The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History

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Arkansas Memories Project

Christopher C. Mercer Jr.

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

August 25, 2006

Fayetteville, Arkansas

Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved, catalogued, and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The transcripts, audio files, video highlight clips, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center website at http://pryorcenter.uark.edu. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio recordings and highlight clips, in addition to the transcripts, to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first twenty minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first twenty minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/ redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

- Brackets enclose
  - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
  - annotations for clarification and identification; and
  - standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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Scott Lunsford interviewed Christopher C. Mercer Jr. on August 26, 2006, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: I want to start with saying thank you for being with us today. I—and I also would like to say that this interview is getting done—uh—as a part of a collection of projects for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History.

Christopher Mercer: Right. [*Sniffs*]

SL: And this tape [*CM clears throat*] recording will be housed in the Special Collections Department at the University of Arkansas, Mullins Library, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Unknown person: [*Unclear words*].

[Tape stopped]

[00:00:29] CM: Okay, well, let me start by identifying myself.

SL: Okay.

CM: My name is Christopher C. Mercer Jr. I was born March 27, 1924, in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. I have lived all of my life in Arkansas. I grew up in Pine Bluff and matriculated in the various segregated schools in that town, including kindergarten, elementary school, high school, and college. Uh—and—uh—but

the last fifty-one years of my life I have lived in Little Rock. So I know more about Little Rock than I do anything. I was—as I said, I was born in Pine Bluff. It—there was something unique about my birth. My mother had—uh—had difficulty in delivering, and she—quote, "wanted her babies," end of quote, as I guess most mothers do, and it's my—it's my—uh—information that she'd had two or three stillbirths. And durin' this particular time, she had what was supposedly the best doctor in town, a doctor by the name of Dr. Harry Williams. And he, incidentally, was chief of staff at Davis Hospital. Davis Hospital was the white hospital in town—uh—and he was married to the president of Simmons Bank's daughter, so he was big—he was big stuff in town.

SL: Yeah.

[00:02:11] CM: And—uh—he told my mother is the only way that he was gonna be able to—uh—save her babies was—uh—to do cesarean, and it would have to be done at the hospital. And of course, he said, "I know what you're thinkin'. You let me take care of that." And so it is reported to me that Dr. Williams—uh—got—went to the hospital—telephones back in 1924 was [*laughs*] newfangled things, if you had some. But everybody didn't—didn't make use of 'em. My understanding—he went to the

hospital and told them to prepare for surgery. He had a cesarean to deliver, and course, everybody prepared. And then when—when—uh—he rolled my mother in, everybody was aghast about what's going on here. He said, "Well, that's my patient. I've—I've got to do a cesarean, and I can't do it on a butcher block, and I want everybody to get in high gear." And su—supposedly they did. And the way the story goes, I was the first black to be born at the Davis Hospital—uh—'cause I was in 1924. Uh—there was a repeat performance in 1926 [*laughs*] by the brother. [*Laughs*]

SL: Uh-huh.

CM: That also had to have the same thing, and of course, that was the last—last of the children. The doctor told my mother it was too much strain on her, so no more children. But she had those two. Um . . .

[00:03:38] SL: What was—um—what is your earliest memory of your mom and—or . . .

CM: The earliest memory I had—uh—the earliest memory I ha—I have goes back to when I was fifteen months old. And I was born in March of [19]27, so fifteen months old would've had to been June of—of—uh—I mean, March of [19]24—it had to been June of—of—uh—[19]25.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CM: Uh—my mother was half Choctaw. She had long, coal-black hair, and course, back then they didn't cut boys' hair. It supposedly sapped their strength. They didn't cut boys' hair until they were two years old. So—uh—I had long, straight hair hang—hung down to my shoulders, and I remember what I thought was an uncle of mine, but it was really a foster uncle, was tryin' to comb my hair. And I was fightin' mad, and I—I guess all little kids [*laughs*] don't like when you're messin' with their hair. [*Laughs*] And I remember—uh—uncle—Uncle Scott—uh—uh—Cash—his last name was Cash—tryin' to cut—cut my hair. They took me around to—we lived about a block around the corner from my aunt. This was her brother. And I just remember feuding with him ?by the time?—it—it was an ordeal that day, and I remember that very vividly. Of course, after that time—from the time I was four years old, I guess I remember almost everything. No, but I guess—I guess three years old. I remember almost everything from the time I was three years old.

[00:05:28] SL: Well, paint me a—a picture of—of your house and what was going on at this [*unclear words*].

CM: [*Exhales*] Well, when—at the time that I was fifteen months old,

we lived on a street in Pine Bluff called Morris Street. It was not a very long street. It was about maybe three blocks long. We lived in the six hundred block on Morris Street. I remember the house. It was a bungalow-type house. It had a little front porch. It had a little door, and it was sittin' up on kind of a little semihill that was not a true sidewalk, it was just a beaten-path sidewalk that was the sidewalk in front of the house. And going down from that was just a little hill—I guess had an altitude of about maybe two feet at that—at that particular point. And this scenario I was telling you about, my uncle cutting my hair—I mean combing my hair—uh—I had been taken—uh—from my house by my grandmother—uh—who was this full-blood Choctaw—around to my—what I thought was my aunt's house. I don't remember what the occasion was, but I know when I got around there, I remember him trying to comb my hair. [00:06:59] This house was a much, much nicer facility. Uh—it was—uh—oh, I guess my aunt's house—I remember my—my house having two bedrooms—uh—a living room, a kitchen, and a little small hallway. My—my aunt's house had a big, palatial dining room and a large living room and—and then there was a sewing room. She was a—a very excellent seamstress. There was a sewing room and—and a screened-in back porch. It was a

very palatial home. Uh—when I was three years old, we moved to 20th and Kentucky in Pine Bluff, and that was—uh—the house was on a full acre of—of ground. It had been owned by some rich, white family. Call—it was called the Lumpkin Place. And it had a long—which was stylish at that time—a long porch that swung from halfway the house over here and, I guess, all way round to the front of this—this circular front—long porch that was out there. Uh—that house—let's see—one, two, three, four, five—that house had about eight or ten rooms in it, all large rooms and had—had barns and sheds and had—had—we had fruit trees and had a garden space. And I remember it had a sycamore tree in the front yard. And by the time I was—uh—maybe five—by the time I was maybe five, I could climb up in this sycamore tree—we were at 20th and Kentucky, and I could see the bank building downtown at 5th and Main. Simmons Bank. It's still in Pine Bluff now at the corner of 5th and Main. And this was a thrilling thing for me to be able to climb up in that tree and be able to see this bank building. I guess Simmons Bank must be—I'm gonna say it must be ten or twelve stories high, at least. It—but that was a skyscraper back at that time. [*Laughs*]

[00:09:35] SL: Hmm. It's amazing that you can remember this

stuff, you know, pre-five years old. I—I have this old theory that people kind of—the building blocks of the way their life or the way they're gonna be all their life . . .

CM: Yeah.

SL: . . . is—kinda happens in the time when they can't really remember how it went by in that first five years.

CM: Oh. Oh yeah, I remember during this period of time—uh—my brother—we moved—we moved there when I was three years old—uh—in—in [19]27. And I remember coming from—from out there—what I'm calling downtown for the [19]27 flood. I don't know if you know—whether you're a native Arkansan.

SL: I am.

[00:10:23] CM: Everybody relates to the [19]27 flood. Supposed to have been the most devastating flood we had in the history of the state—the state. Uh—I went—we went down to see the flood. It looked like to me it was a big as an ocean. The little ravine that ran through town where the water had backed up from the river—I ne—I didn't get down to the river. I—I—for years and years I was always saying that was a river, but it was just a ravine. It runs through—it's called Harding Drain. It runs through Pine Bluff now, but they recaptured—uh—all of that because—uh—back in [19]27 flood, it—uh—inundated that thing,

and it cut a swath in there about two blocks wide. And that was a very unsightly thing right down the heart of Pine Bluff. Of course, it ran through from about 8th to about 10th Street. And they recaptured that and covered it up, and that's where the Pine Bluff Convention Center is now. It's where all the city offices are located.

[00:11:27] SL: That flood changed everything . . .

CM: Yeah.

SL: . . . down there. I mean, there was a lot of flight that went north after . . .

CM: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . that flood.

CM: Yeah, well, the flood—it—it caused a lot of—lot of flight—people that displaced by the flood. But during that time also, there was a lot of flight, especially in the black community—leaving the shackles of segregation and—and—and discrimination. Uh—when people got big enough to—to mobilate, they—they got out of Dodge. They got [*laughs*]—they . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:11:59] CM: . . . they went to St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit. You had such a mass exodus from the South. We lost so many—so many things. Uh—this aunt I was talking about that had—had

this palatial home—uh—she left in—in—uh—she didn't leave until—she left in [19]36. Uh—no, [19]36—[19]34. She left in [19]34. Moved to New York. Uh—she probably—she was probably makin' forty or fifty times as—as much in New York as she—she was a seamstress, and that's all she did for—for a living. She was a—a—an exceptionally good seamstress. But when she got to New York, she became what's called a modiste. [*Laughs*] A modiste makes originals.

SL: Uh-huh.

CM: Don't do anything but make originals for people, and she started sewing for a lot of rich—rich people. Uh—and something about—uh—movie stars—uh—uh—uh—rich people. They don't want—they're eccentric. They don't want to see anybody else with something on like themselves, so . . .

SL: Well, right, and they . . .

CM: Yeah.

SL: . . . don't want to buy stuff off the rack.

CM: Yeah, they . . .

SL: Yeah.

CM: They—they want something original.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:13:23] CM: Once you make that, don't do it for no one else.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CM: So she—uh—she declared that she would never live in the South again. And of course—uh—nobody can explain how devastating to your spirit—uh—discrimination is. That's—that—uh—to survive that—you're always gonna be scarred. But—uh—many people fled the kind of discrimination they had in the South. Now, they went—they fled, and they just had less discrimination. There was still discrimination [*laughs*] where they went.

[00:14:07] SL: You know, you mentioned that your grandmother was full Native American. Um—what about your grandfather? What—what was it that he did? And what were their . . .

CM: Uh—they were—they were . . .

SL: Do you member their lives and . . .

CM: Yeah. Yeah, my—uh—my grandfa—I don't remember their lives, because my grandfather—all of my grandparents were deceased by the time I was born except my grandmother, maternal grandmother.

SL: Uh-huh.

CM: My maternal grandmother. But it's been related to me that they were farmers.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CM: And they migrated to Arkansas back at the turn of the century.

Uh—my grandfather on my—my—my paternal grandfather—uh—migrated from Petersburg, Virginia. Uh—my—uh—it's—it's my understanding that my maternal grandfather came either from South Carolina or Georgia. Everybody was going west looking to get their fortunes, and of course, they ended up—uh—settling down in the south—southeast corner of the state, down in southeast Arkansas, in Lincoln County and—and—uh—Bradley County—uh—where they ended up settling. And of course, my parents—uh—my dad was born in Virginia. My mother was born in Arkansas, but when they got married in 1915, they moved to Pine Bluff. They had been living down in the country—eighteen or twenty miles down—a little place called Tyro. They moved to Pine Bluff.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CM: And of course, I was not born till [19]24, so there was that span in there I was tellin' you about—those still births. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah. It's tough.

CM: They'd been married nine years before I was—before they had a live birth. I wanted to say before they had their first child—before they had a live birth, and I was the live birth.

[00:16:04] SL: What—uh—what did your father do for a living?

CM: My father was probably one of the smartest people I ever ran

into in my life, and he had a fourth-grade education. But he could take—uh—some wire and some pliers and fix anything, take a hammer and a saw and build anything. [*Laughs*].

SL: Mh-hmm.

CM: When I was born, my dad was a mechanic at the roundhouse in Pine Bluff. The roundhouse . . .

SL: Was the train?

CM: Yeah. They built—the—was the—where the—where St. Louis Southwestern railroad—they called it the Cotton Belt route—built their big 800 engines, these big steam engines. They built 'em in this—uh—facility there in Pine Bluff, and it's my understanding that he got up to be a foreman in the roundhouse. Well, he was—he—he did so many things. When you say, "What did he do?" He could do a—could do a number of things. Uh—I've seen him—uh—take—I saw him take a [19]27 Model T Ford apart piece by piece and wash 'em in gasoline and grease them and put it back together again. I've seen him build a house, you know. So he could—he was gifted. He could do anything.

[00:17:36] SL: Did—uh—did you get to work with him as you were growing up or . . .

CM: For a while. My mom and dad separated—uh—divorced when I was six years old. So I s—most of my formative years were

spent with—under the tutelage of my mom. But—uh—my dad still lived in town, and I don't know what their differences were, but occasionally we would be over there with him, and I would get—get a chance to deal with him.

SL: Uh-huh.

CM: He called himself teaching us how to work. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yes.

CM: How to fix—fix all of our tools, our wa—wagons and bicycles—uh—how to—uh—cut a lawn or wax a floor or paint, you know.

[00:18:25] SL: Now . . .

CM: How to be gifted.

SL: . . . your birth name was not Christopher Columbus . . .

CM: No.

SL: . . . Mercer.

CM: My birth name was Castor Columbus Mercer.

SL: Uh-huh.

CM: And for some reason my mother changed the Castor. She didn't like Castor. She changed it to Christopher. So I never knew. I—I—I—I was aware that I was supposed to be a junior, and then when I got up big enough to know how to spell my name and spell my daddy's name, there was a difference. And my mother would always say to me, "You know, don't worry." But I

just—you didn't question them about what they did, so . . .

SL: Right, right.

CM: So, what—what made her do that—whether she was tryin' to be vindictive toward my dad or what made her do that, I don't really know.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CM: So I just accepted what she did and—and let it—let it alone.

[00:19:29] SL: Did you—uh—maintain contact with your father as you were . . .

CM: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . growing up?

CM: Yeah, I maintained . . .

SL: And did he get to see you . . .

CM: Oh . . .

SL: . . . go to college and . . .

CM: Well, yeah. Uh—I had—I—as I said, I had contact with my dad. My dad died in 1959.

SL: Okay.

CM: So by—by this time, I—I was out of law school and—and practicing. Had a family. Uh—but—uh—I don't—I—I wasn't nearly as close to my dad, even though we had communication, as . . .

SL: Hmm.

CM: . . . I was to my mom.

SL: Mh-hmm.

CM: Because my mom had me all the way through, you know. [*Laughs*]

SL: Raised you.

CM: Yeah, yeah, she raised me all the way through.

SL: Uh-hmm.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:11] CM: And my mom had a sixth-grade education. But when I was in the ninth and tenth grades, she was able to help me with my lessons, you know. [*Laughs*]

SL: You bet. Mh-hmm.

CM: So—and she had more of a—what I would call a business head on her—business mentality than my dad, even though my dad did a lot of contracting work, building house and this sort of thing. My mother operated a number of successful businesses in Pine Bluff down through the years. When I was born, they were operating—my dad was a mechanic at the roundhouse there in the—at the shops in Pine Bluff. My mother was running a dry cleaners. They had the only black dry cleaners in town. And she ran a dry cleaners off and on until I was—till I finished high

school. So I guess eighteen to twenty years. [00:21:15] And was considered one of the premiere dry cleaners in town. She was considered to be the best dress finisher. Materials have changed down through the years. You didn't have any synthetics back there. [*Laughs*]

SL: Right. It was all cotton or wool or silk.

CM: Cotton or wool or silk. And for a woman's fine dress, ordinarily it would be made out of silk. And if it was really a expensive dress, it would have a lot of pleats in it.

SL: Yeah.

CM: And all of this had to be done by hand, you know. And so be—to be able to lay those pleats and do 'em and not get 'em twisted, that was an art. And they call that dress finishing in the dry cleaning business. And she was one of the best dress finishers Pine Bluff has ever produced, see.

[00:22:12] SL: Now, Pine Bluff was kind of an unusual place because there was enough black commerce there. Y'all, you know, were kind of in a—in some ways protected.

CM: That is true, and then the college did for the black community, and has done for the black community down through the years, what this school has done for Northwest Arkansas. Northwest Arkansas is primarily prosperous by virtue of benefits reaped

from having this Athens up here.

SL: No question.

CM: No question about that.

SL: Yes.

CM: And the black community in Pine Bluff—from its inceptions in Branch Normal—and ultimately AM&N. It was Branch Normal until 1928. Then it became—and it was supposed to have been a branch of the University. Then it became a separate entity, AM&N College, in 1928. That had some benefit by virtue of the atmosphere it's created, and of course, there were a number—it had a large enough black population for you to have some opportunity for meaningful existence and to create some semblance of society within a society. And back up until—even after the days of the carpetbaggers up until the nineteen—early 1920s all up and down Main Street, you had many of the stores owned by black. Yeah, so Pine Bluff was somewhat a unique little place. And of course, with the college there—well, you always had enough—a large enough population to have a school system, even though it was a segregated school system, and to have a high school. [00:24:27] And so it was always thought of that you not only would go to high school, but you would also go to college. [*Laughter*] And with it being immediately available,

many people went by accident rather than by pur—on purpose. Of course, a lot of people went on purpose, but a number of people went by accident, you know. School's right there. It's easy to walk right there, and . . .

SL: Right.

CM: Yeah. Course, I . . .

SL: And back then if you didn't go to school there or probably Philander Smith, then maybe you got some kind of state assistance to go north to a school? Is that . . .

CM: If you had enough—well, you only got assistance to go north to a school for graduate school.

SL: Oh, okay.

CM: For graduate school. See, the state would provide you with some assistance for those things that the state did not provide. So if you wanted to go to med school or wanted to go to law school or wanted to go to dental school or you wanted to go to grad school—see, they provided the undergraduate. So they didn't—you couldn't get any assistance to go off to undergraduate school. But a number of people went otherwise to undergraduate school just to get out—thinking they'd get a better education, you know, more prestigious and this sort of thing. [00:25:49] But you had another—you had the two

sectarian schools. You had Arkansas Baptist and Shorter College. And both of them at that time, back in those days, called themselves trying to provide a four-year college opportunity. Course, blacks couldn't go to school anywhere else, so they—Shorter had a full complement. They even had athletic teams, football teams, and all this sort of thing, so you had an appreciable number of people going there. And the same thing is true about Baptist. Now, Shorter has reduced itself down through the years because of—it couldn't keep up with things. It's only a junior college now.

SL: Right.

CM: But Baptist has always called itself trying to have four years in spite of itself. And of course, what they did with Baptist—what—I say what they did—for a number of years way back when—not way back when—in most recent way back when is when they started integrating. This is after the [19]50s. Baptist graduates were accepted at Ouachita full fledged, and they could go down there and get their master's and then have one from an accredited—they'd have credentials from an accredited institution. Ouachita would—afforded Baptist graduates that sort of thing because if they graduated from Baptist, they weren't given much consideration. Yeah.

[00:27:40] SL: Let's go back to your home life . . .

CM: All right.

SL: . . . early on. What kind of . . .

[Unknown]: I need to mess with the mic for two seconds. I'm sorry.

[Tape stopped]

[00:27:49] SL: I always—I like to go to the dinner table . . .

CM: Okay, well . . .

SL: . . . and just—and can you tell me anything about a typical—well, I guess—did your mom do the cookin' and did—how . . .

CM: Yeah.

SL: . . . did the family . . .

CM: Well, you see . . .

SL: . . . divide up the chores and . . .

[00:28:14] CM: I had one brother. There was two of us. My mom was the everything. She provided everything. [*Laughs*] She provided the money. She was the mama and the papa. She did the cookin'. There were no—back in the [19]20s—let's get on over to the [19]30's, when—my brother was born in [19]26. He was two years younger than me. So—but I started to kindergarten when I was four years old. And we started—and then we went to school, and so she was the one that see us get to school, get our clothes, do the cooking. Back at that time,

there were no fast-food places.

SL: That's right.

CM: You never heard of that. [*Laughs*].

SL: That's right.

CM: So everybody that ate [*laughs*] had to eat at home. You mighta had a few restaurants, but there just was none. There was no bakeries—very few bakeries. As we called it, the light bread store. All the bread was cooked at home, and some—people could make the kind of bread they make in the bakeries at home. But yeah, all meals had to be cooked. Refrigeration was not very good. I remember the first Frigidaire refrigerator that you ever saw. We—you have a icebox, and you'd get a big block of ice [*laughs*] and put it in one cabinet, and you'd have things in the icebox. So you couldn't keep things for days on—you know, cook a meal now and eat four or five days off it. You had to cook every day. Yeah, so there was some cooking done every day. And most households did canning, you know. You—in the summer when things would be growing in abundance and you had the gardens and stuff, most households would—and mine was no different. My mother . . .

[00:30:37] SL: Did you help with the garden, and did you plant? Did you . . .

CM: Yeah.

SL: . . . weed and . . .

CM: Yeah, I don't—if I had to do it now, I don't know whether I could do it, but my mother knew what to do, and so we did it and we—she always had a garden. And she raised everything. Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, corn, squash, peas, beans. And she would cook cucumbers. She would can all this stuff. Then we would go out and pick—out in the wilds and pick berries and she—various kind of berries, and so there was always—she always had a lot of canned goods. And of course, you couldn't buy a lot of canned goods in the stores. It wasn't like it is now, where you have everything and a lot of prepared food. So—and same thing is true about buying meats. Now we didn't—my mother didn't raise livestock. We'd have—we had some chickens and stuff, but she didn't raise hogs and cows and things. She would usually buy that from other folk. So it wasn't hard. You always had some relatives or some friends that was doing this, and you'd get your beef and your pork from them. And you would—some of it'd be preserved, like ham and bacon and stuff.

[00:32:20] SL: Salted. Did the neighbors kind of help each other out that way or . . .

CM: Oh yeah, to some extent. People would help each other out.

Everybody didn't make a great big garden. My mother would—my mother always had a larger garden than most folk. And it usually was more than we could really eat and even she could can, so she was very generous in giving people out of the garden, and same thing was true about others. And if people who—they would do that more so with relatives than they would just generally with neighbors, you know. Relatives make sure they—if they butchered a cow or a hog, they'd make sure some of their relatives got some. And we had that sort of thing. But I grew up during the Depression, and I really didn't realize times were as hard as they were. [*Laughs*]

SL: Well, people were self sufficient . . .

CM: Yeah.

SL: . . . to begin with—didn't get as affected by those that . . .

CM: Yeah.

SL: . . . weren't self sufficient.

[00:33:35] CM: Well, see, the banks closed in 1930. That's what brought about FDIC now, you know. [*Laughs*] So with the insurance—see, all your accounts are insured now. But that was devastating to my family. They tell me—and of course, I certainly don't know, but I don't have any reason to doubt them because of their success at the time. My dad had a very

successful job. My mother had a successful business. They tell me that at the time the banks closed in 1930 that they had enough money in the bank to pay for my college education and my brother's college education. But when the banks closed, that left them devastated. They were broke, you know. They—and it was hard, hard times. It was hard, hard times. So the [19]30s, the early [19]30s from 1930 when the banks closed—the economy didn't start back buddin' some until about 1939. [00:34:40] And 1939 was when they were starting to get prepared for war. They started drafting in 1939. The—but from [19]30 to [19]39, it was hard, hard times. The banks closed. The economy was hard. And this was during the time that I was growing up. I was in school. It was—when I look back on it now, I realize how little we had. But we were all happy and didn't [*laughs*]—see, we didn't know we were as hard pressed and as depressed as we were until things started getting a lot better. But the home that I was talking about with the long porch—I guess that porch musta been—oh, trying to picture it in my mind now. It musta been twe—maybe fifty, sixty feet long . . .

SL: Wow!

CM: . . . all the way around the house. Oh, that was the thing. And

it had a great big . . .

SL: It's like a runway.

CM: A very big porch. I don't what we'd do all—why it was necessary to have all that porch. But the—this house that we moved into out there, this house I told you had eight or ten rooms to it—at least eight or ten rooms, maybe twelve rooms. It was a great big house. We moved into it in [19]27, 1927, and it burned to the ground in 1930.

SL: Oh my gosh! [*CM laughs*] How'd that happen?

CM: I really don't know. I don't know. I just . . .

SL: So . . .

[00:36:29] CM: I remember as a little six-year-old kid standin' out there with my parents seeing the house go up in flame. So the banks closed in 1930. We lost our home in—it burned to the ground in 1930. My dad and mother separated in 1930. So 1930 was a [*laughs*] . . .

SL: Wow!

CM: . . . was a awful year for me. So but . . .

SL: So where did you end up after that? I mean, did they rebuild on the same property or . . .

CM: Oh no, they never did. They never did rebuild on that property. My mom and dad split up, and we went—for a couple years we

went back and stayed with this aunt I was talkin' about where the fellow tried to comb my hair. [*Laughs*] [00:37:20] So I was in school by this time. I had started to kindergarten, and I started in regular school at six years old. They wouldn't let you go at five like they do now. You had to be six years old. I started regular school at six years old. I'd been going to Miss Hattie Benson's kindergarten. [00:37:42] Incidentally, Wiley Branton matriculated in Miss Hattie Benson's kindergarten. She was supposed to have had a highfalutin kindergarten, you know. And teach you your manners and your colors and your numbers. And when you got to regular school, you had a little advanced start.

SL: Right.

[00:38:03] CM: But I started to Missouri Street Elementary School, which was at the corner of 7th and Missouri Street in Pine Bluff, and my aunt lived at 7th and Virginia, which was just a block from Missouri Street. So it was not far for me to walk to school. After the house burned, we stayed with her for almost two years that I went to school, and so it was—that was enjoyable time, not having quite a walk 'cause after that we moved to 15th and State—well, on 15th Street between State and Alabama. And the school was at 7th and Missouri. It was about a mile and a

half or something like that.

SL: To walk.

CM: And we had . . .

[00:38:46] SL: And that's the way you got around—you walked.

CM: Oh yeah, you walked. Everybody walked everywhere. Nobody had any car.

SL: Right.

CM: We had—my dad had those cars—those—when I was a little kid. He had—he always had a car. But when my dad and mother separated, he went his way, and he took his car. And my mom not only did not have a car, my mother couldn't drive. My mother never learned how to drive in her life. But after—oh, I would say from about [19]30—[19]32—from about [19]32 on up until she passed in [19]91, she always had a car. [*Laughs*] But somebody else would drive it. She . . .

SL: Right.

CM: She always had a car.

SL: Never learned.

CM: Yeah. So we—she started her business back in 1932. The one that I guess she lost when . . .

SL: When the banks failed.

CM: When the banks closed . . .

SL: Yeah.

CM: . . . in [19]30.

[00:40:15] SL: Did—you know, you mentioned that she possibly had the best dry cleaning business around. Did she have white customers, too? Did that—was . . .

CM: I don't . . .

SL: Was that ever happening or . . .

CM: I don't really remember the—her having any white customers. That wasn't done much back at that time. Black businesses serviced black customers and vice versa. Everything was segregated. The—even the—well, not even—the normal thing—the cabs were segregated. Wiley Branton's folks ran a cab line named Branton's 98 Taxi. Telephone numbers didn't have but two digits. [*Laughter*] Their cab number was 9-8. The white cab number was 4-4, the police number was 2-2. [*Laughs*]. All these digits we got . . .

SL: Those were the days. Yeah.

[00:41:18] CM: Yeah, that—but it—no, it didn't do that. Now, I was saying we had cars from [19]32 on. In 1932, the primary use that was made of our car was picking up and delivering clothes. There were no panel trucks at that time, like your delivery trucks. What they would do—would—they would fashion a sign

that you would—it was—cut it the shape of the window. And you'd put your sign in the window, so that would be—that would make it a delivery vehicle—in the back window . . .

SL: I see.

CM: . . . you see. And then they would hang a rod across the thing and hang the clothes up in there for delivering. So this increased your business potential, to pick up and deliver.

SL: Deliver, yeah.

CM: Yeah, so that was the primary use of the car. She had a man that would drive it all day long. He was—he would pick up and deliver all day long, and then at night it became the family vehicle. If we had to go somewhere, she'd get somebody to drive it, or it would sit up there if we didn't have anybody to drive it. So . . .

[00:42:42] SL: You know, I want to change gears because I've probably only got you for a few more minutes.

CM: Okay.

SL: And I'd—I would like to come see you in Little Rock and spend some more time with you 'cause I—like I say, I'm kind of . . .

CM: Yeah, we're getting off to a slow start. You haven't gotten down to the thing that relates to the law school, so go ahead.

SL: Well, and I understand that, and we can get to that later, but I—

you know, in my talking with Edith Irby Jones . . .

CM: Yeah. I know her.

SL: . . . and with Janis Kearney, Daisy Bates comes up, and I know that you knew Miss Bates, and I just wonder—you know, the—of course, Edith Irby's story was that she got to the medical school and had the exact amount of money to enroll in the school, but they had not told her that she needed fifty dollars for the lab fee, and she had Miss Bates's name, and she went there, and Miss Bates gave her fifty dollars out of a jar in the back of a bookshelf or something and I . . .

CM: I wouldn't . . .

[00:43:53] SL: I just wonder—can you talk to me a little bit about Daisy Bates and . . .

CM: Oh, I knew Daisy well. I had known her—of her. They were high profile, so I knew her by reputation before I met her personally. But I guess I met Daisy personally and started socializing with her in [19]46. That was the year I finished college down at AM&N. And—but when I was in college, I had—I would come to Little Rock occasionally, and I knew Daisy, but after I finished college and started—I started teaching at Menifee. I don't know if you ever heard of Menifee. It's . . .

SL: Yeah.

CM: . . . it's on Interstate 40 just between—right outside of Conway. Nine miles this side of Conway. And I would end up going to Little Rock weekends to socialize. And I got in the same little social circles where Daisy was, and there was a lot of fraternizing and socializing in homes. And I was accepted in that little social circle. And I played cards with them and drank alcohol and danced and had a lot of things. And of course, when I got out of law school and came to Little Rock, I became involved with Daisy because the primary reason for me coming to Little Rock was to engage in activities to help implement the Supreme Court's decision on desegregation of 1954.

SL: Absolutely.

[00:45:43] CM: Incidentally, my license, my law license is dated same day as the Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board*, of [19]54, May 17, 1954. So I came to work with the Arkansas Council on Human Relations. I don't know whether you know—you probably have heard of that entity, the Arkansas Council on Human Relations. I won't try to go and describe what it all was now, but Daisy was with the NAACP, and of course, I had been involved with NAACP. I became president of the Pine Bluff chapter of the NAACP when I went back home to practice law. My first year after I got out of law school in [19]54, I went to

Pine Bluff, and Wiley Branton and I started a practice together.

SL: For about a year, right?

CM: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

CM: Yeah. Wiley had already started practicing. I went in with Wiley. And in fact, Wiley was the one—Wiley was on the board of the Arkansas Council on Human Relations, and they were looking for two executive directors. They wanted to exemplify what they were espousing, and they were espousing integration. So they wanted to show a face of integration. They wanted two executive directors, coexecutive directors, one black and one white. And in describing what the qualifications were, Wiley was saying, "Well, I've got a law partner down there. If this thing ain't gonna be but three years"—it was supposed to been a three-year stint.

SL: Right.

[00:47:20] CM: Say, "He might be interested. He doesn't have any attachments." So Wiley persuaded me to take this job at the Arkansas Council on Human Relations, which was supposed to been a three-year stint at best. And of course, I came to Little Rock in [19]55. I'd been in Pine Bluff about a year with Wiley, and I never left Little Rock. [*Laughs*]

SL: I know that. [*Laughter*]

CM: But when I came to Little Rock having—Daisy was state president of the NAACP. I had been president of a local chapter, and so I knew Daisy and had a lot of contact with her. And it was a normal thing for me to make contact with her and continue the thing. Of course, the Council's role—were a number of the other ?elements? in their organizations—the Council's role was in the same vein as NAACP's role was—you know, trying to help implement the decisions. So there was room enough and enough work for all the do-goodies, you know.

SL: Yeah.

[00:48:25] CM: The Councils and the NAACP and the Ministerial Alliances and Urban League and everybody called themselves trying to project something. Daisy was a number of things. She was a very, very attractive woman, and that always opens a lot of doors. [*Laughs*]

SL: Sure. Sure it did.

CM: She was a very attractive woman, and of course, society itself caters to requests from women with much more open-mindedness than they do from men. Society will—won't dismiss men—women as much. They're not gonna be as unkind. And of course, women take advantage of that. All women, white and

black.

SL: Well, now that's . . .

CM: They [*laughs*] . . .

SL: I'd probably agree with that. Yeah.

CM: Yeah, they take advantage of that. [*SL laughs*] So Daisy didn't mind espousing these unpopular causes, and she did a number of things. She was very supportive of Edith. See, Edith was originally from Hot Springs. Yeah.

SL: Mh-hmm. Did you know Edith?

CM: Oh yeah, yeah.

[00:49:47] SL: You know, Edith tells me that some evenings, she and three or four other folks would—guys, I think, would go out into local communities, out in the rural communities and talk to them about not having to accept secret but—separate but equal and not having to accept the used books and the potbelly stoves, and . . .

CM: Well, she may—that . . .

SL: . . . all that stuff.

CM: . . . that may have happened. Now, I—when Edith was here in school, I was teaching at Menifee, and I didn't have that much contact with her. But I knew—I know Edith, and I knew her—knew where she came from, knew her family. And of course,

she's Edith Irby. Irby was her maiden name. She's Edith Irby Jones. And of course, I know her husband, ?Jerry Berghart?—Dr. Jones was dean of students down at AM&N when I was a student down there. So I knew him down there. And he ended up marrying Edith, and course, since they've been in Houston—it's been many, many years since I've been to Houston, but two or three times I've gone to Houston, and I've socialized with them and been around 'em. But I don't see Edith enough to know. I know who she is. She know who I am, you know.

SL: Right.

CM: We know each other. But Daisy would've befriended her. And everybody that was matriculating at that particular time needed some help. Jackie was the next student after Silas—Jackie Shropshire . . .

SL: That's correct.

[00:51:28] CM: And Jackie—he had enough money to basically ?sufficiate? himself in college. His mother was a teacher there in the Little Rock school system. His daddy worked for the railroad. And of course, his daddy died, and he left enough money for these boys to go to school. Jackie was the baby of three brothers, and all of whom finished college. The oldest boy, Bruce, is a dentist. I think Bruce is deceased now. He never did

come back to Arkansas to practice. He was always in Atlanta. His second brother, Tom Bailey, ended up being one of the top execs at Miller Brewing Company.

SL: Okay.

CM: And Tom Bailey—they all went to Wilberforce—undergraduate school. And Tom Bailey got his master's degree—I think it was Columbia—I know he was in the New York area because we hobnobbed around together the summer of [19]50. He was in graduate school then, and we all hobnobbed around together the summer of [19]50. I had just finished my first year here, and I had gone to New York to try to earn enough money to come back to school. That's what I thought I was doing. [00:52:57] But Tom Bailey, who is Jackie's middle brother—Bruce was the oldest brother—was in New York that summer working on his master's degree in business, his MBA. And of course, when he got his MBA he went to work for Philip Morris.

SL: Okay.

CM: And Miller Brewing bought Philip Morris and so he—that's how he got transferred. But his first job was working with young adults in college campuses. And it was bold then to go around and try to get people to smoke—giving away free [*laughs*] cigarettes and this sort of thing. And it was unique in that he was black, but he

wasn't relegated to the black campuses. He went to all campuses, except he didn't go to the white campuses in the South. But all the . . .

[00:53:52] SL: This is about when—what years?

CM: Oh, beginning about [19]51 . . .

SL: Ah.

CM: 1951.

SL: Yeah.

CM: Yeah. [*Unclear word*] He was in graduate school working on his master's in business in the summer of [19]50 in New York. And I think he was matriculating at Columbia—might have been NYU, but I think he was at Columbia because I was tryin' to go to—I was thinkin' about changing—no, I wasn't thinking about changing. I never did think about changing. My aunt, the one that I told you moved to New York, she was tryin' to get me to—I was havin' a hard time tryin' to stay in school financially.

SL: Right.

CM: And she said, "If you go to school here, I'll pay all your expenses." And she sent me out to Columbia to check it out. I checked it out, and I could've got there, but her condition was that I would stay in New York and practice.

SL: Yeah.

CM: And my mother was in Pine Bluff and . . .

[00:55:04] SL: Well, she probably knew that you'd make more money in New York and . . .

CM: Oh yeah.

SL: Yeah.

CM: I probably would have been financially a lot more successful in New York than I could have been here, but I was too emotionally attached to my mother to think about abandoning her. And I knew my mother never was gonna leave. You know, so I . . .

[00:55:29] SL: You know, I'm getting some signals over here. They're probably wanting you out there pretty quick, but . . .

CM: Okay.

SL: I wanted to say one thing. I read that you were the guy that were driving the Little Rock Nine back and forth to school that first semester and . . .

Unknown: [*Unclear words*] change tape.

CM: Did he say he wants to change tape?

SL: Yeah.

[Tape stopped]

[00:55:51] CM: You ready?

SL: Is this rolling?

Unknown: Yeah.

CM: Okay.

Unknown: [*Clears throat*] Yeah.

[00:55:55] CM: At the particular time, I was working as field secretary for the NAACP. The job with the Arkansas Council had petered out. It was—well, I'll explain all that thing. Let me get to the—I was working as the executive secretary—I mean, field secretary for the NAACP, and we needed someone to ferry some of the kids to school. And for the first semester, after they were admitted back to school—you know, the first day they went [*unclear words*] out, and then when they admitted back to school—for the first semester, I drove five of the Little Rock Nine to school every day, picked 'em up every morning, took 'em to school, picked 'em up at school and took 'em back home. [00:56:41] Of the Little Rock Nine, there were six girls and three boys. The five that I drove were the three boys and two of the girls, Carlotta Walls and the little Ray girl. I'd—I picked 'em up at the house every morning and drove 'em back in the afternoon. That was—it took some courage because I would drop them off on the 14th side of the school, and they would get out of the car—I'd pull up to the curb and drop them off, and that's where I'd pick 'em up. And of course, this was an exit and an entrance—both those—the north end of the building on 14th

side and the south end of the building on the 16th Street side was where most of the school students went in rather than the front, facing Park Street, or the back, facing the athletic field. And there was a stream of kids going in and out, and they would heckle us every day. Throw rocks at the cars, spit on the car [*laughs*], do that sort of thing. And it was an exercise in patience to control yourself enough to not get out there and do something physical. And of course, back at that time, I call—I guess I was crazy—I—my attitude was that I was not afraid of anything that walks, swims, nor flies. But you had to exercise patience because—gad, I was, you know, thirty-some—a thirty-somethin'-year-old man, and I thought I had [*laughs*] . . .

SL: You . . .

CM: . . . had some muscle, and I thought I could whomp . . .

SL: Yeah.

[00:58:23] CM: . . . those little kids with doin' this sort of thing. Once or twice I let my emotions get the best of me, and I did snap back at them—you know, they—when they were spittin' on my car or throwing debris on the car. But they're not realizin'—you have to—but I guess it's—that's sacrilegious, so I started to say "Invictus" in that—"My head is bloody, but unbowed," so you keep going. People say in—Henley's "Invictus" is sacrilegious,

you know, "thank whatever gods may be," as if there is a doubt about there is a God. But that part about "My head is bloody, but unbowed" is symbolic of what you have to do many times to survive these kind of things. I guess it's time for the . . .

SL: It's time to go . . .

CM: Time to go out there.

SL: I can't thank you enough . . .

[Tape stopped]

[00:59:23] SL: . . . him—you probably didn't . . .

CM: Oh yeah.

SL: You did?

CM: Well, we were in college together. He went to school at AM&N. That was the only place most blacks could go to school at that time.

SL: That's right.

CM: Undergraduate school. And I knew Silas quite well. We were in school together. In fact, I got his room where he was staying over in Mrs. Joiner's. You know, we first had to stay off campus. We didn't have housing on campus for us.

SL: Right.

[00:59:48] CM: And I ended up with his room [*rattling*] and with his Black's Dictionary that [*laughs*]—I think I got it somewhere now.

Yeah. They've got these lined up in the order, supposedly, that they matriculated. And the only part of that that's in controversy is George and myself. George declares that he was first on the campus. We were freshmen together. I declare I was first on the campus, so that [*SL laughs*] should be . . .

SL: And was that . . .

CM: That should be . . .

SL: . . . by a matter of days or . . .

CM: Oh, same day. We both were freshmen together.

SL: Hours.

CM: Yeah, hours.

[01:00:25] SL: Yeah. But you had—you kind of came and went. You had to go earn money . . .

CM: Oh, I was here one year . . .

SL: . . . to finish . . .

CM: . . . and then was out a year.

SL: Yeah.

CM: Yeah, that's how I came. And that got me off track, and so I ended up coming back after I had taken the bar, and the second time I successfully passed it. But I was lucky enough on the time I passed it to make the highest score, which I think I made the first time, but I'm not [*laughter*]—not gonna argue that . . .

SL: There was some of that goin' on . . .

CM: [*Unclear words*]

SL: . . . back then . . .

CM: Yeah.

SL: . . . wasn't there?

[01:00:57] CM: I think so. I believe I did a better job. Yeah, well, this is awe inspiring. I didn't realize that it was a specific room. I remember the classroom we had up there. Fine. [*Laughs*] Six pioneers from—okay. Yeah, I knew all those fellows. And the only ones that are livin' now is George, myself, and George—the two Georges. George Howard and George Haley. Wiley's deceased. Jackie's deceased. And course, Silas didn't last.

SL: He was only about a year, wasn't he?

CM: No, not . . .

SL: Year and a half?

CM: . . . that long. He entered in February, and he passed in August.

SL: Nine months? Oh.

CM: Yeah, same year, in [19]48.

[01:01:46] SL: So that's only six months or so.

CM: Yeah, six months. Only six months.

SL: And you know, someone—I always heard it was some kind of respiratory thing, and maybe it was war related from . . .

CM: And that's—that really is true. Of course, the rumors were saying otherwise, when he [*laughs*] first passed after he'd been up here for six months. He—I think—it's my recollection that it was respiratory or something he contracted in—I say contracted—contacted or contracted—whatever—in North Africa. He was in North Africa with the ones that were fighting Rommel.

SL: Right.

CM: Yeah.

SL: Right.

CM: And he never did overcome it.

[01:02:36 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]