

Interview

with

VASCO ALBERT SMITH

July 12, 2004

by Elizabeth Gritter

Transcribed by Laura Altizer

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Transcript and tape on deposit at
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Citation of this interview should be as follows:
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**For Related Documents, See the Interview
of Vasco A. Smith by Elizabeth Gritter on
October 9, 10, and 12, 2000. (Interview No. U-70)**

Transcript – Vasco A. Smith

Interviewee: Vasco A. Smith
Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter
Interview Date: July 12, 2004
Location: Memphis, TN, at his home
Length: 2 cassettes, approx. 2 hours and 30 minutes

ELIZABETH GRITTER: [This is] Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Dr. Vasco A. Smith on July 12th, 2004 in Memphis, Tennessee. Continue with what you were saying.

VS: The [Shelby County] Democratic Club just crossed all borders. I can remember the Ballard family in a very poor neighborhood. This man had taken up scrap lumber that you pick up out of the street and neighborhoods like that along by the railroad track. With that lumber he had built onto the side of his house, which was just itself looked like, it was just a little better than a shack. He built a little addition to it that would seat about twenty people, just with wooden benches, just maybe anything that people could sit on. That was his club house. That's what he built it for. The Democratic club to have its meetings there from its precinct and the NAACP. He had one of our better clubs. They met on a regular schedule. Then of course you had people from the colleges and so forth who were part of the Democratic club.

EG: You mean professors?

VS: Say it again.

EG: Professors. I'm sorry. College professors were members of the club.

VS: Yeah, uh huh. For example, Dr. A. A. Branch, chemistry professor. You make me remember things. Dr. A. A. Branch--he was a professor of chemistry at

LeMoyne College, LeMoyne-Owen now it is--was very active in both the Shelby County Democratic Club and another organization that you are going to run across if you haven't already, the [Bluff City and Shelby County] Council of Civic Clubs. Well, it was a very active organization. They were even active probably, historically probably just a wee bit before the Democratic club became very active. Now they might have been active but not as active as they became later on--the Democratic club. Yeah, but the Council of Civic Clubs was--. I'm getting way ahead of myself because you actually have--. I think you're dealing now with the political combination in the civil rights movement or civic club contributions and so forth. Are you?

EG: Yeah. The political [arm of the movement]—I'm looking at that for my thesis. Right, the political angle although I know that [the different prongs of the movement] really intersect.

VS: Yeah, the political angle. Yes, that's good. Yeah. They were pretty much one and the same. Anyway, I forget now. Russell Sugarmon could tell you the exact number of clubs. I would say there were thirty-five or forty—.

EG: When?

VS: Of these precinct clubs, starting with the middle and late '50s and continuing on up.

EG: When would you say that it really become active and strong?

VS: Again, you're going to have to talk to Russell about that. I'm the world's worst on dates. I can't remember what happened yesterday.

EG: You were president at one time?

VS: I was vice president. I was president at one time. I didn't keep it very long. I tried not to be president of most things because being a dentist, number one, having to support Maxine who was doing all this other and having to keep my office going. I tried to keep from being president, but I kept it for a few years but I don't remember when those years were. Most of the guys who would be president were running for office by that time. That was probably the most active or at least it was part of a very active period of the club. I think I mentioned I was talking to another group about this the other day. The precinct clubs would come together for a monthly meeting of the general organization. At that organization, there was a roll call of a club. Precinct 31-4.¹ There would be representatives there from practically each of these clubs in the monthly meeting. Of course, they would have their own meetings on the precinct level too every month. People were very much interested in this thing. The amazing part is that blacks had never been apart from voting in Memphis. Matter of fact, the Republican Party did everything it could because they were Republicans at one time, the black community was. The Republican Party nationally was in power during a period of our history, and blacks were delegates to the conventions from Memphis—Lieutenant George Lee. He was a lieutenant in World War I incidentally. I can remember him being a delegate [and also] the Church family, Bob Church family, well known name. But the real switch came I think, and I'm not sure about this, Russell [Sugarmon] could tell you about it. It looks to me like it was in the election when [Wendell] Wilkie ran. Something happened and some local blacks who had been Republicans switched over to being Democrats. That displeased the local power structure downtown, and they, up until that time, a black who

¹ Thirty-one refers to the ward and four refers to the precinct within the ward.

wanted a job in the post office could just go see Lieutenant Lee. Whatever. But anyway, we're talking about so many different things at one time.

Back to the way the Democrat club operated. An election comes up and the meetings are held where they endorse candidates. Of course, the local candidates were selected by this group to run, and they endorsed the state and national candidates. So you've done all your work on knocking on doors and getting out your literature and so forth, yard signs. I mean just like big time. Even on black radio, the time was donated really by black radio.

EG: WDIA.

VS: WDIA, yeah. That's right. You didn't make it exactly political because you didn't want to run them out of business. There are certain FEPC—not FEPC. What am I trying to say?

EG: FCC

VS: Yeah, FCC rules about giving time but they can buy it. We didn't have money to buy it. Like on talk shows, you just have the people who will call in be the people who are talking for you so you've got thirty minutes of free time. [laughter]

EG: That was something that you would do?

VS: Oh yeah. Everything was used.

EG: Well, I saw when I looked through NAACP papers about how you made sure the equal time provision was enforced.

VS: How about that. Anyway. Okay, Election Day comes. Assignments had been made for the poll workers. This all was volunteer. I mean, none was paid. We screwed up politics in Memphis when they started paying people to work in politics.

EG: When did they?

VS: I don't know when they did the doggoned thing. Again, Russell could tell you all about that. But during the time we are talking about right now, [it] was all volunteer. Absolutely nobody was paid anything. Poll workers. The beautiful thing though was at every precinct just outside the boundaries where you could do your--. You had to be so many feet from polling place before you could do your--.

EG: Giving out campaign literature?

VS: Yes, and all that sort of stuff. Okay. Well, beyond that line also there would be a table, a card table, any old thing you could use, with a card file on it of all of the Democrats who were registered to vote in that precinct. As the voters came out of the polling place after having cast their votes, they went to [the] table and their card and the file was pulled out and put over yonder as having voted. Then about two or two-thirty in afternoon, the volunteers who had another job began to come in. They would look over here to see who had not voted because your other card's over there. They would take cards from here to go and see why they hadn't been there to vote.

EG: So they would track them down and—. [laughter]

VS: But they were usually people who were going to come anyhow but you just remind them generally, time to go vote. And it worked. It worked. As I said, people just sat there and just didn't believe that volunteers had set this thing up and were doing the work on it. At that time, there was a man named Frank Kilpatrick whose thing really--. In the whole civil rights scheme, he enjoyed working in politics more than anything else. Kilpatrick was not a highly educated person. His enthusiasm for his work was, actually I learned as much from Kilpatrick--. See I came here, me and Maxine got here in 1955

from the Air Force. They were right in middle of this whole business of voter registration campaigns. They were all starting up full steam.

EG: Right when you came back.

VS: Just when we came back, a little while later on, but not just then. But it was beginning then. Yes, it was beginning. Sure. Yeah.

EG: And who was doing this--the voter registration?

VS: This was really the Democratic club but I just happened to mention Frank Kilpatrick as one of the members who loved that sort of work. We would ride together, sometimes making three and four different precinct club meetings where we would make talks to get the people to get enthused into the whole business of voter registration, voter education, and voter participation. Just as I rolled those off my tongue and I haven't even thought of it in the last fifty years. But that was it: registration, education, and participation. We would ride together night after night making--. This wasn't just us. This was being done all over town. When I refer to we would do this, I'm talking about the generic "we", the members of club and the leaders themselves. When election time came, we already had audiences set up for candidates to come and make their appeals because the people had been working in ward and precincts all the time. They just changed it from go out and register now to go out and vote.

EG: So like in 1959 a reason that there were so many people who were able to mobilize the electorate to come out for the Volunteer Ticket was because of all this work that had been done in the 1950s.

VS: That's exactly right.

EG: Yes, the voter registration and—.

VS: All of this now, remember, is a matter of people changing hats.

EG: Yeah. Because it started out with like Lieutenant Lee and was involved—.

VS: Well, I mean it in another way though.

EG: Okay.

VS: Changing hats from—.

EG: Oh from NAACP.

VS: Yeah from NAACP. [Laughs.] You got it.

EG: Because I remember that () you're working nonpartisan, NAACP () [laughing talking simultaneously].

VS: You didn't dare mention NAACP in those meetings because that would be all the people wanted really, newspapers, to show [the] NAACP was more political.

EG: Then that's what I saw because I looked at press coverage in '59 and that there were charges made that this was NAACP that was doing this. All the leaders repeatedly said, it's not. It's not.

VS: No, it's not.

EG: It's the same people.

VS: And to a great extent it involved, not as much, but to a great extent it involved also the Council of Civic Clubs in that same group.

EG: Were civic clubs engaged in the '50s in voter registration?

VS: Let's say the civic clubs were not, but members from the civic clubs involved themselves in all these things. Again, changing hats. Yeah. But no, not as vigorously, they were because you had in civic clubs you had both Republicans and Democrats. For example, a fellow who lived across the street, Bill Weathers, was a well-

known Republican, but Bill Weathers was also one of our best life membership writers of the NAACP and he was also a vigorous member of the Council of Civic Clubs. So you really couldn't, that was--. Within the Council of Civic Clubs you had both Republicans and Democrats. But there were those who worked again with the other groups.

EG: How influential was the Lincoln League in the '50s and '60s? How was it different?

VS: Well, again, Bill Weathers was a member of the Lincoln League. At that time, now I can't tell you about--. See, I was away from Memphis. We were away from Memphis for a long time. When I got back here, the Lincoln League was pretty weak. Its influence, I think, had been waning for some time, but there were those who were still very, very proud to wave the banner of the Lincoln League too.

EG: Then the Democratic Club I saw was really re-structured after '59 and it seems like that was what made it a more powerful political force. Because Russell Sugarmon was telling me that in the '50s it was engaged in voter registration and it wasn't as organized as it was later.

VS: Yeah. Right. [telephone ringing] As I say [it] is really very instructive to listen to Russell. [tape turned off and on again] Even now, the club's just about gone. Nobody is using that sort of thing now anymore. You've got two mayors, two out of two and all that sort of stuff. They've got there own organizations or whatever. There's not much need for this other thing even though you do need voter registration, but nobody is going to do it now. That group back there just had a sort of religious zeal for doing these things. Now they're paying poll workers and everybody else to do that sort of stuff, but it's not done as thoroughly as it used to be.

EG: What were you hoping to achieve through political action in the short term and the long term in '50s and the '60s.

VS: Everything that we did and I'm talking about the leadership now of the Democratic club, the NAACP in particular, the other Council of Civic Clubs, it was all basically civil rights. That's what it was. See now we think we're so free that we don't have to bother about this stuff. [tape turned off and on again] I forgot where we were.

EG: I was asking you what the goals were of political action in the short term and you said for everything it was civil rights.

VS: You see, it was. This was where your troopers came from. The troops came from the neighborhoods. The more neighborhood organizations you had, the more troops you got. We re-took, which you've probably seen. When the movement began, it included all of Main Street with the picketers. Had to have a lot of folks.

EG: Yeah. Yeah. It's so striking to me the amount of unity and organization that went into all of this.

VS: That's right.

EG: It's just incredible.

VS: That's the key right there.

EG: You told me too when we talked a few years ago about how sales went down on Main Street 41 percent.

VS: Forty-one percent.

EG: How were you able to determine that?

VS: The stores themselves have some type of organization that collects these figures, like Federated stores. That's Goldsmith's for example. They know what the sales are in every doggoned store they've got across the United States.

EG: Are these the Dunn and Bradstreet figures?

VS: I'm not sure about Dunn and Bradstreet. I don't know. But it sounds like it might be. I don't know. But the figures that we had at that time were actually published in the papers. Just in stories, the reporter would write that they reached their peak—they're referring to the NAACP—when sales on Main Street had dropped 41 percent for the year.

EG: So that's something the *Commercial Appeal* and the *Press-Scimitar*.

VS: *Press-Scimitar*, maybe. The *Commercial Appeal* wouldn't do it. They couldn't survive. As a matter of fact, Elizabeth, Gerber's, Bry's, Lowenstein's, and Goldsmith's, those four, were large, huge department stores. Bry's was the first to close down midway during the movement, not until it was over. Bry's closed down and forever stayed closed down. They never reopened. Gerber's closed down. It never reopened. Lowenstein's closed down. They tried to re-open and redecorate and so forth but it didn't work. They closed down. Goldsmith's tried to re-open and redecorate. They had to go out of business. Honey, all of them are gone. They didn't last. Any time. Any time. It hurt but it hurt because they were hardheaded. It didn't need to, it didn't have to go on that long. How long did it go on?

EG: Eighteen months. If they had just succumbed to demands right away.

VS: But they were too stubborn to do it.

EG: Because what were you asking for, employment?

VS: Generally speaking, desegregation of all facilities. See there were signs, black and white in front of the restrooms, the water fountains, you name it. Most humiliating thing you can ever think of. So as far as eating was concerned, that's out of the picture entirely. Some stores, not department stores, some of the ten cents stores, like Woolworths and so forth, had counters, but there would be just a little corner on this counter kind of here's the front of the counter and around here the side of the counter next to the wall--they let blacks eat there. Humiliating really. You'd rather go hungry than do it. There were many, many other stores but you just mention the fact that if you did that to the big stores, imagine what it did to the small ones. They just evaporated.

EG: That must've been really great to see. Very satisfying. How did the political electoral activity intersect with the direct action activity? Do you think protest activity was more successful than the political activity? Do you think protest was necessary to achieve certain goals that couldn't be worked through political means?

VS: Even then, there were some things that could be aided greatly by the political activity--things such as publicly owned facilities, parks, playgrounds, and so forth. However, they had to be done jointly. They were not done just only politically. But this was--. We didn't go after those first. They came a little bit--. Not too long after civil rights, but we didn't start out for that sort of thing. For example, this was a fairground. Fairground came just after the stores and things started doing okay. The zoo. Even with those things and you've got to see this before you leave. Write down this. The Spanish American--oh you've got this going. The Spanish-American War Veterans Park.

EG: I remember you telling me about this.

VS: Down on Parkway, the corner of Parkway and Central. You can't identify it as a park. Nobody [can], black or white. "We are announcing that the of the Spanish American War Veterans Park is now open [to people of both races]." Nobody. And just as bad, this was at the corner of—. [Laughter.]

EG: So it was the park commission that did this?

VS: This was and still is--. I think you still can see where it was. I don't believe buildings are there now. There was at this corner Calhoun, C-A-L-H-O-U-N, I think, at the corner of Calhoun and Second Street. It's a block from the civil rights museum. There is at this corner on one side of the corner there was a piece of vacant ground, just a little larger than this room. And on the other side there was a corner and this was the--. Basically, the title meant this: The Army park was on that side and the Navy park was on that side and each one of them had a seat in them about the size of that couch. That was it. So these were the parks that were desegregated at first. That's right.

EG: I will have to check out these parks.

VS: Now that was done, that was negotiated that we were going to do the parks and playgrounds. But we thought that anybody would have better sense. [Laughter.] Nobody even mentioned we are going to start out gradually. How foolish can you be?

EG: So this is negotiated with the NAACP leaders and the black political leaders with the commissioners.

VS: Yeah, the political, right.

EG: Or the park commissioner and the city commission too?

VS: At that time I'm reasonably certain that your park commissioners and most of the stuff like that had not been elected. I'm not sure. Hadn't been selected. I don't

know. Again I can't keep up with those dates. But we'd get in our cars and we read in the paper, we'd run down to see the Army and Navy parks. [laughter] Had to get a map to find it. Spanish American--.

EG: Amusing stories. [laughter]

VS: Isn't it?

EG: Well, I saw that it took a Supreme Court decision to rule that the parks--. Gradual desegregation of parks went all the way to the Supreme Court.

VS: That's right. That's true. That points out the next thing that, besides the political side, you also had here something that I think most cities didn't have. We had very intelligent black lawyers who were not asking for a penny. That was, that's very important.

EG: People like Russell Sugarmon and H. T. Lockard and A. W. Willis [Jr.].

VS: Right.

EG: Who else would you say? Well, Jesse Turner wasn't a lawyer there.

VS: Jesse Turner. I'm trying to think now who I want to classify. Well, every black lawyer in Memphis on the night of the day when the first sit-inners were arrested--I think it was ten lawyers, nine or ten, who marched into the church where we were having the mass meeting. It was the CME church at Lauderdale and Wellington, and the name of it, yeah, Lauderdale and Wellington. I can't think of it. This big church was crammed with people, and boy, it was hot. There were speeches and songs and all, prayers, and the sit-inners who had just been getting out of jail by our lawyers, they marched down the aisle. The place just went wild. Behind them came the lawyers one by one.

EG: Really?

VS: Yes. It was [A. A.] Latting, Lockard, Sugarmon, Willis. I'd really have to get a book and look them up.

EG: Benjamin Hooks.

VS: We'll do that. I'm just trying to remember if Hooks was here at that time. He probably was. Yeah, Ben was here. Sure.

EG: B. F. Jones?

VS: Ben, Ben died young and again I can't remember whether he was here at that time or not. Probably so but I'm not sure. Ben probably was. [Odell] Horton was there also. Latting is a name that you never heard before and probably won't yet again. Latting was here under difficult times. At one time, he was the only black lawyer leading up to this. He was the only black lawyer. Again turn it off, will you. [tape turned off and on again.] Anyway, there was a, again as you said, [it was] really almost a matter of even here changing hats. One of the times I was arrested, I was arrested at a little before twelve on Main Street in front of the Black and White Store. I'm not going to go through all of the dramatics about it but there was a white guy. It was hot weather. Let's see. This is the corner of—.

EG: Is this where the guy had a knife. Yeah.

VS: The guy had the knife. Now I guess they hauled us away about noon or a little before noon and had the hearing where they dock you. I could hear one say to the other, "Lock them both up and we'll have them on the penal farm before two o'clock." I said, "Wait a minute. What you mean? Give me that telephone." "What you mean?" I said, "Give me the phone. Everybody is entitled to a phone call." Then I said, "While I'm making this call be right and give me a seat for a hundred dollars. [laughing]"

Anyway, I was put on the one o'clock docket as I say. One o'clock, yeah. One o'clock, two o'clock, probably was the two o'clock docket. I don't know. But anyway, whatever it was. I called Maxine at her office. I went home and changed clothes so I was going to be looking good. Maxine had five lawyers. Every time I was arrested they always had four or five lawyers because they knew that I had done something to somebody. I had made somebody mad. Every cop within hearing was mad because I made them all look bad. I said, "Now take me back to where you picked me up in the squad car," and that's what they're supposed to do. But just the way I said it. [laughter]

EG: Authoritatively.

VS: Yeah, boy. So yeah, how she got those guys-- Ben Hooks was one of them then.

EG: Was he.

VS: I think Hooks, Willis, Sugarmon, Lockard--that's four. I don't remember who the fifth one was, but there were five lawyers. These guys, they were all busy men. But they all rushed down there. [Laughter.] They didn't know what was liable to happen. Oh Lord. But yeah, the lawyers played a very important role. As time passed, it became more and more political. The other things you didn't need as time passed. Until finally, it was mostly political.

EG: Yeah, because I saw most of them ended up winning public office.

VS: Yeah sure. Right. Uh huh. That's right.

EG: Yeah because the protests, well the desegregation had taken place and the lawsuits and so forth. So the next step was to—

VS: Yeah, they really started going together simultaneously and then finally one section would wane and the other would go forward.

EG: Yeah, what do you remember about the 1959 election with the Volunteer Ticket.

VS: Yeah, that was the most unusual thing that ever happened in the United States. Maxine had a heart attack on the day that she announced for the school board and during her campaign. See, Maxine was taken to the hospital and she was given strict orders to stay in bed. People came together and organized. They rented a campaign headquarters up here on Airways Boulevard next to the Handy Theater. They staffed it. They had furniture in it. They got together the literature, the handbills, everything else. Maxine made one appearance. I have the picture somewhere here. They had gotten a truck, a large long truck, parked it on a vacant lot and they used the truck bed for a platform for the speakers. They decorated it. And she was so happy to get out of the house. There was just a crowd that you could never imagine. Her opposition was a woman who--. I can't remember her name right now. She was with one of these fringe groups. Now, I can't explain to you fringe groups. But the best I can say is that they are groups who would like to have the same things that you want to happen but they don't want to work with you. They want to have their own groups so they can get credit for doing it.

EG: Oh like the shoot offs from the Shelby County Democratic Club.

VS: Like what now?

EG: You were saying with the Shelby County—.

VS: No, no. We haven't gotten to that year. No, these are people who are just, who are just—.

EG: Because is it a white candidate who is running?

VS: No, these are black candidates. These are groups where they just, let's—. The best example that I can give to you right now is we get every week a rather large envelope with primarily cuttings from a Muslim newspaper that was published in the '40s and '50s by Elijah Mohammed. This guy whoever he is, he puts his address and name and so forth on it. But he sends us one of these every week. Now where he's getting his money--. He must have a heck of a doggoned postage bill and printing bill and so forth. But this is his place in the sun where he is. Now he ain't had much sun. But those people like to feel like they're going to find themselves a place in the sun. However this woman was a little bit more than that. She had somewhat of an organization. Or claimed—.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

VS: She was a well known musician and barber [and church work?] or whatever. Nothing against Maxine. She just wanted to be somebody up there too. Her headquarters were also on Park Avenue less than a half block away from where Maxine was. Maxine's headquarters was located. I have never seen a campaign run so smoothly. They had full-time staff there doing all the things that you do in a campaign. Maxine had nothing. Maxine was here. She was chomping at the bit. She wanted to go so badly and that's why we just said we were going to let her go this one night. They really fixed things up for her that night. So she could go and be a part of it. Oh it was just a

landslide. Ralph Jackson, whose name you ought to know of from the sanitation workers and so forth, he was a minister. I can remember as the polls are closing and the votes were beginning to come in you could just see it was going to be a landslide and Ralph, he made up some song. Anyway, whatever it was a song that everybody knew but he put his own words to it and they said that in essence let's go down and pee on her campaign headquarters. [laughter] Down the street. We had this group from our—[laughing]—here's this group from Maxine's going down the street singing. It was funny. But that really showed just how much people loved Maxine. I couldn't imagine it myself. We still have, incidentally we do, I've got some chairs. () Hold on a minute. [tape turned off and on again] Chomping at the bit wanting to go.

EG: These are same people who had been involved in political activity all along?

VS: Same thing.

EG: Oh okay.

VS: Same ones.

EG: Was she the first black woman elected to public office in Memphis?

VS: As far as I know. I'm trying to think. As far as I know, yes. I'm trying to think. I'm almost certain she was.

EG: And I saw when I was looking at the press coverage of '59 that she had thought about running for school board even back then.

VS: Yeah.

EG: That's something I'll ask her about when I talk with her, which didn't surprise me.

VS: She is quite a gal. Today, one of the calls that came in for her was from the chancellor of the state board of regents. That board and this ain't () want to use him in this story but it emphasizes just how much influence. That board. She is on the board of regents. They govern all schools within the state. You can use she's on the board. It's okay if you want to. All schools, public schools, colleges within the state except three or four schools that are in the University of Tennessee system. All the rest of them, I've forgotten how many it is from Johnson City to the technical schools here and so forth. This guy was wanting me to give word to her that he wants to discuss with her the appointment of the new president there. Well, people have learned that there are certain positions and places that you're going to have a black face and it's just as well to go ahead and get together on the front end so on the back end you've got to do it anyhow. How she does it, I don't know. I really don't.

EG: Yeah. That's just incredible—all she's done.

VS: Now, on same sheet where I have that call, there's a call from a woman from the Woman's Foundation. The Women's Foundation is basically a group of wealthy white women.

EG: Of Memphis.

VS: Of Memphis. Maxine is in that. She wants a statement from Maxine on something they're doing. I don't know what it is. She's made herself not only endeared to people but respected, very highly respected. How she does it is just amazing. She can disagree with me, and we do disagree vigorously at times, but it turns out that she was right. She has an amazing ability to analyze situations.

EG: One of the people I interviewed was John T. Fisher.

VS: Fisher is crazy about her.

EG: Yeah, he talked about how she got him to make it so that the building he built was not segregated and how she was the one who explained it to him and it made sense.

VS: Yes.

EG: Yeah, he talked about that as one of his key moments.

VS: [Restricted information on the tape]. At the point when Martin Luther King was killed, this group of distinguished whites in Memphis came together to do something publicly to show that the better thinking whites in the community—this ain't nothing but national publicity and stuff. Chamber of Commerce type stuff.

EG: Memphis Cares you're talking about.

VS: Yeah. Memphis Cares. I don't know why Maxine and them always made me go to things like that and they knew I don't have any business there. That's the planning group, not the celebration. [Laughs.]

EG: Oh so you were at the planning group.

VS: So finally I've got to go I said but I'm going to tell you, they probably are going to make me do something that I ought not to do. Sure enough—if you could've seen. Ben Hooks was there too. It takes Ben to tell you. He was there with the group. He was part of the Memphis Cares group. I guess they had just bulldozed him and took him there. I was there as one of the representatives of the black community in on the planning. I mean this was going to be oh boy. The speeches and everything about how much Memphis Cares and the way, about halfway through it making the plans and trying to get the date. I said, "Look y'all. Let me tell you something. This ain't nothing but a

bunch of shit if you'll excuse the expression." I said, "None of you have I ever seen anywhere doing anything. What do you care about?" I walked out of there and told them all to go to hell. Now I know, [laughing], I know that that's awful but you can't stand that.

EG: It was a tragedy to make something like that.

VS: It is. It is. Forty-eight hours before that King was nothing but a rat to them. [One of the planners of Memphis Cares, David Smith] saw me about sometimes within the past year.² It was the first time we had seen each other since those days. [David] went abroad working with some church group or whatever. But he and his wife have been very nice people for a long time. [He] saw me and he went over there and he grabbed me and hugged me. Maxine looked at us right strangely. [laughing] When we got home, she said, "What in the world was all that hugging and going on?" I couldn't get away from him. That was [David] way of telling me, boy I hated your guts then but I love you now. Basically that's what it meant. But he, Lord, they thought I was the worst man on earth. I can understand that. I think that there are a few in, I guess there were 100 or 150 there. I think there are a few of them who are in that group now who haven't changed but most of them have though.

EG: It's interesting because of course [one of my interview subjects] told me the story about Memphis Cares [being] this wonderful event and then when I talked to Mrs. Helen Wax, Rabbi Wax's widow, she said basically what you said. It was just about business and looking good.

VS: Oh it was.

² Dr. Smith did not want this person identified in the transcript and researchers may not use this person's name from the tape recording. As a result, I use the pseudonym David Smith in the transcript.

EG: Then of course to hear your perspective is interesting.

VS: That's all it was. I just could not stand it any longer. Now, of course, Maxine would've lectured them and would've put them on the right track. Look, it's four-thirty and I've got something coming up.

EG: Oh okay. I have a few questions about 1959 and when the volunteer ticket ran and Russell Sugarmon and Ben Hooks and so forth and what you remember about that.

VS: I can't remember as much about that as you would want me [to].

EG: I saw you were one of the speakers of the Freedom Rally when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

VS: Yeah.

EG: Yeah. And that there was a lot of white mobilization against the black candidates and it was an unprecedented black electoral effort.

VS: Well, that's true. But I just, I just can't focus in on it. It just doesn't--. And I was very much part of it. Ask me something else.

EG: Sure. Sure.

VS: It isn't going to come.

EG: Well, in '50s were you involved with voter registration efforts—.

VS: Everything.

EG: And education.

VS: Everything. [laughing]

EG: Everything.

VS: Uh huh. Everything. But that, I know that that was a landmark thing, but I can't come up with it. There's like-- I have done on so many other things. But some of it will come back and some of it won't. I'm trying to figure, there was one thing that was-- Russell was running against—he is a lawyer, was a lawyer. He's dead now.

EG: William Farris.

VS: Farris, Bill Farris and was doing pretty good it seems until-- I just don't know. Something happened and it was connected with the newspapers. I don't know exactly what it was. I can't bring it back.

EG: That's alright. You were saying with [the] Shelby County Democratic Club there were people with all different classes with it. How did that go? Was that a source of conflict and how were you able to overcome those class differences?

VS: They just weren't there. Maceo Walker, president of Universal Life Insurance Company, president of Tri-State Bank, [was] right there in middle of it. His wife participated with me on picket lines. Some things now that you could depend on some people to do better than other people. I think I exaggerated it a little bit by saying, and I do believe this, that it's unfair to ask other people to do something you're not doing yourself. So if I asked over people to get into the street, I felt I had get out in street. But then others were making contributions that let's say I was unable to make. But no, there were not, you didn't find the class groups. When you got into this, the social part of it was just a little bit separate from that.

EG: So people were congregated by class in terms of socializing but not in terms of protest activity or civil rights.

VS: I would say that really that's where economics and education came to play. For example, Maxine had--and this has nothing to do with what we're talking about--but an example of what I mean by it. To get a white person to be a co-chairman of our annual Freedom Fund dinner--. We had been having dinners in Memphis. We had been having dinners in Memphis. I think the last one on this particular level was for Jesse Turner, and the tickets were fifteen dollars a piece.

EG: Fifteen or fifty.

VS: Fifteen. To go from fifteen to eighty-five means that you got to make contacts, and we had Fred Smith and everybody else that you could think of here at the house for dinner. Well now, you're going to meet some differences there.

EG: When was this?

VS: I don't know.

EG: Okay.

VS: The tickets now are unbelievable. Again, Maxine can do things that other people can't do. I think at that very first one, the tickets were seventy-five or eighty-five dollars. But the tables that were purchased by the businesspeople were, I think she started out \$1000 or whatever and now it's some thousands per table. There are some contributions some people can make where others can't, and that's where the social thing--.

EG: That's where it really comes in.

VS: Yeah. Now you'd be surprised to know, that same family--what did I call him, his name that got the little the shed?

EG: Oh the Ballard.

VS: It's B something. What—.

EG: You said Ballard.

VS: Ballard, B-A-L-L-A-R-D, yeah, the Ballards. Do you know that his wife who worked as a maid and he did common labor, they also have \$500 life memberships in the NAACP. That's true.

EG: Wow.

VS: Can you imagine that?

EG: That's like what Mrs. Smith told me a few years earlier that people gave like the widow's mite.

VS: That's right, they did.

EG: What about when you, do you have to leave at five did you say?

VS: I should've been gone but don't worry.

EG: Okay.

VS: That's okay.

EG: Because ().

VS: No, come on because I've got something to ask you anyway.

EG: Okay. When you were—[static]. What did you do in terms of [the] Democratic club [in regard to] keeping candidates accountable who you helped endorse, both black and white, and when were you in public office did you feel you were able to make as much a difference for civil rights as you had hoped?

VS: Well, I'll answer both questions at the same time. No, we didn't have as much influence on candidates black or white. If the black candidates were, if a black elected official was of the right mind, he was going to do the right thing anyhow. If he

wasn't, he was going to be a Tom. [laughing] Whatever. But I think I probably accomplished more than I ever thought I would.

EG: When you were a county commissioner.

VS: Yeah, uh huh.

EG: As gruff as I can be at times, I created something down there that we had never had in the county government. I created a very influential black and white coalition. Now that sounds strange, doesn't it? I did. These guys, [John Doe] for example--Lord, do you know in just, () any--[Mark White]. It might not be best to use these names also.³ Sometimes politicians would rather be unnamed.

EG: Do you want me to put a note then on the tape not to quote with these people's names.

VS: Yeah, if you'll do that in this particular instance or in any that you can think of. I think it would be better that the names wouldn't be used. Even [David Smith] wouldn't just love being named for being one of the criminals that was part of the coalition.

EG: I'll make a note of that. So with [John Doe] and [Mark White] and [David Smith] and those.

VS: I'd say basically the obviously white ones I would not name them.

EG: That you mentioned, don't name.

VS: I can think of, yeah there was [John Doe], [Mark White], and maybe two of the other whites. Now there were only, I think there were eleven people on the county commission. I'm not sure. Not more than, I think there were eleven. Well, there were I

³ Per Dr. Smith's request, I use the pseudonyms "John Doe" and "Mark White" in the transcript. Researchers may not use the real names of these politicians from the tape recording.

think at any given time for most of the period I was there, the numbers grew quickly to maybe at least four blacks. So with a, it was five. It grew to five. There were, with even four votes—it makes no difference—. With four votes black, three votes white, you got a good coalition there. With that coalition, probably the most outstanding one as far as the number of people that it serves, I was able to get a sixty-three million dollar hospital built over the opposition of most white people in the city of Memphis because they looked on it, they couldn't understand when I said that we can make this finest hospital of its kind in the United States. They just didn't believe it. They didn't intend to vote for it, the majority didn't. The majority whites didn't want to see it. But I convinced [Mark White]. [Mark] helped me convince [John Doe]. And we ended up with the right number of votes. [Mark] was chairman and [Mark] cast the deciding vote and when he did, boy, people couldn't believe it. His daughter, his twin daughters had their babies born at the MED.

EG: What was the name of that hospital?

VS: The, what does MED stand for, the Memphis—. I don't know. Find out from somebody what the MED means. But it's the formerly old city hospital, but it has the only accredited trauma center within 500 miles or so. If you're in an accident—. This was my slogan. If you're in an accident and you're seriously hurt, just find enough breath to lean up there and touch the driver on his shoulder and say [whispers], "Take me to the MED." I had people saying that around town. Not only trauma center, we got a newborn center. Cybill Shepherd came from California to have her baby at the MED because it is only facility of its kind in this entire area, in many states, where if a woman is likely to have trouble with this birth she can be taken care of ahead of time. Our

newborn center is one of best in country. We have a burn center. Now if you get badly burned, you don't have to go to Houston, Texas which is the closest burn center there is to Memphis.

EG: Why did white people oppose the hospital?

VS: They figured it was for poor niggers.

EG: Because was it located in a section of town for blacks?

VS: No. It's right across the street from where the old Baptist Hospital used to be.

EG: So why did they think it would be for poor blacks when--?

VS: Downtown.

EG: Because you proposed it or—.

VS: Historically. No. Historically, it was supported by tax money, and that's where most poor people went, and they still thought of it as being the charity hospital. I thought that that was probably the most outstanding thing that I was able to get done. I think next would come. I found out there was some money, a few million dollars around not that was not being used and was available if we could come up with a good enough plan. So I wish I could remember [a revelation?] But I'd already laid the groundwork for this thing that we would create a blue ribbon committee, biracial, to come up with--what was my thing?-- creative and some other kind of, oh I almost had it. Anyway it was suggestions to use so many thousands of dollars for programs of that nature, creative, unique, and yet useful to the community. Okay. You're using one of facilities, LINC, the library information. What does that stand for?

EG: Oh, I've seen that at the library.

VS: You're using it.

EG: I'm sure I have.

VS: That's where you just came from. LINC, ask somebody out there what LINC stands for. LINC was created out of this. Library Information something, anyway. Also, they created legal services for the poor and the third was Meals on Wheels for the shut-ins.

EG: My dad does that. Meals on Wheels.

VS: How about that. Yeah. [laughing] Nobody, again--. People were thinking in terms of legal services for poor and Meals on Wheels--that's crazy. We ain't going to--. But we got that pushed through.

EG: And did you do that through this black and white coalition that you developed?

VS: Say again.

EG: Were you able--. My accent. Were you able to push it through via the black and white coalition that you--.

VS: The way I was able to do it basically was first to get this committee of influential white and black women to give suggestions on how it should be used.

EG: How the money would be used.

VS: Uh huh.

EG: Did this committee have a name--of black and white women?

VS: Yes. I'll remember, no. It did have some kind of name but I don't remember what it was. I'm not even sure it had a name.

EG: And it put pressure on the other members of the county commission?

VS: Just their presence.

EG: At like meetings and stuff.

VS: Just their presence on the committee was enough to give it some impetus. Then, of course, LINC appealed a little bit to their common sense.

EG: More broadly?

VS: Yes. I got a list around here somewhere of the things that I was able to do. It was done primarily by creating this coalition. I never dreamed when I was elected to the county--. Since we're talking about firsts, this was the first time that a commissioner was elected from a truly at large position--that's the entire county.

EG: First time that a black was elected at large?

VS: Yes.

EG: Okay.

VS: The position was only created--. It had not been--. The at large positions before was a name that they used, but the county was divided by Poplar Street. Instead of being elected by a county, those two people who then were elected at large were actually elected from that half. One from that half of the county and this other one from this half of the county. They called them at large because [they were] not really from the usual district. Their district was half of the county. But mine was a truly at large position, and that was the first time that had been done. It's odd, again, with the attitude that I sometimes had that--. You make me think of things that don't ordinarily—. Well, they just don't stay in my mind because I don't think of them as being accomplishments and that kind of thing. My headquarters, white and black, number one. Number two, people of all classes in the county including, I think they called themselves, the Mobilizers. This

is one of the black power groups. Long hair. Now they did their work differently however from the others. Again in my campaign, I think, whereas other people [were] raising tremendous sums of money, I believe the largest contribution that I got--. Oh wait a minute. I forgot this one. Anyway, I raised more money than I thought I ever would. But most of the work was done voluntarily. Materials and so forth went into the biggest amount--. The biggest amount of money went into buying campaign materials (). This was the Mobilizers. The Mobilizers were these bad-looking black power dudes with their hair all the up way up yonder and that sort of stuff. The Mobilizers didn't come on work until the other group, whoever it might be, volunteers again, manned my campaign headquarters and did all the work. But these guys came to work about nine or nine-thirty when everybody else had gone.

EG: At night?

VS: They got themselves and how they got it and where they got it I don't know. They got themselves a pick up truck that they used every night and just as--. Around here we used to use posters on the telephone poles and light poles. Everywhere you go, you see them. Well, these guys would take a truck of my signs and they'd let a tall guy stand on the bed of the truck. The first thing he did was take down everybody else's sign. Then the second thing they did was reach up and put mine up so high that nobody else could get to it. [laughter] I had visitors coming to Memphis to--. Maybe I happened to see them. They'd say, "What's all these pictures of yours around town?" This is two and three years after my campaigns was over. [Laughter.]

EG: That's really funny. Late at night, hanging up the signs () putting yours way up high.

VS: I didn't know what they were doing until people said, "Man () signs around () you."

EG: Now I know how you ended up winning. [Laughter.]

VS: How in the world did we get involved in so many unusual things? Oh shoot. The surprising thing is that when I decided I wouldn't run again--. I decided.

EG: In '94.

VS: I decided the night before, almost the night before the campaign was over, well before the qualifying date was about to come up. I had just decided that I didn't want to be down there. I was, I had just decided at the end of another four-year term, I would have stopped most everything. And I didn't want that hanging on too. I just decided best thing to do was decline to run again. Editorials, everything else were, nice ones were printed and pictures and all, that sort of stuff. The only reason I ever gave was a white woman who was very good looking, a relatively young looking woman who was a reporter--. Everybody wanted to know why is it I wouldn't run again. They just did not going to, () they can't understand it. Finally, she saw that I wasn't going to say anything about that. I just quit. I didn't have many reasons. She leaned over and whispered in my ear and say, "It's time." And that's the excuse I gave. It's time. People can't argue with you about that. But I have no regrets about any of those things. My office either. I left there and I have only been back there once or twice since then and that was to get a filling in.

EG: Your dental office. Your dental office.

VS: Yeah. I sold it. My son just convinced me that he was not going to come back to Memphis.

EG: Was he a dentist too? Is he a dentist?

VS: He's a dentist. He's not here in Memphis though. He's in Washington.

EG: Oh, he's in DC. Oh okay.

VS: Yep. But the time served on the county commission was some of the best and some of the worst. I could not stand idly by and see public officials rape the county the way they have historically done, and some of them probably are still—. Okay, Rout is former mayor who is now being investigated by the FBI.

EG: Rout you said.

VS: Rout, R-O-U-T. It's [in the] newspaper. I don't know what they'll find. But for the FBI to get into it, it's got to be something that they found.

EG: What's an example of how they--.

VS: I'm fixing to give you one.

EG: Okay.

VS: Now this is most blatant example. I had two or three things going for me which will come up and show how I can work for things. This was a commissioner who was I guess chairman of roads and bridges. Somebody came to me and said in my ear This guy's committee--.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

VS: Frequently government officials on all levels—. Is it working?

EG: Yeah.

VS: Okay. Frequently government officials on all levels know things that are going to happen far in the future, long before the general public does. They know where

roads and bridges are going to be built. They know about airports and all that sort of stuff. It's not a matter of going out and asking somebody for money or anything to grease their palm. They just go and invest in maybe the ground that is going to be bought.

EG: So they do this before getting like the public approval or the approval of the voters or the commission.

VS: They know that it's going to be discussed and according to what they know about the needs and the usual way things are done and so forth. Enron is the best example that I can give you. They finally got the top man.

EG: Yeah, an election year.

VS: Yeah. Uh huh. That's one of the reasons why some politicians spend a lifetime in politics. Can't find a better thing than that.

EG: Yeah, and these loopholes where they can—.

VS: Sure. Yeah.

EG: Well, it's within their power to spend money and then take advantage of it.

VS: That's right. On the local level, a county commissioner, let's say on the land use control board, or whatever, knows an application has been put in for such and such an area. After a while he decides, if that passes, that's going to be a pretty good thing. But there are many ways. I used to always say that wherever there was land involved, there was somebody involved in trying to take advantage of it. Anyway, what else do you want to know?

EG: Did you find that the white members of commission, did you feel any sort of prejudice from them?

VS: No, there was not that sort of thing. I think there was one there who didn't like me and I didn't like him. We were pretty open about it. But no. We took trips to New York frequently.

EG: New York City.

VS: New York City. That usually was on bond issues, borrowing money. And then to other big cities for conventions of some type that affect what we're doing, and the wives were—. I guess we were pretty corrupt too. The wives were taken along. I think most people were damned glad to socialize with Maxine.

EG: Yeah. The wives on the commission.

VS: Yeah, the wives that hadn't had a chance to know her and they—.

EG: Yeah, because she was so influential.

VS: Uh huh. That sort of thing you don't find much anywhere.

EG: You mean blacks and whites socializing.

VS: No, blacks and whites being discriminated against on that level.

EG: Oh, on the politician level.

VS: Yeah, the ones discriminating against each other and so forth. Not wanting to be around them or whatever, not wanting them on the level with them. That's just not anymore. Time has taken care of that because you've got—. Take this city for example. You've got county mayor, city mayor, almost anywhere you look—.

EG: People are black.

VS: Um hmm.

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

VS: In the overwhelming majority of cases, yes. In Atlanta now they've even changed name of airport from Hartsfield to Jackson-Hartsfield—.

EG: Have they? How about that.

VS: Maynard Jackson. Jackson-Hartsfield—

EG: That's what they call it.

VS: Yeah.

EG: Really. Wow.

VS: They know that Maynard was a doggoned good mayor. I think basically [pause] you get a better class type person from the black community than you get from the white community for a given position. Okay, city mayor is a Ph.D.

EG: Right. Right. Herenton. Yeah.

VS: Sure.

EG: Do you think it's because the blacks who run for office are the ones that are the more educated.

VS: No, I think that there are better opportunities out there for whites that blacks can't get.

EG: You mean in other—like business.

VS: Yeah.

EG: Other occupations.

VS: What I mean is that as far as qualifications are concerned a guy with Herenton's qualifications if he were white could get a better position in private industry.

EG: So public office is more open to blacks with qualifications than with other fields.

VS: Yes. Right. Sure. That's what I'm trying to say.

EG: When you were county commissioner did you feel that--you did say you made more of a bigger impact than you thought that you would--you made a big impact for the black community or a lot of things were more broad like you mentioned Meals on Wheels which of course is for anyone who is in poverty but disproportionately blacks.

VS: Well, you don't want to take the hospital because boy, what the City hospital was before that was--. It was horrible. It was not the best example. Yeah, it made all the difference in the world.

EG: What about things specifically for blacks?

VS: Generally speaking, I did as much as I could, but there were things I couldn't do. But generally, generally, okay since we're () give an example. Let me jump back and give another example and I'll pick this up a later. Herman Morris who was head of MLG&W until—.

EG: What, MLG&W?

VS: Memphis Light Gas and Water. The present guy down there [makes] more than \$200,000 a year. So that's not a bad job. Anyway, he was black. The man before him came up through the ranks from a very, very low level management [position] and then made the gradual steps to the top.

EG: The man before Herman.

VS: Herman Morris, yeah.

EG: Okay. What was his name?

VS: I don't remember that man's name. Again I guess it would be best not to use names. The black president of MLG&W and white one before him. But the white one

before him worked his way up to the top from low level management to the top position. Herman came in over-qualified for the position. He's making more money now. The biggest predominately white law firm in the state of Tennessee.

EG: Which was with this white man.

VS: I think it's, yes. Pardon.

EG: This white man had been part of it who rose up the ranks?

VS: Oh I'm sorry. When black guy who had held the job up until just a few months ago when he and Herenton had a falling out, he just moved on up to where he should've been all the time.

EG: Oh, to the white law firm.

VS: Yeah.

EG: Oh okay. What name was the law firm?

VS: Baker, Donelson, and all that sort of stuff.

EG: Oh okay. Lewis Donelson's firm.

VS: Yeah. You know a lot about Memphis don't you.

EG: I've learned a lot.

VS: Yeah, gosh.

EG: Good guides.

VS: You sure do know it. So man for man, qualification for qualification, there are more opportunities out there for whites than for blacks.

EG: I see, thinking about what you were saying, I was thinking about a report I ran across in the NAACP papers at the Library of Congress about the protest that your branch did against the token employment of blacks in government. Now that must be

really rewarding to see how blacks are so in public office and government positions and it's no longer token.

VS: Um hmm. But that's also because not only in blacks in position to help the black community but you also got better qualified blacks were available for the job.

EG: So the increase in education ()

VS: Right. The push in education is now the main focus of the NAACP.

EG: I remember you mentioned that at the reception.

VS: Yeah, that's right. But you see they've got, their national education committee is not just a figurehead sort of committee. They've got—

EG: Mrs. Smith is head of it.

VS: Yes, she is. Maxine's head of it. But you've got young blacks with Harvard degrees on that committee. They ain't playing. They are really doing a job. They work. You should see the material they turn out and it's backed up. The figures that you see for example, state by state, on how blacks have progressed on education since Brown are accurate, and they scare you to death because, you know what, a short time we went ahead and now we're falling down. That's right.

EG: Why do you think that is?

VS: I think it's two reasons. Money has something to do with it. Like Memphis's schools are suffering. But secondly, secondly, blacks from a deprived family didn't just start yesterday. You had an overwhelming high percentage of blacks from deprived families for generations. Don't you think that all of a sudden the effects of all of that will fall off and suddenly become ambitious and wanting to achieve. It doesn't work like that. It's a complicated thing.

EG: You see [the] intersection of race and class.

VS: That's right. I frequently talk about how blessed I was. Maxine's daddy was a postman. His mother went to college. I don't know if she got a degree but she went to college. My mom was a maid scrubbing white folks floors. My daddy worked on a railroad, backbreaking labor. But they had a dream for their children. That doesn't happen too often. It just doesn't.

EG: So you don't see this parental involvement and emphasis on education that you think there should be in the black community.

VS: That's exactly right. I could write a book about now reflecting back and seeing how they worked to make their dream happen. I have two earned professional degrees. My brother had two earned professional degrees. His was from Howard University and University of Iowa.

EG: What's your brother's name?

VS: Herman. I also repeat to people how the greatest thing that ever happened to us is when I was in only about the fifth or sixth grade we moved to [a] house on Saxon Street that is still standing. It's a little three-room cottage. When we were there, the john was on the back porch. I think they've enclosed it now.

EG: What was that?

VS: The toilet [laughter]. But the house is located now right where the student center of LeMoyne College is facing that house.

EG: What's the address?

VS: 825 Saxon.

EG: I might go by and () take a look at it.

VS: It looks better now. It has brick around it. It's still the same little three-room house. When we were kids, it was supported by American Missionary Association, the AMA, the American Missionary Association.. They would have speakers come to address the students every so often, just sort of inspirational speeches. My mama and daddy would see those signs up and they would say we're going to clean up these boys and we're going to have them see people who accomplished something. They always wanted us to see what can be done. They'd bring a program home to explain degrees to us. [They'd say], "See this man here. He's got two letters behind his name and that means he finished one college. Now this fellow here, he got about three letters behind his name. Now he finished two colleges. He knows more than that other one did. Now you see a few of them, they've got a line of them letters behind their name and there's always a D back there." They'd say, "Now, that means that they know everything that there is to be known." [Laughs.] Really. They'd say, "We want your boys to see a D behind your name." Isn't that wonderful.

EG: My mom, she read a part in my thesis where you talked along those lines of how you were so highly educated and the influence of your parents. She was like, "Wow. My mother had only gone through sixth-grade education." I think about my grandparents. They only went through high school. I mean, it was a () but also back then it was unusual for any race to have that sort of emphasis on education like that. That's wonderful.

VS: They used examples even as far as race is concerned. LeMoyne has always had whites on faculty. First president was a white man. When I was there, early on the first person--. A guy was president who was white and faculty members. There was a

tennis court out there. [It's] not much of a campus now. It's crowded with what few buildings they've got. But we'd see whites and blacks out on tennis court playing together. That was [the] only place in Memphis where whites and blacks played together on a tennis court. Nowhere else. [My parents would] point up there and they'd say folks with education don't bother with nothing like race. They know that everybody if you give them a chance can achieve. They kept pounding that thing into our heads. We didn't have an automobile. We walked everywhere we went. But as we changed neighborhoods--. That's very easily done here in Memphis, a city this small. I mean you can find right behind me on the next street houses different from these on this street. But they always pointed out certain things indicated [that a] person had more education than the others by the kind of street he lived on. [They'd say] these people lived on a gravel street. They didn't have much education. They don't make much money so they can't do no better. But these people here are on the paved street. They don't have sidewalks but it's paved though. And these people have a little bit more education, and they buy a better house.

EG: Interesting.

VS: Then when you get to that street with the sidewalks where I can skate with my skates, that person finished college and had a good job and making good money and living nicely. That just sort of inspired you. That's practical.

EG: You mentioned that there were always whites at LeMoyne College in the faculty and so forth. In terms of political activity of the Shelby County Democratic Club and other campaigns of blacks, did you find there were some supportive whites?

VS: Yeah. You always had some whites who were well known. For example, Lucius Burch. You know his name. Shoot. Lucius Burch, they just don't come any better than he was. He was that way a long time before it was fashionable to be that way. I just liked to kid him because he would say things so many whites wouldn't say. Early on on the county commission--we'd known each other a long time-- he was down there one day speaking about something and he loved hiking. He has hiked from the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains, I guess, all the way up the Cumberland Trail, the Appalachian Trail, all the way to its termination in New England. All the way. He was talking to the county commission one day and the matter of race came up. He said, "I understand what you guys are talking about." He said, "I've hiked Appalachian Trail all the way from its beginning to its termination. He said, "The thing that bothers me is that I don't see any black folk doing that." He says, "I long for the day when after [a] day's hike and campfires are being built, I can sit down with brethren of all races and share my beans and my bacon with them and we can converse and get to know each other." He says, "Vasco, I don't hear you saying anything about this." I said, "Well, Lucius, we just got used to wall to wall carpeting and you want to carry me back to those rats and roaches." Kidding him really but he was just as serious as he could be about that. He had strong feelings, real strong feelings about race. So you always had some--few, very few. Then you get more and more converted. Nobody pays any attention now to the fact--you probably haven't even noticed this yourself--on television even in commercials and certainly in lots of other circumstances, you see blacks and whites together. Not only that, you are now beginning to see black men and white women together, occasionally. That's right. It's been brought on gradually but a little more every time.

EG: I mean, most people of my generation--I'm aware of the historical roots and what that meant a lot time ago, black men and white women --wouldn't even know about that and [would] just think it was normal. It's a huge step forward.

VS: That's right. Yeah.

EG: What do you think when you see that?

VS: That's the way it should've been all the time. I've always had friendly relationships with whites, and the odd thing is that it has been more with white women than with white men.

EG: Interesting because then you get gender dynamic as well.

VS: That's true. I think number one it's because I respect the intelligence and I just feel that there's nothing inferior about a woman. That's true. I think that women can see that.

EG: I noticed that with your wife prominent that a lot of men would have difficulty with that and you don't seem to have any difficulty at all.

VS: I am a big--. Did you hear me talk about how much I love my wife.

EG: Yeah.

VS: Sure.

EG: And that she is more prestigious than you. You don't seem to have any sort of jealousy toward her. A lot of men would have.

VS: I am her biggest supporter.

EG: Sure. And usually it's reversed.

VS: So I think that attitude of mine--that just naturally makes me have no feelings at all about black men and white women. I think that white women can see

something in me that is not necessarily a personal sort of thing but they can see that he respects women. I do.

EG: I can totally see that. Definitely.

VS: Plus the fact, they're pretty nice to look at anyhow.

EG: () [static] What's striking with me with Memphis—[when] you look at like the political activity and the civil rights activity, women were just involved as men.

VS: Sure, that's true. They really were.

EG: Particularly it seems they were even more involved on like the grassroots level in terms of the voter registration, the precinct clubs of the Democratic club and so forth.

VS: Sure. Maxine's main buddy was Sugarmon's wife, Laurie. That ain't nothing to boast about that she would respect Laurie and so forth. Hell, [Laurie] was a Ph.D. from John Hopkins. Why not respect her? And she's a good looking girl too. You never did meet Laurie I guess.

EG: No. [static]

VS: More white women than black men.

EG: I'm wondering, I saw that you ran for school board in 1963.

VS: That was not a nice thing. I would not do it now and I didn't like it then. There was a white they wanted me to run against to maybe help a black get elected, but it didn't turn out that way.

EG: I don't get it.

VS: You were running by positions, and Hollis Price who was the president of LeMoyne was also running. He was running for another position. The feeling was that I wasn't going to work hard. I didn't want to be elected to the school board. But my presence would bring out more votes to polls so Price would be able to—.

EG: He had a better chance of being elected than you did.

VS: No. But that would help him with his good relationship with the white community. My presence there on the poll would increase his—.

EG: Black voter registration. Did that happen do you think?

VS: I don't think it really did. I think he wouldn't have gotten same amount of votes anyhow. That wasn't a whole lot. What year was that? How do you know?

EG: '63. I ran across it. '63.

VS: '63.

EG: I ran across it in a newspaper clipping. I remember it from—.

VS: What year was Maxine elected?

EG: I think, '71.

VS: Well, that's a good long ways after () you know.

EG: Because it seemed like it took the change in city government like the Program of Progress to make it so blacks could be elected.

VS: [whistling] Lord, that POP program. You bring that thing—. Never would have thought about. Yeah. The POP program, I was on the POP board.

EG: I saw you were on that too.

VS: Somebody--. I told you they put me on things I didn't want to be on. I didn't have any business being on no POP board. I really wasn't interested in it. I guess

that's the reason I just didn't work as hard in it and it would've been too hard to have to learn about education. If you're on the school board, you're in the spotlight, very often. Like right now.

EG: That's why you didn't want to be elected to the school board.

VS: I have to know the facts of the discussion at that time, whatever it was. I didn't want to put forth the effort but they just kept arguing that you can do it. You can do it. We're going to work and all that stuff. So it really wasn't with the idea of me getting elected. It was just to use me as, whatever you call it, to get the blacks out.

EG: Did that happen with other black candidates that they were ran and it mainly to increase voter registration and you didn't really think that they would win.

VS: No, this was just one of the strategies that they decided to use.

EG: I think you mentioned also, I talked to Ben Hooks briefly and he mentioned that people would come from all over--you mentioned this earlier--to be at elections to see how you were able to get out the black vote.

VS: Yes.

EG: Who were these people that came?

VS: I can remember even one young white woman, good looking () but her name was Shosanni. Was that an Indian tribe, the Shoshannis but she came here from Washington State.

EG: Was she Indian?

VS: No, she wasn't Indian. She had an Indian name though. But plenty of blacks, let's say from Southern states in particular would come because they wanted it for

practical reasons. They wanted to use it. Then there were whites who came just to see something new.

EG: So blacks wanted to learn from your electoral strategies and how they could bring it back to their communities.

VS: Yes.

EG: Did you find any evidence of them actually doing that, being able to do that.

VS: We didn't look for it but I don't there was because they didn't have the base that we had.

EG: And the organization that you had?

VS: The various organizations that we've talked about. We had a different base from most other areas. As we pointed out earlier in this, there were different groups whose main objective might have been something else but who was amenable to working as part of the group.

EG: These blacks from—.

VS: You didn't get that did you?

EG: Yeah, I did.

VS: You didn't like that.

EG: Because you said that there [was a] organizational network that you had that the other communities didn't have and that's why it couldn't be effective in other communities.

VS: Yes. Look how fortunate you are to have a Russell Sugarmon, a Maxine Smith, Jesse Turner [Sr.], A. W. Willis [Jr.], who were willing to get out here in the trenches. You didn't have it in many other places.

EG: Blacks who came from other communities, were they members of the NAACP?

VS: Not necessarily. I would say that probably the majority were. But not all of them by means.

EG: With the Shelby County Democratic Club, how [did you] decide who to endorse and how did the decision making process work? Did the leaders meet beforehand and present it to the board like you did with the NAACP?

VS: Actually a, whatever you want to call the committee. I've forgotten what we even called that--selection committee or whatever. They would want them to be people who knew enough about the position or positions and the individuals who might aspire, but you also had to know the people. You frequently, frequently made enemies in doing that. Because you'd have--. I wish I could remember the process and what they called it. It's a common name. But anyway, there would be a committee, a broadly based committee, to interview people who were interested and even to influence some who were not interested to come on in and be interviewed. You're really using the selection process as well in trying to find the best suited.

EG: Yeah. One of people I talked to said that you, the leaders would often call precinct leaders ahead of the meetings and let them know what they were thinking and to get their input. Do you remember anything about that?

VS: I just don't remember that too much. But I imagine some of that went on because these individuals in the end would be ones who would vote. All of the precincts had a chairman and it's that group that elected, selected the individual to run.

EG: Did you have any international attention at all?

VS: Wait a minute. I hear something. Oh I know what that is. I heard that noise but it's some of those air conditioning shutters. Like this room has four in it and some of them are shut down.

EG: ()

VS: Are you comfortable? It isn't really that cool in here.

EG: It isn't.

VS: Huh? Heck yeah. That's easy. Maxine gets on me all the time because I forget about the—

EG: Where I'm living too. Susan will come into my room and be like, "It's boiling." [laughing] I'm like that's okay. [break in taping]

VS: It's amazing how many small towns in the South that are not majority black have black mayors.

EG: Yeah. Now?

VS: Um hmm. I was just reading about a town in the paper yesterday that was—. Oh what was that story about? But it was surprising to note that the mayor was black. It was a town that you wouldn't think of ordinarily as having a black mayor.

EG: When you were doing voter registration here in the '50s and '60s, did you face any sort of resistance from the registrars?

VS: No.

EG: Yeah. Why do you think that was and why do you think--?

VS: Because blacks were never discouraged from voting in Memphis ever. Now I told you that way back there, Republicans ran Memphis and they encouraged voting because to keep it Republican controlled in the South, you have to have the black voters

too. They also did this, which was very bad, and Memphis was known for this. I don't think it was this bad but they referred to the fact that they paid the poll tax for blacks. They went and got him to vote. They said when they got through voting, he got a barbeque sandwich.

EG: For Crump, right. Yeah.

VS: Uh huh. So, no, there never was any effort to discourage voters, black or white.

EG: I saw in [the] 1950s that voter registration increased dramatically from like 200 to 500 percent.

VS: There again--Maxine.

EG: Why you think that? Because you would think, well, that maybe there would be more resistance if there was a larger increase in black voters.

VS: The only resistance I've ever seen and I almost went to jail this time. [It] might have been during the POP era and I'm not sure. The Republican Party sent white poll watchers to heavily populated black areas to just look over the shoulders of the registrars and so forth.

EG: When was this?

VS: I think was during the era of Program for Progress.

EG: The POP.

VS: Now, I'm not sure about that. But it was that recent. They were trying to discourage blacks and that just had never been done. The Republican Party sent young white men to the voting places and looked over the shoulders of the person who was checking the books and so forth. Things like "Wait a minute, I haven't seen his name."

It was done not to stop this guy who was in there from voting but to let the word spread that white folks are in there and that might frighten somebody that they--. Trying to keep them from voting.

EG: It was Republicans who were doing this?

VS: Yes. It was the Republicans who were doing that. Because that was when you were first getting your blacks to run for office.

EG: In, well, POP was '67.

VS: Probably something like that. I keep trying to, I can't remember when it was. That's the only effort and it was well organized. They had it in all the heavily registered black ward and precincts.

EG: You talked too about how you had attention nationally for the work that was being done politically by blacks. Did you have any international attention at all?

VS: I don't know about that. I don't remember. Now Russell would—.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

EG: Well one of the things I was wondering because I was looking at the--I told you--press coverage of '59 and they're talking about how campaign--. They thought the crusade for electing these black candidates would be heard around the world. Did people actually believe that or was that more kind of rhetorical flourishes?

VS: [Nods or indicates an affirmative response regarding the latter.]

EG: Rhetorical flourishes. Okay. That's what I thought.

VS: No, it wasn't making that much a splash.

EG: Yeah, so that was kind of more to pump people up it seems. Just one of the strategies.

VS: Yeah.

EG: I'm also wondering too about the role of children and youth in campaigns. Did they play a prominent role at all?

VS: Um hmm.

EG: How so?

VS: Basically the young people did primarily the same thing that adults did but usually in the company of another adult or other adults. But you could sometimes find that they would make up a little singing group to attract people. An Orange Mound group of kids in Maxine's campaign did this on their own. They wrote a song about Maxine.

EG: In her '71 campaign?

VS: She probably remembers that. They made dresses so they looked alike. Wherever they could get a group of people together they performed for them.

EG: Like at rallies?

VS: Yes. It was very creative and unique.

EG: Was this consistent activity throughout campaigns that would be common to have like a youth group.

VS: No, it was more toward the end of the campaign. But yeah, there was participation by young people.

EG: What about the role of churches in politics?

VS: Always.

EG: Yeah.

VS: Yes, ma'am, played a big role. And most black candidates knew not that white candidates didn't attempt to go into the black churches. Some did. Some were endorsed by blacks.

EG: Oh some of the white candidates were endorsed.

VS: Yeah. Not many but some did.

EG: When was this? Did this happen at all in '50s?

VS: I don't remember but—.

EG: But they recognized the important role that black churches played.

VS: Blacks also recognized importance of endorsing some whites where there was a good candidate and no promise of electing a black to that position anyway. So why not have a good white in that position? But most blacks who were politically alert—most candidates--practically all of them also once they were endorsed by an organization, they'd get a little instruction on how to handle a black church. The first thing you got to do is to get the minister's endorsement. Then if you get his endorsement, you don't go in the church making a speech.

EG: You don't.

VS: Uh uh.

EG: What do you do? Let the minister do it?

VS: Yes, ma'am. [laughter]

EG: The minister would announce it at the service.

VS: The congregation would pay much more attention to that pastor than they will to you seeing you for first time. So a smart candidate doesn't interrupt a service at

all. Just gets there and makes an appearance with the minister knowing that he's going to visit and usually he's given a time by the minister during that part of the service where he won't be interrupting the sermon or something like that. I had one of the bigger Baptist churches in Memphis--East Trigg Baptist Church. It was pastored by Dr. W. Herbert Brewster. Brewster was a minister who composed a lot of the spirituals.

EG: I went to the Rock and Soul Museum and I saw his name. I thought that's someone I've run across in the civil rights stuff.

VS: That's right. And Brewster whenever he'd see me coming in, he'd get up there, mouth full of gold. He'd smile and boy, gold would be shining everywhere. He'd say, "Vasco is back there." I know you must think it's odd people that folk call me Vasco. Almost nobody calls me Dr. Smith. That just almost never was. And very few people call me by my last name. Even the lady who works here calls me Vasco. Now she calls Maxine, Ms. Smith. But he'd say, "Vasco is here. You know, I'm going to have him stand up in a minute. But we've got an agreement between each other." This was after one of my incidents and it made great publicity, and then it continued on until he died. [He] said, "You know, we shook hands on this." [He] said, "I do Vasco's praying for him and Vasco does my cussing for me." [Laughter.] He thought that so funny.

EG: He said that right in church.

VS: That would get everybody all on my side. Pastor likes me, he's telling jokes on him. [Laughter.] They go away telling the joke. But the guy that goes there to that church and decides that he's going to go up in the pulpit, he's going to make a speech, he loses them right fast.

EG: Has to have the minister's support.

VS: Oh yes.

EG: To be effective in the black churches.

VS: Uh huh. The black minister has tremendous influence on his congregation.

EG: What did you think of the press coverage of the campaigns of like the *Press-Scimitar*, and *Commercial Appeal* and also the *Tri-State Defender* and *Memphis World*.

VS: Black coverage was okay. Generally, the *Press-Scimitar* was pretty good. The *Commercial Appeal* was thumbs down almost across the board.

EG: How was it, why was it so thumbs down?

VS: Well, you could just ignore them. That's the best way a newspaper can do it.

EG: So just ignoring what you were doing and like that.

VS: Yeah. Through the years, they changed. Then they eventually got to the point where people would make endorsements and would write editorials on the candidate.

EG: How influential was the press coverage like in '50s and '60s do you think in getting people to vote for certain candidates?

VS: Not very.

EG: Would you say that of the black and the white press?

VS: Black candidates. I mean, yeah. Black candidates. You see the black community didn't read papers as much as the white community did. So you had to--. You couldn't depend on the papers.

EG: Was it because a lot of population was illiterate?

VS: Yeah. Sure. It was about that time that black radio stations began to get influential in campaigns. Talk shows.

EG: In like the '50s were radio stations influential when you came back?

VS: Um hmm. WDIA.

EG: WDIA. Because I saw that [when] looking at the press coverage there was a lot of radio coverage. What about television, how influential was television in the late '50s?

VS: You had to buy it and it cost a lot of money.

EG: So black people pretty much didn't ().

VS: Blacks didn't bother about television. [talking simultaneously]

EG: So that maybe was influential in terms of whites but not the black audience.

VS: Yeah.

EG: We talked about this a little bit on the phone. What happened to the Democratic club. You said that in some ways you thought that the success—.

VS: Success.

EG: Had--.

VS: Success brought its demise.

EG: Because you said that there were a lot of splinter groups and that there was more people wanting to take control instead of this unity that you had had before.

VS: Uh huh.

EG: Were there any other reasons?

VS: No, that's about it.

EG: That's the main--.

VS: I can't think of any other reasons.

EG: When you were doing your political and civil rights activities, did you get a lot of people, I guess particularly those in the white but also maybe those in the black community who called you Communists for these activities.

VS: Oh yes.

EG: Was that a prevalent thing?

VS: Ben Hooks. Now see you make me remember things. Sometimes things come to my mind and then they don't at all. I can remember this so well with Ben. We were on a forum at Metropolitan Baptist Church. The two of us were to speak on "Is the NAACP a Communist organization?" Whites in the newspapers and so forth would say that they're just a bunch of Communists and so forth. I gave some remarks that were just factual and more or less remarks that were intended to be a form of instruction really. Ben, Ben can't help it. When he has an opportunity to turn an audience on, he does it. So Ben made a few remarks and in his closing he said, "They're talking about we're Communist. They're saying we're rocking the boat. Rocking the boat? What do you mean? We're going to turn it over!" You know how Ben talks. Have you heard him speak? Oh Lord. You need to hear him. He had the church all hollered and going. The next day newspapers had headlines "Hooks says they're going to turn the boat over."

EG: Do you remember when this was at all?

VS: I don't remember that really. I sure don't.

EG: That's funny. It must've been in like the '60s or the 1950s in the Cold War was really going on. What about the Kennedy and Nixon campaign. I understand that blacks were really influential.

VS: What was that again?

EG: The Kennedy-Nixon campaign or the Kennedy campaign, not with Nixon so much.

VS: I can't remember anything about them in the black community at all except black folk loved the Kennedy family, all of them, if the last name was Kennedy.

EG: Because they loved them. [break in taping] It's very durable. The next one is: What do you think can be done now to overcome polarization that still exists between blacks and whites.

VS: It will always be with us.

EG: Do you think so.

VS: Sure.

EG: Why do you think it will always be there and isn't something that ideally would go away?

VS: I'll ask you a question. Do you think they're always be this hate between Christians and Muslims?

EG: Hmm. I think so.

VS: What's the difference?

EG: Well, I see that as difference in terms of religious persuasion which is different than racial discrimination.

VS: What about Christians and Jews?

EG: Well, just again that harks back to the religion tenets whereas I see with [telephone—break in taping] I see the differences of those as more about religious differences, though there certainly could be physical differences. But with racial

discrimination I see that as unique in terms of the color of one's skin. And that it has been historicized. I'm not saying that I think it will go away but I'm trying to get more at why you don't think that it will ever go away.

VS: You know this matter of racism is a two-way street. Many blacks don't think much of blacks who associate with whites. It isn't just that we blame whites for this situation. It's both ways. I guess I say that more from—. Okay, this situation that I mentioned to you, this individual who has power to make the appointment of a president at Tennessee State University in Nashville. Used to be () State College Black and it is mostly black now. First of all it was supposedly desegregated a long time ago. Whites won't go there. It's a good school. But it has the aura of being a black school. And it has a black president and the next one is going to be black. Now if the president of University of Tennessee should happen to be removed from the position in whatever way he leaves, the position becomes vacant. That's University of Tennessee in Knoxville. They're not going to be looking for a black president.

EG: So are you saying its systematic and it's very structural the way that racism is now.

VS: [He must've said yes.]

EG: It's historically been that way as well. That's really--.

VS: You're familiar with the situation in Sudan.

EG: In Sudan. No, I'm not.

VS: There's a situation of genocide that's going on and has been going on for over twenty years. The ruling class is the Hutus. The minority class is the Tutsis. For some reasons the Hutus hate the Tutsis and literally millions of them have been killed.

And more are being killed every day. The world stands by and looks at it. My gosh, if you don't know about it, you know darn well it gets little publicity or you'd know about it. Kofi Annan spoke just yesterday about the situation. No white race on this earth would be permitted to do what they're doing even though they're doing it to each other. It's inhumane.

EG: So power as well.

VS: Sure.

EG: Differentials. It's very complicated.

VS: Yeah. Yeah. Sure.

EG: Is there anything that you think that can be done to help though to make things less polarized even though you believe things will always be polarized?

VS: I really think that education and economic growth will do more to help us than anything else. I don't see that coming about too much right now. We talked about education earlier. Pardon me. Whatever hope was a long way off. Take Jesse Turner. Jesse Turner was from Mississippi. He came to LeMoyne the same year I did. Jesse was a very brilliant student. Even though he had a college degree and just a transcript that would blow your mind, when he was drafted during WWII, they assigned him to a baker's school. He refused to go. He just took his chance on being courtmartialed. He could've been courtmartialed. Eventually they ended up seeing he was just going to insist that they send him to officer's candidate school. They didn't want him to use the facilities there, the swimming pool, dining room and so forth. Now here's a man that's being in a uniform trained to kill for our country or be killed and is treated just entirely differently from anybody else. During World War II, I stayed out of school a year after I

finished. I finished in '41. I was accepted for the class of '42. I wanted to work a year because I just didn't have any money to go to dental school even though I applied to go. I didn't want to put undue pressure on Mama and Daddy. So I just told them I wanted to stay out for a year and work. The draft board called me and told me to come down. They wanted to give me the pre-induction examination. So, I called up at Meharry and told them I was about to be drafted --. Didn't they have a policy where they could get deferment for either students or students that had been accepted? They said, oh yeah. We've got a standing policy for that. They said what we do is we get in touch with war department. They will give you a commission as a second lieutenant even though you're not in service. Then you will go out to the fairgrounds, General () headquarters and you will be sworn in as a second lieutenant and be put on inactive duty, which means you are free of the draft but you can't be drafted. That way you go to school this fall. I went to the draft board and showed them the commission and letter and showed them the letter that I could not be drafted. I can remember very well the draft board #10. The woman told me, "There ain't no nigger second lieutenant." She looked at it in her hand. She said, "You will go to Fort Benning, Georgia for pre-induction exam on such and such a date at such and such a time." I told her I wasn't going. She said, "The FBI will pick you up if you don't go. You are a deserter." I said, "I won't be there." They called me everyday threatening me until finally--this was silly thing--this went on for ten days and finally [the] day came for me to be there at the train station. After threatening me all this time, they said, "Why don't you do this? Just come, be a good nigger come on and cooperate with us." I hung up in her face. Now that's talking about somebody talking to someone that you want to put a uniform on to go and die. Now even more dramatic than

that, when I went to school in Nashville at Meharry, there was still general segregation even though in most towns that have three and four colleges it's not as enforced as strictly as it was in towns that were not of that type.

EG: That didn't have as much emphasis on education, didn't have the colleges and universities?

VS: Yes. That's what's made the difference in Atlanta, all the difference. Generally, where Meharry was, if we rode bus downtown we sat where we wanted to anyhow because white folk just didn't get on the bus. But on this particular evening a black guy in olive drab uniform, Army uniform, got on the bus and sat down right behind the driver. The driver pulled the bus off the road and he realized what was happening. He looked around and said, "Boy, don't you see that sign up there." This is how degrading it was. Signs did say, they were there: "White folk in front, colored folk to the rear." Really.

EG: I didn't know there were signs.

VS: I'm not kidding you.

EG: I believe you. I believe you. Yeah.

VS: It was worse than that. If you just decided that there was plenty of room up front for white folks to sit and plenty of room for blacks, you're just going to sit about half way. Any white person who wanted to could walk up to you and tap and say, "Boy get on to the back of the bus. I want your seat. So the bus driver finally said, "Boy I told you to get up and go to the back." I have never seen a more dramatic scene in my life. It was perfectly quiet. Guy looked at bus driver in [a] calm, cool voice, he said, "They put

me in uniform to die. I'd just as soon die right now." The man drove the bus on off. It's a deep thing.

You can't ask me no more questions because I ain't going to answer. [laughter]
That's over with now. Save some for Maxine.

EG: Alright.

VS: Now tell me—.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by L. Altizer, June 9, 2005