

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

EDWARD LAMONTE  
December 22, 2004

WILLOUGHBY ANDERSON: So today is Wednesday, December 22. I'm here in Birmingham, Alabama. The interviewer's name is Willoughby Anderson interviewing Dr. Edward Lamonte for the Southern Oral History Program's Long Civil Rights Movement project. And if you'll please say your name we'll see how you're picking up.

EDWARD LAMONTE: My name is Edward Shannon Lamonte. I go by Ed. And I have been in Birmingham on and off since the summer of 1964.

WA: So if we can start a little bit before you got to Birmingham. Tell me a little bit about where you were born and grew up, and then how you came to Birmingham in '64.

EL: All right. I was born in Columbus, Ohio and attended from grades one through twelve a country day school, The Columbus Academy. And while a junior at the academy I interviewed with Harvard College and was accepted to the college and attended Harvard from 1961 to 1965. I came to Birmingham for my first time in the summer of 1964 through a program that was organized by the then dean of Harvard College, John Hugh Monroe and organized through Phillips Brooks House Association, of which I was the president. And John Monroe had met Lucius Pitts who was at the time the president of Miles College, the historically black college here in the Birmingham area, technically in the town of Fairfield. They became professional colleagues and very good personal friends. And indeed John Monroe resigned his position at Harvard College in the late 1960s and moved to Miles College

and became director of freshman studies there. But in any event, Dean Monroe organized a group of Harvard-Radcliff students to come to Miles College where we were matched with a team of Miles College students. And we did work in what was then the new Head Start Program. The public school systems in Jefferson County had refused to accept Head Start funding because it required desegregation of both faculty and students. Miles College agreed that it would operate a network of Head Start centers and the Harvard-Radcliff team worked in the centers. Two of us did not work in the centers. Both I, and the youngsters, will be very grateful that I in fact worked on campus that summer with another Brooks House volunteer named Jack Fitzgerald and we did tutoring work on the Miles College campus.

I returned in the summer of 1965 for another summers work and unexpectedly in the fall of 1965 as I literally had my bags packed ready to go to the University of Chicago, I was at home in Columbus, Ohio, Dr. Pitts called and asked if I would come and serve as his assistant for a one-year period of time, which I did. I was the assistant to the president at Miles from September of '65 until September of '66. And during that period of time met very bright young microbiologist named Dick Arrington, who came back to Miles, having earned his Ph.D. in invertebrate zoology and we worked together closely during the few months that we overlapped. I then went off to do the coursework for my doctorate at the University of Chicago. Never thought I would come back to Birmingham. I didn't have fond memories of Birmingham. Was very grateful for the opportunity to have been here but never thought I would come back.

And when I finished my coursework I wanted to ask John Monroe some questions about Roosevelt University in Chicago where I was considering doing some

teaching. And John had moved to Miles College and become active in the Birmingham area and he answered my questions in a letter and then said but I encourage you to come to Birmingham to interview at the new University of Alabama in Birmingham. What I knew as the extension center, in the fall of 1969 was able to grant undergraduate degrees for residents only in Birmingham. Students no longer had to complete a residential requirement in Tuscaloosa. And the head of the Birmingham campus was Dr. Joseph Volker. John Monroe said that Joe Volker wanted to create an urban studies program and urban studies was the area that I had worked in at the University of Chicago. And Monroe said, he always called me Eddie. He said Eddie, you need to come down here and interview with Joe Volker. The man has a vision for the future and he would like to talk to you about coming and working in the urban studies area. Simply because I had such respect for John Monroe and thought it would be rude to say I'm not even going to come, I came down to Birmingham. Never expected to stay but Joe Volker who was truly a charismatic figure as was Lucius Pitts, Joe Volker not only spun a story of what UAB could become, and indeed it has become much of what he envisioned, but offered me a job and a very exciting opportunity to be part of creating an undergraduate academic program in an applied service and research center for urban studies. So I came down expecting to spend three years, complete my dissertation, and then get a real job somewhere and I've been here ever since.

I was at UAB for ten years. In the fall of 1979 Dick Arrington, who I had met and worked with at Miles, and who had been a city councilman and with whom I had worked through the Center for Urban Studies, was literally drafted to run for mayor. I

was very, very enthusiastic about his candidacy and from the beginning indicated that I would certainly do anything that I could to help Dick Arrington because I regarded him then as I do now as an extremely competent professional, a very bright and a very dedicated man. And after his election he asked if I would join his administration for a year and I went to the university and negotiated a typical years leave of absence that could be extended to two. I remained with Dick Arrington through his first two terms, eight years, and then decided either I had to get back into higher education or I had to get out of it. And so I talked with him. He understood fully, did not know if he would run for a third term at the time. But at the end of the second term, at the beginning of the '87 academic year I moved to Birmingham Southern College where I have been since, with the exception of a nightmare six-month period in the spring of 1996 when I was the interim superintendent of schools for the city of Birmingham.

WA: Great and I will want to ask you about that. Laura had told me about that.

EL: Sure.

WA: So let's go back chronically to when you were working in Head Start or when you were working sort of for Head Start but at Miles at '64 and then in '65 and '66. Let's first start with school desegregation, what was going on in the Birmingham schools at that time. Do you remember school desegregation as a big issue at that point?

EL: I was very much involved with Miles College and was aware that it was a big issue. The schools desegregated here in the fall of '63 and I was here the summer of '64, our Harvard Radcliff group. And so there had been the first year of

desegregation. I was aware of it but frankly I'm not even certain that we were regularly reading the Birmingham newspapers. We were completely engaged in our work at the college, very much caught up in that. And so while I was aware of it, I was only aware of it and not in any way a well-informed observer and certainly not in any way involved in the actual process of desegregation.

WA: Okay. Why did John Monroe and Phillips Brooks House decide to come to Birmingham?

EL: I think John Monroe, as many people were, to Lucius Pitts and his vision of what Miles College could be as a historically black college and what Miles College's role could be in the future of Birmingham as a Birmingham moved into a new era of its existence. The previous president at Miles College had discouraged student activism. Lucius Pitts encouraged student activism. And I have said before and would still say that Miles College during the presidency of Lucius Pitts, during that period of time from say '63 when I think he came to the early '70s when he left, I'm not sure exactly when he left, but Miles was as important and vibrant and exciting an institution as there was anywhere in the country; particularly in terms of a college that was intertwined in the life of its community and making real contributions to it. So I think John Monroe was attracted to Lucius Pitts for two reasons. One, Miles was devoted to giving educational opportunities to kids who were unlikely to be accepted at any other kind of institution. It was a truly open admission institution and Lucius Pitts was committed to the proposition that Miles College could be the training ground for many talented young black kids, most of whom had deplorable secondary education experience and that it could really serve as the staging ground for the

careers of talented young men and women who otherwise might not have those chances. And indeed there are people. Arrington himself is a Miles College graduate. Judge U.W. Clemon is a Miles College graduate. And he would be a good person to interview about school desegregation.

WA: I interviewed him in November. Got to talk to him, yeah.

EL: I will say one of the great joys of my life in Birmingham, U.W. and I met each other in the summer of 1964. We have kept in touch. We have become really good friends. I regard him as one of my closest friends in life. We've developed a course that we teach together at the college. It's been a wonderful opportunity for me. But in any event, Monroe was attracted to the personality of Pitts, a truly charismatic figure, to the role of Miles College as an educational institution for its own student body, and then to the role of Miles College as defined by Lucius Pitts in terms of community engagement. And the commitment to Head Start, other commitments that the college made to try to nurture the civil rights movement and have its students participate attracted John greatly. And so I believe that Dr. Pitts had proposed to John Monroe that there would be a program like this at a time that they had met sometime in 1963. And John immediately responded to it and turned to Phillips Brooks House as the logical vehicle for mobilizing a group of students to do a project like that.

WA: So when you came back to Birmingham and came to UAB in 1969, were you driven by that sort of engagement with the community to enter and help design this new urban studies program? Was that part of what brought you back?

EL: It was part of it. Joe Volker commented that no great city lacked a public university and this was Birmingham's public university. As I indicated, I had no

intention of coming here for essentially a lifetime. I thought the opportunity to not yet have a Ph.D. but be involved in creating an undergraduate academic program and creating an applied research and service center in a community where arguably there were as great needs as any other urban community and greater in some cases, that was an extraordinary opportunity for a young person. And so I came more for the opportunities that were being presented to me at the university, than because it was Birmingham. But the combination of the two made it an attractive prospect for a short portion of my life.

WA: So then let's skip to your work with Arrington in 1979. You said that Richard Arrington was drafted to become mayor. Can you tell me more about that?

EL: Well, the image of Birmingham is that we had matured as a city to a point where Birmingham, Alabama could elect a black mayor. And internationally the response was very much if Birmingham can do it, anywhere in the world can do it. I think I'm right in taking a somewhat different view in thinking that Dick Arrington was not elected because of profound maturing and revisions in Birmingham's culture, but because of a tragedy that was an echo from the past, a police shooting, and the changed demographics of the electorate. I imagine you already have encountered the locally famous Bonita Carter incident. I hope you'll have a chance to interview Arrington. But he has never in our long relationship with one another spoken anything other than absolute candor with me and he is not a natural born politician. He is naturally an academic. I am confident that his goal was to be president of Miles College. And there were many, many people when Lucius Pitts left who clearly wanted Dick Arrington to be the president of Miles College. I believe I'm correct that

religion was the issue that prevented that from occurring. The board of Miles College was almost entirely, if not entirely at the time, made up of bishops of the CME church. And, bless their hearts. In most cases I think they did not have a great insight into the needs of college administration. But they knew they wanted their president to be a CME. I think the faculty wanted Arrington to be president. I think alums were supporting him. But he is by his own description a foot-washing primitive Baptist and not willing to make any compromises in his religious activities in order to please a board. And so another man was appointed, Clyde Williams.

Arrington left the college and became director of the Alabama Center for Higher Education and was drafted by his own account to run for city council. I interviewed Dick on videotape at the Civil Rights Institute summer before last. And there is about seven hours of really good material because Dick was very relaxed and very outgoing. If you don't have an opportunity to get the interview from him directly, this provides information about a group of young African American men coming to solicit his candidacy after the voting rights act. And they essentially put it to him that he had not been an activist during the civil rights movement. He had not even been in Birmingham. He was in a position, having gotten training during that period of time, to bring that training back to Birmingham and make a different kind of contribution. And I believe that Dick Arrington ran for city council simply because it had been put to him in that way, that he could be an example of black political leadership and he could take advantages of the opportunities that the civil rights movement had created, though he had not been an activist in that very movement. And so he ran for council, was elected in '71.

In '79, the summer of '79, the Bonita Carter shooting occurred, when the young black woman was shot and killed by a white police officer. And the current mayor, David Vann, the incumbent mayor, David Vann, refused to dismiss or discipline the officer even though a panel appointed by Mayor Vann had concluded that the officer deserved discipline and perhaps termination. David Vann and Dick Arrington were very good personal friends and they were political colleagues. Indeed I think in many ways David Vann was Dick Arrington's political mentor and I believe David Vann fully expected to probably serve two terms as mayor and then pass the baton to his protégé, who worked so closely with him when they were on the council together. But when Vann refused to discipline the police officer there was absolute outrage in the black community. And a group of black ministers approached Arrington and said that they simply demanded that he run for mayor. And so I think it was truly a draft. I don't think that Dick would have run without being approached and without that kind of crisis in the community or at least at that moment in time. And so he did run and he did win and he won with about eleven percent of the white vote citywide and he served five terms, twenty years and he never got more than about eleven percent of the white vote.

I have always thought that Dick Arrington was elected not so much because Birmingham had changed but almost because Birmingham hadn't changed, that this police citizen adversarial relationship, which had haunted the city's history, sort of came to full fruition with a white officer killing an innocent young black woman at the scene of a crime. And that the reason Dick was elected was that after the voting rights act, African American registration, of course, skyrocketed. And the combination of

white out migration from the political city of Birmingham and the dramatic increase in black registration led to an electorate that was virtually fifty-fifty. I think if you go back and look at the registered electorate in 1979 it would be almost fifty-fifty. Well, Dick was the adored candidate of a unified black community and had over the eight years that he had been a councilman, largely because of his very intelligent and capable work as a councilman, gathered support in this South Side area of Birmingham where we are now sitting in this neighborhood and over in the Redmont area. So that he had a concentrated group of supporters in what I guess would be described as the upper middle class white community among professionals and people who by virtue of their own education, their own experiences, were far more open to the possibility of a white southerner supporting a black political candidate. So anyway, he was elected in '79 and I began working on his staff the day that he took office.

WA: So was the Bonita Carter shooting, was it characterized as a civil rights issue or was this the kind of police brutality discussions that were going on at that time? Was that sort of divorced from civil rights?

EL: I don't think it was divorced from it. I think that the whole question of the police department, the composition of the police department, the conduct of the police department was tied to the whole civil rights movement. Birmingham was the last large city in America to hire a black police officer. I don't think Birmingham hired its first black police officer until either, no earlier than '67 or later than '69. I forget what year. And that had been always in every civil rights conference, meeting, statement of grievances, demands, the hiring of black police officers had been

presented as a civil rights, a need of the civil rights community for change in Birmingham in order to allow the black community to achieve its full measure of civil rights. So in a way it was a separate issue but I think it was more, I would see it more fundamentally connected to the variety of issues in Birmingham that constituted the core of the civil rights movement. Education, healthcare, policing, all were areas that I think civil rights activists regarded as part of the civil rights movement.

WA: So tell me what was your position in Mayor Arrington's staff. What were you doing when you started?

EL: Well, it was wonderful and I must say I look back on that as a remarkable and wonderful time in my life. Dick indicated that he would like me to be one of three senior staff members and that the three of us would sort of function as a trio in his office. But after about a year he sat down and said if I could agree to remain with him for his entire first term that he would like me to become his senior staff person. And so the position that I occupied is in the charter designated as executive secretary to the mayor. And I forget how many months after he took office we went through this modest reorganization and instead of three of us working with him, I became the senior staff person and served in that role for the remaining about seven years, seven plus years that I was with him.

I have never worked more comfortably or easily with anyone in a working relationship than I did with Dick. And so from a purely professional point of view the daily working relationship was superb. It was an extraordinary moment in Birmingham's history. I really cannot find words to adequately express how totally unprepared the white community was for a black mayor and particularly the white

business community whose cooperation was so desperately needed if the city was going to begin to make advances. Having a black mayor whose only influence was over public employees was not going to begin to scratch the surface of what Birmingham needed to do if it was going to deal with the profound economic changes related to the withering of heavy industry in the emergence of finance, services, and particularly the university. And these business leaders had no opportunity or experience to work with Dick Arrington and I think they were just absolutely terrified of what it might mean. And so one of the things that I'm very aware of and that Dick was very aware of was that I became a kind of bridge and emissary to the white business community. And I like to think anyway that Dick and I worked very effectively together and then whenever I was functioning in a setting and spoke for the mayor or indicated that the mayor was going to do something, those individuals would accept me as being an authoritative representative of the mayor. And I think we have no instances where I went beyond what he was clearly prepared to do.

So I think one thing that happened was as business leaders found it necessary to deal with Dick or as in time they began to seek out the opportunity, the fact that he had a track record of performance and that I was able over the long haul to sort of reflect his policy positions, and by virtue of sitting down with these guys, and they were mainly guys, simply tell them what my own experience was with Dick Arrington and to say look, you know, this city is very fortunate. This man is a very, very intelligent human being. He is superbly trained. How many cities have Ph.D. mayors? And this was not, I mean this was a real Ph.D. in the hard sciences. That is not at all typical. Capable administrator and one of the things that I think I was able to

do was to help persuade members of a very agitated and concerned white business community that they ought to at least give this guy a chance. If he was going to fall on his face, let them give him the opportunity to do that on his own. Don't assume he's going to do it and refuse to have any contact. And I really do think that from the time Dick Arrington entered office until the FBI investigation began in what 1986 maybe? I'm not sure of the, I don't remember the year exactly. There was an almost unbroken record of continually expanding confidence in the mayor and a growing network of relationships with him that really led to a city that was, in my view, remarkably well governed in many ways. He wasn't a perfect mayor. I don't think there is one. Nor is he a perfect human being. He is a human being. But I think that one of the things that I had the opportunity to do because I knew him, had worked with him, had a real sense of his personality and personal strengths was to interpret him to others. Not as I wished him to be but as I actually knew him to be.

One thing that I want to mention, Ruth and I made a very modest financial contribution to his campaign. We were both faculty members at UAB with a flock of kids, four kids, here in this house. And when he got into the runoff I said to Ruth, well, I want to send another contribution to his campaign. And Ruth, far more politically astute than I, said maybe he would like something other than money. And I said well, like what. And she said well, maybe they'd like us to invest that money in wine and cheese and have a reception for him. And I said well, why don't you call. Tony Carter was the campaign manager. Said why don't you call Tony and I don't want to negotiate something that would involve your preparing something here at the house. Just see what they want. And Tony Carter said we'd love to have a reception.

And so we had what I think was the first reception for Dick Arrington in a predominately white neighborhood, or one of the very first. And I will never forget it because we had no idea how many people would come. There were, as I recall, a hundred and fifty people who came into this house. It was packed. And I will never forget Dick walked over to that corner because then he had the best view of people and he gave a very, very simple little talk and he said and I will promise you if you elect me mayor, I will never embarrass you. And there were people across the street. Ruth can do the imitation much better. Who left and said we never dreamed that we could think of voting for a Negro for mayor. But now that we have met him, and that was the invariable response when people had an opportunity to meet him. If he didn't win them over he at least gained their tolerance and willingness to work with him. So that was a very interesting period for him, for me, and for the city and a great privilege for me to be part of that, really extraordinary.

WA: So tell me a little bit about some of the work that you were doing, some of the policy issues, some of the work that you were doing with these businessmen and in other areas.

EL: Sure. The way Dick organized the staff I was the chief of staff and so part of what I did was work with the other staff members in their areas of responsibility. And then among the staff members he allocated the primary departments of city government and I tended to work particularly with the community development department, which included housing and community development, and also with the economic development activities. And much of what I worked on involved the continuation of policies that David Vann had begun during his four-year term as

mayor. And in many, many ways Dick Arrington and David Vann were two peas in a pod when it came to public policy and they were good friends. When Arrington defeated David Vann I know David was crushed, absolutely crushed. But I will never forget walking into the mayor's office when the very first time that Dick walked in as mayor. Completely blank office, everything had been removed and there was this huge desk with a glass top and under it was a photograph and the photograph was of David Vann and it said to Mayor Richard Arrington, Jr., from your good friend, David Vann.

And one of the first things that Arrington did was to hire David Vann as his advisor in annexation policy because no one knew annexation policy better than David Vann. He was utterly brilliant and knew the intricacies of annexation law. And he and Arrington teamed up to carry out the extraordinary annexation program, which is I think one of the main legacies of Arrington's administration. So I was marginally involved with that but that was mainly David Vann working as either a consultant to the city or then a member of the legal department.

But a great deal in the area of economic development did involve building relationships between the business community and individual businesses, particularly to encourage businesses to remain in the city, to expand. And a major, major part of the first couple of years was an attempt to implement a very, very bold, if somewhat misguided, master plan for downtown development that would have involved an entire city block being redeveloped as condominiums, office buildings, and hotel, the so-called Block Sixty project. And that Block Sixty project involved ongoing negotiations for the acquisition of property, for the development of a plan, and for the

involvement of the business community in that plan. And that was one of my assignments.

Another assignment was the city's industrial park program. Again, David Vann had the idea of purchasing large tracts of land and putting in very basic roads, sewers, water, and then selling it on very favorable terms to businesses that would come in and create jobs. That has been a very successful program of the city over the years and it was one that I worked on and then a whole variety of neighborhood development projects. The city has a full-blown and much recognized citizen participation program. I was the liaison from the mayor and the citizen participation program, which meant that I in addition to having the opportunity to deal with the sort of downtown business elite and business leaders through the community, I also had the opportunity to work with the neighborhood leaders throughout the city, which was a wonderful education for me. So those were the primary areas in terms of substantive policy and then the internal work of being the chief of staff and then simply accompanying the mayor or representing being his spokesmen. Mayors are invited to come to an unbelievable number of official occasions and often he, of course, would go but there were many more invitations than he could accept or frankly that he wanted to accept. And so often I would be the city's representative at something representing the mayor.

WA: So tell me a little bit more about the annexation policy that you said was one of Mayor Arrington's greatest legacies. Is that the annexation of the two-eighty corridor?

EL: Among other areas, annexation along two eighty, annexation out in the Oxmoor Valley. The Oxmoor Valley is a particularly interesting case to me because as you probably know SouthTrust Bank has now been sold to Wachovia and the first of the main banks in Birmingham is now sort of gone as a leading citizen. Two individuals, I had the opportunity to sit in on two meetings that the mayor had. Emil Hess was the head of Parisian. They had a downtown warehouse on Twenty-Sixth Street I think and they needed to build a new warehouse facility for Parisian, which was then family owned, and it needed to be a large one-floor warehouse to take advantage of the new means of storage and transportation within warehouses. And Emil Hess came in and spoke to the mayor and said Dick, there is no property in the city of Birmingham that is large enough for us to build a warehouse. My family owes its prosperity to the generous treatment of the citizens of Birmingham who have patronized our stores. And he said I very, very much want to do everything I can to remain in the city of Birmingham. Can we work together somehow? It seems to me within weeks, it may have been months or whatever, Joe Bruno of Bruno's came in with almost exactly the same script. They too needed a new warehouse. They had the same needs for a large parcel of land and couldn't find it. And Joe Bruno again said, and was very, very emotional, he said we began out on Eighth Avenue near Birmingham Southern. We bought this store and now our family has this empire and he said we owe it all to Birmingham and I want to pay Birmingham back in some fashion. Well, the upshot of those two visits was that Bruno's and Parisian's bought a large parcel of land in the Oxmoor Valley outside the city of Birmingham, annexed it into the city of Birmingham, and that became the corridor for annexing and bringing

into the city the much larger area that's now the Oxmoor Industrial Park. And to me those were very, very important conversations. They reflected for one thing the commitment of civic leaders to the well being of their community. Secondly, they reflected a willingness on the part of successful and effective business leaders to approach Arrington as a colleague in what would have to be a very complex and demanding development. And that they had the personal confidence to do that I think reflected his success in performing as mayor. And the third thing is I can't imagine Wachovia or whoever owns Bruno's now caring where they bought property. If they needed property I don't think they'd think it should be in the city of Birmingham and could be anywhere. But that was a very, very important part of the economic development project, the industrial park.

The other was the corridor down two-eighty [Highway 280]. And the mayor always made it very clear, unlike the view that prevailed in many areas of a power mad mayor who was just trying to reach his, wrap his tentacles around more and more of the community, he understood the economics of the city's budget and that economics is based on sales tax revenue and business license revenue. A disproportionately small proportion of the city's budget comes from property taxes. And so for this city to be economically vibrant the business community has to be performing well within the city limits. And Arrington always said that he was not primarily interested in annexing residences. He was interested in annexing commercially developable land that could become the source of business and tax revenues for the city. And that is exactly what has happened. The city is a financially healthy city with a reserve. The revenues are based primarily on business activity and

people to this day when they learn that the Summit shopping area is in Birmingham are surprised or the Colonnade. But what the Vann-Arrington strategy did was to find even narrow pieces of land that someone was willing to annex in the city that would then allow the city access to a much larger piece of land. And that land could then be developed for primarily commercial purposes and those funds would flow into the city. So the combination of annexation, land acquisition, and then negotiating development packages so that there would be incentives for developers to build in the city rather than the suburban areas, required a level of sophistication on the part of city government that it had not had before. And Arrington presided I think very effectively over a city government that became far, far more sophisticated in its ability to do complex economic development work.

WA: And what about education in this period, was school desegregation—

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EL: I think that by 1979 when Arrington became mayor it was clear the schools were going to be desegregated. What was not clear was could they be desegregated and be in any sense stable biracial institutions. And the answer to that question has been no. The public school system of the city of Birmingham is now something like ninety-eight percent black. There are virtually no white families who have options as to where they will live or where they will educate their kids, who would find attending a Birmingham high school an educational alternative that they would consider seriously. Ironically and Dick Arrington's very open about this and very clear on the interview that I did with him two summers ago. He regards his

failure to assert himself more in the area of public education to be one of the primary shortcomings of his tenure as mayor. And any number of people, including me, spoke to Dick over the years about what was perceived I think accurately as the dramatic downward spiral of the public education system in Birmingham. And he always took the position that the school board was an independent and autonomous public agency and that he should not be meddling in the business of the school board.

And I think in retrospect one of, I think that public education is the Achilles heel of Birmingham. I think city government is going through a rocky period since Arrington left office and even during the latter part of Dick's tenure as mayor there were some real problems, much of it I think going back to the unwarranted and disastrous FBI investigation. But we have many, many things to offer in almost all areas of life. What Birmingham itself does not have to offer is a public school system that can be a magnet to draw people. There are clearly, as you know, suburban systems and private alternatives. But no one I think could present the Birmingham public education system as an additional reason why one should consider coming to Birmingham. And that has been a great, great sadness for many people. But I don't think the question of school desegregation in 1979 was an issue. The issue was trying to retain whites in the system and the system did not do well at that.

WA: Was funding an issue?

EL: I don't really think so. I think the issues were the quality of the education that was being provided and I think the real unwillingness of many white families to have their kids go to school, if it was clear that the trend was towards the school becoming a predominately black school. I personally don't think that the actual

amount spent was the determining factor. I think it was how that money was spent more than how much. And I think it was the great difficulty, and Birmingham is not alone in this. I mean I don't think there are many urban systems that one can point to and say that they have made the transition from being a segregated system into being a stable biracial system. Maybe Charlotte but that was an extraordinary circumstance with the merger under court order of the city and the county. But I think that we really reflect much of the kind of national trends in public education. But Arrington didn't see that as a place where he should really become deeply involved in a policy leadership role.

WA: And so it was the school board that was guiding the big decisions on that?

EL: Yeah.

WA: Okay. What about the merger of city and county in terms of the Birmingham city schools? Was that something, I'm not sure if you know but was that something that was thought about in the early 1960s as a way to facilitate school desegregation?

EL: I believe there were efforts made to create merger. In fact, when Birmingham changed its form of government in 1963 if you go back and look at arguments that were made as to why that should happen, one of the arguments was that it would be an incentive for suburban systems to merge with the city. And I've done some writing about that and have some of the quotes. But there were really attempts made by the new government officials to go out and present to the suburban areas the proposition that under a new modern form of local government consolidation

might really be feasible. But I believe all of those discussions assumed that the public school systems would be exempted from merger. I do not think that that was ever pursued, that the merger of public school systems was pursued as a means of school desegregation. I don't recall, I may be wrong. I don't recall any leaders in the Birmingham school system advocating that, certainly none in the suburban systems and I don't believe there was any attempt legally. And I don't think the Supreme Court has been very supportive of requiring suburban and city systems to merge in order to achieve racial balance or desegregation. So I don't think that the consolidation of schools has ever been an option or an issue here.

WA: Okay.

EL: You may prove me wrong and if you do I hope you'll let me know because that would correct a misimpression that I have, but I think not.

WA: Okay, well, just looking at Louisville and places like Charlotte and Nashville that was part of their school desegregation if not court ordered then it facilitated. So that's something that we're looking at. So let me get back to the schools for just a second and maybe also you could reflect on this period of '79 when you were working in the government about the schools in Birmingham, it wasn't a much different trajectory from other urban school systems. Do you think that Birmingham in that period was progressing differently than other say Pittsburgh or Detroit or other sort of medium size cities? Was it on a different path or?

EL: In terms of school desegregation or just in terms of a community?

WA: In terms of the community.

EL: No, I don't think we were. I think, well, certainly we were distinctive in having such an economic dependence on one sector. Of course, Detroit was dependent I guess on the automobile industry. My own impression is that after Birmingham got over the kind of extraordinary period of adjustment during the civil rights era, that we sort of joined mainstream urban America in a relatively common pattern of development and confronting relatively similar issues. So I do not personally see Birmingham as being on a different trajectory but rather kind of getting in step and in tune with urban America generally in terms of what it confronted with housing, with job development, with public education, with maintaining a tax base, and so forth.

WA: Okay. Is there anything about that period when you were working with Arrington that I haven't asked you about?

EL: Well, the Civil Rights Institute was something. Two things that I would mention as what I think will be regarded as real hallmarks of his administration, one, the McWane Center downtown, the science center. I had the opportunity to go with Dick Arrington when we went to () [Loveman's?] Department Store to be told by the president, I guess, Jerry Squire, that () would close its downtown location, as had followed since behind leaving those two immense buildings vacant in downtown. One of the things that Arrington supported very strongly was an array of cultural institutions. Birmingham Public Library always fared well. Birmingham Museum of Art fared well. I think their leadership would to this day indicate that when many cities were retrenching or at best holding their own, Birmingham was quite generous in the way in which it used public funds to support arts, cultural activities, and so

forth. And one of the projects that the city was interested in was the Red Mountain Museum up on the crest of Red Mountain and across from it a private children's center called the Discovery Place. And the leaders of Discovery Place wanted to expand their operation and they needed more space. And what they came to the mayor hoping was that the city and the mayor would support their moving into an undeveloped area in the periphery of the city. And the mayor indicated that he was willing to support their growth program but he really wanted them to grow in downtown Birmingham in the ( ) building. And watching that project move, completely redefining what the leadership of Discovery Place had in mind, seeing that project grow and develop and come to fruition has I think been another example of a thoughtful, capable public leader being able to build real bridges with the private sector, link with it and come up with a development that the private sector alone could not have afforded, the public sector alone could not have afforded. But working together is really I think quite a remarkable project in downtown Birmingham. A person who if you cared to could reflect on that experience is Margaret Porter, who was for many years the head of the board for the McWane Discovery Place and then the McWane Center. And I think if it were interesting at all to get the perspective of someone who approached it from their point of view and her impressions of Arrington that would be a valuable interview.

But the other thing is the Civil Rights Institute. David Vann had made the comment at least in 1978 at Birmingham Southern Conference, at Birmingham Southern College as part of a conference that UAB's Center for Urban Studies organized, he made the comment that sidewalks from Sixteenth Street Baptist Church

to Birmingham City Hall are, roughly his words were, as sacred to this country as the battlefields of Gettysburg and Valley Forge. And I'm sure many people thought well, this was David Vann in another moment of utter hyperbole. But I think really David had a fundamental point that he was making when he said that. David initiated the idea of the "Civil Rights Museum." Arrington made a commitment to see that project carried through. It was almost unanimously opposed by the white business community and the white community and on two separate occasions I believe the Civil Rights Museum was included in a bond issue referendum and was defeated I know once and I think twice by the citizens. Nonetheless, Arrington was absolutely committed to seeing that this museum be created and devised a way of tapping into a pool of funds that required only the approval of the city council and not the approval of the voters. And those funds were committed to build what is now the Civil Rights Institute. But what Dick did was to acquaint a group of people. I know Odessa Woolfolk is one who would probably be the authority on the Civil Rights Institute and I imagine you'll interview her or maybe have.

WA: I did interview her.

EL: Okay, well then you know the chronology of the task forces.

WA: Pretty much, tell me.

EL: I had the advantage of seeing that process unfold first of the vantage point of the mayor's office because I was a staff member until '87 and I think that the institute began as a significant project of the mayor in about 1980 or '81. So for an extended period of time I was the staff member in the mayor's office who worked on the institute as a project when the mayor himself was not directly involved. And then

when I left city government I continued on as a member of the task force that was working with the developing program. And then when the institute was actually inaugurated in November of '92 I was a member of the founding board of directors and succeeded Odessa Woolfolk as president. I was the second president of the board of the Civil Rights Institute and my term as president and as a board member ended in 2000.

But what I think is, the thing that is to me most memorable is the way in which David Vann's civil rights museum was transformed through the planning process into an institute that you're familiar with, that has I think a quality of exhibit program that is internationally impressive, that has an ongoing set of educational activities, which is very good and developing in the right direction. And which I think very importantly from the beginning staked out connecting the civil rights experience in the U.S. with the international human rights movement. And so I think that again even though Dick didn't stay deeply involved with all of the details of its unfolding, he inherited an idea which would go nowhere without his nurturing it, which could have evolved into a museum that would probably be of considerable local interest but which he aspired to see achieve national and international quality and created and presided over a process that resulted pretty much I think in achieving that goal. I think it's an impressive accomplishment.

And one of the things that has been most heartening is the way in which over the years communities that were opposed to the institute now not only embrace it but utilize it extensively, and I think particularly the white business community. Because from the beginning Arrington said that this could not be a public project only. It like

the McWane Center needed to be a public private project. The private part was always in place with the McWane Center and so there was a kind of easy marriage of public sector commitment to a strong private sector commitment. There was not that core of support in the private sector and the institute began very much as a public initiative. No one in the white business community was willing to step forward and lead a fundraising effort in behalf of the institute until Dick talked to two people anyway. One, Ted Kennedy of BE&K, the much more important one, Herb Sclar who was the CEO of Volker Materials. And Odessa may have mentioned to you that Herb was open to the possibility that the civil rights program could be more than a project of a black mayor for his black constituents, that it could really be an identifying project of Birmingham's and that it merited his learning more about it at least. And Odessa particularly, but Odessa and I spent untold hours meeting with Herb and members of his staff going through all of the details of the institute, from mission statement to construction questions. And Herb finally stepped forward and said that he would assemble a team of six representatives from the business community and they would raise the private funds needed. I forget how many million it was. They exceeded their goal. Herb always said I won't be the chief fundraiser, I'll be one among equal. Well, he was one among equal nominally but he was the leader in terms of fundraising. And again another reflection I think of the quality of leadership that Arrington offered was the ability to nurture eventually a high degree of support from the white business community.

An organization that came into existence shortly after Dick was elected still meets in I think a less effective and much larger group and I believe it's always been

called Mayor's Business Leadership Group. But Henry Goodrich, a local business leader, and James White, III of Porter, White, and Company both had the idea that this unknown black mayor should have the opportunity to meet confidentially and frequently with representatives of the white business community simply to get to know one another and to be able to have candid conversations. And so I think it was in Arrington's first year that, and I think Henry Goodrich and Jim White put together a list of about twenty-five mostly men but not only men, from the primarily downtown business community but not only. But it was a good core of leadership from the private sector and that group began meeting on a monthly basis, always unpublicized. The names were never released. I think even to this day it is an ongoing forum that is little known but I think it was another very important way for Arrington to have ongoing contact with members of the white business community. Yeah, we need to go in about five minutes.

WA: Okay, okay.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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