Interview with William Washington
April 4, 2004, Springfield, Illinois
Interviewer: Willie Mitchell

Mitchell: Testing. Today is Sunday, April 4, 2004; it's approximately a quarter till three. I'm here with Mr. William Washington. I am Willie Mitchell, the interviewer; and Mr. William Washington is the interviewee. Mr. Washington, how long have you been in Springfield?

Washington: Going on seventy-two years. I was born here.

Mitchell: Okay. Where did you grow up then?

Washington: Grew up approximately right where I'm at, on the east side of Springfield.

Mitchell: All right.

Washington: Lived here all this time. I got a home on the east side of Springfield.

Mitchell: Okay. Did you have any siblings?

Washington: I had five brothers and five sisters.

Mitchell: You had a pretty large family.

Washington: Yes.

Mitchell: Yes. May I ask how did your parents support you all?

Washington: Well, my mother was always – for the most part, cause of that many children, she was more or less a housewife. My father worked – first job that I could think that he ever had was on – what we called – was at the Ordnance Plant, out at – that was during World War II.

Mitchell: Okay.

Washington: And that was a pretty good job. He was – they were fixing – you know, whatever it was – making bullets, and bombs, and things. Then after that – see, this was during the time when the Depression was going on too – so he worked on WPA, which was like a workers' – whatever it is – association, where the government made up jobs. In other words, like projects like fix the roads, or – whatever it is. The government paid. This was to put people to work, because there were no jobs.

Mitchell: Right.

Washington: And he did that for most of – most of the time that I was growing up – on what they called WPA. Now you have to find out what that means, cause I can't think of it right now.

Mitchell: Okay.

Washington: But that was something like public aid, except they paid you for work, at that time. And just about every – everybody in Springfield, who was an adult, who was black, was in that program then – cause there was no jobs.

Mitchell: Right. Wow. What was, I guess, the community like, growing up in Springfield during that time?

Washington: Very segregated.

Mitchell: Okay.

Washington: But not in the sense where, you know, like – like black folks live here, and white folks lived here; because I was born and raised on – on that – I guess we call it the northern – northeastern part of Springfield, on streets such as – I was born on Mason Street, which was primarily a black street. And the next street over was an all-white street, so we were pretty close together. We went to the same school. We went to what we called Palmer Grade School then, which sits right now where there used to be a project. I was there before the project. Before the project, that was where basically most black folks lived; and they called that the Bad Lands. They were old houses; most of the businesses and most of the churches were sitting in a – in a radius of about six blocks.

Mitchell: Do you know why they were called the Bad Lands?

Washington: Cause that's where all the taverns, and that's where all the prostitution, and –

Mitchell: Oh, okay.

Washington: Cause everything was there. They were shacks, I mean _____(??) And next to that was groceries, stores, churches, and all that sort of – like a community. That was a nickname they'd given it; they called it the Bad Lands. And it stayed that way until – till the government came in again – and I can't think now what their program was, but anyway, they built the project – housing projects there; they took the place

over. Tore all the houses down; moved the churches. Where the churches are now – the Union Baptist Church sits over on 14th and Monroe Street – well it was sitting on 14th and Mason. St. John's was sitting in that same area. St. Paul AME Church – all the churches in that general area. When they tore down all that – all the houses there, they moved all the churches and all the businesses out of that area, until they got it built up. And most of them stayed where they were.

Mitchell: I see. Interesting. The black community back then: did they appear any way different from the community today – as far as like, I guess, getting along, or – you know –

Washington: Yeah. In Springfield, we had what we called a mixture – you know, like if – see now, when – when you talk about a black community, you're talking about where the cream has been taken off. Everybody that goes to school, or goes – or gets a good education, moves out. And the only persons you find in a black community are those that can't get out, don't have the jobs. This is the reason you have the dope and stuff too, see, cause that's the only thing that they can do, and that's the only thing they know. And Springfield was a community where some people that – that left out of this community – families – they went on to be doctors and lawyers, and everything else; but they left. But when I was growing up, they were all here – see. Then they decided that – you know, most of them went away to school, cause we didn't have a four-year college here; what we had was a junior college, which they called the Springfield Junior College – which is now Springfield College in Illinois, up north. And so, you know, you had to go somewhere if you wanted to get a four-year education; so most blacks that amounted to anything, that had a good education, went on. They didn't come back. And then, later on, some of these that didn't go on, that got – got a high school education and maybe some college; they'd work for the state – places like that. They no longer lived in the black community. Now you find this all over – everywhere. They no longer live in the black community. They moved out into – in Springfield, they moved out west, or further out southeast. My own children, you know. Because this is where they didn't want to be. This is where all the trouble comes from. But you see, I blame it on those people that moved out of this neighborhood. I never did – I've been living in this same neighborhood now, married, for over forty-five years. If more of them had done that – you see, a person's got to have somebody that they could at least look to see what they're doing. If you're living next door to a – to a boy who is – or to a family where the father works for the state, the mother's a schoolteacher – this inspires you to do something. But if you live next door to a drug dealer, and a drunkard – then this is what you expect. And when you come outside to play, and you see five or ten fellows standing on a

corner selling drugs, that's what you want to be – cause that's where they're making the money. And nobody else is working. Another thing too, is the school is the same way. Most of these – most – this is after I got grown up – and most of these kids nowadays, they really don't have any peer group, or no family group to look to. The family is doing what these people are doing in the streets. So this is what they think is – is – is – you know, that's – everybody's doing that. I've had – had kids come into this place, and I'd ask them: How come you're not in school? They'd say: Well, they – this is an old story – you know, Moms don't get them up, so they don't go to school. And sooner or later, they drop out. And don't blame it on Springfield, because this happens *all* over the United States. Okay.

Mitchell: I understand. You think that stems back from, I guess, during the time of Depression when it was hard to find jobs, and people wanted to go school, and therefore had to leave?

Washington: Mm-mm.

Mitchell: Or how does that – this problem today stems from – what does that come from?

Washington: This stems from – from blacks wanting to better themselves, which is – nothing wrong with that. But see: what they don't realize – got to realize is that there's been a lot of other groups – ethnic groups – that bettered themselves, but didn't desert the community as a whole. And here's where the slave syndrome comes in too: they figure that the only way to better themselves is to go and live like whites live – out in a white neighborhood, doing the things that white – get you a new car, get you a new house, go into debt – this is the way they do it. They could do the same – my point is, they could do the same thing cheaper on this side of town. Build a home – some of – most of their parents – I bought homes from some of their parents – from their parents. Some of those same kids could have built a home on this side of town, saved themselves money in the long run, and also been someone that someone could conform themselves to be like them. In other words, they would serve as a – as a role model for somebody else. But no, most of those people that could be role models are not here. See, they had role models to start with. So mostly it's the desertion; that's what I call it. I told my kids the same thing I'm telling you; they live out in Chatham, and places like that now. It's because they just figure that the best way to do is to get away from this. It'll never change – nowhere in the United States – until some of those same blacks – that's what I call the cream of the crop – comes back, and lets some of these people know there's another way to do it, besides – you know, how they're doing it now.

Mitchell: I believe I'm like in that same group of people who have thought about relocating, and the reason that I'm looking at is because – I mean safety concerns. Do you think that plays a part in it, or is that a legitimate reason?

Washington: It might be a legitimate reason; but the only way to change it is to change the way things are in this side of town. Most of those people – these people have just – they're not the same as you and I. They just have been – they didn't have any – any upbringing in the first place; they don't respect – they don't even respect their own family. So – see – a person has to see somebody doing differently than what they're doing, before they'll make a change. If all of it is for – why do you think people sell drugs? They sell drugs because this is a way to make money; and there's no other way to make money, that they see – here on this side of town. So most young fellows, when they get to be seventeen, eighteen, nineteen – and you got to have some money in your pocket – you either go out and rob, or something – I don't care who you are; they find this is an easy way to do it, so they sell drugs. And they make a lot of money; then they go to jail. That's why the jail – the prison's – full of them now.

Mitchell: Yeah, I can –

Washington: Because they think they're beating the – but see, the – white man got them all down; and sooner or later, he sweeps through and gets them all – sooner or later. That's why they're all packed into them places – most of them drugs – most of it's drugs, selling drugs.

Mitchell: Yeah. I can see it.

Washington: Oh yes. But it's a way of making money. I mean I don't doubt them for it; because if I were in the same situation, and had the same background they had, where I didn't know any better, and this is all I – that's all I know; and I went out to make a dollar, and I see this guy's making five, and I'm making one, selling bottles; I'm going to start selling drugs along – right – right side along him.

Mitchell: Right. Right with them. As a youth, I'm assuming you hadn't – or had you experienced anything of this nature – or things that probably have led to what's going on now – growing up, or going to high school ____(??)?

Washington: I went to a white high school. I went to Lanphier High School, which was – in those days, there was probably about twenty blacks in the whole school; the rest were white. And there weren't no differences as far – you know, you sat in the same classroom, and you did the same

studying; but see, most blacks – I don't know the reason why – I came from a family where there was great religious stressing – education – I – when I went to school, I went to school to study; I didn't go to play. Even when I was going to school ____(??) and I used to wonder how come all of my friends were what they call – what did they call that class now? – they were all in the same – they were all in the same class – ____(??) (laughs). This is the truth. I'm not telling any lies.

Mitchell: Okay.

Washington: What did they call that class now? Well, in other words: they put everybody that – that was dumb – the dumb class. And mostly it was – it was ninety and nine-tenths black. And a lot of the people that I – a lot of the people that – you know, my same age – this is grade school – I was wondering why they wasn't in my class too. They just didn't study. They didn't want to study, so they put them all in there. Then there's another thing too: the white man, back in those days – you didn't worry about how it looked; if you didn't want to do something, then he put you in a group, and let you do nothing together.

Mitchell: Oh, I see. Yeah.

Washington: These people graduated; but as far as I know, very few of them went past the ninth grade in high school then, because most of them dropped out, and got jobs, or something like that. But myself, because – and I'm just saying for myself – cause all my brothers – I've got a brother who's – he's retired now, but he was a scientist in the Houston space program; and I got another brother who's a banker; another brother who's a policeman. So there must have been some incentive somewhere. And all of us have a religious background; went to church whether we wanted to or not – where most kids didn't – you know, that lived right around me – you know, just like everybody else. But we were just told to do these different things, and – my mother, the main one, would make sure that we did them. So when I went to school, I didn't go to play; cause my mother came behind me, and she'd ask how am I doing? You know. You know, and so if I wasn't doing right, you know, I'd get a whipping, of course. So when I got to high school, it's the same thing. I was an honor roll student. _____(??) because I thought that's the way you did it – you know, you did your best when you was there. Most blacks didn't come up with that same thing; they just went there because they had to go; and as soon as they were able, they quit and got a job.

Mitchell: So it sounds like there wasn't much concern or pride in doing well, or trying not to flunk out.

Washington: They did the best they could with what they had. When you started grade school doing nothing, by the time you get to ninth grade, you're tired of doing nothing. You know, it was ____(??) so you go get your job. And then most of the women – most of the girls were pregnant by the time they were in the ninth grade, you know.

Mitchell: Wow, that's interesting.

Washington: Yeah, most of them were. I could – in my class, anyway, I could – they dropped out one by one. There was a handful that – that went on. But most of them got – got pregnant and got married, or – you know, or started raising a family.

Mitchell: Yeah. It sounds like the religious influence was very powerful in your life.

Washington: Always has been, yes. Um-hmm. I did my share of everything though, to tell you the truth. But as the Bible says – you know, once you're in it, you'll always return to it – sooner or later. Cause those – that's what you call your conscious – your moral consciousness, keeping you on the right side. When I came back from – this was like in 1954, I came back from Korea – had the same fellows, you know, that I grew up with; and they were around here – I was right up – used to be a black business section uptown too, you know – they were up there robbing people, you know – then it was in plain – right out in plain sight –

Mitchell: When you say uptown, what – what street range did you say that is – or what area of town?

Washington: So that was between 8th and 11th, mostly on Washington Street – some of it spilled over to Adams. The main thing was most of the places like businesses: such as the taverns, of course, restaurants, night clubs – everything was – was in that area. I think the blacks had about three – well, two hotels I know of: the Ford Hotel, and – there was another hotel, right in the same [area] – the black run businesses. That all was taken care of – white man took care of that.

Mitchell: And you said once you came back from Korea, some of the guys used to hang around where –

Washington: Yeah, hang around there, and – you know, I was wondering why they did that, see because even when I – I've always had a job – you understand what I'm saying – so I didn't ever see any reason to take anybody else's money. But they made a sport out of it, you know. White folks – grabbing white folks, and taking their money, and stuff like that.

Mitchell: Well like pickpocketing, or something, or –

Washington: No, strong arm. Strong arm robbery, is what it amounts to. But back in those days, it wasn't as – you know, they didn't do anything as much, cause – you know, they didn't do anything really. Cause we had black policemen then too, see, in Springfield. And they just probably went along with the program; I don't know what it was, but nothing was ever done to none of these fellows. And I was wondering why they – you know, it just seemed strange to me that – they kept doing this, why didn't they get them a job? You know.

Mitchell: Right. Where did you attend church, growing up?

Washington: St. John's AME Church. And then, of course, I dropped out after – you know, after I came back from Korea.

Mitchell: Where was that located at – St. John's AME Church? Or is it still –

Washington: It's still located at the same spot. But they built a new church, but the old church is right there. That church has been there since 1940-something, when they moved it from over on Mason Street – 14th and Mason. But it's been on – it's on 15th and Capitol right now. And I was raised there. And I probably would have stayed there, you know, but my way of life – I dropped out of the church business then – way back then – when you're a young man, you ain't got time for that, you know. And then when I got married, and started having children, I decided I'd better do something to show something – somebody something.

Mitchell: Were you active in the church, growing up, in any way?

Washington: Well, I went to Sunday School, and – and I went to – what do you call it – the young folks' whatever-it-is, in the evenings –

Mitchell: Bible study.

Washington: We studied [the] Bible, and all the stuff like that. And I stayed in that for a while, you know – till I became a man. Changed when I went in the Army – see that was the thing. Got drafted. When I came back, you know I didn't have time for that then.

Mitchell: Right. I have spoken to a lady named Bettie Allen, and she mentioned that you once sung in church – part of a quartet?

Washington: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I've always sung. I'm still singing, to tell you the truth. But yeah, we had a quartet. In fact, the quartet also was a

popular quartet back in those days too; you know, we sang in the taverns, and stuff like that.

Mitchell: Did it have a name? You guys have a name?

Washington: Oh – boy, boy, boy. At one time, it was the Harmony Four.

Mitchell: The Harmony Four. Okay.

Washington: Then when we went popular, the name changed; but I can't think of the name now. But we were singing mostly songs by – you've never heard of the Dominoes or the Drifters, or any of them people.

Mitchell: I've heard of them vaguely, but – (laughs)

Washington: Yeah, that was in the '50s and the '60s. And we sang their songs, and – this was in order to make some money, you know. Oh yeah.

Mitchell: Right. Was that like local to Springfield, or did it go beyond Springfield?

Washington: Most of it was local.

Mitchell: Yeah. That sounds interesting.

Washington: Then – really to do anything, see you had to be in the big city, you couldn't – nothing happens here. Nothing happened back then – in the music world.

Mitchell: Right. So you guys sung also gospel, ____(??), and R&B, at the time?

Washington: Yeah, we was on the radio at one time too, you know – here in Springfield, yeah – the regular Sunday morning program.

Mitchell: Did they have any black radio stations during that time?

Washington: Oh no, no, no, no, no. No, no. During those days – we were doing good; I think we had one – one disc jockey, I believe – they didn't call it that then, but – he was at one station; that was the only person that I'd ever known of in my days that was on the radio – a black man. His name was Woodson – Eugene Woodson.

Mitchell: Okay. Wow. I was also informed that you had started a paper in Springfield. Is that right? What inspired that?

Washington: Well, because every time I wrote a letter to the editor of the *Journal-Register,* you know they'd change the words around, and make it to suit their purpose – oh, they did that stuff, back in those days, like that. So I just said, well, I'm going to – I'm going to start a paper, and say what I have to say. I did it mostly for the editorial; and I used to write a lot of good editorials – to say what I have to say, and nobody can change my words, or nothing like that. And I've been putting that paper out – I'm still putting that paper out – for thirty-one years.

Mitchell: What's the name of it?

Washington: *Springfield's Voice.*

Mitchell: *Springfield's Voice.*

Washington: You've probably never even seen one. Thirty-one years. And in 1972 or three, I couldn't even get that paper printed here in town. See, the *Journal* wouldn't do it. But I – but I could understand their part, you know, because they were a daily paper, and they had business of their own, and so they didn't have time; you know they couldn't fool with me, with the paper. But they had what they called – I think it was the *Springfield Sun,* and it was a weekly paper; and they had these big web presses, and they'd just sit from one week to the next, you know. And so I thought – you know, they'd make a chance to make some little money on their press – they really didn't want nothing to do with it.

Mitchell: Wow. Why do you think that is?

Washington: Beats me. I guess it's probably because I was a black man; they didn't want nothing to do with me. Then I went around to the – to the individual press companies, like Williamson's Press, and – but then it would have – see, if you don't have what they call a web press, then it becomes expensive when you're doing this stuff sheet-by-sheet and hand-by-hand; and most of these – these general press companies around town, that's the way they do it; and it would be – the cost would be prohibitive. So I had to go and search around the state, to see where I could find somebody that had a set-up. I found a place in Astoria, Illinois. This guy did papers for just about any – see you wonder about how these other little towns, like Auburn and Chatham, and all these little towns – you know they have these little newspapers too – how could they afford it, if they had to do – But they took this same – see I'm just – I was – nobody ever told me that, I just had to go inquire till I found out for myself. This man, he made a business out of doing all these small papers. He had a plant in Astoria, Illinois.

Mitchell: Where is that, in relation to Springfield? Like north, west, or –

Washington: It's about – well, you see it's really – it's northwest. In fact, it's fifteen miles west of Havana, Illinois. And the man has made that into a million dollar business. Now he does Sangamon – not Sangamon State, but University of Illinois-Springfield's papers; and their – that thing, they put out, you know, for the classes, and all that stuff. He does those; he does them for Lincoln Land. He does just a myriad of – and when I first started with him, he was like me – you know, just trying to make a buck. He's dead now, on top of that. But you know, that shows you what ____(??) – that's the reason I went sixty miles; the paper came out every two weeks; and it was cheap. It was relatively cheap. And that's the reason why I still go there, is because I couldn't get it done any cheaper anyplace else. You know. I've had offers for people that – you know, want to do it closer, but they charge much, much more too.

Mitchell: Wow. It sounds like you are – or were – comfortable expressing yourself, when writing those editorials.

Washington: Oh, I never had no problem with that. No problem with that at all.

Mitchell: What topics did you write about, when you sent them to the paper at that time, that altered your words?

Washington: Well, most of them were personal things, like I'd write a letter to the editor – like one time I went to – to see about a job at the A & P, that was a grocery store – a big supermarket – as big as it was back in them days, it wasn't as big as these things now, but you know, it was big enough; and they give you a test. And I think I made like a hundred and twenty on the test, and you had to have a hundred to pass. And it was for like bagging groceries, and stuff like that. And I never got a word – a peep out of them – no way.

Mitchell: So they had – you had to take a test to do something of that nature?

Washington: Oh yeah. So I wrote to them, and I said: Now how then – and plus I had two years of college, on top of – at that time, too. I had another job, but I'm always looking for jobs; I had two or three jobs at all times. And so I wrote, and – you know, saying: How is it a place can have applications that they need help – a person goes in there who has two years of college, gets a hundred or hundred and fifteen – I forget what – on the test – and hundred was supposed to have been the maximum – and you never hear from them. Well when that letter came back, I couldn't even recognize it. Things like that. It was just personal things then, see – personal letters. I wouldn't write about no politics, or anything – policies, or nothing like that. But then when I started in, I started in on – most of the things that I wrote when I started my

newspaper was about the black community as a whole, like ministers and everybody else that wasn't doing what they were supposed to be doing.

Mitchell: How did you distribute them?

Washington: Hand. Started out by hand. I – when I really first started, I had little newsboys, and all of that rigamarole, and I sent them out. Once a week, we'd go; and I'd take a bunch of them over to the project, and we'd run through the project – which was about – I guess there's probably about two or three thousand people lived in the project then; and we just swooped through the project, selling them – twenty-five cents a piece. And they'd make some money, and then I wasn't that much interested in making money, because I had a job – I had two jobs when I was doing that, see. But it was just – you know, get the thing done – and I made a lot of enemies too, back in them days, because I didn't spare any feelings, cause most of them weren't doing what they were supposed to be doing anyway.

Mitchell: The articles: did you have help writing them, or –

Washington: No, no, no.

Mitchell: You wrote everything yourself?

Washington: Oh yes. Remember I told you I was – I had two years of college. I probably would have – I probably should have been something else, but see, I got married as soon as I got out of Springfield Junior College. There was no college here, and I had to get a job to support my family; so that was the end of that. And all my other brothers had degrees, you know – because they didn't stay here. I was the only brother that stayed in Springfield. (laughs) But my mother was here; that's the reason why – I had to look after her; my father died, so – that was one of the reasons why I stayed.

Mitchell: I see. How was it, I guess, being married at that time?

Washington: What do you mean?

Mitchell: How did life change for you, living in Springfield, after being single and being in college?

Washington: Well, nothing really changed, except that I got more serious about life itself, here in Springfield. And that's probably when I started doing a lot of things, you know, like – that I should have been doing before, but I didn't do. See, a person who hasn't got any responsibilities

doesn't have too much incentive to do anything for anybody except themself. But when you get responsibilities that means you've got to start branching out, for a lot of different reasons. One of them was going to church. I mean I had to go to church all the time, cause I wanted to set an example. That's the word I'm trying to find. See you got to accept – if you want somebody to do something the way you want it done, then you got to show it. Just like I didn't *send* my kids to Sunday School; I took them – me and my wife both, you know. And we lived on South Grand; didn't have any cars back in those days, we used to walk. That's like seven or eight blocks. Summer and winter, I was carrying one, and she was carrying one – and stuff like that, you know.

Mitchell: That's commitment.

Washington: Yeah, well she was religious, I wasn't. (both laugh) But I did it because I knew it would set a good example for them. So I had no trouble with all of my children going to church, cause this was natural as eating a piece of bread. See that's the way it has to be done. All my children, I also taught them piano, drums, guitar, organ – so they played for the church too, when they got grown. They – you know, when they got ages like fourteen, fifteen or sixteen; they all played for the church.

Mitchell: I see. How many children did you have?

Washington: Four. Two boys, two girls.

Mitchell: Did you experience a lot of racism during the time growing up, or anything of that nature?

Washington: Yeah really. I can remember when I was like ten or eleven; I was selling newspapers, you know. I think I was selling the *Chicago Daily News,* or one of those papers like that. Right across 8th Street, on Washington, there was a lot of white taverns and things too, which – you know, that's where I was trying to sell them at, you know. I wasn't allowed to go into any of those places. Get chased out if you went into those places. If you go to the movies, you have to sit upstairs. This is in Springfield.

Mitchell: This was like a law, or something?

Washington: No, no laws; it was just unspoken law, you know. So most – all the black folks sat upstairs, and the white folks downstairs. This was – this was just – there wasn't any law says you had to do it. But see – and so eventually, it broke down, you know, as time went by – like one – one

proud black went to sit down there, and pretty soon some more sit down there, and it was all done. But when I was growing up, everybody was upstairs – in most of the theaters in Springfield. And that's the way it was; it was an unspoken thing. See, there really wasn't any segregation here in Springfield. But you didn't go to white churches either, you know. There's no law – was no law against it, but you had your own churches. The schools were always desegregated, you know; there was always black and white – probably cause they didn't want to build a black school for black folks, you know; and so it was easier to do that. Oh. (sighs) That's the way it was, you know. And there wasn't any spoken thing that said: You can't go here, and you can't go there. But most of us didn't. Even when – like that skating rink – and I was seventeen or eighteen then – they had special nights where blacks would get into a van – you know where Knight's Action Park is now?

Mitchell: Yes.

Washington: Well that used – well this skating rink's still out there, I think. Well, a guy named Boston Richie used his van to carry blacks out to the skating rink on a certain night. And that was the only night that they went to skate. And we'd all be out there skating; and we were out in the man's place. And same place – I think it's the same – where it's at now. Then he'd load us all back, and bring us all back into town.

Mitchell: And that was just somehow known; it wasn't like posted like, such and such a night is –

Washington: No, there was no postings; but that was our day, and no other time– it was night really. That was our night; and you didn't go out there any other time. And that's the way most things – even the – Lake Springfield. See they had a white beach and a black beach.

Mitchell: Oh, did they?

Washington: Well, *yes*. You ever been to Chatham? No, you haven't been to Chatham.

Mitchell: I haven't been to Chatham.

Washington: Well, when you cross the bridge, going like you're going out 6th Street, going towards St. Louis –

Mitchell: Yeah.

Washington: When you cross the big bridge out there, they used to call that – that used to be the black beach. I've forgotten the name of it now. But it was right before you get to Chatham. Chatham is down – further down the road; but you get off the bridge, you go under the thing, and – it's still there. And it was a – it was a – in fact, the black beach was better than the white beach. No, no, no really, it was. And you know where the white one is, over there where they've got Henderson's –

Mitchell: The zoo, or something.

Washington: Zoo, and all that stuff. That was the – that was the white beach. The black beach was over there. But we had – ours was much better, I thought. Reason why I know that it was, because as soon as – they integrated it, when they started building all those white clubs down there, you know – like – what do you call it?

Mitchell: I don't know.

Washington: I can't ____(??) either, but they're private beaches now – you know, private clubs down there on the waterfront. And everybody swims, and does everything now, over there at the main one. But before that, nobody was over there; everybody was over at the black beach – colored beaches are what they called them – colored beach, back in them days. And it was just – that's the way it was. Nobody said you couldn't do this, but this was – this is your beach, and this is our beach. That's the way it was.

Mitchell: Were there like – did you see much of interracial dating, or anything of that nature during that time?

Washington: Not back in those days – very little. There was maybe a handful. I mean this was on the QT; there wasn't no outright walking down the street, or nothing like that. And most of it was – you know, back doors, and all that stuff like that. No, not like it is now.

Mitchell: Yeah. As far as like the black businesses: were they pretty much, I guess, booming – for lack of a better term?

Washington: Yeah. Much – much more than they are now. Oh yes. We used to have a big nightclub out here. Oh, I'll tell you where that is too. You know where Southeast High School is?

Mitchell: Yes.

Washington: As you go – continue south about a block or two, there's a little park that sits on the east side; that used to be a black nightclub area, out

there. Oh yeah. That was big time out there then. It was owned by a black man too. Oh, that's where you went after hours, to party. But see, they took that too. (laughs) And all these businesses that we had downtown – what did we call that now? – where the government comes in and supposedly makes it better?

Mitchell: The capitol? That place?

Washington: No. You know where Horace Mann Insurance Company is now?

Mitchell: Yes, I do.

Washington: That was the heart of the black businesses right there. They came in and paid these black businesses; tore them down; and you see what happened to it – disappeared, everything disappeared. See: and this probably was the same thing all over the country, this way; because the government was – was doing this – urban renewal, that's what they called it. Urban renewal. But what it does: they give you a little money, but still, it takes away your fortitude, your whatever it is that – you know, that makes you a man. And these businesses just went plumb out of sight – all of them, not one or two. And in turn, they built these corporations down there. Sold the land to them dirt-cheap. All that land down there? That's where black businesses were.

Mitchell: Wow. I was just thinking it was like on South Grand and 11th – that area.

Washington: No, no, no, no, no. All the way down – I'll tell you – you know where that public aid building is down there, right across from Horace Mann, and going east?

Mitchell: Yes.

Washington: That was all black businesses. Cross the railroad, where they had a Wabash tavern – but it was owned by black folks. All that was – everything there was owned by blacks.

Mitchell: Wow.

Washington: Oh yeah.

Mitchell: Urban renewal changed all those things.

Washington: They had a Savoy, which was big enough to have dances in there, in one of the halls – the Savoy Hall?

Mitchell: Yeah.

Washington: That's where some of the big names used to come – during my day, used to come there. And everything was black-owned. But see, blacks sold out too, for a little copper. Cause they were almost forced out by – by the government, supposedly to make things a little better. But what it did is just knock the black man out of all his businesses.

Mitchell: I can see that.

Washington: Now this is just not Springfield, this has happened – happened just about everywhere; because these government funds went to every town that ever – you ever thought about.

Mitchell: Yeah.

Washington: I hope I'm helping you with all that I'm rambling here.

Mitchell: No, you are helping. I'm not quite sure of what to ask next. Is there anything in particular that comes to mind that you would like to share?

Washington: I can tell you about some places. You know where the Boys Club is now – Boys and Girls Club?

Mitchell: Is that off of South Grand?

Washington: No, that's right down here on 15th and Monroe.

Mitchell: Okay. I'm familiar with the area. Yeah.

Washington: That used to be the place where all the teens used to be. Used to call it Douglass Community Center; they had a big building there. That's where they had a basketball court, and all that stuff like that.

Mitchell: Uh-huh. Inside the building?

Washington: No, the basketball court was outside. But in the building – we used to go in there and they'd have hobbies, and we'd play cards, and whatever you do when you're young; I've forgotten now. But all these things like that. And the city paid for – for the directors, and stuff like that. They took that all away too. That land was sold – was given to Boys and Girls Club. See that was like – I'm not talking about the Boys and Girls Club – but see that was a white folks organization; that's not a black man's organization – even though they handle, you know, mostly black kids. But that was – only reason why they got it was because they had a group behind them – I forget what they call

them now – ABC Club, which is a white club that sponsors it – the Boys Club. See, the city would do a lot of things if it's white. But if it's black-owned, you have trouble getting monies out of them down there. And that's always the way it's been. But anyway, they took away a place where a lot of teenagers used to be; so they had nowhere else to go. Used to have sponsors – cause I played on their teams: softball teams; I played in the recreation league, and all that stuff like that. That all disappeared.

Mitchell: That sounds like it was a – a positive thing in the community, something constructive. Did that help you in any way?

Washington: Hmm?

Mitchell: Did that help you in any way?

Washington: Oh yes. I can remember my first experience away from home, was going down there to preschool. They used to have a preschool there; that was way even before it was thought about in any other place. You'd go there before you went to kindergarten, and it gives you a chance to intermingle with kids, you know. And I remember going there then. So, you know, it was a good thing – a good thing.

Mitchell: That's about all the questions that I have.

Washington: Okay. (both laugh)

Mitchell: I really enjoyed your time. And that concludes our interview.

(break in recording; then interview continues)

Washington: White folks don't have the same thing – seems to me like you'd have more white in that class –

Mitchell: That's what I would think too.

Washington: – since the good majority of the population, you know – So I went to the school board, they said – took it out there to – Miss Lowder was her – was the name Yoder – Mary Lowder, or something like that – she was – she was in charge of those middle-aged handicapped, and all that stuff like that. And I asked her the same questions, and she was saying: That's not true. I said, "Well the man out there told me this, and he's your deputy director, you know." And – on that time, there was a black man that was on the – on the [school] district board – they're useless – I say that anybody that gets out there that don't speak his mind, is useless. He sided with the white folks. And I'm not going

to tell his name, cause I – you know I won't get into that. But he was a black man; he knew what was happening down there, and he wouldn't go along with what I had to say. They got that changed though out there. I could tell you some more things that – I'm not going to say I, cause that 'I' gets boring sometime – that *we* have done – we'll put it like that – because of just personal interactions. You can get a lot of things done if you just go and get in the man's face. But if you sit and wait for it to get done, it'll never get done. Okay, you can go. (Both laugh.)

(end of interview)