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Interview with John L. LeFlore, newly elected black legislator and veteran leader of black politics in Mobile, Mobile, Alabama, July 14, 1974, conducted by Jack Bass and Walter de Vries, transcribed by Linda Killen.

Jack Bass: If you would just tell us just about your background and summarize that. Won't get into any specific question.

John L. LeFlore: Okay. My background has been one, I would say to begin with, of deprivation in the early ages. My mother was a widow. I was nine months old when my father died. There were five children and of course the two oldest boys had to be taken out of school to try to take the place of the father. My daddy had left a \$400 mortgage on the home at that time. Just happened I had a good mother, real good mother. We had timber resources up in Carr county, Alabama, but we just couldn't sell much timber at that time. Not enough to sustain a family. So mother had to do domestic work considerably.

J.B.: Did you grow up in Mobile?

LeFlore: Yes, in Mobile and down in Biloxi, Mississippi. I recall when I was four years old--about four--a man was lynched down there. Before I was born, two men were lynched out here at [Platteau?] oh, just several years before I was born. About four or five miles north of Mobile, three or four miles north. I do recall hearing this man scream [down by] railroad tracks on Sunday morning when I was a boy [They put] hot pokers to his body then they finally took his life. He had been guilty of no more than telling a girl . . . he worked on the beach front. Really the seashore camp grounds two miles below Biloxi. I don't know--have you been down that way? If you have, you may know where the light house is on the beach down

there. We were about two miles below the light house but lived in what were the black quarters. Black people had to live in quarters. Of course that's been recent in Mississippi, some places in Mississippi and some places of Alabama. This lynching--we lived about a quarter of a mile from the railroad and that's why we could hear the man scream. It's a wooded area between the quarters where the black women lived who were all domestics. Only women lived in these quarters. And the railroad track. And I recall we--at night, about eleven o'clock, you could see the tree/train? which was then the Chrissen Limited. I don't know whether you've heard of the Chrissen/Crescent Limited. It was a train that operated--it still operates on the Southern now, but through Meridian, I understand, and Birmingham. Well, up until the railroad began this total abandonment of passenger service, Crescent Limited operated between New Orleans and New York by the way of Mobile, Montgomery, Atlanta, up through Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Washington and of course the other states. Delaware, New Jersey to New York. It was an all Pullman train and I recall that the old black mothers, after their day at toil, would be sitting on the front. It was the only place where they could get some breeze in these--they weren't tenements. They were long--we lived in long buildings with just--it was a two room apartment. I think we had two rooms. May not have had but one room. For each family. And it could accommodate maybe about ten or twelve families. Women with children or those without children. In each building. And there were, let's see, one, two, three buildings. And when this train would pass we could see reflection of the lights. And to them it was a gospel train because it was an all Pullman train and it was the rich people's train. Of course back in that day blacks couldn't ride in Pullman cars. Not until 1940s were we able to

do any extensive riding in Pullman cars. It's an interesting story. Of course--I mean the struggle for and the change that has been experienced in the different eras. E-r-a-s is what I'm trying to say. A change which young blacks who have just come on the scene do not fully appreciate because they didn't--don't know anything about it being denied. Toilet service. You'd drive up to a station. They don't know anything about having to go around in the back door to get a hamburger if you got one at all. So those who've come on in the last ten or fifteen years can't realize what the rest of us have endured. And as a consequence they have very little appreciation. As I told one of you gentlemen, in talking to you over the phone, of the struggles their elders have made, they know nothing about riding up in a Jim Crow coach where cinders would pour in on you because you were sitting up front and there were no screens to your windows. And when you had to go up to the front of the car to a water cooler to press a spigot to get water to put on a towel to wash your face. They don't know anything about that. They don't know anything about sitting over the hot motor of an inter-city bus. That was the only seat you could occupy. That seat was across the width of the bus in the back and you were right over the motor and summertime you such place as Hades. You caught it when you rode that bus. And despite the fact that there was just one person maybe sitting in a seat for the rest of the distance up the length of the bus, you just couldn't occupy those seats. There are so many things they don't know anything about. They know very little about lynchings. I have a picture of four people that were lynched in Monroe . . . A lynching I covered on July 26, 1946. And Monroe is just 26 miles from Atlanta. One time in my civil rights work that. . . I was a little afraid when I went into Monroe. And then I also investigated the lynching of Willie

McGowan down at Wiggins, Mississippi.

J.B.: In what capacity were you investigating that?

LeFlore: In 1946 I was connected with the NAACP. Then I was also working for a metropolitan newspaper. I won a citation from the newspaper for covering the Georgia lynching.

J.B.: What paper was it?

LeFlore: Chicago .

[Interruption.]

I was connected with NAACP up through 1956 and very actively. When John Patterson who was then the attorney general of Alabama put us under the injunction we had to cease operations until 1964. The NAACP came back in 1964. Well, I just didn't become as active as I had been because of a misunderstanding with one of the paid members of the staff. And of course all my time was free. And I estimate that I gave about a quarter of a million dollars worth of free time to the NAACP. I covered most of their investigations of railroad service in the South, bus service. Very often, oh, I recall I had to ride a bus from Tallahassee to north of Jacksonville to Petuniak Springs, Florida. And there were no toilet facilities for blacks. Bus stations back in that day ^[were] and generally in drug stores. Bus companies didn't have their own passenger stations, with the exception of terminals like Mobile, in intermediate areas, with few exceptions. I worked for the Chicago Defender , for the Pittsburgh Courier for ten years. my [postal?] salary enabled me to put my kids through college. I was getting \$225 a month and travel expenses. My newspaper work didn't interfere with my postal work because both of those papers were weeklies. And with the Defender having a deadline for Mondays, and I was off at the post office on Saturdays, I'd fly up to Georgia or almost anywhere else that was within

reasonable distance as long as I could get back to Mobile before Monday morning. And I sent most of my story by Western Union press service. But I imagine you're primarily interested in my background. I went to college here. Junior college at night. Had to. Then I took extension work with the University of Chicago at the time that Dr Hutchins was there. And other than taking that and taking some extension work from Columbia University at the time that they offered extension courses, that was the extent of my college background. I never stopped reading. I've continued to read and to try to keep informed. I have a very serious interest in political science. I did take a course in that, also.

J.B.: Did you help establish the nonpartisan voters league of Mobile?

LeFlore: Yes I did. In fact I helped to found the NAACP here. When I was a teenager in the '20s, Ku Klux Klan was running rampant, not only in Alabama but almost all over the United States during the post World War I period. It was organized primarily at that time for the purpose of trying to return blacks to their previous status that they had before World War I. And we had an agrarian society in the South and mostly blacks came from the rural areas who were drafted into the military service. Who came into towns to work in plants and who went up North. At that time they had a number of Can't Getaway Clubs--it was a misnomer that was used for people who were used to furnish transportation to go North. It was a part of the migration of blacks that probably helped to change the political complexion of blacks in the North. We founded the NAACP in 1925.

J.B.: How about the Voters League?

LeFlore: Okay. The Voters League became the political arm of the NAACP at the time that I was actively identified with NAACP. The NAACP as such was not supposed to be involved in politics. When the NAACP was

put under the injunction in 1956 by John Patterson and the state of Alabama and because of the thing that Dr King had been projected into in view of the Montgomery bus situation, almost every minister felt that through some miraculous power he was endowed with the prerequisites for leadership in a field that was nonreligious. We felt. . . . It was obvious to us they were making a lot of mistakes right here in Mobile in their leadership. So we made the Nonpartisan Voters League a civil rights organization after the NAACP was put under an injunction in '56. It was the Nonpartisan Voters League that filed the Bernie Lee Davis suit, school suit here. It was the Nonpartisan Voters League that succeeded in getting Billy Malone into the University of Alabama.

J.B.: It was organized in '56 or it was organized before then?

LeFlore: No, it was organized before then as the political arm of the NAACP. But after '56 we decided to make it a civil rights organization because we felt that civil rights was not being given the right direction here by those who had taken over and who were capitalizing on the fact that the NAACP was under the injunction. Who had taken over the civil rights movement here.

J.B.: How far back does the Voters League go?

LeFlore: The Voters League is more than 25 years old. The Voters League was founded about 1948.

J.B.: How potent do you consider it now?

LeFlore: Well, I think in the last election it was a deciding factor in the nomination of Claude Pervis for sheriff here and a change in that particular office. I think it was potent in a number of areas. I think it helped to give me my, the vote that I gained and also that Gary Cooper gained over Mrs Eddington. We didn't wish to. . . . In that particular

race. . . . Mrs Eddington happens to be white. We wanted to doubly endorse but we can well understand what white people are up against when they have a sense of fairness toward blacks for fear that the people who probably don't think in what we would class. . . with a sober direction. . . . And you know how they can rabble rouse. We were just a little pusillanimous there. We endorsed only Gary and he admits now he felt that was the reason he won. Although if you notice that statistical information sent here by Voter Education Project, his district is more than 65 percent black. But it did not necessarily mean that you had that. . . . The people who voted were mainly black, were largely black. I would think you had a few more white voters than you had black voters in the area. But Gary did conduct a voter registration campaign and he did have some white support. He attributes his victory, by less than 500 votes, over Mrs Eddington to the support that the Nonpartisan Voters League gave him.

J.B.: Is there any affiliation between the Nonpartisan Voters League of Mobile and the Alabama Democratic Conference?

LeFlore: No. We operate independently. We do try to cooperate where ever possible. I am a member of the Alabama Democratic Conference and we usually. . . but we don't support all the candidates that the Alabama Democratic Conference supports.

J.B.: Even on the state level.

LeFlore: No, no. But I would say in most instances we do, but not. . . we don't just let them give us a blanket order or anything of that sort or do we blindly let them influence us. We get the candidates here. We question the candidates ourselves.

J.B.: Including the state wide candidates?

LeFlore: Yes sir. We questioned Jeri Beasley. We questioned Creel.

We questioned Charles Wood. We questioned all of them. And the questions that we asked I imagine they. . . similar to what any other citizen of Alabama would ask unless. . . . Of course in some areas we must ask about their racial viewpoints and how do they stand on certain issues that specifically would effect black people. We do it without any arrogance, anything of that sort. We do it just as we are talking here now. We supported Charles Woods, as an example, in the lieutenant governor's race. I'm not quite certain they supported Charles Woods. I think they supported Jeri Beasley. I think that they did in the last race in the run-off. Charles Woods did carry Mobile county. How much we contributed to it, I haven't been able to get the figures yet to see how the black vote was. But I think most of the black voters did support Charles Woods.

J.B.: Have you supported any local Republicans?

LeFlore: Yes. We have rather consistently supported Jack Edwards. Rather consistently. Even on double endorsements. At times. When there were black candidates running such as Beasley, who headed up the NOW group--Neighborhood Organized Workers--who's running for Congress. We double endorsed in that. In fact we supported all three of the candidates. Jack Edwards, John Tyson--who was running on the Democratic ticket--and Nobel [?] Beasley.. we [did/didn't] wish to support Mr Beasley because. . . for certain reasons that we thought were not in the best interests of the community. But again, maybe we were a little cowardly there that we put the black man on the ballot when we didn't. . . against our conscience.

Walter de Vries: What is the meaning and the value of a double endorsement?

LeFlore: A double endorsement merely gives a person. . . . It gives

us a way out. It's almost like Pontius Pilate.

W.D.V.: It's when you have a black and a white on the ticket--

LeFlore: No, no.

W.D.V.: -- people that you want to endorse.

LeFlore: Yes.

J.B.: And sometimes you have no endorsement, right?

LeFlore: Yeah.

W.D.V.: I didn't mean to interrupt you. How is it like Pontius. . .

LeFlore: Yeah. Well, we call ourselves, in giving a double endorsement, either letting them know that either of the candidates would be acceptable to us as far as our viewpoints are concerned and that the candidates were just about even in so far as what they stood for was involved.

W.D.V.: Does it confuse voters?

LeFlore: It does, some. And others just go on and make their choice. And I think almost all organizations do that. We know. . . noticed the labor ballot. It was the same way.

J.B.: How much coordination is there between the Voters League and labor?

LeFlore: In most instances we support candidates that are supported by labor with the exception of the fact that labor went for George Wallace and we couldn't do that for governor.

J.B.: Did labor state-wide go for Wallace?

LeFlore: Yes. And of course we couldn't do it.

W.D.V.: What would it take to make you vote for George Wallace?

LeFlore: For Mr Wallace to give definite assurances that he has made a change in his racial attitude. See, all that you have from Mr Wallace so far is what you've gotten from him before. Some ambiguity with his expressions

that could be interpreted whatever he says could be interpreted. One way or the other. And I would judge Mr Wallace as a Machivellian politician. He's an opportunist and we feel that he continues to be that way. There's been no significant change in Mr Wallace's attitude on the race question as far as we can see. We had to go to court to enforce. . . to employ black state troopers. I'm in Montgomery once a month. I'm connected with the Alabama Council for Voluntary Family Planning, the Alabama Council for Comprehensive Health Planning, connected with the advisory committee to the Commission on Civil Rights. I'm on the subcommittee for the Alabama state bar studying prisons. And I'm up there every month. You go through the state capital and black employees are still as scarce as hen teeth up there. The man has made no significant change as far as we can see. We can't get a like some of the blacks, like Charles Evers as an example. And Ford. Now we can understand why Johnny Ford is that way. He's the mayor of a city and he's looking for some help from Mr Wallace.

J.B.: How do you feel about Evers, though?

LeFlore: Well, I'm a little disappointed about Evers' position in this instance.

W.D.V.: But you feel Ford is more understandable.

LeFlore: No, Evers has joined Ford in position that Wallace would benefit from.

J.B.: I know, but you say that Ford's position is more understandable to you for Ford to take that position.

LeFlore: Well, yes. It's more understandable but I don't agree with it. You see, because Ford is looking for some help from Wallace with his various projects for Tuskegee. Charles Evers is over in Mississippi and Charles Evers, of course, cannot expect to get any help from Wallace, as I

said. I don't know just why he's taking the position without giving a full explanation to the public as to why he assumes that kind of position.

W.D.V.: When you got started in this business there was just basically one civil rights organization, NAACP.

LeFlore: Yes, NAACP.

W.D.V.: Now that has a political arm here plus you've got the Demo--

LeFlore: Alabama Democratic Conference.

W.D.V.: Yes, and the NDPA.

LeFlore: And then you have. . . [Billingsly?] has a group that he calls the Democratic something. It doesn't have much potency, but he supported George Wallace, too, his group. Now how large his membership is I don't know, but I know it doesn't compare with ADC.

W.D.V.: Well, my question was with that proliferation of groups, all representing blacks, do you think there's a tendency for black unity to split on political candidates?

LeFlore: I would say in some instances, but I would feel--

W.D.V.: Are you more unified now than say ten years ago? Or less?

LeFlore: I would believe that there's perhaps less unity now.

W.D.V.: Do you think that's a healthy thing?

LeFlore: No, I don't think so. But I think it's a normal thing for human beings to be that way. As their strength increases. It's normal. It's a normal pattern.

W.D.V.: Where do you think it's going to go in the future?

LeFlore: I'm hoping that there will be. . . . No, there wasn't any unity among blacks when I ran for the senate. There was no unity. Most or many of the blacks. . . many of your leading blacks didn't support me. They supported Senator Sparkman. Now I retain a very cordial relationship with

Senator Sparkman. I did not try to inflame the black public against Senator Sparkman. Mr Cooper, the mayor of Pritchard, in the May primary that year attempted to inflame black people against Sparkman because he was supporting someone else for the Senatorial nomination. He used the same kind of appeal that I agree would involve demagogory. He said that Sparkman voted for the southern manifesto, that he had voted against all civil rights legislation, and he couldn't see how any black person. . . . Actually hitting at Joe Reed, head of the Alabama Democratic Conference, because Reed was lock stock and barrel for Sparkman. And of course we supported Sparkman. The very fact that we supported Sparkman. . . . Again the potency of our vote was shown. The Nonpartisan Voters League vote. Now I'm not going to tell you it reflects itself that way all the time. It doesn't. But Senator Sparkman won over a number of by perhaps 2,000 votes. I mean he had just about two or three thousand votes more than were necessary to keep him from, to avoid a run-off with Melba Till Allen. And we furnished him. . . the blacks in Mobile county furnished him with about 6,000 votes.

J.B.: You ran against him though in the general election?

LeFlore: That's right.

J.B.: Why did you run in that race?

LeFlore: The NDPA group was a group that in my judgment by and large was a little to the left. It was a little to the left down here. Quite a bit to the left. Almost all the people who supported the NDP in this area were so-called black power people. With that connotation go the people who say damn the hunky and damn the black middle class, as they call them, the Uncle Toms, etc., etc. I suspect that Dr ^{Cashen} ~~Cashen~~ felt that since I represented the moderate position, and it was unlikely that one of the so-called

black militants could a reflection of strength in Alabama, that he chose this individual because I was regarded as a moderate. Regardless of who may have run on the NDPA ticket, the black political hierarchy in Alabama was solidly lined up behind Senator Sparkman. It was rather ironical that the same Jay Cooper, mayor of Pritchard, who had in the May primary denounced Senator Sparkman, what he classed as his racist policies, turned against me in October and supported Senator Sparkman. And again it was a case, in my judgment, of Machevillian politics. That's all.

J.B.: Who was mayor Cooper supporting in that first primary?

LeFlore: He was supporting Robert Eddington, a local attorney who was seeking the Democratic nomination. So it looks like. . . I don't know, it looks like--

J.B.: Why did you agree to run, though?

LeFlore: Well. . . it was actually forced on me and I accepted it. I didn't seek it.

J.B.: What was your objective in running?

LeFlore: What was my objective? Well, there. . . I had been told. . . and I knew. . . I try to be a pragmatist about my politics. But I was influenced by that branch among the blacks, or that group among the blacks, who said there was an outside chance of winning. I had felt, because of my civil rights record which I thought was very well known, not only in Alabama but throughout the South, that blacks would rally to your support. I felt because I'm moderate in my viewpoint I could have corralled maybe about ten or fifteen percent white vote. And the political strategists who induced me to run had figured it that way. To me it seemed rather reasonable that if the white vote was split right down the center between Sparkman and Blount and I could hold the black vote and get about a ten or fif-

teen percent white vote that there was an outside chance of winning. So I got into the race.

J.B.: I've heard. . . . I haven't actually seen or studied them, but I understand that actually Senator Sparkman got about five or six times as much black vote as you got. power play between, really between Joe Reed and Dr Cashion as to which one had the most organizational. . . .

LeFlore: No, it was this, I believe, more than anything else. I think it was who, which one of the Senatorial candidates had the most money. Dr Cashion and the NDPA spent no more than about six or seven thousand dollars in my campaign state-wide. That included. . . I'm trying to include all the literature and everything else they put out. They sent down here. . . I had about \$3 or \$4,000 and I travelled all over the state of Alabama. We didn't have the newspaper ads, we didn't have the tv presentation or anything else that any of the other candidates had. We didn't have the teamwork in the average black community that the Sparkman people had. And I think Mr Reed, people like that, had the state well organized with the ADC having groups in almost any large city in Alabama and many of the smaller communities. They were able to retain the black vote. One thing I learned out of it. That people like most folk don't give a dern about how much you do for them. That doesn't always give you the kind of charisma that you would need in order to win an election.

J.B.: Was that the first time you'd run? For office?

LeFlore: Yes, uhuh.

J.B.: Did it prove to be valuable when you ran this time for the legislature?

LeFlore: Oh yes. It was valuable then. I made a number of contacts.

I met a lot of people throughout the state of Alabama. I think I made some new friends. It was a novel experience.

J.B.: Your legislative district is what percentage black?

LeFlore: About 90 percent.

J.B.: Did you have opposition?

LeFlore: Yes. My opposition was the brother of the Pritchard city councilman, John Lamb.

W.D.V.: Is there any other black in Alabama politics who's been involved in it as long as you have and is still active?

LeFlore: Let me see. Arthur Shores, I believe.

W.D.V.: Is he a candidate for something?

LeFlore: Shores is on the city council in Birmingham.

W.D.V.: In all those years you've been involved, what are the major changes you've seen? Political changes.

LeFlore: The major political changes. . . . I think I mentioned to you gentlemen when I talked with you this morning that up until 1944 blacks voted very little in Alabama, very little. We, in 1944. . . . Let me take Mobile as an example. We had only about 400 or 500 black voters. There was always the apprehension that you weren't going to be permitted to vote. They'd let you vote in some of the elections, when they felt like it. And in others they just wouldn't let you vote.

J.B.: How many black voters now in Mobile?

LeFlore: Oh, I would say that we comprise about 20 percent. You see, what they tell you. . . they tell you we don't keep voter registration statistics on the basis of race. Of course we don't believe that. We know that. . . . I know what I would do if I were down there, just as a matter of keeping a record. I would certainly have some method by which I could

tell white or black applicants, tell the cards are white or black applicants. And I know they're not. . . they have perhaps far more sense than I have about doing that kind of thing. I would say about 20 percent of the people who vote in Mobile county are black. We have a total registration in Mobile county of I think it's around 160,000. . .

J.B.: So it would be about 30,000--

W.D.V.: But has that been the basic change? The absolute increase in the number of black voters over the last 20-30 years?

LeFlore: In the last 20-30 years. . . with the increase in number of black voters. . . I think I told one of you gentleman. . . who did I talk to?

J.B.: You talked to me.

LeFlore: Okay, when I talked to you on the phone, that you had what was known as a Democratic white primary in Alabama. Which meant it was a white man's primary. Occasionally we'd let you vote. I mean that was the way the political oligarchy looked at it. We'd let you vote sometimes and again we wouldn't. On this occasion, rather consistently in the early 'forties they didn't let us vote. Then Life magazine, through Thurgood Marshall, sent some photographers in here for the May primary in '44. And it was the same year you got the ruling in Smith v. ^{Alright} ~~Amright~~ [e] by the Supreme Court, Texas white primary case. We told these photographers what time we would appear at the polling places. They came in a day ahead of time and we told them what time we would appear the next day at the voting booths. And the photographers were there. The old 7th ward then was a predominantly black ward. They were there to see deputies with outstretched arms keeping three of us, Professor Powell, Mr Rivers and me, from coming in. They got pictures of that. They were in the 5th ward, down on the bay,

to see blacks being barred and they got pictures of that. There were four wards from which they had pictures. And of course there was a big story written about it. That afternoon, that evening after the polling places had closed, we had twelve affidavits that were made up in our office and submitted to Thurgood Marshall in New York. And he in turn went down to Washington and submitted them to Francis Bittle, who was then Attorney General. And Mr Bittle promised to criminally prosecute the Democratic state executive committee in Alabama, which was then headed by *Gessner McCarvey*, ~~McCarvey~~ ^{McCarvey} [2], a Mobilian, who was an avowed Dixiecrat. Mr Roosevelt died in Warm Springs, Georgia, and of course there was a change in the presidency. Mr Truman brought his own attorney general in, as you know, Mr Tom Clark. And Mr Marshall, Thurgood Marshall, kept pressure on the Department of Justice and Mr Clark decided that he would try to give these people a chance to adjust this question without criminal proceedings. And as a consequence of Mr Clark's influence in that particular, Mr *Gessner* McCarvey called the state Democratic executive committee into a special meeting in Montgomery, on January 12, 1946, and let the bars down and removed the white primary. But that same *McCarvey*, almost immediately after that, began a campaign for another prohibitive measure, which was known as the [Balso?] amendment. And this amendment would set up very restrictive intelligence requirements in order to vote. And the boards of registrars would have arbitrary power to determine who could or could not vote. And as a consequence, very few blacks were able to register to vote. This was attacked, while we were getting ready to attack it, and Voters and Veterans League of Mobile attacked it and it was declared unconstitutional. After that. . . well, even before that, it was amazing to see blacks standing in line, half a block and a block long, with that retroactive poll

tax feature involved, where some of them paid as much as \$48 in back poll taxes. . . to see them standing in line to register. And today young blacks don't seem to take that much interest in registering. When that was declared unconstitutional you had a rash of registration among blacks. I think we registered in the course of three weeks 1,500 new voters. And that was about 1950. As a consequence you were able to swell the black voter registration. That brought on changes in city government. We brought in some new men in city government. Black vote was a deciding factor in the election of Joe You didn't get to talk to him since you've been here. He was about the Mr Joe . . . has been the . . . I would say the most humanistic candidate, I mean political office holder, that we have probably anywhere in Alabama.

[Interruption on tape.]

The black area didn't have any but one or two paved streets. He paved streets. He was responsible for black police officers being put on. And of course we kept pressing him for these things. He made black appointments in other areas that I just can't remember right now. But it was very significant to have some black police officers put on back in the early '50s. Oh yes, we had. . . there was a question of bus service. They did not effectively enforce the segregation ordinance on buses. We tried to get them This was a completely new . . . in 1953. We tried to get them to voluntarily remove segregation from the buses, but they thought it would be politically unwise. And they suggested that we go to court to have it done. But we were going to court anyway, which we did. Joe Langen, l-a-n-g-e-n. . . . The Negro, the black councilman in Pritchard is Joe Langum. His brother, George Langum, was my opponent. George Langum is a guy that's counsel in the school in the [Tottenville?] area. But

I recall when we filed a petition asking--

J.B.: But the one you're talking about is the former mayor?

LeFlore: Yes.

J.B.: Spells it the same way?

LeFlore: No. Lengen is the former mayor. Lengham in the black counsellor in Pritchard. Joe Lengen. . . . We did a lot of research in law and we came up with a number of court rulings to support our contention that the public library should be desegregated. And of course we filed a petition signed by twelve citizens asking for desegregation. We didn't direct it to the library board. We directed it to the city commission. And Mr Lengen took it to the library board himself and urged them to desegregate the public libraries system. Which saved us maybe a \$1,000 in legal fees. The same thing happened with regard to parks and playgrounds. We filed a petition asking for desegregation of parks and playgrounds and that same policy prevailed. We didn't have to go to court in either one of those two instances. We did go to court with regard to city buses and with regard to segregation at the municipal airport. But it so happened that the federal judge here at that time, Judge Thomas, sat on the cases so long that by the time he ruled these questions had become moot because the city was not enforcing the segregation ordinance in either instance. So those are some of the changes that we witnessed. And today you have blacks who are working in city hall. We still have another suit. It primarily affects the county, county departments. Job discrimination suit we filed year before last. We have a consent agreement, consent decree in that case and it has not been effective. So we are going back to court. But you do have blacks working in the court house in the tax assessor's office as clerks and also working in the matter of making land surveys. You have them in the juvenile

court. One black girl is--

[End of side of tape.]

--but I would say there's been significant change. We still have a long way to go. You had. . . not by voluntary action in any means, but because we have filed petitions and have filed suits. In the line of industry, you have blacks, for example, in the shipyard working in almost all capacities now.

J.B.: Has that been primarily the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as it effects public accommodation and employment and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 been the major factors in bringing about change? After the earlier suits.

LeFlore: Yes, yes. I would say that prior to the 1964 civil rights act, passage of the '64 civil rights act, we had desegregated the Greyhound bus station here, Trailway bus station and the municipal airport. Now we filed suits in those instances as a result of the case of Barton v Virginia that was decided by the Supreme Court I believe in 1960. I think it was '60. But subsequent to that, early part of '61, we immediately hit the trail in making test cases at bus terminals here and bus terminals in New Orleans, bus terminals in Pensacola. And believe it or not, we desegregated Greyhound bus terminal in Montgomery. You may recall that there was a lot of hullabaloo there when the freedom riders came down. But the reason that happened at the Greyhound bus terminal, because the mob stood between the freedom riders and the bus station. But the bus station had been desegregated two weeks before, by us. And the Greyhound bus people were not hard to get along with on that particular question. The Trailways bus people were. They were the most. . . they were almost intransigent in their position against change. And you just had to take some very hard action against

Trailway. But Greyhound people. . . they had a man in Chicago by the name of Hayes Kennedy, who said he was related to President Kennedy. I talked with him. Who was an attorney who headed up the Greyhound Post House restaurants. And in any instance that blacks were denied service in the restaurants, Mr Kennedy took steps in Alabama to fire the crews that did it. I know that happened in Montgomery when we were refused service the first time. The next time we went back there we were served. And he wired us that the persons responsible for it had been fired, were no longer in Greyhound's employ. That's the way he put it. Which meant the same thing. And I know he fired the entire crew here of three who refused us service and the cashier in Mobile when we were refused service. Greyhound . . . of course. . . I imagine civil rights people, like any body else, they would play up certain things many times. Maybe it was because Rev Abernathy and those people didn't know that. . . . I think Abernathy was connected with the Montgomery effort to desegregate the bus stations. And they did seek to desegregate Trailways. But Greyhound had already been desegregated. So had the railroad station in Montgomery. We did that.

J.B.: Until the passage of that and the voting rights act, it just took a great deal of energy just in overcoming the barriers of segregation, right?

LeFlore: I didn't hear your question.

J.B.: I said until the passage of the voting rights act and the civil rights act in the mid-60s, a great deal of effort and energy was expended just in establishing the right to vote and the right to use these facilities. Has the emphasis since that time been placed on getting into the political mainstream?

LeFlore: Oh yes. That seems to be the major direction today, is to

get into the political mainstream. That and jobs. Those are the two main areas of concern for black people today.

J.B.: Have you had any direct, personal dealings with George Wallace?

LeFlore: No. We wired Mr Wallace. . . . Oh, I saw Mr Wallace and shook hands with him and talked to him briefly at the time he was in a meeting. . . at the time he and Senator Kennedy appeared on the same platform in north Alabama. I've talked with him at one or two other meetings briefly. But we have not had the privilege of talking to him any length of time about race problems.

J.B.: What was your reaction to Senator Kennedy's visit and decision to come down here.

LeFlore: We gave a statement to the Christian Science Monitor on that. I may be able to find a copy. We feel that we haven't closed our minds. . . I haven't closed my mind to the possibility or the probability--maybe I should say more than possibility--of a Kennedy-Wallace ticket. I'm not quite so certain I would relish that kind of a ticket, but I think I would prefer that to another. . . to a Nixon-Wallace Republican ticket. And I think that perhaps Gerald Ford would give us another Nixon-like administration. I believe that most Republicans are too conservative in their viewpoints on the matter of human justice and the question of meeting the needs of our human. . . meeting human needs.

J.B.: If Senator Kennedy were to get the Democratic nomination, do you feel there are any other southern Democrats who could be effective as a running mate?

LeFlore: I would like to see a gentleman like the governor of Florida, Gov Askew, or. . . well, I have confidence in Gov Askew. I don't know too much about Gov Bumpers. I'm not quite certain. . . well, Gov Bumpers will now be Senator Bumpers. I'm not quite so certain that his racial viewpoint

would measure up to that of Gov Askeu of Florida. I would think that Gov Jimmy Carter would probably be a good running mate. But my first preference, among the southerners, would be Askeu.

J.B.: How do you find other blacks you've talked to on that question? Who would they like? I mean are you sort of a minority view or Askeu or do you find that among. . . .?

LeFlore: Well, frankly, I haven't talked to many blacks as yet about this particular question. It's one of the things that has escaped. . . well, discussion in talking about this overall political spectrum.

J.B.: When you get into the legislature, do you anticipate there will be a black caucus organized?

LeFlore: First, I have a Republican opponent in November, so. . . .

J.B.: You also have a district that is 98 percent black [laughter]. Let's say if you get there, then.

LeFlore: Yes, because incidentally, my Republican opponent is black. You have a few blacks who have identified themselves with the Republican party. If I should get elected, I would feel that it may be important to the black legislators to form themselves a caucus. Because I've found in my postal work that there were just some certain problems among black folk that require an organization, such as the National Alliance of Postal Employees, to deal with those grievances. I would say where Jewish people are concerned in the postal service or any governmental service the same thing applies. Almost where any minority. . . where Mexican-Americans. . . they'd be involved in the same thing with blacks. Because people just haven't learned to live together with a sense of total fairness toward their fellow man.

J.B.: Anything else you wanted to ask, Walt?

W.D.V.: Anything that we should have asked you that we haven't asked you?

LeFlore: Yeah, I'd forgotten you were taking it on tape. Maybe I wouldn't have rambled so much. I'm terribly sorry and I should have seen--

J.B.: It's all right.

LeFlore: --but I hope out of my rambling you can get something that would be helpful to what you're trying--

W.D.V.: You optimistic about the future for blacks?

LeFlore: Oh, I see significant periods of change that have taken place. In retrospection I've seen significant periods of change. I think much of it depends on blacks themselves. I think that blacks have the responsibility to make themselves acceptable to their fellow citizens by their conduct, by their ability to. . . by their own initiative. And the determination to take a rightful place in our society. And I don't mean. . . . And with realization that with rights and privileges are responsibilities. That along with rights and privileges, one must accept responsibilities. And I believe that if we develop a greater potency in politics, we become better educated. . . that is, you do find an increasing number of blacks that are going to college now. If we aspire for better jobs and maintain our self respect. That some of the problems which confront black people today are going to not necessarily disappear, but they are going to be ameliated. When I think about the issue of the Jews. As smart as the Jews are, there are still special problems that effect Jews. There are still people who persecute Jews, who are not looking for any Utopia where black people are concerned. But I do hope that with the. . . in the direction that we are going today and the direction our country seems to be going, with the exception of all this busing question. . . . I can't go along

with the attitude of President Nixon and the majority members of the House that busing all at once becomes a terrible evil. I believe that we can overcome this particular problem with a sense of fairness toward everybody that would lead toward a unitary school system where understanding may be developed. That we are going to have a better America. Anybody who advocates separation of the races merely because one man happens to be white and another happens to be black, in my judgment, he is not following the sort of precepts that have made this country great. Segregation And the black who becomes a separatist and who talks about what he hopes to gain by segregation should have lived about 20 or 30 years ago. Or if he lived 20 or 30 years ago, he should not forget the damnable evils that segregation imposed on black people and the humiliation of 20 or 30 years ago. And one will begin to question whether that person is sincere in what he's doing or whether he hopes to separate the black people from the mainstream of American society for the purpose of using them. I wouldn't leave that out. Using them to. . . some sort of foreign ideology. That may sound farfetched to you, but I wouldn't put it beyond certain elements in the black community.

J.B.: There's one thing I did want to ask you about the local situation and that is in local legislative races you've got a legislator, Republican, such as Bert Nettles. Where does the Nonpartisan Voters League sit on that?

LeFlore: Well previously when we were voting on a county wide basis we often supported Bert Nettles because we thought Bert had some pretty good. . . well, we thought he had some pretty good planks in his over all platform to offer to the people. We found, as an example, his attitude toward the price of milk, that he certainly had a very sincere sympathy for

the consumer and he was for abolition of the milk commission. So am I.

J.B.: If he becomes minority leader in the house--which appears to be a pretty good possibility--would you anticipate that blacks and Republicans may form a coalition on certain issues? More or less on reform type issues?

LeFlore: Oh, quite possibly, yes. Yes. On reform type issues, yes, I would believe that.

J.B.: What is it about Edwards that blacks found appealing? Because he's one of the very few southern Congressmen who gets black support.

LeFlore: Mr Edwards has not been. . . . We've previously had an [intimate/~~intricate~~] relationship with him, most intimate relationship. We have talked to him with candor about his racial viewpoints. We have protested to him in instances where we felt he was doing something that would be to the unity of black and white people. Now we're not unmindful of the problems that a white politician has out there with his white constituents. And many times he has to walk a tightrope if he hopes to get re-elected.

J.B.: Does he have blacks on his staff?

LeFlore: Yes, he has the son of a police officer here on his staff. And incidentally, I know one or two blacks--I don't know whether he would want this publicized or not--there have been one or two blacks from Mobile who have been entertained in his home in Georgetown, without any thought of race or color or anything of that sort. And up until he got in there, that just didn't happen. Edwards, in my opinion, as one who knows him pretty well. . . I mean in an intimate way. . . . I certainly don't agree with his views on busing. I'm not unmindful of the fact that if he hopes to get re-elected with most of his constituents having a closed mind on

busing today--what I would class as a closed mind--that he has to please most of them because you just don't have the black votes to get him elected. Then you find today the black vote is somewhat fragmented. It goes in three or four directions. I don't know how the Nonpartisan Voters League is going to go this time. The Democrats have a very fine young woman who is running for the state legislature.

J.B.: You mean for Congress?

LeFlore: I'm sorry, I mean for Congress. And there is a likelihood that they may support her. I don't know. Or they may double endorse. I don't know just what they're going to do. But they have had. . . this organization and black people generally have had a fairly good communication principle with Congressman Edwards.

J.B.: Is there anything else you wanted to add? That we didn't discuss.

LeFlore: I think we have just about. . . . We've covered most of the civil rights bill. We've covered much of the political picture as I see it. I don't remember anything. . . I can't remember anything further that we could discuss that would be helpful. I've appreciated the opportunity of talking to you gentlemen and I must confess, as I said a little while ago, I'd forgotten that this was being recorded--

J.B.: That's all right.

LeFlore: --and I did a lot of rambling. But I trust out of that, as I said a little while ago, that you may be able to get something that has some substance to it that can be used.

J.B.: We appreciate your giving us this amount of time on such short notice.

W.D.V.: Yeah, particularly on a Sunday afternoon.

[LeFlore later said that his home had been bombed seven years ago and that he had to move into a new house. And subsequently it was shot into. And his belief was that the shooting was done by black militants and the bombing by whites. J.B.]

[End of interview.]