

Hunter Lane
By Elizabeth Gritter
Memphis
Interview 2
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Hunter Lane: Interview 2

Q. You said city commission had absolute control, you said parks were an example. Another examples.

A. There were boards and commission who had to put it in place but commissioners had to supervise it. Like I was liaison with MLGW and Jimmy Moore was so with park commission. As a practical matter I didn't interfere much. At that time, we had good citizen board. Very well known and well educated and just first-class people on these boards. AS far as desegregation aspect of it, it usually started with the boards. For example, Park commission decided to desegregate swimming pools. That was a case where they had pressure put on it. We had funding power, we could cut money off, never happened but big stick we could use. We had power to desegregate or not. precious little blacks at that time I had building inspection brought in some. Not any on boards or commissions. In 1964, they were totally excluded. At that time, we were getting highly qualified, Ivy League couldn't even get in local theater here. They had Miss. Patrons didn't want to offend. Looking back, demeaning. It evolved, once broke one barrier. When swimming pools desegregated, I didn't follow it but I don't think white people went anymore. You know, I got this call, they'll transmit these sexually transmitted diseases, water contaminated.

So you had enforcement but didn't use it.

Right. The boards were quality people. Most weren't political climbers. In a different category.

Did protest activity of NAACP have an impact on plans to desegregate.

Yeah, I told you about SCDC a lot of them NAACP folks. Oh yeah, they put a lot of heat on in terms of hiring black people in all areas and also to desegregate public facilities. IT was sort of instead of being confrontational subrosa type things. They'd call you up on telephone, back corridor.

Were there meetings?

I don't remember meeting where we were all invited. It was more an individual thing. For example, M Smith would call and say when are you going to get around appointing someone to board or commission. Slow but actual progress on board and commission employees and appointments. NAACP was a constant presence. They were very vigilant. They had other things to do. They had to use pretty strong tactics. They were more than ignored, despised by a lot of the white people. They thought Maxine Smith was dragon lady in eyes of whites, many prominent whites, she was devil incarnate. She

was spokesperson and high profile. Yes, NAACP did put pressure on, there was involvement constantly. During the four years after the term I served, it got a lot stronger then.

With sanitation strike, Black Mondays.

Yeah. There were other desegregation groups like SNCC from out of town who joined with NAACP.

In late 60s?

Well between 67 and 71. It continued on after that. Once Dr. King got killed, at first, there was reaction, "Glad they got that goddamn nigger." Chamber of Commerce didn't care about Dr. King but about effect it had on the city's image. I remember Time characterized Memphis as a sleepy rivertown. Anyhow, the power structure began to see - leaving out morality - racial problems not good for the city. A lot of biting of tongues and suppressed emotion with it.

NAACP and SCDC two main organizations for political power and civil rights.

Well, they had most effective organization and most members. Not many whites. They interacted. The SCDC - it would mobilize around election time. They were more involved in politics of it and getting people elected. NAACP was a constant pressure. Both organizations had large number of members, most were invisible. You heard from Jesse and Maxine.

How characterize Ingram's politics on race?

On 1967 election, we had first black mayoral candidate, Willis. He got more votes than him. He had status among blacks. He was a city judge and for first time listened to defendant in cases. He outwardly hadn't been benefactor of blacks. He held up War on Poverty singlehandedly for like a year and a half. He had a power to appoint in that thing, commission didn't have to approve his appointments. Frances Coe, for example, she was a nominee and another guy finally got the job. Ingram's strength among blacks were ministers and people who didn't feel they belonged in SCDC. Back in Crump days, so many ministers got money to produce votes. They kind of got shut out by SCDC and had been used to being in politics. He was devious, a little crazy.

Why held up on War on Poverty?

He wanted to put his people in there, a hack. I'm wrong - he did have to get city commission approval in this case. Under our charter, he had to have counsel. He would keep bringing these people in and I proposed Frances Coe. Washington Butler was sort of the compromise. The black community didn't seem to realize that they were being deprived. I didn't hear any active protest. Ingram was sort of a loner, didn't have close allies on city commission, didn't seek them out. He just went his own way. He was very peculiar. He was not all bad or all good. He was tricky. He lied a lot. He was a demagogue. He was in German prison camp. We thought that affected his personality. He was a little paranoid.

194 – IN 1967, two major changes with city government becoming council form and runoff law that was passed. I saw you were supporter of runoff law.

HL: I was general supporter of charter change – to mayor-council form. No way black elected official be elected was one of the defects b/c the numbers weren't there. At that time, whites outnumbered the blacks. Under commission system, the same people who ran the departments controlled money too. Consequently, very little check and balance. Under the new system, the mayor had a lot more power. He appointed the various boards and commissions. Council had to approve them but he had the initiative. The things commission used to do as a group, now mayor could do. Mayor made recommendations to city council and most all the time they went along – they considered that his province. They did block some appts. First city council was probably as well qualified and motivated as any political body. Had some top flight people, nonambitious. It was as free from political maneuvering – not to say there weren't any. They just had a five star cast. Never been the same. Quality of council just has gradually deteriorated.

About getting run off law, what your involvement.

It was par tof the charter and I was generally for the charter. My memory has faded. I'm almost certain it was part of city charter. We had been given home rule law by legislature some time ago. So we could pass our own charter. It was controversial. I think the NAACP and SCDC were not in favor b/c they could get someone elected with a plurality and not a--. I think whites generally for it b/c denied blacks opportunity to elect somebody. I thought great improvement – majority rule is what it's all about.

So that's why you were for.

That's the way it works in about every other system. It didn't occur to me till I was reminded that this was not a good thing for blacks. It didn't change my mind. There were still examples of black representatives being elected at large like Willis. Mathematically it was possible for them – if they turned out and voted in a certain level of participation then they could outweigh whites. Solidarity was the key to it. Blacks always voted in higher percentages than whites b/c of campaigning activity that NAACP and the Club did.

Sugarmon mentioned run off law and he said it was passed illegally. Do you know anything about that.

I don't know. He might've meant--. It's been a long time. My memory it was voted on as part of charter and not separate.

He mentioned there was a slate of progressive candidates.

People who supported charter change. They were elected to city council. I don't think they supported a mayoral candidate. Henry Loeb was the darling of the redneck, blue collar guys. He was Hollywood good looking, tall, handsome. He would always say what was on his mind but his mind wasn't working. He was a bigot by and large even though he was Jewish. He had been in commission of public works. He got a reputation of fixing potholes. He was a pretty good politician, always answered every letter that he got. He'd get up at 6 in the morning and dictate letters from previous day. That got him a lot of support. He had the good sense of appointing good people on his staff like Jim

Manire and Tom Prewitt. As much as anyone, it was Loeb who brought about the garbage workers strike. He wouldn't agree to a dues check off. That was it was all about. In all fairness to him his lawyers were telling him and it was true that in state law municipal unions were prohibited. Like most politicians, listening to people who put him in office. Most of people were white, unenlightened people who didn't see it that blacks should have power.

Do you know other whites with similar experiences of changing racial attitudes with politics.

I'm sure there were. You couldn't have relationship with Sugarmon, Willis without being impressed by their competence. I never got to be on socially friendly basis with them at the time, I have later, particularly with Maxine and Vasco. You got to realize that as far as city commission was concerned, only Ingram and I were really beholden to black community for that election. Ingram was getting it through other parts of black community.

Brown v. Board - rxn.

Initially, the rxn was ignore it, maybe it will go away. School board had top flight people on it but they were elected at large and no black people. They didn't do anything, just waited it out until NAACP filed a local action. School board had taken a few feeble steps toward mergers of schools - maybe two schools. That was a clear line of demarcation between where blacks and whites school. Only way to desegregate in in Memphis through busing albeit as ineffective as it was. Busing didn't go in effect until 1972. Almost 20 years later after Brown decided, something happened. At the same time the charger went into effect it went into effect for school board. I and Coe were moderates. Maxine Smith was a person on school board and also exec director of NAACP so she was suing herself. Didn't bother Maxine. We had three black members of school board, George Brown who is now circuit judge and Carl Johnson who is still on the school board.

Were working relationships good b/w black and white members.

IN some cases more than others With conservatives, absolutely not. Frances Coe and I it was marriage of convenience. We thought their cause a lot fairer than conservatives. They were intelligent people.

So conservatives were against policies.

They were against desegregation. Almost every elected official or somebody running for office came out and had an anti-busing plank in platform, I mean even running for nonpertinent office. Wyeth, a boyhood friend, I don't think saying racist would be too strong a word. He was an obstructionist. He was smarter than Loeb. McRae forced him to put gas into buses.

What sort of role did women play in politics in 1950s and 1960s.

It was like most things that went on those days. There were league of women voters. There were a good many women who got involved and that's particularly true when Republicans started showing some strength. Scattered numbers like Frances Coe who

had been involved in politics in one way or another for a long time. There was a woman elected to first city council, Gwen, who's dead now. In my recollection, not any candidates till 1967. I can't recall many women who were on these boards and commissions. It pretty much was a male preserve at that time.

What about in terms of grassroots campaigning.

There was a lot of that. A lot of people put out signs and bumperstickers. There were a good many on like the City beautiful Commission – practically all women. That was kind of their place – make things pretty, plant.

Anything else to add.

I'd like to have a copy.