say and feel that the people who caused the riot were all bussed from Youngstown?

W: Yes, that was a prominent comment which was really ridiculous. As a matter of fact, these were the types of comments that really kept this whole thing . . . It just kept adding fuel to the fire because there was nothing further from the truth. Youngstown had their own problems. I just can't imagine a group of guys saying, "Hey, let's get on a bus and go to Farrell and let's riot." It is just so far from the truth. There is no truth in it at all. That was not a problem in Farrell but when those types of rumors spurted the whole damn Heritage Mall shut down. Communities were going to a curfew and strictly over rumors. There was no basis for it.

R: What was the news coverage like on what happened in 1969? What do you recall about that?

W: Okay, as I recall the coverage was that they always played to the Black Youth Action Committee as an intimidating force coming to any meeting. The only times that I recall getting press coverage was when we went to a meeting and made certain comments or statements, but I think the whole overture of their comments was always to show us as an intimidating, threatening force. The press helped give that illusion that we were very strong and very reactionary. I think because of that illusion they kept us internally a very strong group. What happened I found out was that even a lot of black groups were backing off. Then the black cultural center came to the forefront. Another fact too that those in the Urban League didn't agree a lot on were the positions that were taken, but again, rather than have any confrontation from within or the fact that they didn't know what we were all about at any given meeting . . . It would be pretty difficult for them to support any given position that we had taken. Overall I think the thing that made us that dominant group or so-called leadership position in the black community was the fact that they played us up as being a very intimidating force.

R: They made you a lot more powerful than what you felt you were?

W: Right, exactly. One-on-one I think we were pussycats. We never struck anybody.

R: Who made up the Black Youth Action Committee? Do you know?

W: Yes, Maurice Hopkins as I recall was president. There was George Thomas, myself, Ernie Robinson. All four of us were pretty much in the same age group. We all went to school together and had similar backgrounds at least to the extent that we grew up in Farrell. Then as it happened we all came back to Farrell around the same time. I think a lot of it also is the fact that we were exposed to other communities, other life styles, and somehow we felt that Farrell had better start to grow in black lives.

R: Right. How do you feel the police handled the situation?

W: I'm not terribly sure a lot of times because more recently I have talked to the chief--I work in the same building as the guy--and we joke about a lot of what occurred in that period of time. Overall I found that the police weren't terribly aggressive, which is fine because they really didn't have anybody to be aggressive towards. Now we had the reverse problem because like in any community it was very easy to say, "Those pigs." Here we never had that kind of relationship with the police. I mean they were okay as far as we were concerned. I mean we couldn't identify them as pigs; we couldn't cite incidents of brutality, et cetera, whereby there was a constant pattern. Sure, a guy might get arrested and possibly make the black jacket, but again, even by my own definitions maybe it was justified. Just in terms of being overt cases of police brutality, we couldn't hang our hats on that one. For the most part we were even allowed to ride in the cruisers. Again, I think our role maybe was to try to keep things quiet. They allowed us that opportunity.

R: Did they ask for some help then?

W: No, no, we volunteered our services as it happened. Again, they conceded and things worked out pretty well because two nights we did go out; it was the night that Farrell got taken off the curfew. There were no major incidents and things started to quiet down at that point.

R: How about the city government itself, the mayor and the council, do you remember how they reacted, or if they tried to better the situation?

W: Yes, as a matter of fact as things did come to a head--I

think around that period of time--there was a meeting of the more dominant black organizations. We had come up with a list of eight demands. The press played it as eight demands. The truth of the matter was that it was the eight areas of concern that we really had drafted up to present to the mayor and council. What had happened was that this was presented to the mayor prior to the actual start of the council meeting; so he had opportunity to get a consensus of council prior to going into the regular meeting. We had taken over the council chambers. I mean, we had 200 to 300 black dudes who just totally filled the chambers; they were all out on the staircase, out on the streets, wherever. At that point he made the announcement that he had conceded on all eight demands, all eight things requested.

R: Do you remember what they were by chance?

W: I could get them out for you. They were considerations like we wanted a stronger code of enforcement in the area in terms of health inspections and that kind of thing, and that we were looking for greater black representation; we were asking for that on all the commissions and boards that were appointed by the city because at that point particularly on the boards and commissions as they were there were no blacks on any of these boards or commissions.

R: Weren't the elections too at that time done by everybody who voted for the council, and there was no representation?

W: That is right; that is why voting was a must. We had no tool, no representation on council. Even at that time that was not one of the areas that we wanted them to make adjustments on. A lot of them were general, and a lot of them could be done with just a stroke of the pen. I do recall that the major concerns were that we do get blacks into responsible type positions. Then the code enforcement was a major concern in terms of how to give a man those kinds of inspections. They were reasonable demands, and I think that based on the mayor conceding to it along with the fact that maybe it was better than the situation that he had current. He was looking at a packed chamber with 300 blacks; it was hot; there was no air-conditioning, and he is there all alone. I think the other councilmen left him. He was there by himself with this damn sheet of paper conceding the fact that he was agreeable. I don't think the police could have gotten up the steps if there was an incident because it was so packed and there was only one way in and one way out.

R: Did he follow up on any of this?

W: Yes. The administration did put into place . . . I think

they conceded all eight requests. I think the problem really occurred maybe two years later because we were such a flaky organization. We actually lost track of all eight of them; that was how much it meant to us. Within a period of less than two years we totally had no interest at all, nothing.

R: For the time would you say the Action Committee was loosely organized?

W: Yes, definitely. Only in terms of the fact that we really didn't know . . .

R: Well-organized but not too much direction? How would you describe it?

W: Well, I think for the most part that we were just totally irresponsible in terms of the fact that we could identify problems but we never did find any solutions. There was just no method to our tactics. We had a lot of internal problems. I was kicked out early. I was the first one to get kicked out, and I'm very proud of it. I think we were totally irresponsible in terms of leadership, the obligation we had to the society and to other people. We didn't practice what we preached. We just let our feet drag. We never went outside of our education and life styles and upward mobility, et cetera. We didn't relate to it. Our own life styles were very questionable in the eyes of other blacks; that is why we never had the position of leadership in terms of older blacks. The best thing we did for the community was to fade without doing a great deal of more damage.

R: How did your relatives feel about the situation with the Black Youth Action Committee and some of your friends?

W: I think along the lines of my friends, they were very accepting because we were pretty much in the same age group and had really similar knowledge of the problems; we understood it pretty much on the same level. My own parents had some real problems with that. They couldn't relate to my so-called black militancy. For the most part they weren't very supportive. Like most parents they would question my actions along with the fact of saying this isn't right and that isn't right, but you don't correct this by going out and doing a wrong. That was pretty much what was happening. They didn't see all of our actions being justified. Then the real question which always came home was the fact that you had a family with kids who looked up to you. So if something should happen to you or you should get involved in some illegal activity to the extent that you have to go to jail, who is going to take care of your family? That made a lot of sense. I was trying to

avoid having that happen. I didn't mind the role of being advocate, militancy, or a confrontation, but I really didn't want to get into a situation whereby there was any criminal activity or anything illegal that I could be a part to.

R: Okay, is there anybody who you know that was directly affected by the violence besides yourself and what you saw?

W: Well, I think for the most part the community itself . . .

R: There was more material damage than there was anything else.

W: Right, because Farrell was pretty much in a decline to a large extent in the first place. When you have this type of disruption in a community, a lot of those resources that perhaps may have been stable or even marginal, they had to go under. What happened was that we lost a lot of those stores and businesses, mainly what we call the commercial district. A lot of other people who perhaps wanted to stay in the community felt that it was just too detrimental to their business; they couldn't risk it. So overall it really had a significant effect at least in terms of the commercial district. There was a period of time where it did have a tremendous effect in terms of black-white relationships because at that point any given incident could lead to another confrontation, even though it may just start out between two people, one being black and the other being white. It could be a major incident. We maybe went through three years of pretty shaky circumstances because nobody knew how to treat anybody at that point.

R: Well, looking back to 1969 and the late part of the 1960's, what changes would you liked to have seen instituted in the neighborhood?

W: Well, I think that a lot of the good that came out of this happening maybe came through the so-called Vietnam era whereby there was a forced consciousness toward people. I think for the most part that the government had been much more responsive. As an organization we would have never came to the forefront as a leader had there been other avenues channeled or had they sought those types of responses locally.

I think the other part of it is that Farrell has a representative type of government whereby today we are still voting at large, which really doesn't make a large segment of our community a part of government. This is for the

simple reason that you can take your best shot and not get a guy elected. Farrell is unique to the extent that they are very ethnic oriented. I'm saying that is still a feature that makes Farrell unique. I don't find it a problem in terms of black versus white, but the true division comes along ethnic lines. I'm talking about Slovaks in Farrell; we have very strong Italian families, Croations, et cetera. This is a real problem for blacks because blacks have never learned to relate on that level because all of these groups have a very strong identity; it is part of their tradition and part of their culture where blacks have never quite pulled their's together; so they are at a total disadvantage. I think because of that they were able to keep their involvement in the city government.

Another thing too that could be a positive thing is that they were voting perhaps back on an award basis whereby you could elect on a basis of award that people would feel much more at ease and understand everything about ethnic differences.

R: Do you think everything could have been prevented, or do you think it would have happened anyway?

W: Yes, I think it could have been prevented because for the most part the black culture, the Black Youth Action Committee, pretty much initiated the efforts to move towards civil disorder. I think if enough pieces of the pie or t h e puzzle were in place that it was impossible for it to occur. We didn't have any real focus. We couldn't incite the police as being pigs which was the common term at the time. We had no area of confrontation with city government, city mayor and council, whereby we could come to the conclusion that they just aren't receptive to what we want so therefore we have to make demands on them; that never occurred. Whenever we went to the school board or the superintendent of schools, their doors were open. We went to the city commissioners of Mercer County and they gave us an appointment; they gave us their time. Even based on those types of meetings, we weren't treated with any discourtesy. There were some things that we didn't like, but again that is part of negotiations.

R: Do you think Farrell has been given a bad reputation in the Shenango Valley?

W: Yes. There is no question about it. A large part of it too is the fact that Farrell traditionally--and people tend to assess the fact--is a dumping grounds for all ethnic

groups. As a matter of fact, Farrell is viewed upon as being pretty much like a migration center where groups migrated over from Europe and in this case blacks migrating from the south. They got their start in Farrell, and then perhaps as they became more prosperous . . .

R: Because of the steel mill do you think?

W: Yes. Employment had a lot to do with attracting blacks, well, Europeans for the most part too. Again, it was opportunities and employment, et cetera. What had happened was that Farrell was somehow viewed as the center of attraction, so the immediate migration was for Farrell. Perhaps as families became more successful--perhaps second generation, third generation--then they opted to move to suburbs like Hermitage, outer limits of Sharon, and if you were really sharp to Masury and et cetera. All these families tended to have their roots or families perhaps in Farrell, in the immediate work area. Anyone who stayed in that immediate area was definitely looked down upon because they didn't show success; they stayed in Farrell. It really is a syndrome that Farrell has had to work itself out of.

In the late 1960's Mayor Petrillo and Mayor Gyroski had formed a fact-finding committee; Mayor Petrillo was the one. I think he had nine or eleven people appointed just to review what is right and what is wrong with the community and perhaps find some workable solution. The number one area that we hung our hat on was Farrell's image. In spite of all the other problems and concerns, it was definitely our image. Our whole private development is coming back now, and the local residents have a different identity and pride in the community, et cetera.

R: Great. Would you assess the entire situation as being overexaggerated?

W: Yes, in portions. I'm one of the ringleaders; I was up front. After being one of the guys who was definitely up front and even help set one of these fires and not knowing there was a riot, that was hilarious. People relate to it as a riot, including the administration; otherwise, nothing had come out of it. If they would have put out those two fires that night and everybody would have gone home there would have been nothing.

R: How different are the race relations in Farrell now than they were in the 1960's? Are they any different, better or worse?

W: I think to a large extent better. I think seriously there have been some visible opportunities in the community just in terms of living standards; I think the blacks tend to feel a lot better about themselves as people. I think government overall tends to react to the citizenry on a different level. Sometimes this administration--I'm very close with them--is very oriented toward a one-on-one type of contact as opposed to pressure groups. My feelings are that if a guy comes into my office with a valid complaint I feel very responsive to it. I think earlier in the 1960's they were much more geared toward pressure groups. If you had a group and they were dominant and they were a key in elections, then you had to respect them for this. Perhaps one of your stronger groups in Farrell that nobody gave credit to was the Elks Club. The Elks supported the right man as opposed to a guy like myself walking in with a valid complaint, and it would probably get treated as an invalid complaint regardless, because this was just one person's opinion. But I think the role of government has changed. For five years it has been responsive.

R: Things are definitely making positive progress you would say?

W: Yes, I would think so. I feel today there is an overt attempt to supply help, as opposed to years in the past.

R: Well, is there anything else that you would think important to add that we didn't cover?

W: No.

R: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW