

**Transcript – Lillie Jones Wheeler**

Interviewee: Lillie Jones Wheeler  
Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter  
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ELIZABETH GRITTER: [This is Elizabeth Gritter] interviewing Mrs. Lillie Wheeler on June 28, 2004 in Memphis, Tennessee. 2004. Testing. Okay. Should be fine. Well, I was wondering. I'm doing this thesis and I'm looking particularly at the 1959 city election but also I'm probably going to do a dissertation looking at Memphis more broadly on civil rights and electoral politics and Shelby County Democratic Club and NAACP and civic clubs and so forth. So I'm asking questions about both things. I know they're interrelated. So I was wondering how you began [your] political and civil rights activism?

LILLIE WHEELER: Well, I was president of [the] Fourteenth Ward Civic Club and doing community work like that--working with the Scouts and other community events. When the Shelby County Democratic Club was started, they had someone in each ward and precinct to head that and work together. I was with the Fourteenth Ward Civic Club. I went from there with the Fourteenth Ward Democratic Club. It was [the] Shelby County Democratic Club but that was the ward and precinct I worked at. That was over in the LeMoyne College area.

EG: Sure. So there was two clubs -- the Democratic club and the civic club -- because you worked for both at the same time.

LW: Yes, but not for long. After I got involved in politics I just kind of got away from the civic club because we were doing the same things.

EG: So the Democratic Club you were involved with that after the 1959 election.

LW: Um hmm.

EG: When, Mr. Sugarmon told me, I know that's when they were set up.

LW: Um hmm.

EG: Were you involved with the 1959 election at all?

LW: Yes.

EG: What did you do?

LW: Well, I've always worked and am proud to say that I was grassroots. I call myself a grassroots worker even now because that's where the activities are. You're not out there for publicity or to be seen but to work hard to get something done. At that time I went in to working for Mr. Sugarmon to get him elected. After that we got involved in getting President Kennedy elected.

EG: Yeah. Yeah. And you were one of the people who received invitations to the inauguration of President Kennedy?

LW: Yes, I didn't get to go but--.

EG: How did that make you feel?

LW: I felt very good about it. But I always had faith in him because the reason I worked for him so hard was because he didn't seem to be a prejudiced person and he

seemed to be fair in what he was doing and not just for one group of people but for everyone.

EG: Sure. What are some tasks you did for [the] 1959 election?

LW: Well, we went out door to door to get people registered. That was the first task--make sure we could try to get everyone registered to vote. We threw parties and had the candidates come in and speak to a group of people and raise funds.

EG: What were these parties like?

LW: It was just like a lawn party, mostly like a lawn party.

EG: I'm not familiar with how a lawn party works.

LW: Well, we just served like sandwiches and drinks and talked about the issues that were going on and had the candidates come in and talk about them and let the community ask questions of the candidates.

EG: Sure. What were some of the issues that you discussed?

LW: Well, at that time, we were really trying to get Memphis from being a segregated to a desegregated city. We wanted to know about that and what would be done for the city, streets improvement and all that kind of stuff that the city was involved in, garbage collection, everything. So that was what we were mostly interested in then.

EG: Sure. So were those some of the things obviously you were hoping to achieve through political action?

LW: Yes.

EG: Was there anything else you were hoping to achieve through political action?

LW: Just that everybody could live in one city and be a group of people who could love and respect each other and do things together. But you had a choice. We weren't just trying to get in with whites. We were just trying to get in where we thought we had a right to be, like the library.

EG: Ah, sure. Sure.

LW: And other places that we wanted to eat and places that the government was spending our tax money on that we couldn't utilize the benefits from it.

EG: Right. Did you have any longer term goals at all?

LW: Well, I didn't. That was really my main goal. We did want to get some blacks in office because we felt like it would make a difference because they knew how we felt where the others didn't. We thought getting in there would make a big difference.

EG: Yeah. Did you feel that—were you going to say something else? Okay. Did you feel that when blacks were elected to office that they were able to make as much a difference as you--?

LW: In the beginning not as much, but it was a progress from what it had been. For instance, when we first got black policeman, they could only arrest black people. They couldn't arrest whites. So it was still just a step. We were still being fought on every issue.

EG: Sure. What sort of turnout did you get at these lawn parties?

LW: We had good turnouts where I was because we worked really hard and did the complete community and talked it up how important it was to vote and how important it was to get someone elected that you believed in whether it was black or white. We didn't just work for the black candidates but white candidates too.

EG: Right. Right. What did you say to persuade people? What were your--?

LW: Well my thing about voting and I started with those young people who weren't giving much thought to voting at that time and told them how we had fought for our right to vote. They could make a difference if they would do the same thing, go in there and get registered and let their voice be heard. So it wasn't too hard. We used young people right along with us. My children worked right along with me. Wherever I went, I took them. So at an early age, they got involved. We would put literature out door to door.

EG: Sure. Were you involved with any sort of like organizational work? Mr. Sugarmon was telling me how he would have it planned out at what stages they needed to be at a time in the campaign for getting cars to take people to the polls and so forth.

LW: I did a little bit of all of it. Mr. Sugarmon was an attorney, and we had a lot of faith in him. He was never a person who was trying to be loud and seen. He just worked kind of like we did at the grassroots level to me at first. But he could get the information we needed and give it to us. Then we could go out and get people who had cars that could take people and pick them up and take them to polls and take them home and people to work at the polls who had learned enough about it to be able to meet people as they came in, not just hand out literature but talk up your candidate and talk about your candidate and tell them something about your candidate so they would know and could make a good decision on who they were choosing.

EG: Right. Right. A person at the library pointed out to me how this was a three-step process, getting people to register, educating, getting to the polls and it seems to me really challenging—.

LW: And see a lot of the education came during those parties that we had. The group was small enough where you could really kind of get in one on one and talk to them. It's not like talking to 1000 people at once. Anywhere from maybe twenty-five to maybe a hundred people at the time. We used to call them coke parties.

EG: Yeah. Did you, let's see. I had a question that just slipped my mind. What sort of work did you do with the civic club?

LW: Help keep [the] community looking nice and talking to people about how important it is to have pride in your home whether you were renting or buying. At that time, there was a LeMoyne Garden Housing Project, which I lived in for a few years. Even though it was a project we told them how important it was that we have our lawns looking nice and keeping our children in order and respecting other people's properties because if they rented it, it was theirs. That's my yard. But we worked together like a family. We got to be like a big family. So we would do that and try to get them to learn more about going to library and reading up history and being sure to go to these coke parties so that they could get information from people like Russell Sugarmon, Ben Hooks, and A. W. Willis [Jr.]. Those three I worked with closer than any of the other attorneys that we had at that time. They sometimes were around the clock.

EG: Sometimes what?

LW: Sometimes worked around the clock.

EG: Oh wow. Who would you say were the major leaders back then? You mentioned Sugarmon and Hooks and Willis.

LW: Maxine and Vasco Smith. Maxine was executive secretary of the NAACP for many years. She was one of those who helped get Memphis State opened up to

blacks. I would say I think we had about ten black lawyers at the time, and those lawyers along with leaders like Maxine Smith. We had Rufus Thomas's wife. Everybody knows him. They don't know her. Lorene Thomas was a good worker. Had another, Elizabeth Russell, and different ones like that who didn't mind getting out and giving time and doing some work.

EG: Sure. So did you also do political activity in civic clubs?

LW: Not that much.

EG: Okay. Yeah. Was it pretty much the same people who were in the civic clubs and the Democratic club and the NAACP?

LW: Um hmm.

EG: That's something that's really striking to me is the amount of civic involvement that took place back then in terms of—.

LW: Yes, that was pretty much most of what we had, not being able to do a lot of things and go a lot of places. We had one day that we could go to the zoo, and things like that that really bothered us. Our children couldn't go to certain parks. Just had certain parks our kids could go to.

EG: You mentioned a lot of the people were involved-- some of the people, including yourself -- lived in the projects. Did you find that with these campaigns that people of all economic levels participated?

LW: Yes, [they] did because some of them lived in homes around and some of our most influential people lived around there, including people like Russell Sugarmon, I think, who never--. He always wanted to make things on his own. He didn't want to profit from what his family had. He wanted to just go step by step on his own. That's

really what kind of drew me to him. I think one of the reasons he lost the election was because at one time we begrudged each other a lot too if they thought you had a little something.

EG: What happened?

LW: People kind of resented those who had a penny and they didn't. Well, they always said, "Well, he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth." That was a phrase thrown around because he didn't have to chop cotton. But he went to school, and he worked hard, and he was always anxious to learn, and then he was anxious to share what he learned with others.

EG: How widespread was this resentment of--?

LW: It was pretty widespread, mostly with the uneducated people, which we had quite a few in those days because we had a lot of school dropouts.

EG: Was part of your work trying to smooth over these differences?

LW: Yes.

EG: How did you do that?

LW: I just told them well, people I knew personally liked Mr. Sugarmon and Mr. Hooks and all. I told them they weren't wealthy people. They just didn't have to do a lot of things like we had to do to get ahead. But as I say, Russell always started--. I know he didn't want to start in any big house out in East Memphis. He just wanted to go slowly and start his law firm and not try to get a big office downtown. But he started out on Vance Street. He and A. W. Willis and Ben Hooks shared an office for some years down there working together. It was really hard trying to educate those people like the school dropouts because they just seemed to not really understand the process of getting through



everyday life and not being resentful of what others had or were doing or had achieved but [that] you could do the same thing that they did if you worked hard, get an education. So that was really the hardest thing that we had going on.

EG: I think it's incredible that just like that you still were able to get so many people out for the election, have people voting alike and so forth. What accounts for that unity of having 90 percent of what roughly 70 [percent of] people out voting for the same candidates?

LW: Education, being educated and knowing and the fact that the whites really didn't want us to succeed at that time. So they worked hard to keep us back. We had a few white friends that would go to the library and get stuff for us and help out. But for the most part, most of them didn't want it known that they were doing that because they didn't want the rest of the white community to know that and pick on them.

EG: What do you remember about the white resistance to Sugarmon's candidacy and others of the Volunteer Ticket?

LW: I can't really say, but I think they really resented the fact that he had a good education and was able to talk to others and go with any group. He could talk with a judge. He could talk with an uneducated person on the street and still be the same man. He had a good personality. He never flaunted anything, and he's still that way. He's still humble. When he got to be judge, he was still Russell Sugarmon.

EG: Do you think most, well, you said there was resentment of him and other leaders because of their middle-class background but do you think overall people respected them or what ( )?

LW: I think overall they did. Sometimes you can be led by whoever has largest voice out there shouting things, especially when you're not educated. I think that's really what happened during that time. But, after that, I think really starting getting together when they saw how things were happening. That we would elect the same people over and over and they're doing same thing. ( ) pushing you down. So I think that kind of helped make us come on up and really work harder and do things. We didn't just start on election time. After that we really got busy working, trying to educate people on the political process and stuff and what was going on and how history was not really altogether true.

EG: What do you mean by history wasn't al--?

LW: Well, just like even now. We have one month we celebrate as black history month and the black community really did a lot for America. We know that Indians were here when they said Columbus discovered America, which means Columbus did not discover America. But that's what was taught. So we were taught a lot of things that weren't true. Like open heart surgery and making the stop, red lights, stop red lights were done by blacks. People didn't know that, especially us. Other people were taking credit for things that we did. So we had a hard time trying to get people really to understand what was going on and how we would have to do and not be so angry. You know what I'm saying. Don't be angry at you because you were treated this way, but you could go with love and win over a lot of people that way.

EG: You mean to, this was one of the things—.

LW: That was my philosophy.

EG: Could you talk a little more about that?

LW: Well, for instance, I was never arrested during the civil rights movement. At first I didn't march because I've always been a person who never bothered anybody. I've loved everybody whether they were white or black. I used to get talked about a lot saying that I wanted to be white because I didn't do a lot of bad talking because I still had white friends even when it was segregated, but we just couldn't go to the movies together or anything like that. I think--. I'm losing my thought. Your very question was—.

EG: About let's see, oh, why your philosophy, talk more about your philosophy of going with love.

LW: Well, for the most part, most blacks were very religious. That brought us a long ways. We had the black churches to pray for us and teach us right from wrong and not to hate, and I think that helped a lot too. I always used that. I used to babysit, and the people I babysat for were pretty influential in Memphis at that time. They didn't want their children to go the movies upstairs where we had to go—like at the Malco Theater and the Warner and stuff. They didn't really want them on Beale Street. So I could go downstairs with them, take them to the movie, and sit with them downstairs and wasn't bothered. But I never thought I was more than someone else because I could do that. I think I was gifted with personality that made it easy for me to get along with people regardless of who they were or what they were or how they acted.

EG: Right. You mentioned too the importance of letting black people know about their history. Why was that important?

LW: It's important that you know about yourself because a lot of time it makes you dislike yourself because all you hear is negative things. So it's important for children to know early what contribution was made by blacks and know that you can do the same

thing. At that time, it wasn't recognized. But we don't need to have black history month. We just need to know year round the contribution that everybody made.

EG: Right. Right. Did you run across that problem of people being apathetic toward working for political action?

LW: Sometimes.

EG: And again you—.

LW: But I had some white friends, like I said, that would--. We needed certain information from the library. They would check it out for us and bring the information back. We got a chance to get some things done with their help that way. We had some that even gave money to help us.

EG: Gave money to the political club or the--?

LW: Um hmm.

EG: Oh okay. For just—.

LW: You know, it takes money to run for office, and we didn't have that kind of money just coming out of our pockets, say, I'm going to run for office and pay my way. So we had to do things to raise money. We had some that thought enough of us to give donations.

EG: Oh sure. What were some of your other fund-raising strategies?

LW: Well, we used to sell lemonade and the children would have dances. Where I lived they would have dances at the auditorium in [the] neighborhood and raise money like that.

EG: Sell tickets to dances. Yeah. Sure. And was it mainly black people that came or also black and white people?

LW: No, just blacks at that time, just blacks were coming.

EG: Sure. Right. That was one of the things I was thinking about recently was where the funding came to do these campaigns. And some it seems was donated by business, black businesspeople in the community.

LW: Um hmm and churches, they took up money in the churches.

EG: Yeah. How else did churches play a role in electoral activity?

LW: Well, back then we used to have meetings at the church along with them praying for the success of a person. We believed in prayer and I still do. We took up money too at churches.

EG: Like an offering.

LW: Have an offering for the candidates.

EG: Sure. Were a lot of speeches at churches?

LW: Um hmm. That was practically all we had back in those days. We could go to the churches and go anywhere else.

EG: Did you go to the big Freedom Rally when Martin Luther King Jr. came?

LW: Um hmm.

EG: What was [it] like?

LW: It was difficult for me at first because people like Attorney Sugarmon and Hooks--I just, I'm calling these names, there were some other lawyers working too and other people--believed in nonviolence. I did too, but I always told them I don't know if I could handle it if someone put a cigarette in my hair or down my back or if they came up and spit in my face. I might have to hit back. So Mr. Sugarmon told me to answer the telephones, ( ) get you out of jail. Answer the telephones, be with the fund-raising,

stuff like that. I got a little tired of just being on the sidelines. I said I'm going out here and nobody's going to bother me. I prayed. So I started getting into marches. They called me names, but they didn't touch me. That was the main thing. I sat on the bus for almost three hours once and I don't think he really called the police. I think they had gotten tired of calling the police. They never came. So I was never arrested, but I did work and I worked hard. I think it was God that kept me from being arrested or spit on or that kind of stuff.

EG: How much time did you spend on all these activities?

LW: Oh Lord. Back in those days, an awful lot of time. It was ( ). I wasn't working at the time. I was just raising my children. So I could afford to work all day, going out talking to people, older people who weren't working and going door to door and trying to get information that I needed.

EG: How were you able to juggle raising children and doing all that political, civil rights activism?

LW: It was easy because that was part of their education. I felt that was part of their education.

EG: Oh taking them along.

LW: Took them along with me and told them why I was doing what I was doing. They got very much involved. Yes. When Kennedy and Nixon were running against each other, my children could talk about Kennedy as much as I could.

EG: Wow. That's very impressive.

LW: One of my best friends who worked with me in the civic club was a Republican. I was a Democrat. And he had the Republicans of that ward. I was over the

Democrats. Everybody was coming to us for literature and information. He had been in the past kind of the big wheel. They got very upset. But after that election was over, we got very, very close and he became a Democrat.

EG: Sure. Were most black people at that time Democrats?

LW: Um hmm. We have always been predominately Democrat.

EG: Because I know that there was the Lincoln League that also was around. I'm wondering how influential that league was?

LW: At one time it was pretty influential. People like George Lee who could really get up there and talk good and talk loud and make people believe but then it got where we could do the same thing.

EG: When would you say that the Lincoln League declined in influence?

LW: Oh Lord. I wouldn't--. They weren't as large as the Democrat once we got organized. It was mostly of the older people. So I don't remember the exact year, but I would think in 1970s they started going down.

EG: How was Lincoln League different than the Democratic club?

LW: I can't tell you a lot about them because I didn't attend any meetings or anything. I couldn't understand why they were there. So I didn't have a lot to do. I had friends who were Republicans. Even my pastor was Republican until after the Nixon-Kennedy election. So I just think they were being taught the wrong things and were still believing in that old stuff that everything that was said was true back in those days.

EG: Everything was—.

LW: Everything wasn't. Like if you were telling me something because you're white, I would think you knew what you were talking about and I didn't.

EG: So the Shelby County Democratic Club was more the younger generation and more ( ).

LW: It started out and then there were older people there too. But the younger generation like Sugarmon, Maxine Smith and all, they were young and energetic and knowledgeable and were able to get everybody in there and tell them things and make them understand how to find things out for themselves instead of listening to what everybody else said. I think it just grew. That fact that we did things ward and precinct helped a lot instead of just trying to grab a whole city at once. Getting every ward and precinct in the city.

EG: Yeah. And you were the precinct leader.

LW: I was the ward and precinct leader.

EG: What were your responsibilities as precinct leader?

LW: To get everybody together that lived in that ward and then get them involved and get them educated to what was going on.

EG: Sure. You did that, you said some of the things ( ) door-to-door, meetings, and campaign meetings and lawn parties and coke parties.

LW: Yes. We started out getting registered to vote those who were eligible. I still do that even now. I'm not as active as I used to be, but every election I'm active to some point. I always start with the high school kids who are coming out and old enough and getting them registered. I will take them to downtown if they need to go. We're allowed to bring registration forms now and they can mail them in and get them involved that way. After that then we start on getting them interested in going to polls to vote.

EG: Sure. Sure. What do you hope to achieve now through political action?



LW: I don't think it will be achieved in my day, but I wish that we could get really together and forget about ethnic backgrounds and just work for the good of the city, the state, and the counties, and the national communities.

EG: So, you've been doing this political work your whole life it sounds like.

LW: Well most of my young adult life on to now.

EG: Yeah. Yeah. From or the '50s and '60s and '70s and '80s.

LW: Um hmm.

EG: Wow. That's very impressive. I'm finding with, talking with Vasco and Maxine Smith too and Russell Sugarmon how these are all ongoing processes and so forth. In fact my advisor at [the] University of North Carolina did a speech called "The Long Civil Rights Movement" talking about how issues are still unresolved and she made that a basis of her speech. She was president of the Organization of American Historians. So that's something in particular when I work for the Southern Oral History Program next year that we're going to be looking at.

LW: Yeah. Maxine Smith [has] donated I think most of her papers and stuff to the library or the museum. I've forgotten which now, whether it was the civil rights museum or the library. Ben Hooks--he's done the same. He's donated most of his to University of Memphis.

EG: Yeah. They're wonderful for historians to look at. How often did you have precinct meetings when you were the precinct leader?

LW: Well, we had monthly meetings unless something going on and then we had as many as was necessary.

EG: Sure and so these were in addition to board meetings that you went to.

LW: Um hmm. Um hmm.

EG: How did board meetings work?

LW: Well, pretty much the same. We had someone who chaired the board and groups that got together for certain different things and would bring it back to us to vote on and say how we're going to use strategies to do this and that. But the board never was group of people who said I'm it, I know it all, and you do this and you do that. We worked together to get this achieved and I think that's what helped us a lot.

EG: How were you able to do that? What was like the process for that?

LW: Pretty much like the others, going into small groups like the ward and precincts and starting there. Then have one big meeting, we had one big meetings of all the wards and precincts to know what was going on, what to expect.

EG: And you could vote on different things that came up and so forth.

LW: Um hmm.

EG: What ended up happening to the Democratic club?

LW: I don't really know. I think at one time we just had so many people who wanted to be head of this and head of that and just kind of got the organization torn apart. Kind of like the civil rights movement when Dr. King was killed, then it just, everything, because everybody had a different attitude. They thought that being nice wasn't getting you anywhere.

EG: When was this that it, that the Democratic club--?

LW: When was it set up?

EG: When did it seem to fall apart?

LW: I would say somewhere along about that time.

EG: In the late '60s.

LW: When Dr. Martin Luther King was killed [it] kind of fell. Then the splinter groups coming, different organizations. We would have Democratic Club and this Democratic Club and this Democratic Club.

EG: Yeah. Yeah. Because I've seen that looking at some of the literature. There's all these different political clubs, and so it's kind of confusing.

LW: It was just like civic clubs and it was like maybe North Memphis had their [neighborhood?] had a Democratic Club, headed the Democratic Club and whoever was in my [neighborhood?] would head that club. Just too many different ones and then we started getting different opinions about things. For the most part we were still pretty much together just we may [be] different at how we go about getting it done. Because as we involved more of the young people after Martin Luther King died, they were pretty aggressive. They felt an eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth for a while. That's when I dropped out because I knew how wrong it was that that happened. I knew whoever did it had to pay for it. They were going to be the one that would have to answer to God. I would have to answer for how I acted and how I think and how I feel. And I do believe there is a heaven and a hell. That keeps me kind of grounded.

EG: So you were involved with the Democratic club from when it began to the late 1960s, a precinct leader?

LW: Um hmm.

EG: Okay. Could you talk too about, I understand that you would screen candidates.

LW: Yes, we did.

EG: How did that work?

LW: We would have a committee that would screened the candidates, ask them about their philosophy and what they believed in and what they planned to do if they get elected and like that, and then we would bring it back to the group.

EG: Were you part of the screening committee?

LW: Some of it.

EG: Okay. Okay. Did you keep accountable the politicians that you helped elect?

LW: Oh Lord no.

EG: No.

LW: No, I can't tell you all but like Sugarmon and Hooks. Hooks was a judge too. The NAACP, but almost anything Maxine Smith said we just kind of went for it because we know she was going to go in and do a lot of work into her background and research and stuff. Then she could really speak for us. So but every, well, Mayor Herenton when he became the first black mayor, I was very heavily involved with that campaign and I still worked for Harold Ford [Sr.] when he became the first congressman and every year after that that he ran and Harold Ford Jr. I worked in his campaign. But at this time I had gotten older and wasn't getting around as much. But I would still always do my voter registration and stuff like that and take people to the poll and talk up history on it because I had known them all the years and knew about what they were capable of. Did the same for some whites after that. There were some whites that I really had faith in and worked hard for.

EG: The voter registration work that you did, was that a function of the Democratic Club or the NAACP or—.

LW: Both.

EG: Both. Now I heard that there was a Citizens Non-Partisan Registration Committee.

LW: Yes.

EG: Is that what it was? Oh, okay. How did that committee work?

LW: Well, we--. Pretty much the same people so you were doing pretty much the same thing. We would organize and go out into different areas of the city. We wanted every ward and precinct, especially predominantly blacks, to be involved and to be registered to vote and go to the polls. So we did pretty much the same way by ward and precinct.

EG: Knocking on doors, going to churches.

LW: Um hmm.

EG: I saw one of the things too the committee did was go to the courthouse and register people to vote who were coming in to renew their license. Were you involved with that?

LW: Um hmm.

EG: It's exciting for me, I've read so much about it, to actually meet someone who was involved at that level. Yeah.

LW: And I'm as much as possible, I kind of work with different ones now in trying to get people are registered and lose their right to vote. If they do their time we

feel like that they've paid for their crime, they should be able to vote. So we're working on that.

EG: With, through an organization.

LW: Not through any organization just blacks are just getting behind and working with different lawyers and stuff.

EG: So you're doing that on your own.

LW: Um hmm.

EG: The Non-partisan Voter Registration Committee was that just formed during campaigns or was an organization that was existed throughout the year?

LW: Well, it was existing but just worked harder and longer during the campaign time. That's when you could really get people's attention during—.

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

EG: That people overcame class divisions particularly when things started to get mobilized in more of an accentuated way. When would you say that was?

LW: They haven't really overcome it yet. Not everybody but the majority have. And I would think at least by the early 1970s they started looking at it in a different way.

EG: Why the early '70s? What was significant about then?

LW: I think because of everything that was happening with the civil rights movement and how people had to suffer. Right now, we have children who don't know what we went through to get them in different colleges and stuff now. They don't know much about Martin Luther King and his philosophy. The younger generation have a

different philosophy. Like I say if you get in there with them in the right way you can get them to listen. So I work through churches and schools—.

EG: Oh and schools.

LW: High schools. I don't go to schools to make talks but just go and those children who are in the twelfth grade that I know are going to [be] eighteen that year, I start talking with them, especially mostly the ones in my community where I know the principals and stuff.

EG: Like do you come in as part of a class or—.

LW: Sometimes I've been invited to some schools to a certain class just to talk. Some I just go in as a volunteer and talk to the children.

EG: When did you start doing this?

LW: Well, I've been doing that all along.

EG: From the 1950s onward.

LW: I just still do that now even though we're not organized as a Democratic club, a civil rights group.

EG: What sort of impact did [the] 1959 election have on the black community?

LW: I think it made them start thinking more because I think when it was over they realized that the way they were thinking was different than what it was. I think after that they were sorry they let that get in the way of voting like they should.

EG: Did the class differences get in the way?

LW: Um hmm. Um hmm. Now some of us still have problems but it's such a few. Of course we have more middle-class people now too. I think all of that came from [the] time we were doing the educating of the civil rights and stuff.

EG: Because that paved the way for more—.

LW: That paved the way

EG: For blacks to become middle class.

LW: Right. Right. But unfortunately, I don't think what they're calling the baby boomers--. I don't think they're working as much with their children as we did and talking about civil rights and civic groups and stuff. Some of them don't know what it's like because they didn't have to work hard, babysit, or pick cotton or chop cotton or anything like that. They don't know anything about not being able to go to the movies or the zoo. So that's why I think we should be teaching history, American history with everything included all year.

EG: Yeah, because too often--. I heard John Hope Franklin speak and he talked about people introduce him and say he does African American history. He says, no, it's American history. So yeah, I'm with you with that. Let's see. How involved were women with political campaigns?

LW: Very much. We've always--. Actually I would think more women [were] involved than men.

EG: How were women's roles different than male roles or similar?

LW: I don't think the roles so much as just the way we think. Women just don't think like men. Most men got to be here and we don't care about being here and coming up. We don't mind being educated on what's going on and sometimes men and especially our men that didn't have much education, you couldn't talk to them the same way you could those who did.

EG: You think--. By going like that, what do you mean?



LW: And it took longer to get them into the mainstream because you had to work harder with getting them to understand what was going on.

EG: So you think women were more community focused and doing what was good for the community whereas men were more kind out for themselves and trying to get power and that made it difficult for--?

LW: It made some people think that's our role to do that. It's just like housework. You know, they don't think they should play a role in housework. They didn't in those days. You see men babysitting now and doing housework because the man and woman [are] working to try to get a decent home and everything. So it takes two salaries. I think if you don't know where you came from, it's hard for you to get focused on where you're trying to go. So now I think we're losing a lot because we're not focusing on what was done to get where we are all the year. I think voter registration is something that should go on all the year because everyone is turning eighteen at a different time of year. You need to get them right then. But now, like I say, with my health and my responsibilities I work more with the church groups and some of the school groups trying to get people registered early and then on talking to them about voting and about going to library and learn stuff and then learn how to think for yourself and listen and then research. Now with the computer age I think that has helped young people a lot. They know more about how to go online and do some research than some of us old ones.

EG: Were you involved with church groups back in the '50s and '60s?

LW: Um hmm.

EG: What sort of church groups [were you] involved in?

LW: Whatever church, whether it was a Methodist Church, Baptist. I'm a Baptist. But I didn't just work with Baptist, just any black church.

EG: Were you involved with Baptist church groups at all?

LW: Um hmm. I think we had more, well, back in those days anyway we had more Baptists than any else. But we have Catholics, well, we have everybody now. It was not just the whole church because they're mixed now, especially like in the Catholic churches. But now we have some white members at my church and then there are black members at some white, at predominately white churches. The ministers worked together better, the white ministers and black ministers are working together. So it's a lot different today, but I still think it's harder than even when I was young because we didn't know much but we were eager to learn. Now most of them have this idea that, well, I know what I need to know, especially certain age groups.

EG: Did you feel as a woman back then working on political campaigns, you talked a little about how you experienced resistance from men. Did you have other ways that you feel you experienced sexism at all?

LW: Not really. It wasn't anything that we weren't used to so we knew how to handle it. I always believed in catching flies with honey [rather] than vinegar. So that has been my philosophy since [I was] a little girl. That's why I have never had any real problem with anyone, any race. I've never been arrested. I've never had fights. Not in school or anywhere because, like I say, I've been a believer in God since I was twelve. I have always believed in the Bible. So that's where I got a lot of my training because my parents, even though they were poor, they were not haters. They didn't go around teaching to hate.

EG: What did your parents do?

LW: My father was a barber. For years my mother didn't do anything because she had eight children. Well, then she worked at the board of education as a salad maker.

EG: You said too, well, were you working while you were in school?

LW: You mean had a job.

EG: Before Head Start—. Before the daycare.

LW: I used to babysit. I started babysitting when I was fifteen.

EG: Was it white families that you took care of?

LW: Um hmm.

EG: And you said they were [the] wealthier ones in the community.

LW: Um hmm. But they were nice. I couldn't have stayed with them if they hadn't been.

EG: Looking too at the 1959 election, I noticed there was a lot of movement among whites to get black candidates to drop out the public works race?

LW: Um hmm.

EG: What do you remember about that? What was—.

LW: Well, there was a lot of undercover stuff going on. I couldn't tell you about all of it because a lot of it was undercover. It has been known that whites would try to pay you to drop out and then try to pay us not to work for black candidates but work for theirs because they could pay us more money.

EG: They came to you and offered?

LW: Um hmm. Um hmm.

EG: What sort of people were these? Were they businessmen or--?

LW: They were mostly businessmen.

EG: Did they give a reason why they were trying to pay you?

LW: They were just trying to convince me that they were the best and what they would do for us when they got elected.

EG: So some of these were candidates too for the races?

LW: Um hmm.

EG: What did you say to them? Obviously you didn't take the money.

LW: I told them I was where I wanted to be and I was working for the person who I thought would do the most for me.

EG: What did they say?

LW: Some of them told me to think about it, and they were going to get back with me. Some of them did, but the answer was still the same, but I never told the black candidates.

EG: Were you aware of other precinct leaders, people, who had the same thing happen with them?

LW: Yeah, I'm sure. I know several did, but they did the same thing that I did. They turned them down.

EG: What other undercover stuff went on with your other ( )?

LW: They could walk up to you on the street if they see you giving out literature. If you were standing at a bus stop or something, they would come to you.

EG: And try to pay you?

LW: Um hmm. If they knew your name and about where you lived, some had the nerves enough to call.

EG: Did you experience any harassment or threats at all?

LW: No. I didn't personally.

EG: Were you aware of other blacks who did? I know Sugarmon did.

LW: Well, there were harassment among most of the black candidates in the early years. There were a few threats like [against] Mr. Sugarmon and I think Ben had a few threats too.

EG: Why do you think whites would feel so threatened by having blacks in public office?

LW: I think it's just the way they came up. They've always felt that they should be on top. Some of them still do. Like I say, desegregation has accomplished opening some doors, but some people still have the same heart.

EG: Another thing I ran across in the newspaper coverage because I looked at the newspaper coverage of the campaigns, some of it was that a lot of whites too were saying that race relations are fine now. They're peaceful and harmonious.

LW: Yes.

EG: Why do you think they would say that?

LW: They want you to believe that. They want you to think things are going well. It would help them financially because businesses would come in. It could hurt their business. We used to do a lot of boycotting, and that helped a lot. Like I said, it got us in some doors; it didn't change hearts. My work for desegregation was not to mix with whites. It was just to have equal opportunity.

EG: So were you involved with boycotts done by the NAACP?

LW: Um hmm. We had Mondays that we wouldn't spend money at all. We've had boycotts [of] certain stores after talking with them and trying to get them do certain things. In most of the cases, we were spending more money than whites in these stores.

EG: Were these stores on Main Street?

LW: Some of them.

EG: [Were you] involved with [the] eighteen month long freedom movement [from] '60 to '61?

LW: Yes.

EG: Did you have shifts where you boycotted? Vasco Smith was trying to explain to me how it was set up. That there were shifts.

LW: There were certain times that we boycotted certain places.

EG: Who were the people boycotting? Were they people of all different generations—.

LW: All different generations.

EG: Yeah, and classes and so forth.

LW: Um hmm.

EG: Did you run, I assume that there would be the same thing with NAACP leadership that some people would be resentful of them because of their class status.

LW: Um hmm.

EG: You said that was the major challenge that you faced.

LW: That was one of the major challenges.

EG: What were some of the other major challenges?

LW: Well, getting men more involved like you spoke about—.

EG: Oh right. Right.

LW: And letting the young people know that they should be involved because I thought all ages should be involved. That was why I carried my children with me most places. Now they didn't go everywhere because we had a lot of night meetings away from the neighborhood that I didn't always take them to because they had to be in bed a certain time. We had sat up to three or four o'clock in the morning trying to figure out how to do this and that and we always wanted to do it peacefully. We pretty much accomplished the peace until Dr. King, and then that's when I kind of backed out, after he died. The one thing that I did do when he died. They put a boycott on, and my youngest son was working at one of the hospitals and he got off at eleven. And there was no way I was going to let a young black boy try to come home after eleven when the boycott was on because he would be shot just because he was black. That was one time I defied, but like I say, God has been with me all the time. I was out after eleven. I went—.

EG: You went and got him.

LW: Yes ma'am.

EG: Wow.

LW: That was nothing. I took on the United States Army for the son. Like I say I don't bother anybody but when I'm mistreated or you mistreat my child, you will hear from me.

EG: So you broke the curfew and picked him up.

LW: Yes ma'am. Yes ma'am. I said they'd better not stop me and they didn't and I passed on through.

EG: And so they just let you go.

LW: They didn't stop me.

EG: Wow. That must've been quite frightening.

LW: It was. It was. I was afraid for him because he was young. He was in school and he was working at night to help save for his college. There was no way because he was stopped three times in one day during that movement because they said he fit the description of somebody who had shot a policeman. They let him go. But I don't think that's why they stopped him in the first place. I think they wanted to make sure that he didn't have a gun or just where he was.

EG: This was '68.

LW: Yes.

EG: And that's when you pulled out of the NAACP too?

LW: No.

EG: Or was it just the Democratic club?

LW: I didn't just pull out. I didn't start working with [them] when they started looting and stuff and burning because I didn't believe in that. And everybody wasn't doing it. It was just some. But it did make everybody pretty angry and everybody I think felt like doing something.

EG: Yeah. Yeah.

LW: But I didn't believe in burning and I didn't believe in taking things.

EG: Right.

LW: So I just pulled out and prayed.



EG: So you were a member of the Democratic club when it began to '68 and did political work after that on your own pretty much?

LW: Um hmm. And for different candidates.

EG: Different candidates and with the NAACP. You were a member of that from the '50s to '68 or—.

LW: No, longer.

EG: Longer than that.

LW: We have one life membership. You couldn't get but one.

EG: Oh you got life membership.

LW: So my husband paid for his life membership. We got him through first. So I never got through paying for mine.

EG: Oh.

LW: But I still believe in NAACP and I still work to do anything to help the NAACP because I think a lot of things would not have happened if not for NAACP.

EG: Would you say that the NAACP, what would you say were major civil rights organizations at that time in Memphis in the '50s?

LW: The NAACP.

EG: Yeah, the NAACP. Yeah. The Shelby County Democratic Club became the main political organization in '60s?

LW: Um hmm.

EG: Sure. You said too that you won men over by your approach of catching flies with honey. What did you say?

LW: I did that even when I started working in the kindergarten. Sometimes men would drop their children off or pick them up. I took that opportunity to talk to them one on one and just feel them out. I didn't just go bombarding persons with certain things. I started off and then I decided to have Men Day once a month and fix breakfast for them.

EG: When you were with Head Start.

LW: Uh huh. And told them how important it was. I did lies. You know, "the centers are competing on getting the fathers involved." I said, "I don't want to be the one that doesn't have the most fathers."

EG: So you made it competitive. That's good.

LW: So they would do anything that I asked them to do. Then we got to talking about politics and jobs and church and like that. Some had to even be taught how to be a father. So we had parent involvement in Head Start. That's what it's all about. I just took that time and even on Saturdays and even now I try to keep up with some of my students and parents. Some of them are making \$80,000 a year.

EG: Wow. Wow.

LW: Some have graduated in the top of the class, second in class and sometimes first and one girl that I thought would never be anything, just never seemed to be able to get through, but did. So her father was telling me about three years ago, he said you should see [Louetta?]. He said, "We give you the credit for giving her a good start." [He] said that she's working for Dow Chemical and they started her off at \$80,000 a year.

EG: That must be really rewarding.

LW: I have a parent who's a writer now and some have their own businesses. And I try to keep up with them and see what they're doing and if they're doing fine. If

they ever meet me on the street sometimes I don't know recognize them but they recognize me and come up and say something. I keep my camera with me so I can snap a picture.

EG: Oh so you don't miss any opportunities.

LW: And get phone numbers and—then I will still, well, “How are you doing? Are they involved in this or that?”

EG: When Head Start came on the scene in Memphis how did people react to it? Was there support for the program or were some people like against it.

LW: Well, they didn't really talk out loud against it so much because, like I say, when it first started. They did more after it became full day. But when it first started it was in the public school system and they only allowed the first-grade teachers to be teachers. Some center directors like myself who had only worked in kindergarten although we had the experience in working with early childhood and had more education in early childhood because like I say they didn't have it back then ( ). They would work during those two months of summer and only thing they were really interested in the second grade teachers and third grade teachers were allowed to be teacher aides too. People like me who had kindergartens--we could be aides but we couldn't teach the first grade teachers taught because those children were going to be coming into their class. They would pick out the ones they thought was the smartest for their classes.

EG: Sure.

LW: So I don't think it did as well as long as it was in the public school and that wasn't but about two years. I think it was '67, '68. Sixty-eight it became full day and that was because of Sumi Peeler who was white and Elizabeth Jones who helped work to

get it full day saying that it really wasn't enough. In '67 we had two full day programs. They let us have two full day programs. One in LeMoyne Gardens and one at Metropolitan Church which was still in the same area just across from each other. They had three year olds at LeMoyne Gardens, at over there at the church and they had the four and five year olds where I had the kindergarten. It makes all the difference and they finally convinced them full day would be better. So then [the] War on Poverty was established. They took it and then they took over the running of Head Start. So that's still the way it is now except that War on Poverty became CAA and CSA and different names, Community Service Agency, Community Action Agency.

EG: Oh right.

LW: And all that. Of course the funding was coming from the same source so they just wanted all of that under the same roof. Then we went to the city. Head Start was closed for a short time. I think it was in '70 or '72 and when it was reopened it was reopened under the city. Then from the city to the county. But we still had [a] community service agency which was under that county or city umbrella. They still ran it for a long time. When I guess about '90--it was after I left Head Start, after I retired--that they were able to become independent from the county. The county still was the funding agency but they had the Shelby County Head Start Incorporated and then that didn't work out too well and so Mayor Wharton got rid of that group and now it's under the county.

EG: A lot of different changes. A question that came to my mind was when you had the board meetings with the Democratic club, who, was it leaders that set agenda and talked about the issues that were to be discussed or was it also that the precinct leaders had a hand in deciding what issues?

LW: The leaders had the agenda and we could add to it. They never just said this is all we're going to talk about. We were always involved in what we needed to discuss.

EG: So did that happen a lot that the precinct leaders would add some issues to the table?

LW: Um hmm.

EG: And Mr. Sugarmon was telling me that the precinct leader or the precinct clubs were used to carry out the direct action movement with the NAACP.

LW: Um hmm.

EG: So you were able to discuss both places, what was going on.

LW: Um hmm.

EG: And have that network--.

LW: Um hmm.

EG: Carrying it out. Is that where you would decide who would be at different shifts like for the boycott, for boycotting Main Street?

LW: Um hmm.

EG: That sort of stuff. Let me see if I have any more questions. You mentioned how you were able to get men to contribute into Head Start. What about with political campaigns. How were you able to overcome their sexist attitudes or being told what to do by a woman?

LW: Well, just by making them feel that they are important and that it is important that a man lead. We don't mind following, but you know you have to be a good leader. So we just made them feel like you can do this and you can do that, and we can help you.

EG: That's very savvy.

LW: That was all, you have to use some psychology.

EG: What did you think of the press coverage like of the 1959 campaign?

LW: I don't think much of press coverage now. I didn't think much of it then.

EG: Yeah. Why?

LW: Because it was biased.

EG: I'm an outsider and that was apparent to me just reading the paper about--.

How biased it was.

LW: They're still pretty biased. It's better now, of course, but at that time they were just too biased.

EG: How did that bias come out?

LW: You mean in working with people or how we accept it.

EG: In the press coverage?

LW: The same. Not just the news media [but also] the papers would talk about what things are like--like you're not qualified or haven't had this education and this kind of stuff and sometimes they didn't even know what you had. They would make a scene. They would plant a seed and expect it to grow and most times it did. They would say negative things to make you think that this person is not going to do anything for you or they just want something for themselves, want to be in the limelight for themselves or something.

EG: Do you think the newspapers were influential back then?

LW: Yes, I think they were.

EG: How widely read and how influential were the black newspapers?

LW: Not as much as the whites'. A lot of people didn't even get the black newspaper believe it or not. It wasn't as widespread like daily delivery. The black newspaper [still are] the weekly newspapers. So you are just getting it once a week and then everybody wasn't getting it then.

EG: Yeah. I looked [at] the coverage of the *Tri-State Defender* and it seemed to take a real advocacy role of getting people out to the polls and getting candidates but I wonder how many people were actually reading the newspaper and influential it was. Something else. Mr. Sugarmon actually showed me was like a volunteer card that people would fill out to work on campaigns. He was saying that you were able to give them--. When they filled out the card, then one strategy was getting them to talk to everyone they knew about the campaign or providing them with lists of people who were living [in] that--.

LW: Um hmm or sometimes both. Most times both because I think everyone has influence over five or ten people. Some may say three but I say five to ten. When you talk to that five to ten, tell them to talk to their friends and relatives, then keep it going like a chain.

EG: Yeah, snowball effect.

LW: Yeah.

EG: So you would have lists readily available that anyone who sent in the card, you could let them know like who was living next to them and who they could go out and talk to.

LW: Well, we just asked them, we used to have block clubs within the precinct clubs.

EG: Within the precincts.

LW: Um hmm. You take care of this block and you take care of that block. You get them covered and you won't have to do a lot of walking and working and work with your block. Everyone wanted their block to be the best.

EG: So there were block captains.

LW: Um hmm.

EG: Yeah. Did you have any rewards or incentives other than the feeling you get from your block being the best?

LW: Well, we mostly gave out--. At one time, we would give certificates or something. For the most part, it was just that everybody wanted to feel like they achieved what they started out to do. So it made you feel good that you could do what you were assigned to do.

EG: Do you think having blacks in public office has been positive toward improving race relations here?

LW: Somewhat. But there's still a lot of people resentful. For instance, the police force. Well, we have a black mayor; we have a black police director; and we have a black county mayor now. A lot of the leadership is black now and I still think they're being resented.

EG: By whites?

LW: Um hmm, and even some of us. Not because of race but just because we have some of that resentment that you have to do this for *me* and not the community. That can get in the way of progress sometimes. But I think a lot of people now would tell you Mayor Herenton has not done *anything* and that's the word they use, not for blacks,



just whites. But those who have worked for him and those that know the city well know that a lot of streets were not paved before he was mayor. A lot of things weren't done before he got to be mayor. So far the city has always ended in the black, not bankrupt like the county. He's the mayor, and when he ran, he didn't say he was running for blacks folks. He said, "I'm running for all of the people in Memphis. I want to be mayor for everybody." That's what he has done.

EG: Do you think some black people think he should do more for black people because--?

LW: Some don't think he's done enough and some think he hasn't done anything. I think some of it is jealousy and some of it is resent[ment] because they think he has power and they don't. I butt heads with him sometime but not about that. He's a hard worker. I didn't want him to run this time but not because he wasn't doing a good job. I just, it was a lot of hard work and you get kicked in the behind for trying to do good. I said you just have had enough and I have prayed too much. I've got too many scars on me. He said but it's going to be all right. So he promised to run just one more time.

EG: When you were doing voter registration activities, did you get any resistance at all from the city at all with getting blacks to register to vote?

LW: At first we did.

EG: What sort of resistance?

LW: They tried to make the qualification hard for one thing, but then we had some good lawyers that could let them know that the constitution was being violated.

EG: How did they try to make the qualifications harder?

LW: They were saying you need to have this education, and you're not paying taxes, and all kind of stuff.

EG: After getting lawyers involved you were able to register people easily so it seems?

LW: Yes.

EG: Why do you think that registration was allowed here pretty easily as compared to like Mississippi and Alabama?

LW: Mississippi and Alabama is what we call the Deep South, and they're deep rooted in segregation. I think Memphis would have come out better except those who were for it knew that there were a lot of them against it, and they didn't want to go against their friends or even some relatives. But I remember a time--. Like I was telling you, we had some white friends. There was a white attorney once that had been working with us. They pulled my son's car. It wasn't illegally parked or anything in this same community. He was over to a friend's house. They were studying together. They later said the reason they pulled it because they hadn't seen it on street before and that a lady had had problems with somebody breaking in or something. Wasn't anybody breaking in when they pulled it. They just pulled the car. It made me very angry. So the attorney told me, "You let me handle it. Don't you go down there. I don't even want you in court. I'll get your car." Because, like I said, I don't bother anybody but I don't want them just going around picking on people because and I said that was a predominantly black neighborhood. It had been predominantly white but it was predominantly black then. I said, just the car. It wasn't at any fireplug. Wasn't blocking anybody's driveway

on a public street. Had proper license tags and everything. There was no reason to pull it.

EG: When was this?

LW: This was back in the late '60s.

EG: Then what happened.

LW: When he came out and found the car was gone, he called us, told us somebody had stolen the car. So when we called the police, we found out it had been pulled. Said what for? Then that's when they said there was somebody in the neighborhood who had been having problem with people breaking in or coming in the yard or something and that was a strange car.

EG: ( )

LW: You're going to pull a car because you hadn't seen it before. They weren't doing anything and nobody was at her house doing anything. I knew I had to have an attorney. Black attorneys were still having some problems, but this was a friend of our black attorneys too. He was still an attorney. He said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I'll get your car back. You're not going to pay for any overnight parking at the city lot either." He did. He said, "Don't you even go down there." I don't lose my temper fast.

EG: Your what ( ).

LW: I don't lose my temper. Hard to get it, it takes a lot to make me angry. I can take a lot. I don't want my child or other child mistreated. They can't protect themselves. So I said I don't want them to start being bad. So far they're nice children. They go to school. They're making good grades. They go to church. They don't bother

anybody. They're not out stealing or roaming around. I don't want them to get in the habit of thinking that if you do good, you get punished.

EG: Was this after King's assassination?

LW: It was, no it was before. It was before, just before he was assassinated.

EG: What did you think of police force here in '50s and '60s?

LW: Oh Lord, not too much because I know for a fact though I've never been arrested or anything [that] they were very prejudiced, and they would do anything they could get away with and some of them still do. But—.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

LW: We were living out in East Memphis; they called it White Station then. That was before the city took it in. We had been to a movie, my husband and I. We were going to have to wait on the, they had yellow buses—we called them yellow buses—run out. City buses didn't go out that, past city limits. So they had yellow buses to go out in the county and they just run at certain time. So while we were waiting on the bus we decided to walk down to the park and sit down and look at the river and I guess just sit and talk. Police came and we were sitting there. They asked us what we were doing in the park. We said sitting here until time to catch the bus. He shined his flashlight around. He said you can't sit here and what are you doing. We're just sitting. That's all we've been doing since we've been here. Sure enough, there was a Trojan under the seat, we were sitting in.

EG: A Trojan.

LW: A Trojan, a protector—

EG: A protector?

LW: That men use.

EG: Oh.

LW: And I'm sitting there eight months pregnant. Why would we need—and married and got a home—why would we need it? What would we need to go in the park? And why would we have--. That just, I wanted to get up and slap him. That kind of harassment and stuff we had back in those days. A man could be just walking down the street going home because he didn't have any other way. Didn't have a car. No buses running. You may have to walk a good distance. They would want to pick you up, slap you around. It was terrible in those days. That was the worst experience I've had with one.

EG: Do you remember much about the campaign of O.Z. Evers and Eliehue Stanback when they ran in 1959?

LW: A little bit. I don't want to remember it too much.

EG: What do you recall?

LW: It was too much name calling, and I didn't like that. There was too much name calling and a lot of trying to--. In other words, I felt they were trying to get to the top and just using people and calling names and telling lies and stuff that wasn't going to make it. You know, divide and conquer.

EG: Oh okay. Do you think that's how most black people viewed their campaigns--they didn't take it as seriously as the one of Sugarmon's and Hooks and others?

LW: Um hmm. I think there was just a resentment toward Mr. Sugarmon during that time because they felt like he didn't have to work. He didn't feel that way because he was working. He wasn't living off his father.

EG: You said you did go to the Freedom Rally with King. What was that like?

LW: It was good in those early days because he could really get you stirred up. But he believed in peace, everything being peaceful and being a minister too. We just felt like whatever he said he was telling the truth. So it was good. He knew how to get your attention and hold your attention. So we felt we learned a lot from him.

EG: Did you go to Freedom Banquet with Daisy Bates?

LW: No, I didn't go to that. I didn't go to that.

EG: Yeah. I noticed looking at the press coverage of the Freedom Rally that a lot of the speakers talked about "traitorous Uncle Toms." What did they mean by that?

LW: They mean that they just did anything that the white folks said.

EG: Was that widespread during the 1959 campaign?

LW: Pretty much. Pretty much.

EG: What did, were they bought off? How did that manifest itself?

LW: They weren't necessarily bought off. They just were, we said, back in slavery. They were just still back in slavery time. Just anything whites did, they thought that was what they should do.

EG: So like they should, some would vote for white candidates or work against the black candidates and so forth?

LW: Um hmm. Well, that's like I say, after Mr. Sugarmon lost that race, I think people really started thinking a little better about what was going on in the black race.

EG: It served to awaken people more to how bad things were and how people need to work for desegregation and so forth?

LW: Um hmm. Um hmm.

EG: Yeah, were people surprised by the strong white reaction against the black candidates?

LW: No. It was just something they've been used to.

EG: In some of the literature of Memphis and I think quite a bit of it strikes me it's probably written by white people. It says that the desegregation movement in Memphis was peaceful and voluntary? What do you think of that?

LW: That's not true. That's not true. We had to fight for it. It was not peaceful and voluntary.

EG: I remember coming here the first time. There isn't very much written about Memphis and that's the reason why I want to write more about it. That was the impression I had gotten from looking at the existing literature. I talked to Vasco Smith ( ). He was like no way. He was very aware of how that's been and so forth. But yeah, I think that to say that really minimizes the struggle of you and other people involved.

LW: Because right now we don't have but one paper now, one daily paper. We used to have two. We had the morning paper and the evening paper. I took the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* and the *Commercial Appeal* and I took the *Press-Scimitar* because they weren't quite as bad as the *Commercial Appeal*. They were far from being perfect or good. They were a little more liberal to me than the *Commercial Appeal*.

EG: Did you find the *Commercial Appeal* had derogatory press coverage of blacks or what did you find you didn't like about *Commercial Appeal*?

LW: I almost didn't like anything about it. Usually the name would make me sick. We got where we didn't read it. For a long time, we wouldn't even read the *Commercial Appeal*.

EG: Was that widespread?

LW: It wasn't so widespread, but a lot of us just couldn't stand reading it.

EG: Why was that?

LW: Because they weren't telling the truth and they weren't giving good coverage to everybody.

EG: Yeah. Yeah. What do you think should be done now about the problems that still exist among blacks and whites?

LW: It's hard to say because now this generation seems to think that older people don't know anything, and we let people run over us and that we can't tell them anything. Everybody seems to be more into self than community. So I think we need to, the old days weren't good, but there were a lot of good things about the way we acted during the old days that young people could really profit from. So I think that would be good if they would use their education to kind of turn things a different way instead of thinking that everything has to be "I said this" and "me, myself, and I because I want this" and [rather] think of what's good for everybody.

EG: That reminds me of one last question I had was in the '59 campaign electoral activities in '50s and '60s, how involved were children and youth? You mentioned you took your children along with you to door-to-door campaigns.

LW: They were pretty much, mostly teenagers. But they were pretty much involved.



EG: With all the sorts of campaign activities, passing out literature. I know that there was a youth committee in the Volunteer Ticket [effort].

LW: There were a lot of things they could do better than we could like walking long distances and stuff, but they still came under our guidance.

EG: Is there anything else, anything else that you wanted to add at all? Anything major that I haven't covered now that I should know about or anything you'd like to say?

LW: I can't really think of anything. At this age your mind starts leaving you. I do think there's a lot of good relationships between the ethnic groups, but now that Memphis is changing a lot where we have more than two major ethnic groups, it's getting to be a little harder. I don't know what to say to reach there because I'm not familiar enough with some of the groups and their beliefs and what their culture is like. All cultures, all ethnic groups, I would like to see be together as one group for the better of the community and for the city. I guess it would take some good leaders from each group to get together and figure it out

[tape turned off and back on]

EG: Okay.

LW: But we had grocery deliveries at the time. And this lady ordered groceries. She would order something every day to be delivered. When the young man go there—

EG: This is a black man going to a white woman.

LW: Um hmm. Her house. Of course they were afraid anyway because they didn't want to get accused of doing something and get killed. She would pull off her clothes, just have a negligee on. She would tell him if he didn't have sex with her, she would call the police and tell them he tried to rape her. They would've believed it. He

would've been probably dead. So he was scared because he said, "You know, I think if her husband walks in, he going to kill you. And if somebody finds it out then, she'll say I tried to rape her." So he just quit the job and left town.

EG: Wow. Is that widespread, stories like that?

LW: Yeah, pretty widespread.

EG: Sexual harassment by white employers of black women and also of white women of black men.

LW: Um hmm. Yeah, it was pretty widespread. I don't understand it. It was an Italian man that owned the grocery store out in East Memphis. Of course most of his customers were black. My uncle worked for him and I remember one time my mother babysat for them at one time. He was just always nice to everybody. He was nice and he knew that the police would harass you and do things and he would loan the money to get [blacks] out of jail and stuff and they started calling him nigger lover. But it didn't hurt his business because we would go, most all the blacks were going there anyway because he was so nice and treated people nice. It would be a lot of stuff. One of the brothers owned the grocery store and another one owned the service station next to the grocery store. And one of them -- the sister -- was married to the police [chief], one of the biggest segregationists since Crump.

EG: The sister of the man, the Italian who was running the grocery store was married to someone.

LW: Um hmm. Was a big chief in the police department. But as I say I'm not calling names because—.

EG: I don't quite get it. He was married to the sister, the brother was married to someone in the police department.

LW: The brother's sister.

EG: The brother's sister. Okay. And how did you find--.

LW: His dealing with black was very different from theirs.

EG: Right. Oh and you couldn't believe it because he was so nice, the Italian.

LW: But the policeman was not nice. That's what I'm saying. I couldn't understand marrying somebody like that when their philosophy was so different.

EG: Yeah. Just within the family. Sure.

LW: But he was a low down person. Everybody in Memphis knew it.

EG: What did you think of Crump?

LW: I thought he was a typical Southern white man from slavery time and wanted to keep it that way. I think most of the white people at that time just thought of us as servants.

EG: Yeah. Plantation mentality.

LW: Yeah, they had that attitude whether we were on a plantation or not. They still had the attitude that we were and that we should just do as they say.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by L. Altizer, May 16, 2005