

Elizabeth Gritter
Fred L. Davis Interview
At his insurance agency in Memphis, TN
October 11, 2000

FRED L. DAVIS INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ELIZABETH GRITTER: This is Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Fred L. Davis on October 11, 2000 at his office in Memphis, Tennessee. Just to begin at the beginning, I was wondering when and where you were born?

FRED DAVIS: I was born in Memphis May 8th, 1934.

EG: Is it okay if I ().

FD: Yes.

EG: Okay. I saw from your resume you went to Memphis State University for business administration.

FD: I went to Tennessee State and Memphis State.

EG: Okay. When did you go to Memphis State?

FD: That was in the middle-sixties, '63, '64.

EG: I was wondering when you founded your insurance company?

FD: 1967.

EG: 1967, okay. If you could, I read Joan Beifuss's book *At the River I Stand* and I picked up from there that you were a participant in some of the early civil rights movement. If you could describe some of your activism during that time.

FD: Well, early on starting at around 1959, I came back to Memphis from the military. During that time, Russell Sugarmon was running for public works commissioner. There were people running for the board of education. We got involved

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in that movement. We set up the Shelby County Democratic Club--I'm sure you heard a lot about that -- Russell Sugarmon and Benny Hooks and later on Maxine Smith and myself were involved in. We organized the black community in Memphis in support of political power or political force. Political effectiveness is probably the best word to use. Of course, we were not successful in that effort, but the interest ran high. There was a budding interest on the part of, back then, black candidates to run for the state legislature. A. W. Willis [Jr.] ran for the state legislature at that time and was elected, became the first black person since Reconstruction to be elected to the state legislature. I'm sure you've been told about that.

EG: A little bit, yeah. So were you one of the founders of the Shelby County Democratic Club?

FD: Yeah. We sort of activated and brought a hyper-interest. It was not as--. Involvement and position in politics was not as prevalent then as it is now.

[Interruption.]

EG: All right. Well, we were talking about the Shelby County Democratic Club. What year did you begin your involvement with them?

FD: Back in '59.

EG: '59, was that—

FD: We started to organizing it back around that period. Some organizational efforts had made prior to then, but it sort of crystallized around that time.

EG: Okay. Did you come right back from the Army then?

FD: Yeah. I had come back to Memphis out of the military in '59. I got right into involvement and that kind of thing.

EG: Yeah. So my question is: What made you get involved in it?

FD: That was the reason I came back. Many of my associates who had come out of college and did their military or whatever wouldn't have come back to Memphis because of the way things were in Memphis. I wanted to come back because of the way things were in Memphis and help to change them. It was a mission. That's why I came back home—to get into it and try to do what I could to change what I didn't like.

EG: Sure. Sure. Did you have an office, like a title with the Shelby County Democratic Club?

FD: No, I ended up as the treasurer of the club ultimately, and I was on the board of the club.

EG: Yep. How long were you treasurer? Do you remember what years?

FD: Well, I was treasurer of the club in '68 and, well, '65, '66, '67. I was treasurer of the club when I ran in 1967 for public office.

EG: Sure. How did you go about organizing people or creating interest in politics?

FD: Well, at that time, I was working in this community. I was a debit insurance agent, going from door to door collecting insurance premiums. What I did was to organize my policyholders in each precinct. I knew everybody, and there were five precincts in this area. I organized the policyholders in each precinct and turned them into a political force. [Laughter.]

EG: How many people was that?

FD: Well, you have to understand that at one time this was the second largest black-owned community--where the people owned their homes--to Harlem in the United

States. This community was cohesive, and it's not hard to organize. It had never been organized but I'm talking [about how] it's not hard to put together because everybody more or less grew up in this area and knew everybody. So it was just a matter of leadership.

EG: Sure. How long did that take you to organize your precincts?

FD: That was a continuing effort. I guess a couple years to get them all organized. I had them to the point that I could make five phone calls and contact everybody on every street in the neighborhood because we had block captains and precinct captains and all that. I called the five people who headed the precincts, and they would take it from there.

EG: You went door-to-door organizing them?

FD: Well, our precinct clubs in each precinct did door-to-door organizing.

EG: All right. I'm not familiar with how the structure worked of the club. Was that typical of all the precincts that there would be a precinct leader? Then they would organize, and you'd have different point people that you would go to?

FD: Right. Right. Right.

EG: I know there was an amazing turnout with the vote with the 1959 election even though they lost.

FD: Right.

EG: How did that change the community if at all with the 1959 election?

FD: Well, one of the ways is everybody ran at large at that time. They discovered that black folks could vote in a bloc and elect somebody at large. So, what they did, what they said is that the top vote-getters--the four, five top vote-getters--were

the commissioners. If we pooled all of our votes behind one person, we could elect one. So, what they did was changed it, so you would have to run for a specific office, not just one shot. The system was changed to prevent us from exercising the power of numbers as far as black people were concerned.

EG: Were you involved, well, with the precincts was that with voter registration?

FD: I was involved with everything, everything.

EG: With everything.

FD: All of us were involved with everything.

EG: Yeah. How did that work with voter registration?

FD: We organized, we used our precinct organizations to do voter registration drives.

EG: I read that you were arrested in a move to open the fairgrounds.

FD: Yes.

EG: If you could talk about that experience.

FD: Well, we went out there one Sunday.

EG: Your family?

FD: No, it was about five insurance agents, went out there one Sunday. Tuesday was the day for black folk. [Laughter.] We went out there one Sunday to the fairgrounds. At first, they didn't pay much attention to us. Then, we started to try to buy tickets. The ticket person said they couldn't sell us tickets. We said, "Why?" He said, "Because this is not your day." I said, "Any day is our day." "Well, come back on Tuesday." "We work on Tuesday. Today is Sunday. We're off Sunday." So, they called the administrative office to see if she could sell us tickets. They said, "No." We'd go to

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the next one and try to buy the tickets to another ride. One person almost did. Then they backed off, and finally they asked us to leave. We said we wouldn't leave. Then they called the police to try to get us to leave. The regular patrol car came. He couldn't persuade us to leave. Then he called the sergeant, and we wouldn't leave. The sergeant called the captain, and the captain and higher officials came out. By that time, a crowd had gathered around us, a rather menacing-looking crowd. Then they had to be there because the crowd said, "You don't have to put them out. We'll put them out." They had to stay there to protect us. [Laughter.] They ultimately arrested us and took us down. The word got out in the community that we were in jail. About five or six lawyers came down there to get us out and ultimately got us out. With court time they postponed it two or three times. Every time we spoke with the court, they postponed it. Then they had to either do one or two things, either jail us or open the fairgrounds. Finally they didn't jail us so they opened the fairgrounds.

EG: Oh, they did? Wow. So were there other people too who tried to integrate the fairgrounds?

FD: Oh, yeah, there were six of us.

EG: What year was this? Do you know?

FD: That was '63, '64, something like that.

EG: Okay. Were you, what other organizations were you a member of besides the Shelby County Democratic Club?

FD: Well, we all were members of the NAACP, which was promoting that kind of thing. Those were the two activist groups in town.

EG: Sure. What other sort of activism did you have? Were you involved with the sit-ins at all?

FD: Yeah, we were involved with that and the picketing of the downtown stores. That whole era--. That fairground situation was just a segment of a long protest movement that we were all involved in year-round.

EG: What places did you sit-in at?

FD: Well, we'd sit in at the restaurants, the lunch counters in the stores, downtown and tried to figure out how hot the coffee was going to be if they decided to pour it. [Laughter.]

EG: How was it?

FD: It never happened.

EG: They never served you or--?

FD: It never happened. They never poured any on me, but some others they did pour [on them]. They'd call us names, gather around us and taunt. One restaurant took all its stools out, so you couldn't sit down. Nobody could sit down. [Laughter.] Various kind of things. But I think the economic boycott was the thing that got the most reaction. When we shut the money off, people started coming to the table to talk about that.

EG: Were you involved with any of the negotiations at all?

FD: No, I wasn't involved with that.

EG: Would people actually, would they pour coffee on you or on the demonstrators? Would they have any violence towards them at all?

FD: No. I mean I haven't had any poured on me but other people did have it poured.

EG: Poured on them. Okay. Sure. Yeah. In terms of picketing, if you could talk about that, a little more about picketing.

FD: Well, what we did was we had picketers and marching in front of all the downtown stores and tried to be sure that nobody black went into those stores to shop. And we're a significant economy, especially at Christmas and Easter.

EG: Yeah. Yeah. When you picketed, how long was it? Was it in shifts that you went?

FD: Yeah, everybody had [shifts]. You know what time you're supposed to show up at your assigned [place]. We started early in the morning. Hot in the summer and very, very cold in the winter. There was a commitment, and you didn't want somebody to carry your load. When it was your time to show up, you got out there and relieved the person.

EG: How long were those shifts?

FD: I don't remember. Some of them three or four hours, five hours.

EG: Who did you receive your direction from?

FD: Those were apparently coordinated by the NAACP. Who was supposed to be where was sort of handed out. You were assigned to your location and you went.

EG: How did that process work? Would you, would they call you, a leader from the NAACP or did you have meetings ()?

FD: Well, they had meetings, and you knew where you were going to be. They asked for volunteers, and you volunteered, and you were assigned to a location.

EG: These were at mass meetings, was it?

FD: There were some mass meetings and there were continuing meetings-- continuing things going on all during the week or planning, whatever, at churches and in neighborhoods all over the place.

EG: Okay. Sure. You said you went to mass meetings?

FD: Oh yeah. Especially when somebody had to be gotten out of jail.

[Laughter.] We had to collect money, take up the collections, put in money so we'd have money to go down and get people out of jail to () their bond or whatever.

EG: What else, if you could describe the atmosphere of some of these mass meetings?

FD: Well, it was an atmosphere of resolution and determination. We exulted the people to stay, to not give in and to fight the system; not to let the unjust treatment of blacks prevail and not to participate in that kind of thing; not to be a willing participant and to be used by the system to further their cause in an unjust manner.

EG: Was there always singing at these mass meetings?

FD: That was the heart of it. That was the heart of it. That created the spirit. We're pretty good at that. [Laughter.]

EG: Yeah. I've been to some black churches and I love the singing and some of these freedom songs sung. Yeah. Could you talk a little more about the singing. How did that create the heart of it? How was that the heart of it?

FD: Spirituals are the heart of the black experience. Everybody knows spirituals, and all of us know lots of the same ones. So, it's not hard--. We don't even need a choir. We could do it ourselves and good musicians help. There's a sort of a warm-up time so to speak when everybody just sort of sings.

EG: So would there be singing first and then you'd have speakers or how would that--.

FD: Generally, there was a period of singing first, and then there would be speakers and there would be singing and there would be speakers and then would be singing and there would be speakers and singing at the same time. [Laughter.]

EG: So that really contributed to the comradeship and community and that you were all in it together.

FD: And it still prevails. Racism is almost as strong now as it was then, just takes different forms.

EG: Yeah. What could you bring to the movement as a person who was into business? How did that kind of or did that influence at all?

FD: It gave me the freedom to be there.

EG: Because do you own your own business?

FD: Yes. If you work on (), you don't have the flexibility to participate as a person who is independently employed.

EG: Who else was on your staff?

FD: Well, none of the people who are here now were. [Laughter] We had people who worked for us who were just as anxious to hold the fort down while I was out there. We were all in the same boat together. Their job was to be sure that everything on the home front was kept. It allowed me to go out there and do that.

EG: How often were you out there with those protests?

FD: Well, that's hard to say. Sometimes you were there when you could be there. Sometimes, everybody had to try to fit their activity in the process of making a living. Because if you couldn't survive, you couldn't be there.

EG: Were you involved with the Urban League at all during that time?

FD: Yes, oh yes, very much. When I was a member of the council, I helped to direct money to the Urban League. [We had a] very, very activist Urban League director, J. A. McDaniel, who's become a legend in Memphis. The Urban League has what it calls the J. A. McDaniel Award. He was with the Urban League for about forty years. The Urban League was a potent force although its objectives were somewhat different from the NAACP. But they coordinated their efforts.

EG: So did you begin, when did you begin your involvement with the Urban League?

FD: At about the same time I became involved with everything else. It's all part of a package. You fight on every front.

EG: Yeah. How did the Urban League's efforts differ from the NAACP?

FD: The Urban League was primarily concerned with economic development and preparing people to go through the doors that the NAACP opened.

EG: What sort of things did you do to make that happen?

FD: Well, I didn't do anything with the Urban League except to support the Urban League's existence.

EG: Okay, so you were just a dues-paying member of the Urban League?

FD: Yeah.

EG: If you could talk about your role in getting A. W. Willis elected to the state legislature a little more in terms of your role and helping that?

FD: Well, my organization, he was elected city-wide. My organization out here in this area, my goal was to be sure that the people got to the polls and understood the issues and voted and voted right. [Laughter.] There were people like me in other parts of town who were doing the same thing I was doing in this part of town. And we made it happen.

EG: During this time, what was your view of the police force?

FD: The police force was repressive. Each precinct was like () a little plantation. They controlled the blacks. There was a lot of dislike. The first black people were put on the police force in 1949. The only problem was they couldn't arrest white folk. If you got a white man doing something, you had to hold them and call a white policemen to arrest them. We've come through a lot, and we've got a long, long ways to go. I was mentioning to somebody the other day, my grandfather was a slave. My grandmother was a Native American. Now the blacks were enslaved, and the Native Americans -- the whites committed genocide on the Native Americans. I was telling somebody the other day, I said, "You better be glad I'm a Christian because if I wasn't, I'd be mad all the time." With my grandmother--that part, being subject to genocide. That's what happened to a very large part of the Native Americans in this country. The blacks were enslaved. My father was born in 1892. We had not been out of slavery forty years. We had only been out of slavery about sixty to sixty-five years when I was born. So [laughing] so, you know.

EG: Yeah. What did your mother do?

FD: My mother was a domestic.

EG: You mentioned your religion. How did that play a role in the demonstrations and the civil rights campaigns?

FD: Well, it's not so much, it didn't matter so much what it does to civil rights campaigns as it is what it does to you as a person in terms of being bitter, continuously bitter, about the gap between the pronouncements of equality and democracy and all that stuff and the facts.

EG: So you saw it, it was one of the forces that made you more optimistic?

FD: No, it was one of the forces that kept you from going mad. [Laughter.]

EG: Sure. You're a member of the Baptist church.

FD: Yes. You know, how can you withstand oppression that's heaped upon you continuously without having something within you that helps to sustain you?

EG: And during this time or what about your family? I saw that you took them out to protest. Were they involved at all?

FD: Ah, yes. Yes. Yes. Yes, it was a family thing. Everybody had to understand that we're all in this together. I haven't pulled them all out there, but there's boxes and boxes of newspaper clippings, boxes and boxes of pictures of my activities during the civil rights movement put together, and that's going to be my legacy to my grandchildren. They want to know, "Grandpa, where were you?" I'll say, "Open the book."

EG: Absolutely. So, did they come out and protest with you, your family?

FD: Oh yeah, my wife was sometimes picketing with a baby in the stroller.

EG: Wow. Yeah. Yeah. Did you have other children too?

FD: I had three.

EG: Three children.

FD: We'd take them with us sometimes, not all the time, many times. Most times I was out there in the heat and in the cold by myself. But they participated.

EG: Sure. And you picketed, what sort of places?

FD: One time we were involved with education. () we picketed the school board. We picketed the city hall, the library, business especially retail. We were impacting all portions of the system.

EG: Sure. What would, when bystanders walked by, what were their reactions?

FD: Well, the only bystanders that weren't part of this were the white folk. [Laughter.] Some of them understood, and some of them didn't. For the commercial establishments, we were just primarily interested in cutting off the money stream.

EG: I was talking to Vasco Smith, and he said it went down forty-one percent during that time. That just is incredible to me. I saw that a settlement finally was reached in November 14, 1961, and that the Freedom Movement was called off? Or did the protests continue after that?

FD: Intermittently there were things going on even after that. But you start talking about dates forty years ago, it gets a little hazy.

EG: Sure. What about school integration? Were your children involved in that?

FD: I was on the city council when busing started in Memphis. The mayor at the time decided that that was the law, and he backed it. There was protesting in the white community. The busing thing caused problems for a lot of people, but there was not the kind of violence that took place in Memphis that took place in other cities.

EG: Not the same that happened before--you mean in terms of the demonstrations and sit-ins?

FD: Right, it was a white reaction to the busing. But I'm saying not the kind of violence from the white community that happened in Birmingham or Little Rock.

EG: Did you witness any violence at all when you were demonstrating or picketing?

FD: No.

EG: Okay. Why do you think, I saw eventually there was desegregation. In terms of the motivations of the white community, do you think it was because--. Obviously it was the disruptions, but what kind of the main factors were?

FD: Well, the city was getting very adverse to publicity as all cities were. But I think the biggest reason for the change was money. Money is where the power motivated. [Laughter.]

EG: So it was money more than morality.

FD: This country doesn't have any morals.

EG: No. Yeah.

FD: This country. This country. It's a good platitude.

EG: So you were elected in 1967 to city council?

FD: Um hmm. From a predominately white district.

EG: Yeah. How did you manage to win the support of a predominately white district?

FD: I told them I was white. [Laughter.] No, we had a lot of people in the white community campaigning for us in the white community.

EG: How did that happen? How did you--

FD: I had been out there a while. A lot of people believed in me. There were particularly two people who really took a lead with that, George Lapidés and Jimmy Jalenak--both Jewish--who really decided to be my campaign coordinators in the white community. Jimmy is a principal in one of the largest law firms now in Memphis. George is a sports fan. He is the sports editor for TV station WRVG here in Memphis. But at the time, George was working for the Commercial, yeah the *Commercial Appeal*, the sports editor. Jimmy was a junior law associate.

EG: How did you meet them?

FD: They found me.

EG: They found you and they wanted you to run?

FD: No, I was already running. They heard about it. They said, "We want to help you."

EG: What were their motivations?

FD: Well, they thought the other people running were bad.

EG: Did they have motivations in terms of civil rights? They were both--

FD: They believed in the same kinds of things that we did, and this was a way for them to put it into action--help me get elected.

EG: Do you think their support was very integral?

FD: *Oh absolutely. Absolutely critical.*

EG: Do you think without their support you would've been elected?

FD: No.

EG: You eventually became chairman of the council.

FD: Yes, first black to be chairman of the council.

EG: How did that make you feel to be first elected and then be chairman?

FD: Well, I think that I earned my [spurs?] with my peers, not only with the community, but because you're elected by the other members of the council.

EG: How long were you chairman?

FD: A year.

EG: A year. Okay. Sure. Sure. The Shelby County Democratic Club, that was, that organization lasted, is it still in existence?

FD: No, it got fragmented internally, sort of self-destruct, over-ambitious. Kind of a sad story, but it's not an unusual story.

EG: How did that happen?

FD: Well, some people who weren't qualified to lead, packed the house one night, and got themselves elected. That split the club and ultimately destroyed it.

EG: What do you mean?

FD: Everybody got a vote, and they brought in a lot of people who had not really participated. But they were permitted to vote at that time. This person was elected. The people who had put the club together and were the power behind the club just sort of pulled away. So, that started this demise.

EG: Was that in the late '60s?

FD: That was in '65, '66.

EG: How often would there be, how did it work in terms of meetings for the club?

FD: They met monthly.

EG: Monthly meetings for members of the (). Vasco Smith was telling me they would try to run as many people as possible as a strategy for gaining support or awareness.

FD: Yeah. If you got people in your community, in your area running for public office, they would come to the polls to vote for them. But they would also could vote for people who weren't from their communities because you needed to have an interest, have people interested in registering to vote, so they could vote for the person that they were interested in. So it was as much a voter registration drive as it was.

EG: In terms it was educational and that was one of its purposes in setting up these candidates to run. Right. Was there anything else that I haven't covered that you would add?

FD: Well, I think, you talked to the various ones of us and you talked to the key people in the group and Russell and Vasco and Maxine. Some of the other key people are dead now, () Turner. A. W.'s dead. You're making the rounds pretty good.

EG: All right. All the people tell their stories differently.

FD: But I guess the theme is more or less the same.

EG: Yeah, definitely. I just had--. I saw you went to Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral. If you could talk a little bit about that.

FD: Well, I was in a secret meeting across from city hall with a group of people waiting for Martin's representative to show up so we could settle the strike. It took a while for him to get there, and we had some concerns as to why he wasn't there because he was more prompt than that. We got a phone call from city hall to turn the television on. That's when we discovered that King had been shot. I was a member of the city

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council, and that whole group came under my committee chairmanship. Some of us were flown down to Atlanta on a private plane to attend the funeral.

EG: What was the funeral, what was the experience like of being there?

FD: It was rather emotional. People from all over the world were there. You had this sense of a passing of an era.

EG: Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]