Tallahassee, Florida

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B April 13, 1990

(Side A of this tape is an interview with Edgar Kay)

JOHN EGERTON: I'm working on, I hope, a book on the South in the decade or two before the civil rights period began. That is to say, up to 1954 and not beyond there. A lot's being done now, a lot's already been done, on the period from '54 on. I'm really interested in getting into that period from, say, about 1938, toward the end of the Depression, just before world War II began, and particularly after the war when so much was changing in the nation and the world, and there was such a sense of possibility for an improved life for people in the South. And yet we had a still serious problem on the whole racial issue that we were struggling to find a way to address. It's that period there when people were trying to figure out how to address that issue that I'm particularly interested in right now.

LEROY COLLINS: I can't help you much with that, going back that far.

JE: I think you can.

LC: I was in the legislature.

JE: Yes sir.

LC: I wasn't aware, in retrospect, of a great deal of racial turmoil. I just kind of accepted the old system.

JE: Well, I've got a few fairly specific things I want to ask you about. But I wanted to begin by saying you what the first elected office you held was?

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LC: First elected office was a member of the House of Representatives.

JE: What year was that?

LC: '35.

JE: And did you stay in the legislature then continuously until the war, until you went to the service?

LC: Yeah.

JE: In the House or in the House and Senate?

LC: Both.

JE: When did you go into the Senate?

LC: I think it was about '41. I think in terms of the sessions--the '35 session, '37 session, '39 session. All those, I know I was in the House. '41 was my first in the Senate. And I was serving there until I resigned in the middle of the term to go into military service.

JE: And you resigned about when?

LC: It was '44. I'd been in the Senate, I think for two sessions of the legislature. In those days, why, we really just had one session every two years. Now, since that time they have them all the time.

JE: You were Speaker of the House, weren't you?

LC: No. I was suggested, I mean, there was support for me for Speaker of the House in '37 and '39, but it didn't work out. [Interruption]

LC: Because of his current resistance to what was happening in Little Rock.

JE: Well, Governor, let me use that as sort of a linch pin to connect me back to this period that I told you I wanted to talk about. By 1957, there was no doubt in anybody's mind that if you were going to make social change in the South, you were going to have to do it by force. The masses of white southerners were totally opposed by 1957 to any kind of racial, social rewriting of the social contract.

LC: I wouldn't say the masses. Now, I always had the feeling that there were a lot of people out there that wanted me to do what I was doing and say what I was saying. Now, I wasn't just blazing out for total desegregation and all like that in that period of time. I couldn't have accomplished anything, had I been in that role. And I had a huge program for educational reform and other reforms that I was interested in as governor. So I had to, I don't mean, go along with the mob, I didn't go along. . . .

JE: No, but you had to take them into account.

LC: I had to take that into account and how that would effect the totality of what I was able to do. If I'd done more than I did, I think I would have rendered myself impotent for anything. So I was walking a kind of a tight rope there. But still, as events happened, it impelled me to say what I believed and what I thought was right and the course I thought we should follow. Of course, that set in motion a lot of antagonism toward me, toward us. We had the Ku Kluxers riding around the mansion right over here, burning their torches at night. I went out on the [laughter] porch. I thought that that would be a showing

that they weren't backing me down or anything like that. And these highway patrolmen came and got me [laughter] and hustled me in. Said, "That's crazy for you to stand out here. They may have some guns. You don't know what they've got or what they're going to do." It was temorous and yet I every time I sat down and made a speech to the people of Florida and talked to them about a number of occasions and circumstances that developed, I felt a deep affinity with a large group of people who believed I was right and I was right in saying what I was saying. Now, I had more people who felt I was wrong. Some of those were rather tolerant of my being wrong. They just felt I was wrong, and I didn't think so. I made a speech to the people of Florida in connection with the sit-in demonstrations at the lunch counters which was very forthright. I said these people are being invited to come in and patronize the business, and then say they couldn't buy at a certain counter or a certain place or a certain commodity. That doesn't make any sense at all. I think most people felt I was right about that.

JE: Well, I think what a lot of people felt. . . .

LC: But a lot of people were up in arms about it because they thought I ought to be out there marching with the sticks and resisting those demonstrators.

JE: Well, history has certainly proved you right. There's no question about that.

LC: Well, I feel that. I feel that very strongly.

JE: With all that in mind, let's just take the year 1938. You were in the House of Representatives. Claude Pepper was in

the Senate. Frank Porter Graham was the president of the University of North Carolina. There were people in Congress and in some governor's offices. A little bit later on Ellis Arnall got elected governor of Georgia. Franklin Roosevelt was in the White House, and it was okay for people in the South, if you were a Democrat, to say, "I'm liberal. I'm progressive. I'm for improving conditions for poor people," and whatnot. As long as you stayed off the race issue and didn't start talking about social integration and that kind of business, it was okay to be a liberal then. Then we got into a war that was really a war for a liberal cause. It was against a racist dictator in Germany.

LC: Let me interrupt you right there to underscore what you're just said. We had a miserable, miserable school program for our public schools because we had a system of just local support. We had school districts. Every county was divided into school districts, and each school district even voted on how much taxes they should pay on land in that district. I saw very early, and was involved in the campaign to develop public support for a state wide acceptance of responsibility for public schools, for a minimum level of education and state support of public schools everywhere. This had no race lines in it. It just applied to children, and they accepted that, and people were proud of, really, that move forward that we made back in '37 or '39. I don't know which one of those years, but I was still in the legislature. I was chairman of the education committee. I had gone all over the state making speeches to PTA groups, and all about Florida must awaken to new responsibilities and to

leave our children out there, whether they were black or white or what, but leave them our there without an opportunity for a decent education was a sin, a crime. And that we just did not want debasing our state, really. That program, when it was first proposed, was a little unpopular, largely, I think, because of business reasons and worry about the taxes. But as we carried that campaign, it caught on fire. While the legislators were, at one point, very much opposed to it because they felt the popular opposition to it, when we got it ready to go, why, the public was very much behind it. That all happened in this period of time.

JE: Right, just before the war started.

LC: People weren't thinking in terms of segregation and desegregation, and maybe they assumed they'd still have segregated schools. I think they did.

JE: I think everybody assumed that.

LC: Yeah, they thought that.

JE: Now then, you were into the service, and when you came back home in 1945, here was a sort of--and you went back to the Senate, I assume, in '45?

LC: Yes. I got elected before I came back, actually. The war was over, and . . .

JE: Who was governor then?

LC: Millard Caldwell.

JE: Do you think, looking back on that time, that at that point, given what you had been involved in before the war and then your own wartime experiences, when you came back to resume a

life of public service, do you think the issue of race as unfinished business for the South to deal with became a part of your thinking at that time or was it later?

LC: Well, I knew that discrimination based upon race would always be an issue until it was settled. I didn't think in terms of any Supreme Court issuing a ruling that it was unconstitutional. I always felt, and I publicly said, that reforms should come in other ways than by interpretation by the Supreme Court.

JE: Ought to come from within the state?

LC: Within the legal processes available for law change and all that. That's the way I kind of visualized it. I felt that that was a rather bold, and to a degree, unsupportable move on the part of the Supreme Court of the United States to try to tell us what kind of schools to run down here in the South and everywhere. I had some of that feeling. This should have come by act of law.

JE: Yes sir.

LC: And not the way it came. Actually, of course, in retrospect, it never would have come by operation of law, I don't suppose.

JE: It probably never would have.

LC: Certainly not in our lifetime.

JE: No, it probably never would have.

LC: I praise the court now, and, of course, all the time, most since, but in its immediate impact, I questioned. . . .

JE: It seemed. . . .

LC: It seemed to me to be a rather raw interference, you know. State responsibility. I wanted the state to meet its responsibility, and that responsibility could lead to desegregation. But I had the feeling at first, after that decision came out, that it was questionable. But then as time went on, and we went through this adjustment period, well, I realized I was wrong about that. It took that Supreme Court to do it.

JE: Well, even in that time, let's just say right after the war, Florida, though, of course, it had many problems, compared to some of the other southern states it didn't look all that bad. It didn't have a poll tax, for example. It didn't have a white primary. As a matter of fact, in 1947 your state senate rejected an effort to make a white primary the pattern for Florida. There was a Senator John Matthews from Jacksonville, who introduced into the Senate a bill to make the Democrat primary for whites only, and it was voted down in 1947.

LC: Jack Matthews introduced that?

JE: Yeah, he sure did. And you must have voted against that.

LC: I don't know. I don't remember it.

JE: Well, it happened.

LC: I mean, I have some faint recollection, talk about a white primary, but I didn't know it had got that far.

JE: You see that very same year under the Daimadges. . . .

LC: I would like to know how I did vote. Yeah.

JE: I'll check on it. Georgia under the Talmadges implemented a white primary. South Carolina tried do and got stopped by Judge Waring. You remember Judge J. Waites Waring, who ruled later on in that school case over in South Carolina. And indeed, the Supreme Court in 1944 outlawed the white primary in Texas. So this was in the wind, you see, and when it came to Florida, Florida wouldn't do that.

LC: You've refreshed me now. I remember that.

JE: Then even on the issue. . . .

LC: But I don't remember how I voted on it.

JE: There was a lot of agitation for a federal antilynch law.

LC: Yes.

JE: And in 1949 there was a particularly terrible lynching in Groveland, Florida, you remember. And Sheriff McCall ended up killing a couple of the. . . .

LC: Yes.

JE: And that was in the papers for almost three years, a very emotional issue that kept coming up in the papers. There were lynchings in other southern states.

LC: What was that sheriff's name?

JE: McCall, Willis McCall. There were four black men implicated. . . .

LC: I was very much involved in that. See, I was governor at that time.

JE: In '49? When did you first become governor?

LC: '55.

JE: Well, see, this was earlier. I think this was when. . . .

LC: Well, I had a huge fight with McCall over a lynching down there, actually what amounted to, was almost. . . .

JE: In the '50s. That was another incident. But you see, McCall, he had a reputation. . . .

LC: I commuted a life sentence for the conviction, the execution of a black man down there, and it was very, very unpopular. And I was right in the middle of my campaign, running for governor for the first time.

JE: In '55.

LC: I was running for a full term.

JE: For the full term. When you took that partial term, what year was that, '54 or '53 maybe?

LC: No, it was '55 to '61 were my six years.

JE: And you were elected in '57 to the full term.

LC: Yeah.

JE: That was right after the Brown decision. Well, McCall, you see, was a. . . .

LC: ( ) The Supreme Court justice now, what's his name, the black one that's been there for so long?

JE: Thurgood Marshall.

LC: Thurgood Marshall was counsel in that case. I'm interested in seeing it.

JE: Well, this other case. . . .

LC: The St. Petersburg Times supported me very strongly in commuting that to life imprisonment. That's all a governor could

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Interview

with

LEROY COLLINS

April 13, 1990

By John Egerton

Transcribed by Jovita Flynn

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do in a situation like that. That's all I could do. He'd been tried and retried, and all the courts had reviewed, and the courts had sustained it. We were at a point where nothing else could be done. So I commuted it to life imprisonment. A rather sad story. That was brought out in my campaign by Charlie Johns. A great furor was made by him about it in the campaign. I went down and I made a talk down there to the people in that area.

JE: Around Stark?

LC: Yeah, and just told them--not Stark, it was down lower than that.

JE: Where the crime was committed?

LC: Yeah. They had a big annual watermelon festival. Invited the governor to come ride in the parade. Sheriff McCall had gotten this woman who was involved, got her dressed up with a new dress, and when the car I was riding in the parade, stopped, she ran over, and told me who she was. She said, "Suppose I was your sister, would you have done that? Would you have commuted that sentence?" I said, "I think I would have. I hope I would have. But that's irrelevant here. We're not down here for the purpose of talking politics or making political issues. I'm down here to help the community. Be with the community." McCall had set her up for that.

JE: He was a very devious man.

LC: He's still alive. Somebody's going to write a real book about him when he dies. You try to do it now, he was pretty devious, but he was also pretty cautious.

JE: What is that county where Groveland is?

LC: That is Lake County.

JE: And you think that's where he still lives?

LC: I guess he still lives there. I asked somebody not so long ago. But he was from Marion county--I associate him with Marion County, too. I'm not just quite sure where he's living now. I have no idea. But there's a lot of material out there. The St. Petersberg Times has a huge file on that, and it's going to make a real book. But I don't think anybody feels like they can do it until he's dead because they've got. . . .

JE: Some pretty terrible stuff went on there.

LC: Terrible stuff, and they'd at least have litigation about it, which would be very difficult to manage.

JE: Well, this case that happened earlier. . . .

LC: The victim of that has died.

JE: But this earlier case, the crime happened in '49, and, oh, I bet I'm making a connection now. I know what happened. The crime was in '49. A white man was killed, and four blacks were implicated. One of them was hunted down and killed by a posse, and the other three were captured. They had trials, and one of them was sentenced to life in prison, and the other two were sentenced to death. Those two were being transported by Sheriff McCall to some other prison, and he tried to kill them both. He killed one of them but the other one survived and was subsequently retried and resentenced.

LC: That's the one, I commuted his sentence to life in prison. He was out pretty soon, not during my time, but he was paroled. He had an excellent record, a fine person.

JE: He didn't commit the crime, I don't think.

LC: I don't think he did either.

JE: That ties it together.

LC: There were four. No, was there two cases?

JE: You think there is two?

LC: This case had to do with an attempted rape of this women.

JE: This is a different case then.

LC: And it was down by a lake, and these boys, four of them, had gotten this car. I don't think it was ( ) having the car. They hadn't stolen it, but they were down there. One of the basis pieces of evidence that they convicted them on was that they got tire prints from the lake bottom, and they matched the tire prints of the car which they took into possession. Now, questions were raised later that those tire prints were manufactured by a deputy sheriff. He was convicted of manufacturing tire tracks in another case later on. So that gave a certain amount of possible validity to that. But there were four of these black boys. Now, some of this ties into what you're saying though. I don't know. . . .

JE: I'll have to go and do some more reading on that.

LC: If you're going to go into that, that's going to take a lot of doing.

JE: That's going to take a lot of digging. Well, I wanted to bring it up because. . . .

LC: Incidentally, just to get the trauma and drama of it, he was paroled and went to work down in Miami. One of the

conditions of his parole was he not go back to Lake County. That's the county where that was. I followed him the rest of his life. But he just made a marvelous record down there, working for this man, just very much pleased with him and believed in him and came to trust him tremendously. He wanted to go back home to visit with some of his relatives. He couldn't do that under the conditions of the parole. They waved this, though, and let him go back with the understanding that he would do certain things, not go back into that immediate area. Go to another place, visit with his uncle, his relative, and that he wouldn't engage in any kind of a controversy with anybody about the case. So he went back on those terms, and he was sitting in a chair on the front porch of his uncle's house, and he just toppled over dead, heart attack. Died right there.

JE: Soon after he was released or had he been. . . No, he'd been. . . .

LC: No, he was just on a little furlough kind of thing. He could go up there and see them. But the authorities were afraid that the white people would get all disturbed about him coming back, you know. They knew about it. They were upset about it. Maybe got to wondering whether there was any possible foul play on the part of Sheriff McCall or anybody else. But McCall lives on. I don't know how long he's going to live. He's getting up there. I guess he and I are about the same age.

JE: Probably be about the same. Florida didn't go with the Dixiecrat revolt in 1948. Why do you suppose that was? Why didn't the state become a Strom Thurmond--Dixiecrat stronghold?

LC: '48?

JE: That's the year they broke out of the party. They left the Democratic Convention in Philadelphia because of a civil rights plank in the party platform. You know, President Truman had a civil rights program that he tried to implement in the '40s, and all of the southern governors and senators were opposed to it.

LC: I don't know how to explain that except for the fact that we were having an increasing population development, people moving here from the North. So most of that Dixiecrat stuff was kind of old-time South stuff, you know, and rural dominated and encouraged. That population increase would have something to do with it, because most of the people moving in here were moving from other environments where they didn't have this feeling about race like existed down here. Of course, there were a lot of good relationships, too, that went on during that period of time. A lot of good people in the South were reluctant to just change moderately and easily, but they didn't want any violence. They wanted to maintain the old system, you know, being kind and gentle and having black friends. "Some of my best friends are black," you know, and that kind of thing. There was a genuine love relationship between a lot of black people and white people, but still a tolerance for the segregated posture. I think that the simple rightness or the wrongness of that Dixiecrat concept just lost its strength here because just not wanting to be associated with a rebellious, violent. They didn't want the Ku Klux Klans, and they didn't want lynchings, and they didn't want

much of any of that. They wanted blacks to be treated well and to live well and to come to live better, but they still had in mind that they would always be coming to the back door, always be Mr. and Mrs. white people and Sam and Mary black people, and this sort of thing.

JE: They really couldn't envision that changing in any way without the whole structure falling down?

LC: Well, I think they could envision some gradualism toward that. Some could. I don't know how many, very few.

JE: As you look back on that now. . . .

LC: But it was a little easier, I think, in Florida than it was in most other states.

JE: I think it was too.

LC: And we were going forward with pretty progressive school improvements. That was on a separate but equal basis. But they were proud to get, even on a separate basis. So that the black people were maybe not as recalcitrant or not as. . . .

JE: They weren't rebellious at that point.

LC: They weren't rebellious at that point.

JE: As you look back on that now, does it--I don't want to give you too much of leading question--but I wonder if that period between the end of the war and, say, the early '60s now seems in retrospect as a sort of golden opportunity that we missed to make social change peacefully without going through all of the bloodshed and turmoil that subsequently came.

LC: I think that's true.

JE: If we had only been able to see what was down the road, we would have maybe been willing to make those changes.

LC: That's right.

JE: But we weren't able to see it.

LC: And it was difficult for people to make changes without being forced in some way to do it, because that put them in a posture of being nigger-lovers or whatever.

JE: And yet all of our public efforts were to resist forcible change. We kept saying, "Leave us along, you Yankees," congress, the courts, whoever, and "let us work out our own problems down here in a peaceful way, and we'll do it." We were saying that all the way through the '40s, but we never did. We kept saying, "We don't need a federal lynch law. If you'll leave us alone, we'll work it out." But we kept on lynching folks.

LC: That's right.

JE: And we said, "We don't need an anti poll tax law. . . .

LC: ( )

JE: Somebody did.

LC: Renegade ( )

JE: And we said, "We don't need an anti poll tax law. If you'll leave us alone, we'll let black people vote." But we found all kinds of ways to keep them from voting, you know. Some states worse than others. Some kept that poll tax right on up to the time of the Civil Rights Act. Of course, Florida was not one of those, but Alabama and South Carolina and Virginia and Georgia had a poll tax. And if you look at the figures on the

percentages of blacks who were registered and who voted, it was minuscule.

LC: I think it's a mistake to assume that the abolishment of the poll tax was something that was visualized and sponsored to help black people improve their position.

JE: It didn't, in effect, have that?

LC: I don't think it had that racial connotation. Now, Senator [Spessard] Holland here was very much of the old school.

JE: He was a very conservative.

LC: He was conservative to the end. He was with the Virginia people. But at the same time, he sponsored that here. What he was resisting, and I felt deeply the same thing, the use of the poll tax as a device for buying votes. And they were buying white votes, probably more important then buying black ones. Not many black ones were voting.

JE: It supported machine politics, courthouse gang politics.

LC: That's right.

JE: And that's why.

LC: The first race I ever made for county prosecuting attorney, I got beat by that same thing, by that same type of thing. I was running against the prosecuting attorney in the courthouse.

JE: Was that here in Leon County?

LC: Right.

JE: Because you grew up in this county, didn't you?

LC: Yes, I was born here. Born just three blocks from here. But our feeling about the poll tax, we got all kinds of

stories about they'd given the poll tax receipt, you know, out there to vote, and they'd pay it, some of those that were bosses. And the bosses and then the courthouse rings were all tied together, community kind of bosses and the courthouse ring. And I know, I learned, I lost that election by about 100 votes. I was just twenty-one or two years old ( ). But I lost by 125 votes. They could easily count that, those votes that they procured unlawfully. I was kind of happy to see Holland come forward with that, and he got excited about it when it got to be a kind of national thing. He was first interested it as a state. I don't know what he did about that as a state before it got to be a national thing.

JE: Got rid of it here. You got rid of it here ahead of most of the other states. Let me ask you about another. . . .

LC: He followed it up in Washington as a senator on the national level, and we ultimately got a national constitutional amendment about it that abolished it.

JE: Thinking about the election of 1950 when George Smathers beat Claude Pepper and took his seat in the Senate. It was that same fall that Frank Porter Graham lost his seat in the Senate from North Carolina, and one or two other races. I can't remember now what they were, but it was sort of turning point in a way, where some ostensibly liberal voices, progressive voices, of southern, public figures, were extinguished by much more conservative voices. Race was a part of that. The larger part was the whole communist thing, the Red Scare.

LC: That's true.

JE: And it seemed to me that by 1950 the combination of those two fears. . . .

LC: I don't think race played much a part in it.

JE: Not too much?

LC: As I recall.

JE: No.

LC: I don't think Pepper was out, for example, cruising for black people voting.

JE: Not too much, doesn't show up too much.

LC: Or improving their welfare and that kind of thing. I don't think he did that.

JE: In fact, if you examine his record real carefully, he never had much to say about race. Never did.

LC: No, he didn't. Not for the whole way, until right [laughter] toward the end he did.

JE: Did you attach any particular significance to that election? I mean, did that signal to you a sharp turn to the right on the part of the electorate in Florida and in the country at large? Do you remember that? You were still in the Senate then.

LC: Yeah. There was another element that was quite important in that race, as I remember, and that was the control bossism down in Hillsborough County, where they had these Latin people voting and where the bosses were delivering precincts, 541 for Smathers and 2 for Pepper, and that kind of thing, which obviously was fraud--couldn't have been otherwise. That was an element within that too. I was jolted by that and recognized

that we ought to take steps against that. Rampant control of votes. Right here in my home bases, I had some of the same thing. We had little communities, Miccosukee, Chaires, and Capitola and Woodville and all around where there were dominant leaders and people who could pretty well deliver these precincts. Now, how they did it, just how they did it, I don't know, but I know I lost several precincts I think I should have won, that way. But I don't think they were ready to accept me because they didn't know me. I was just a young boy, you know, kind of shouting in the wilderness there. The other side had received favors and were in a close relationship, and, somewhat naturally I guess, would support the people that had been their benefactors. But all that was pretty much washed out, not just by the poll tax, and not by any one, specific thing, but just by the general level of improvement of education and acceptance of responsibility, political responsibility, by other people. I don't think anybody could be elected now [laughter] for anything in this county, just counting on, you know, a few leaders to put it together, particularly in the rural areas. They don't stand out as significant, controlling, influential hotbeds.

JE: You said awhile a ago that at the time the Brown decision came down, it struck you as a rather extreme thing for the Supreme Court to do, and you worried that it would be hard to make it stick. And yet, somewhere down the line, after you had been governor, you were head of the community relations and whatnot, you obviously changed your mind about that. What do you suppose it was that caused you to change your views?

LC: Well, I could see in retrospect that that was the only way it could happen, and that it should happen became very deeply implanted in my soul and conscience. I mean, the more I got closer to that issue and got away from accepting the old traditional mores of the South, why, the stronger I became for reform.

JE: You have no misgivings now about the way that turned out?

LC: No, I don't, I don't. I wish I didn't have to explain that I didn't always feel the same way people wound up realizing that I felt. But it just took some time for me to assimilate that and the experience of time and the experience of dealing with people in public office as governor. I remember distinctly when I was standing up there making my acceptance speech at my inauguration as first governor, looking out at that crowd, and there were thousands of people out there, and there were black ones and there were white ones and they were all kinds of colors. I told my wife after that, I said, "I just felt an enlargement of responsibility to those people out there. I was the only governor they had. I was the only governor they had." And they all seemed to feel excited and anxious and supportive, and it just really, it really touched me very deeply. That idea of obligation to eradicate influences that were morally wrong and fundamentally wrong, and against precepts that I had talked about and preached about in churches and was brought up in the Sunday Schools to understand, I just felt that couldn't be adjusted with

belief in right and wrong. It was just wrong to see this happening.

JE: Do you suppose. . . .

LC: That had more, I think, and an honest and genuine awareness that those people out there had a right to depend upon me. And I wanted them to have faith in me, and their faith, I saw, went beyond just acceptance of status quo. Finding new ways to do new things.

JE: You know, governor, maybe in the way things work in life. . . .

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW