Interview with Timuel Black

VR2-A-L-2009-027.1

Interview # 1: August 11, 2009

Interviewer: Mark DePue

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

DePue: Today is Tuesday, August 11, 2009. My name is Mark DePue; I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and today is a special day. This is the first time I've ever had a chance to interview one of the pioneers of oral history. (laughter) We're sitting in the First Unitarian Church in Hyde Park in Chicago, Illinois with Timuel Black. Good afternoon, Mr. Black.

Black: Yeah, and to give it a little more color, right next to the University of Chicago campus.

DePue: It's a gorgeous neighborhood, I have to say. It's my first opportunity to actually be in this neighborhood. It's wonderful—not bad on a nice August afternoon, and it's not all that hot for August either, is it? (laughter) Well, let's start at the beginning as we tend to do: when and where were you born?

Black: I was born December 7, 1918, in Alabama. In Birmingham, Alabama. My mother and father already had two children, and so, the claim comes that when I was born, that I looked around in Birmingham, Alabama eight months after I was born, and at that time, what I saw I didn't like, so I said to my mother, "I'm leaving here." So, I brought my family to Chicago when I was eight months old—my mother and daddy, and my brother and sister, who were older.

DePue: What were they doing in Birmingham before they moved?

Black: My mother was a housewife. My dad worked in Bessemer Steel [company], which was located right outside of Birmingham.

DePue: Bessemer Steel?

Black: Bessemer Steel, yeah. Or, originally, that was British, as you probably know. He was working in the steel mill. All of his parents were slaves. He had worked as a sharecropper, and then he worked in the coal mines in Alabama. So, he worked in the fields, then—in a sense, it might seem like a promotion—he worked as a laborer in the coal mines there, and from there, to the steel mill.

DePue: Well, they moved to Chicago at not necessarily the most opportune time. Wasn't this about the time that the race riots were going on?

Black: Moved to Chicago a month after the race riots [Chicago Race Riots of 1919], and that will give our listeners an understanding of how vicious life was in the South, even when you were not poor. See, the house where I was born still stands. It's been modernized, but the frame and all are still there. So it wasn't poverty that drove many people who were the children of former slaves to leave; it was a desire to be free, it was a desire to be able to vote. There was a desire to have better schools for their children. That's what drove them out of the South, and that's what drove my parents. My mother particularly because, as my mother tells the story—my dad didn't tell the story—she was frightened by the fact that my daddy was a tough guy, and he didn't take much from anyone. So, the race riot was going on, and many of the soldiers from World War I—black soldiers—were returning to Chicago, and they broke in the Armory, which is located still at 35th & Giles. The school wasn't at Giles at that time, named for the general, Major Giles, I think, who was an officer.

DePue: Was that also the Bronzeville Armory? Is that one and the same?

Black: It's now considered the Bronzeville Academy. Yeah, Bronzeville Military Academy [Chicago Military Academy at Bronzeville]. As I said, of course, that building has a lot of famous things. Benny Goodman came together and wrote his Benny Goodman trio. Joe Lewis came from winning the championship in 1937 and came down the street, and we had a good time together.

DePue: But that's a little bit ahead of our story.

Black: Yeah. We're going back to that era. So, my family moved to Chicago despite the fact that they knew there was a race riot. We had relatives and friends who were already here, and we were met—according to my mother and dad—at the Twelfth Street station, which was a stop for the Illinois Central Railroad, which went from New Orleans up to Chicago, and then there were transfers—we were met by both of those friends, and guided, sort of, how to live in the big city, a real big city. Now, Birmingham is not a small town, and one of the

proofs of that was very few people who lived in Birmingham at that time who had brought their families to the North had more than three children. They were urbanized; children cost money in the city. In the rural areas, they bring in—theoretically—a little money, so...

DePue: They're another hand on the farm.

Black: Yeah, that's what it amounts to, so there were only small families, in terms of numbers. Fortunately ours was small because when we moved into the city, we moved into an area that was then mixed racially, not very far from where I live now—49th & Drexel. 49th & St. Lawrence is about four blocks west of where I live now. That's where we originally moved. So, my mother told a story that when we moved into the apartment building, which was predominantly white, six-flat, three-bedroom apartments, that her white neighbor told her, "If anybody bothers you, you just bring your children here now." Because there was anticipation that there might be a continuation of the riot—if that was anticipated, men who were working in the factories: stock yard, steel mill, and other—were not allowed to leave the plant where they were working, whether they were white or black. So, this neighbor told my mother, "You and the children, just come on here. Don't worry." That was the first time my mother had that kind of a pleasant experience with a white.

Now, another actor at that time was men, particularly, who were attracted to come to Chicago, were encouraged to do that by *The Chicago Defender*. "Come North, young men," said Mr. Abbot, who would send *Chicago Defender* newspapers South to southern cities to encourage blacks—relatively young blacks—to leave the South and come North. The kind of stories that he would tell about the difference with the people… At the same time, the employers and the manufacturers and the stock yards and steel mills, they were trying to force off the unions that were beginning to organize—the Steel Workers', the others. Mostly the people who were beginning to organize were from the urban areas of Europe, who had been rural and they moved to the urban areas, learned how to organize against the industries that were developing, then left and came to places like Illinois and Pennsylvania. Urban areas.

They were dreading organization, so the recruiters that those plant owners sent were to get what they would say were blacks that had never belonged to a union; blacks who were relatively closer to being sharecroppers or their parents were. The assumption was that they would be cheap labor in opposition to the unions. So, they brought them, encouraged—with the agents they sent South—to come North.

DePue: When your father left did he know of a job he was going to be able to get once he got to Chicago?

Black: There were plenty of jobs. There were plenty of jobs. They didn't have any problem. People coming in at that time had no problem with jobs.

DePue: Which job did he land in?

Black: He went to the steel mill—U..S. Steel. He would have joined a union, but the unions at that time were bigots. They did not want blacks as union workers, so therefore, they were contradicting themselves in a sense because my father had to feed his family, so he walked across the picket line as many other blacks did.

DePue: Was he getting better pay once he got to Illinois?

Black: Oh, yeah. Mm-hmm, yeah. The wage difference was quite a bit, even though he was not in the union. His pay was...

DePue: Do you remember Mr. Abbot's first name?

Black: Robert. He was from Alabama as well, and he was a product of a mixed relationship—German father and black—negro—mother.

DePue: The neighborhood you moved to, you said it was a mixed neighborhood—

Black: At that time.

DePue: —I'm wondering if those were—

Black: The neighborhood was called Grand Boulevard.

DePue: What was the ethnic nature of the whites that were living there? Was there any country in particular?

Black: Irish-Catholic and Jewish. Irish-Catholic and Jewish middle-class.

DePue: Was this considered then a relatively middle-class neighborhood that your father had moved to?

Black: Yeah, I think so. If you take a drive through that old neighborhood, if you look at the housing stock, it's very similar to the housing we find here in Hyde Park.

DePue: A lot of brownstones and graystones?

Black: Graystones, particularly on the boulevards. It encompassed that neighborhood, that Grand Boulevard neighborhood. A boulevard called "Grand Boulevard," which was one of the most prestigious boulevards in the world. It was equivalent, in terms of parades and things, to Champs-Élysées, 5th Avenue, and so forth, Grand Boulevard. I saw Charles A. Lindbergh after he'd completed his flight to Paris and come back; he marched on Grand Boulevard

and placed a wreath at Washington's statue which is at the entrance of Washington Park. Crown Prince Wilhelm, the grandson of the Kaiser of Germany came down that boulevard, and that was ordinary.

So, it was not a poverty neighborhood; the people who came to Chicago that moved into that neighborhood had generally lived in urban communities in the South: New Orleans, Birmingham, Atlanta, Memphis. They'd lived in urban areas, so they had some sophistication. Another indication of that, at the same time that we were moving here, city blues and jazz was leaving the New Orleans area and moving to Chicago, with Louis Armstrong and all those pioneers of the jazz and blues era.

DePue: We probably should mention, Mr. Black, right up front, that it's a real joy for me to talk to a historian, and not just a historian, but what you're talking about. To a certain extent, you're telling the stories that you preserved in your own series of oral histories in two books. Is that correct?

Black: Yes, some of that is inserted so that the reader will get a feeling of the social, cultural context out of which these people were living. Very similar were they to any of the other immigrants; they could speak better English, but the segregation based on race separated them from those who had been lighter-skinned. For example, the people who lived in South Chicago near the steel mill, socially, were not equivalent to my mother and father who lived in the mixed-racially [neighborhood] at first, and socioeconomically, but they could move as soon as they learned how to take "ski" off their name or change their accent, or change their religion or whatever it might be that nixed them. They would move into the mainstream if they began to make the money to afford it. So, that was a big difference.

DePue: Before we get too far, I want to plug your book, if you will.

Black: Oh, thank you.

DePue: It's certainly well worth the read: *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration*. Then, Volume II of *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's Second Generation of Black Migration*. This is an important chapter of American history that sometimes is overlooked, is it not?

Black: It is, it is. As I was telling students, some of my students would say, "Oh, Mr. Black, my grandma—" these would be white students, "—my grandma, my grandpa tell a story like that." The difference was color. "Grandma came, she washed dishes and scrubbed floors. Grandpa came, he worked in the steel mill and the stock yard." So, there's a similarity between the migration and the immigration that only becomes different if one then injects—which was actual—the race issue into it. Then, they can see that the opportunities were not as great for the blacks who came in that period.

DePue: I wonder if you can take just a few minutes to discuss the—I don't know—development, if you will, or the emergence of guess what I guess was called the "Black Belt." Maybe start with the parameters. What were the geographical boundaries of that?

Black: Well, Robert Abbot coined that description, and the reason that he put it that way is because there was an agreement between landlords and landowners a little before and very quickly after the race riot of 1919. The landlords and landowners would not rent or sell to people of color—black folk. So, that meant that we were confined to a relatively narrow area. In the beginning, it started around Twenty-Fourth Street on the north to about Thirty-Ninth Street on the south, to the west side of Cottage Grove on the east, and the east side of the Rock Island railroad track on the west. Not only could we not buy or rent in those areas adjacent, but if you ventured into those areas, you were likely to get in trouble. If you came into the neighborhood that I described, east of Cottage Grove, because of the kind of people, the quality of the people, you might get arrested. You would certainly get harassed. Now, there were always blacks who lived in those areas; some of them were house servants, and others were professionals, but they were very few, relatively, and all the people in the neighborhood knew who they were.

I'm thinking of a person who became a judge from the neighborhood where we are now. In 1915, he lived at Forty-Ninth & Ellis, he and his wife. So, sometimes they could not detect that the person had African heritage because of the pigmentation of the skin; that's what makes race such a ridiculous thing. Well, it's ridiculous if you were victimized by it, but if you can exploit it, then it makes you money. So, the restrictions or restrictive codas go into force in that agreement; that meant that even to go out shopping to buy groceries and things, you were confined to that area. So, we paid a color tax, both in terms of rental or purchase. For example, in that era, in that period—and it got worse after World War II—the white population, in terms of residency population, was twenty-one thousand persons per square mile. Adjacent to it, the black population was eighty-four thousand per square mile. Same space.

DePue: Four times as dense.

Black: Four times as dense. Now, that could be exploited in all kinds of ways, particularly if there was hostility against movement. I'm working on a project now about the borough cemetery, which we're going to try and make nice and things. If you were getting ready to die, you had to wait until there was a place to bury you. So, we had to create...(laughter)

DePue: You had to wait to die!

Black: (laughter) Yeah, so you could get buried. It meant longevity. That's on the humorous side, but that was actual, so we had to create parallel institutions in

the neighborhood. Now, the exploitation was very easy; if there was unfriendly attitude about going shopping, why go? So, the persons who owned the small businesses—or even the larger ones—could raise the price of the commodities they sold about 10 percent above what they would get if they went outside.

The person who owned the property could use that, and that was usually that they turned what we might call the apartment buildings that had two or three bedrooms; where there was one family, there would be three families. Where they would charge the rent by the month, they started charging it by the week, and doubled the price. Now, given that and given the quality of the people who were coming, like my family and most others, they were anxious to have more space, which they'd enjoyed in the South, but they couldn't have it, and so they had to crowd up in it. They created a new rental type called "kitchenettes." Kitchenettes were putting more people in the space than they really enjoyed. The exploiters, then, could take that and threaten adjacent white neighborhoods that "these negroes were going to be moving [in]. They'd sell a house to one person, then they would announce on the block that the negroes were coming. The people because of—partly because of their lack of knowledge, but also because prestige and status played great roles in American culture.

Who you lived with or around was something to brag about. Like, in Hyde Park-Kenwood now, many of the people who moved into Hyde Park-Kenwood had equally as large and beautiful brownstones or graystones as the people who lived in the houses they moved into, but they wanted to be able to brag that "I live in Hyde Park," so they didn't sell the house that they moved from. They did the same thing that the people who had exploited them had done; they rented it out into rooming houses. Now, the grandchildren are moving back and taking over those beautiful, mansion-like places. (laughter)

DePue: I wonder if you could get down to a more personal level, and—

Black: Well, I'm just giving that to give some idea of the atmosphere that existed in the space. Again, I want to repeat that therefore, being confined in that way, blacks had to create, because we were talented folk. Many of them and quite a few of the children of the relationship between a white male and a black female, and those men—whatever people want to say—they cared for those children. They provided education for them. We got many colleges in the South as a result of that and some in the North, but even if they came North, they wanted to succeed. So, they were pretty sophisticated.

Now, having that sophistication and this experience and all created parallel institutions: parallel cultural institutions, parallel social institutions, parallel political and economic. So, in Chicago in that period of time, black millionaires began to emerge. We couldn't get insurance, so these skilled, knowledgeable people created insurance companies. Yellow and Checker

taxicabs would not come in to pick you up; black entrepreneurs created taxicabs we called jitneys and others. Then, white merchants—some continued to live there, but most moved over to Hyde Park—they had to hire us. I'd never worked outside the black community until I went to college. Didn't have to. They didn't hire us. We had a slogan called, "Don't spend your money where you can't work."

DePue: Was there a black school system as well?

Black: It was segregated.

DePue: I mean, not just the public schools, but the private schools and colleges in the neighborhood?

Black: Not really, no. If you finish high school, generally you would go South: Wilberforce, Tuskegee—

DePue: To go to college, you mean?

Black: If you went to college in the South. Because you were excluded, until… People like my brother made breakthroughs at the University of Illinois, in that University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 1933. But there were blacks from the South who went to University of Illinois in that period, and because they had finished Morehouse and Spellman and those places, but they couldn't go to graduate school, so the state would pay for them to go to a graduate school in the North.

DePue: What was it like for you as a young child growing up in the neighborhood? I guess part of the question is, how conscious were you at the time about…

Black: Being confined?

DePue: …being confined, and the prejudice and discrimination that existed at the time.

Black: Well, as I say, we moved originally to kind of a mixed situation; the whites soon left. So, my education had been always, until I went to a school that was built almost primary—well, even there—most of my teachers were white, and they were good teachers. They were preparing us, that you have two different neighborhoods. Now, again, we have moved into a middle-class, Irish-Catholic, Jewish community. My mother was herself being so controlling over her children, [she] was going to demand that we have good teachers. Her idea, "You don't have to like them, just go to school and get what they got." She didn't ever want us to live around poor whites, and she called that "white trash," if they amounted to anything. That was our way—my mother and father's way—of describing whites who were not well-to-do, which is the way that foreigners coming here now and looking at poor blacks, they say, "Well, they've been here all this time, why's it..."

So, our... feelings were mixed. Some of my mother's friends who had been to college worked over in Hyde Park-Kenwood, and the people that they worked for treated them nicely. You go down around here and you see coach houses; some of them lived in those coach houses. They were married and started families. So, there was ambivalence of feeling. I never had any problems thinking my education was poorer than any other kid's because our teachers were dedicated to teach.

DePue: Do you recall the first time that you became aware of a prejudicial situation? An anecdote, perhaps?

Black: Well, let's see... I'm thinking of it—oh! When I was about five or six, maybe I was older, me and a white Italian friend of mine, we wanted to go a place called "White City." It was an amusement park. His name was Joe Domino. So, Joe and I decided and we asked our parents "Could we go?" My mother, understanding the race issue, she dressed me up in nice clothes. Joe was just in his regular play clothes. We get on the streetcar and we go out to White City. When Joe gets there, he could go right in. They stopped me at the door and said I wasn't dressed well enough. I understood very clearly at that time, understood. It was painful, but anyway. So, if I couldn't get in, Joe wasn't going to go in. I mean, that was my friend; we were kids, but that's the way he felt about this friendship. So, he wasn't going in if I couldn't get in. It was my first blatant, flagrant experience of facing true, what we now call racism.

DePue: Do you remember a couple of other incidents growing up that especially stay with you today?

Black: Well, some of them were tested because I kind of hung out with some tough characters. When we got older, some of us would test the race [issue] by going downtown to shop or something, to go to a movie at one of the big theaters, and we would face that issue of race. So, we knew it existed, but in Chicago t—I'm speaking of my generation now, the generation of the first volume—it didn't matter too much. We felt, and they succeeded, that one day we were going to break that down. So, we looked to the future, and that's where our parents had reared us. They told us about their experiences in the South, that my grandparents were all slaves, and they had become free and they had worked. They had overcome a lot of obstacles, and we had a challenge we had to meet.

So, we had to learn to adjust and adapt to the differences. There were class differences within the black community as well, which we were confronted with. I found that out when I was going to Burke School [Burke Elementary School, Chicago, IL]. My daddy worked at the steel mill. My black classmates, for the most part, their families were not stockyards—no, no, that was stinky. Their families were post office, railroad, and other

professions and things of that sort. So, I was considered an outsider, and I had learned a lesson.

DePue: As far as they were concerned, you weren't…

Black: I wasn't as wealthy.

DePue: …part of their class?

Black: Yeah, I wasn't quite. Because the school that I transferred to, to go to Burke School—

DePue: What was the name? Burke School?

Black: Burke. Edmund Burke. He was, you know, an abolitionist. He was a British abolitionist in the British Parliament.[1] Before I went there, I went to Willard [Willard Elementary School, Chicago, IL]—Frances Willard—who was also an activist.[2] That's another thing of concern about that neighborhood, names of the schools: Wendell Phillips, Edmund Burke, so, you get a flavor of the kind of white people who lived in that particular neighborhood. See, it wasn't the white folk from the neighborhood who started to riot; they were poor Irish-Catholics from Mayor Daley's neighborhood.

DePue: Bridgeport, is that just on the north side of this Black Belt we're talking about?

Black: No, that's on the west side of what we then called the west side of the Rock Island Railroad tracks. West side. See, if we went there, we had trouble unless our friends—as we played basketball or baseball or something with our white friends—they would protect us; we were friends through music and sports and all those things. Can break some barriers, and we need more of that—I'm speaking—to kind of get in the class. So at Willard, because my brother was a gentleman and remained that way throughout his lifetime—sometimes to his disadvantage. But anyway you have to learn to hit somebody if he hits you—Walt was such a gentleman that people just liked him all around. So, the building where we lived, 48th and Vincent, was next to a retirement center for white women who had been nurses and been professionals. My brother sold newspapers on the street in the neighborhood. One of the ladies liked my brother so much that she wanted—she had been a teacher—to do some tutoring.

So, she tutored my brother. I forget her name, but anyway, she was beautiful. I mean, I'm not talking about looks, I'm talking about attitude. We had learned quite quickly. When I went to Burke, which was, again, upper-

[1] Burke was also an author, political theorist and philosopher known in America as a supporter of the American Revolution.
[2] Frances Willard was the founder of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, known as the W.C.T.U.

middle-class, because of this good training, my brother and I could out-distance our white classmates.

That's another story. When I first went to Burke, I was in second grade. At that time, my brother, myself, and a few others, were the first black students there—to share things. Share books, just sharing. So, when I came in, when my mother had brought me to the school and then I was escorted to the class, they were dealing with the idea of sharing. When I walked into the classroom, there was a shock among the students and the teacher. Well, the students didn't pay too much [attention]. When I went to sit down in my seat, the girl next, she was sharing her book. The teacher became hysterical. Absolutely hysterical. The kids got quiet; I got mad at my momma for bringing me and putting me in such a situation as that. However, when I began to show them—and I'm not bragging, that's actual—how smart I was as a student, I began to get invited to kids' parties at their homes.

DePue: I want to make sure I understand this story. Was this girl that was sharing the book with you white?

Black: Yeah, yeah. I was the first black in the class. (laughter) The kids were shocked when the teacher screamed, "Sharon, what are you doing?" She was shocked, they were shocked, they didn't know. Here I was, just another guy coming in. But it settled down. I was a pretty good student.

DePue: Did the teacher treat you differently, or did she get over that?

Black: She got over that. She got over that. When she found out I was equal or superior to most of the students in that class and they were liking me as a friend, she had to deal with it. At that time, we had Parent-Teacher Associations; she was going to have to deal with those kids' parents, so she had to settle down, particularly when she found out in all other indications except skin color, I was equivalent to the students. I wasn't bringing standards down, I was helping to raise them.

Now, in that same context, you see, the black students who I said were kind of middle-class—my daddy works at the steel mill and theirs were white-collar or professional—they wouldn't have the little children's parties and invite my brother and I. But when they found out that my brother and I were being invited to the white children's, they began...(laughter) So, we broke the barriers of class in that period of time! We continued to be friends with all those folk who had since been...

And then, of course, when my brother went to University of Illinois, when prejudice there was steep. There was a feeling of being honored to know Walter Black, on a scholarship to UIC. University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.

DePue: An academic scholarship?

Black: Academic scholarship. There were no athletic scholarships for blacks at the time, though he was one of the best basketball players in the state. The evidence of that: Lou Boudreau—who later became the coach of the Cleveland Indians—Lou Boudreau had been a basketball player at Thornton Township [High School in Chicago]. My brother had been captain of the team that won the city championship—an all-white team; he was the co-captain of the team with one of the Murphy twins. He was the only black on the team. So, he tells the story of when they were playing in a sectional thing: when he got on the floor, the crowd booed him. Lou Boudreau was only seventeen, eighteen at the time, and was the star of Thornton Township, and stopped the game. He said, "We're not going to have this."

DePue: That was the end of the game?

Black: That was practically the end of the game. He was the star of the other team. Now, when he went to the University of Illinois, he was both athletic and academic. My brother went as academic. Lou Boudreau went to the coach and told him that there was a Negro who would help the team win. The coach didn't even come to see my brother play. Now my brother was a Kappa; he joined a fraternity. The fraternity team that was the Kappas, in just intercollegiate play could beat the varsity team. But still, that barrier was not broken until the 1950s.

DePue: I have to ask you this, Mr. Black: was your brother taller than you?

Black: Oh, much taller!

DePue: Because you're, what, 5'6"?

Black: Yeah, 5'6". He was considered a giant, at the time. He was 6'2". (laughter) My mother said, "Well, you grew up in the Depression; he grew up before the Depression." (laughter) Yeah, no, he was taller. At that time he was center on the Dillon Tech(?) or Tillman Techs(?) team.

DePue: Was religion an important aspect of your life, growing up?

Black: My mother originated in Birmingham; she was a Presbyterian. When she married my dad, she became a member of the AME Church—African Methodist Episcopal—that was founded in the 1700s by Richard Allen in Philadelphia; he broke away from the Methodist Church and formed the African Methodist Episcopal because of a racial thing. So, they were, again, an indication of the middle-class attitude: they were in that congregation, African Methodist Episcopal, so they didn't shout in church and they had to come properly-dressed in that, you know, middle-class style and stuff. They sang not just spirituals, but they sang classics and stuff like that.

I give one experience that I remember when I was a young kid and I'd be home. My brother would always be out trying to make a little money so he

could help the family; that was the way he was, and later, I became that way, too. My dad was working at the steel mill. Went to church every Sunday, he and my mother, and I'd be in Sunday school with my brother. So, my dad came home, and told my mother that he would get home after work, get off the streetcar, and come on home, and my mother would be fixing dinner. Sometimes she'd be washing the dishes after she cooked.

He came home one day and said, "Mattie," using this—don't you use it, unless you're in a different situation—"Mattie, you know what a nigger said to me today?" Momma was washing the dishes. She was like his therapist almost, when he would come home. "What'd he say, Dixon?" "Nigger said, 'Dix! You think the Lord know how these white folks are feeding us niggers down here?'" Momma said, "What'd you tell him, Dixon?" "I said, Hell yeah! He know. He just don't give a damn.'" Good gracious aloud. My father is never going back to church—he's through. Sunday, my daddy got up, and went right on to church. (laughter) That's the religion you're a part of—their lives—that they worshiped, and even to the last days of they lives, they were...

DePue: Well, it's not different from any Christian struggle with, "Okay, why does God let some of the things happen that he lets happen?"

Black: (laughter) Yeah! That's it. When you look at that, but you leave the spiritual and you get into the immediate practical. (laughter) It's the spiritual that carries you on and on and on. Without that spiritual, you quit right away.

DePue: Which one of those parents was most influential for you and your brother?

Black: They both were. They were partners. Now, when I was graduating from high school I was kind of running with the wrong guys. My mother would say, "When are you going back to school, when are you going back to school?" My daddy would say, "When are you going to do what your momma says?" So, I didn't have any out. (laughter) My brother and my sister had gone on to college, so I couldn't use them as an example. That's another thing that I learned from having both parents, which many children and my own children missed after their mother and I divorced. I learned how to deal with different opinions, learned how to do that and still love one another.

My daddy was kind of a black nationalist; my mother was a black integrationist, and they would discuss that. Sometimes—not loudly—but just discuss it. My daddy's position was, the Negro was never going to make it in America, and he ought to think about going back home. That was his attitude. He was kind of a Marcus Garvey kind of thing. My mother said, "My babies are going to be reared right here in the United States, and we're going to change things. We're not going to run away from the struggle." That was an adversity that they never resolved—in terms of agreement—except to raise us to be equivalent or superior to those who accused us of being inferior. That, they agreed on completely. So, that idea that I was going to go out there and

have a good time… I had just learned-—in fact, I think I learned at graduation night—that girls were different than boys. (laughter)

DePue: Well, you were slower in that respect!

Black: A pleasant difference! (laughter) So, I was busy testing it, discovering whether it's true or not! (laughter) So, I went to Xavier. [Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana] We had the first all-black basketball team that played in the Sweet Sixteen, the state tournament. We lost, but they expected us to play like Globetrotters. I should have brought a copy of the Globetrotters photos that I have, original Globetrotters. But, Abe Saperstein, though that time was original by a black guy, by the name of... Anyway, he forged the Harlem Globetrotters from the Savoy Big Five.[3] It was during the period of the Harlem Renaissance, so Abe, to support the team, knew how to make some money, by re-coining it. I should have brought that, but anyway, I couldn't find it right away and I didn't want you to keep waiting. Now, when my brother finished high school, for example, and had the scholarship to the University of Illinois, he had a choice of going to any black college in the country because he was both a good student as well as a nice guy. Abe wanted to get him on the Trotters, and Abe came by to see if he could convince my parents. When he came, my momma said, "No, he's not going to play." This is in the Depression years; he could have made some money. "He's not going to play. He's going to college." My daddy, who now is on the WPA [Works Progress Administration] of the New Deal—jobs had been practically wiped out. Percentage-wise, there were more unemployed people in the United States than any other time in that history.—Now I hope we don't get any more.—I think the unemployment rate was somewhere around 19 percent or more.

DePue: Yeah, I think it probably peaked around 25, and then a couple of years later it dropped a little bit, but not much.

Black: Well, my dad was working at WPA, and he was embarrassed by it because he had said when he lost his job at the steel mill and the stock yard, "We're not going on charity." He would walk over here from where we lived, and ask people could he cut their grass or wash their windows. That was the kind of pride he had.

DePue: Did he walk over in the Hyde Park area?

Black: Ask whether he could cut grass—that's the kind of pride he had. But when Abe came, as a matter of fact, he agreed with my mother that my brother was going to go to college. Now, when I was down at Xavier, I had just gotten into this new discovery in New Orleans and all those pretty girls around there, and then I realized that I couldn't **not** be a good student. I had to flee, so I dropped

[3] At age 24, Saperstein formed the team to promote The Savoy Ballroom. After a highly successful run of a thousand games he renamed the team, The Harlem Globetrotters.

out of Xavier's very early and came back home very early, with the excuse that I was going to help Momma and Daddy keep my brother in school, and help them pay.

DePue: Let's go back just a little bit: you graduated from high school in 1937?

Black: Yeah, January in 1937, but I should have graduated in '36. That's another story, but in my class in that era or period were people like Nat Cole, and I was friends with John Johnson and Dempsey Travis. Harold Washington [later a Mayor of Chicago] and Dempsey were two years behind me, but we knew each other. Ralph Robertson, who became an organizer for UAW—United Automobile Workers—and many others. That was at DuSable [High School]—I had left Englewood because of the class situation. Forged my momma's name and went to Phillips [Phillips Academy High School], which had been originally in an old neighborhood where it was built in 1903, which was built for the middle-class whites that lived in the neighborhood at that time. There were a few blacks that lived there.

Our family relationship—my mother and father, her sisters… Most of my daddy's people in his generation never left the South; they continued to live there. Then, [during] the Depression, because they thought we were starving to death they used to send us eggs and chickens and so. (laughter)

DePue: I'm not sure I'd want to eat those eggs by the time they made a trip North.

Black: (laughter) But anyway, in that year and in that rural part—like they're introducing now—if you have some vacant land, grow some food on it. That was their general attitude; so they had a pig, they had cows, so they would send us food, in the idea that they were not going to let us starve. But, my mother's family almost all left the South and came North. Part of their family in some way had been encouraged by successes. W.C. Handy, the blues man, came from the same town in Alabama where mother was born, Florence, Alabama. Oscar DePriest, who became the first black Congressman after reconstruction, came to Chicago after he'd left Alabama; went to Kansas, and then he came to Chicago. He became the first black Alderman in Chicago, in 1915, and then later, he became [U. S.] Congressman from the First Congressional District [of Illinois].

Well, as a kid, to my mother and her friends, those were like their uncles in that little town of Florence, Alabama. In fact, there's a stadium been erected to Mr. Handy in Florence, and from all over the world, people have admired him. So, when Mr. Handy would come to Chicago—he moved from Alabama to New York—well, you know, he's the father of the blues—St. Louis blues, Memphis blues. They would come by, and that's another no escape mechanism. They would come by our house, and they treated my mother like she was their niece or something—and my mother and Welton and the Taylors at the table—they're treating her like she's their niece. They

would be talking to my brother, telling him how great my momma and daddy were. (laughter)

In that period of time—and this is not (pause) isolated—I think in that generation, that was the way most parents looked at their children, and the relatives and neighbors around them encouraged that kind of thing. The difference is such in America for those of color was that we could see the inequalities because we could measure very easily what that was. In the basketball year, this black team can beat this all-white team, and yet, they will not take the members of this black team—not because they're incompetent, not because they're dumb, only one reason.

Go ahead, you have a question?

DePue: When you were about done with high school, then, a two-part question: What were you career goals at the time, and Did you feel somewhat limited because you were a black in a white nation?

Black: Mm-hmm. Yes, I did feel that, but... Again, given the determination of my generation as encouraged by their parents and other relatives and friends, it's personified in the song of the civil rights movement, "We Shall Overcome." We put it into religious—"I'm so glad that trouble don't last always. / Oh, my Lord, oh, my Lord, what shall I do?" You see, those were...lyrical...musical tones of that, "You must keep on going attitude, and the doors will open." The religious and the spirituality, and the stories that our parents could tell about the struggles of themselves and their parents.

You see, that was kind of a linear continuation that many young people today don't have. The opportunity. The warmth of the discussion. The dinner table—everybody has to be home on Sunday for dinner. Those were binding experiences that we didn't know but we enjoyed, and we had to fit in.

So, yes, we did know that race existed, and we'd had a chance to make it. But again, our feelings were not feelings of necessarily bitterness. The bitterness comes later, when I go into the Army in World War II, and I am shifted… I haven't been South. See, the people of that first migration, they never went back South unless someone died. They never went back. So, our relatives would come visit us here; this was generally the case.

DePue: Would you or your parents, would you consider them part of that first wave of migration?

Black: Oh, they were. They were. There were blacks here, but not in the numbers. I gave you some of the numbers. See, from 1915, the black population in Chicago was somewhere around sixty thousand. By 1920, with the encouragement of Abbot and the business community, that number had doubled to 123,000, and it continued to rise and rise. The beginning of World War II, the number of blacks in America in the same space was 225,000.

DePue: Was the World War II generation that came North then, the second wave?

Black: That becomes the second generation. Yeah, that's the second wave. Mostly not like the first generation, leaving the South for reasons of education, and they had been deprived of the opportunities. See, even in the segregation of the South of that period, my mother and father, they went to school. They could read, write, and count. My grandparents could read, write, and count, and they went to school. They didn't go far, but they went to school. In the cities, they went to school; they had to walk two or three miles to get there, but they went to school. There was no one there to really discourage them from going to school. In the rural/agricultural, they were discouraged from getting an education. They were discouraged from voting. My mother said my daddy would put his pistol in his pocket and go home—nobody knew he wasn't going to vote. His vote wouldn't account for that much, but that was the kind of guy he was, and there were others like him. Some of them were lynched, and others, but...

Given that feeling and that spirit, and then having, you know, white friends as I did, there was some feeling of the future as personified by the kind of connections and opportunities that we had, that things were being broken little by little by those extraordinary people who needed it or were needed. Coming back to that thing about being, not only as good as but better than, the proof of that comes when in military service, where some of us who had skills were in units like mine, in service units.

DePue: We are definitely going to spend some time there, but I do want to go back to that question. At high school when you're finishing up, what are your career goals? What do you see for the future?

Black: That was my problem when I went to Xavier: I had none, except to test the pretty young ladies. (laughter)

DePue: Well, you weren't the first to do that!

Black: Well, sure, I thought that was an exciting career! (laughter) I had to modify it because of what I just said. In the midst of the Depression, my brother being in college, my mother not working at all, my daddy having a job that wasn't paying very much, and that desire, the feeling—I could use that an excuse—to help them, and I did.

DePue: So, 1937: I mean, this is about the time when there was another serious downturn in the Depression. I think that was the year, and I would suspect that any job was a good job at that time.

Black: Yes, but because of the controls that I've just now told you earlier about the blacks creating parallel institutions and controlling much of the employment, when I came back, I went to work first at a jewelry store on Forty-Seventh

Street, right off of Forty-Seventh Street where the Regal and the Savoy and places you may have read about, South Center.

DePue: What was the first one?

Black: The jewelry store? I forgot…

DePue: No, no, you mentioned the Savoy, what was the other place?

Black: The Regal. That was a theater. The Regal was at least twice as big as the Apollo in New York. It was built particularly to contain the black community, but we saw all the great—Benny Goodman—all the great musicians played at the Regal. And the Savoy—Dick Hudson was the guy who was the original owner of the Savoy Big Five, which later became the Harlem Globetrotters. You can probably get a picture of that original team off the internet.

DePue: I have seen that, just doing a little bit of research on it.

Black: Yeah, with Abe. And Al "Runt" Pullins—who was like my basketball hero—formed his own team because he asked Abe, "Don't give me a salary—give me a cut of the commission." Abe said, "No, no, no." (laughter) So Runt Pullins formed his own team, and that was—what did he call that team?—also given a Harlem thing. I think it was New York Globetrotters and—I forget the name of the team that Runt had. He didn't make as much money as Abe, but he was independent.[4]

Again, a story about him: when I was about twelve years old and those guys were on the road, they'd come back and play with us kids on the playgrounds and places, talk about their experiences away from Chicago. They loved Seattle—they loved it. They gave us encouragement, too. These again were fellows who, some went to college and some didn't, but they were products(?) or proud(?). So, I was running up and down the court trying to stop the ball, and —we called him Runt, his name was Al Pullins, he was a great player—what's the name of his day? was just a great player, just made so much history, created an industry. Not created an industry, but made shoe...

DePue: Michael Jordan?

[4] Al "Runt" Pullins was one of the original members of the Harlem Globetrotters and a mainstay in African American professional basketball in Chicago for several decades. Pullins was recruited by Abe Saperstein in 1929 to play on his original Harlem Globetrotters team. In 1934, Saperstein changed the compensation structure, from the team splitting the gate (which could go as high as $40 a game) to being paid a fixed sum of $7.50 per person. Pullins and several other Globetrotters immediately quit and Pullins formed his own team, calling themselves the "Harlem Globetrotters" in their first Midwest tour, competing directly against Saperstein's team. The following year, Pullins called his team the New York Globetrotters and then the Broadway Clowns. *Hoopmedia, - Al "Runt" Pullins,* 2011. http://hoopedia.nba.com/index.php?title=Al_22Runt%22_Pulins .

Black: Michael Jordan. He was the Michael Jordan of his day. So, I ran on and he said, "Shorty, come here." I went over because he was my big brother. He says, "Let me tell you something, man: when everybody else is running up and down the court, acting like they're crazy and wild, you stay cool, man. If you stay cool, you will break up the game." I was twelve years old, and I'm ninety now. I learned that if you stay cool, you will break up the game. Now, you can get angry—which you know you're getting angry, and you play that anger to your advantage—but you don't lose control of yourself. You use anger as a gimmick because you know how to do that. That was the lesson, and I said, "Yeah, on the court, stay cool, but you can be cool in the rest of your life, too." I just want to insert that to give the listener some idea of factors and personalities that helped to shape whatever I eventually would be, happen to be at this time. My family was very, very important.

So, during that period of the Depression, when I returned and I went to work, I worked in a jewelry store. Optical Jewelry Store, this South Center building on Forty-Seventh Street, right off of what is now [Martin Luther] King Drive, which is in South Park. The owner of the store was Jewish—I think they were Polish Jews, and his wife. Not the blitzkrieg, but what do you call it? The pogrom? Hitler had just begun.

DePue: Yeah, 1939, he invaded Poland.

Black: Yeah, Poland, but before that, it was another.

DePue: Oh, Kristallnacht?

Black: Yeah. Not in Germany—this is when I think he invaded Czechoslovakia, first.

DePue: That was 1938.

Black: Yeah, it was in that period. But the Polish would be persecuted over there; the Warsaw Ghetto is classic. So, she went back. Now my friends and I had discussed when Hitler had moved into the—what was that, the Sudetenland?

DePue: Yes; let's see. Sudetenland was also '38 because that was when the Munich meeting happened and appeasement.

Black: So, anyway, this wife went to see what was happening to her family. She came back and she was almost every day in tears with what she had seen. So, I was working there, and I was both a clerk and the porter. I was making enough money to have a good time.

In my house, in our place, my mother was the treasurer: if you made any money, you brought it and put it in Momma's black hands, and then she would redistribute it. So, that's another thing I learned about agreements, too. My daddy made the money, my mother controlled it. I remember one time, Momma said she had bought some things for my brother and I. She was

sacrificial, they both were, but we had to be dressed up and look nice. She said, "Dixon, look what I bought the kids." He looked at it—it was nice, whatever it was. "How much did it cost, Mattie?" She told him. "Mattie, we can't afford that." She explained, "This is for the children; you know you're supposed to go in debt and do whatever's needed." That's what she had done. She had put it on credit; that's what she had done. "Mattie, we can't afford that." He kept saying that, and she kept trying to let him know that this was for his children, not for Mattie, this is for the children, TB and Walker. "Mattie, we can't afford that." That was the first and only time I ever heard my mother swear. As he was walking over with a cigar in his mouth, she said, "You old shit ass!" He started to turn around, "Mattie, you shouldn't talk like that around these children." It was deeper(??). (laughter)

I learned that he who pays the fiddler calls the tune. That's what Frederick Douglass said in 1856 or some time. (laughter) But I learned, yes, you can be a good manager, but you must have something to manage. (laughter) Mom was a great manager, but the income… I think that had a great impact in World War II, when the economy needed women—well, the war needed women—in jobs, on an equal level, that they began to leave as housewives, when their husbands came back from the war or whatever.

DePue: They had different attitudes?

Black: Yeah, a different attitude about who pays for it, and stuff like that because they could pay for their own. So, I think that started a little of the demise of the two-parent households.

DePue: What job did you have after you left the jewelry store, then?

Black: I went to work for a grocery store. 59th and Michigan—Kaplan's Grocery Store. It was a family-owned grocery store. Lou Kaplan's father had been a grocer back in the Yards [stockyards] neighborhood, a Jewish guy who was treated badly but he knew how to do business. Lou had gone to high school at the same time as my brother; I had a great deal of admiration. So when he had left and gone to college and then opened his store, my brother knew him and worked briefly during one summer, and recommended that I take his job when he went back down to college.

So, I took the job there, and it was very nice. It was in not a swank neighborhood, but a very stable, middle-class black neighborhood of entrepreneurs. People had a lot of money from what we called The Policy at that time, we called it Policy, it's now called lottery. At that time, Policy was considered illegal. In New York the gangsters controlled it; they took it from the blacks. But in Chicago, since they didn't know how much money was in it, blacks controlled it—business types, not gangsters. Business types.

The Jones brothers, whose father was a Methodist minister from Jackson, Mississippi, they had gone to college in the South. They saw an opportunity to make more money than they could make in other businesses because the Policy was not only a small-time gambling thing, but it was also social. My mother would go to the Policy just to talk with her neighbors and friends. Nickel and dime and if you won a nickel, you get five dollars; if you won a dime, you get ten dollars, and so forth. So, the chances were maybe a million-to-one, but at least you tried, and a nickel and a dime didn't matter that much.

Then my dad wouldn't allow it, but my mother—when he was at work or something—she would be kind of a Policy person for my apartment. Players could come over and she got a little extra money because my dad, he didn't know what was going on. At least, if he did, he was pretending.

So, they were multimillionaires—the Jones brothers—and that didn't change until George Jones took the heat because they were not paying income tax on that big money. While he was in the prison in Indiana, he disclosed to Sam Giancana how much money: they had a yacht; they had a villa in France; they were great livers. They lived very well. Well, they had legal businesses that they would lend people money to go into small business and they had their own shopping center. So, they were the kind of people who lived in that neighborhood, what I'm talking about, that the Hansberrys—Mr. Hansberry was Lorraine's father—Lorraine Hansberry, [author of] *A Raisin in the Sun*. Joe Lewis' manager. Those were the kind of people who lived in that general neighborhood.

Many of the others were Pullman porters. Mr. Randolph organized—the day when he was able to get the AF of L [American Federation of Labor] to let the Brotherhood of Pullman porters [Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters]—that's another story, which Ms. Roosevelt—

DePue: Oh, A. Philip Randolph?

Black: Yeah. Yeah, Ms. Roosevelt opened the door there. The AF of L offered her the right to be the principal speaker, and she said about two or three sentences. She turned the rest over to Randolph, and he spoke—

DePue: Oh, really? What year was that, roughly?

Black: It would have been 1937 or '38.

DePue: Oh, that's pretty early, then.

Black: Yeah, yeah. The Brotherhood was then accepted into the AF of L.[5] But anyway, the kind of people who lived around that neighborhood were very stimulating, and I had learned a little bit of that. I learned how to be a bargainer and a salesman. The customers came in, "Oh, Mrs. Jones, you look so beautiful! My gracious!" Buy some more! (laughter) "Oh, that sure is a fine suit you have on, Mr. Smith. Where did you get that?" Bring him four more loaves of bread, or whatever it was. To the wholesalers, to the people bringing in our goods, Lou had enough confidence in me that he would let me bargain with them. I never will forget, I did it with the produce guy who happened to be Italian. I was bargaining with him, and he said, "You're just like an old, goddamned Jew." He didn't know he was complimenting me. (laughter)

DePue: Did you take it that way?

Black: I laughed at it. (laughter) Oh, I laughed at it. Because I kept bargaining with him and he wanted to sell; he came in at this price and I've got him down to here! Then, on the other hand, another part of that was because I was working in this grocery store, I could bring home groceries at the lowest prices. I got them at the wholesale price, so I could bring groceries home to my mother and dad. My dad was working at the WPA [Works Progress Administration] at that time.

DePue: Do you remember what specifically he was doing at the WPA?

Black: He worked on what is now the...not the express, but the outer drive. What we now call the Outer Drive [Lake Shore Drive]. They built that. Many of the things that are like that, across the country, were built by these men who had not only the discipline to work, but they were often skilled.

DePue: Well, I imagine working in the steel mill like he had all those years, he had lots of different kind of specific skills to bring to that job.

Black: Yeah, yeah. It wasn't a lot of money that those guys were making—no more than thirty-five dollars every two weeks—but costs were much cheaper, comparatively speaking. So, I came back and I went to work doing that kind of work. Then, because we were being paid very low wages—I think $12.50 a week—we organized our own union. We couldn't belong to the larger retail clerks' union, so we organized our own union. We didn't have any days off.We forced the owners of those small businesses to raise our salaries from

[5] The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was, in 1935, the first labor organization led by African-Americans to receive a charter in the American Federation of Labor (AFL). It merged in 1978 with the Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks (BRAC), now known as the Transportation Communications International Union. The leaders of the BSCP – including A. Philip Randolph, its first president, Milton Price Webster, its vice president, and C. L. Dellums, its vice president and second president, became leaders in the civil rights movement and continued to play a significant role in it after it focused on the eradication of segregation in the South. *Wikipedia,* 2011. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brotherhood_of_Sleeping_Car_Porters .

$12.50 to $17.50, and we had to work a twelve-hour day instead of a fourteen or fifteen-hour day, (laughter) and have a day off. One day off a week. That was big stuff.

DePue: Wow, that's a huge difference from what you described before.

Black: It shows the difference. Lou wasn't losing any money—he was living all right—because I knew the retail prices, I knew he was still making money. He didn't go out of business. (phone ringing)

DePue: Sorry about that. I was supposed to have turned that off. They're not going to like that. I always tell other people to do that, and I forgot myself today.

Black: Oh, well, it's easy to do.

DePue: Well, I know somewhere along the line you got into the insurance business as well.

Black: Yes, yes. The war hadn't started yet, but it's on its way. My brother graduated from college. There are almost no jobs for college grads, particularly if they happen to be people of color. We had become the supply operator for the Allied Forces in Europe. So, the jobs that were important to those suppliers in the war, guys who needed jobs began to go. So, my brother got a job, and that's where my brother was. Whenever he would find himself a job, whether I liked it or not, he would look for a job for me. (laughter) So, he got a job... Let's see, now. I had left Lou Kaplan's, and I went to another grocery store. There was a little conflict—it wasn't racial, but it was conflict—and I quit, figuring I was going to get another job.

Well, one of the things has always been my psychological advantage: I never thought I wouldn't have a job if I wanted one. I might be off two or three weeks, maybe, but I would get another job. That was my attitude about work. So, if you insulted me or something, I'd insult you back, you would fire me and I'd go get another job. So, anyway, that had happened.

My brother was working up in Milwaukee with the fur and metal workers at the Greenbaum Tannery in Milwaukee—which was not unionized—which supplied leather goods and other things to the Army. Therefore, if you worked for them you were exempt, in a sense, from being inducted. Now, I go up there and I get a job, began to work, because almost every major industry plant in the United States wanted to have a public thing that they could brag about. So, they had athletic teams playing at almost every major industry. We went up there as a basketball team, a couple of the guys—George Easter who played with the 'Trotters—who was like my cousin also—he had left the 'Trotters because of his family, wife, and children.

A Texas guy, one whose son is now very important in the Chicago Democratic Organization—we went up there as almost like a team; they gave

us almost choice jobs. Not hard work. Our hard work was out on the court, playing opposite teams that were from other manufacturing [plants]. That was a way to avoid being inducted. By this time, they had passed the—

DePue: The draft had passed about in 1940. I'd assume that's the timeframe you're talking about.

Black: That same time because we had registered. I registered in Chicago. I think my brother registered in Milwaukee and some of the other guys too, but I registered in Chicago. It was not a hard job; I liked Milwaukee in some ways, but not too much. There were a lot of Germans in Milwaukee at that time, and also quite a few Jews. The tensions were very great, but they never talked about the war. And there were the communists who were on the side of Germany until Germany invaded Russia.

DePue: Yeah, that would have happened in 1942.

Black: Was it '42?

DePue: That the Germans invaded Russia.

Black: Yeah, well, they invaded Russia. So, I was up in Milwaukee trying to do that. In 1941 I was in Chicago when Mr. Hansberry took his first case to the Supreme Court, and that's a very interesting story, too. Mr. Hansberry… again, I had met them when I was working for Lou Kaplan. The Hansberry family lived down the street. That's where I met Loraine and Carl Junior, and Perry, and their sister.

DePue: Do you remember their father's first name?

Black: Carl. His brother was a full professor at Howard University. You know, you can check that he was a much-distinguished professor at Howard. So, Mr. Hansberry, who had come to Chicago because of his money, had started a real estate business. He did what the whites did: he exploited the congestion and made money, but then he didn't approve of it, so he had one of his white friends buy a building in a segregated neighborhood, Northwest Woodlawn, that little section. It was interesting when I tell some of my white Jewish friends sometimes, just to be joking.

The University of Chicago's Robert Hutchins supported restrictive codes. Now, Robert Hutchins was a brilliant man; he became the President of the University of Chicago when he was twenty-eight [twenty-nine] years old. Very brilliant; to some extent liberal, at least to the left. But he approved of and supported restrictive covenants, and rationalized it in a very brilliant way. When Mr. Hansberry's friend sold him back the building on Ingleside—61st I think it was on—restrictive covenants had said, "You can't move in," so rioting broke out. What the folks who were living in that area—the whites, blue-collar workers for the most part—didn't understand was that these men,

particularly from the South, had left the South because they were "bad-ass niggers." (laughter) They didn't care; now, in the North, they could fight back whenever they get ready. A judge in the local case ruled that restrictive covenants were not in violation of blacks pursuing constitutional rights—and I tell my friends, the support came from the University of Chicago, and the judge was a graduate of the University of Chicago Law School and happened to be Jewish. (laughter) They tell me the same thing about black students, (laughter) that everything is not the same in any particular group.

Then I tell them—this is 1938 or '39, early '39; this is *Hansberry v. Lee*, that was the case—"So the Justice who read the Supreme Court majority opinion was an ex-Ku Klux Klansman, by the name of Hugo Black."

DePue: Yeah, that would have been my guess. (laughter)

Black: From whom my family name comes. My daddy, who didn't care for white people in general and white men in particular, when Hugo Black was nominated for the Supreme Court by Roosevelt, when I went to bed I thought I was kind of smart, "Dad, do you know the President has nominated an ex-Ku Klux Klansman to be on the Supreme Court?" My dad put his cigar down and said, "He'll be all right." I said, "Good God, my daddy's gone crazy." Somehow, in that mess of the South, my father and Hugo Black had continued to have some kind of contact. I don't know how. That's where I get my slave name: Black. You know, that's where Black comes from, Hugo Black's family.

DePue: Hugo Black's ancestors had owned your family, then?

Black: Yeah, his father and mother had been my grandparents' slave masters. So, that's always a story. If I took time out to do my genealogy I could probably find out the reason, but that's the reason my dad could go vote. He was Hugo Black's nigger, and that was true of a number of people of that period. So, that's why I get so mixed up when we deal with this issue of slavery and segregation and all those things: if you generalize, you're going to find yourself running up against somebody who actually explains this exception.

But anyhow, Hugo Black read the majority decision, and that's *Hansberry v. Lee*,[6] and my family moved immediately up into that

[6] Hansberry v. Lee, 311 U.S. 32 (1940) is a famous case now usually known in civil procedure for teaching that res judicata may not bind a subsequent plaintiff who had no opportunity to be represented in the earlier civil action. The facts of the case dealt with a racially restrictive covenant that barred African Americans from purchasing or leasing land in a Chicago neighborhood. The defense argued that Hansberry could not contest the covenant because it had already been deemed valid by the courts in a previous lawsuit. The U.S. Supreme Court disagreed and held that since 46% of the neighborhood landowners comprising the prior lawsuit did not support the restrictive covenant, the previous decision could not apply to each and every member of that class. The Supreme Court held that the restrictive covenant could be contested in court again, even though some of the parties involved may have been included in the prior class of neighborhood landowners. *Wikipedia,* 2011. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hansberry_v._lee

neighborhood, as did quite a few others. That apartment that we rented had been renting for thirty-five dollars a month. The people who occupied it moved out the back door, and we moved in the front door, and immediately, the price jumped to sixty-five dollars a month.

DePue: When was that, exactly? Do you recall?

Black: That was in October of 1939, I think.

DePue: So, this is still before the war?

Black: Oh, yeah. This is still before the war. I'm trying to close that gap between going to Milwaukee and—

DePue: Well, I thought it was, I just wanted to make sure it was.

Black: —that this is the experience. So, while I was still there...so, I think the Selective Service Act must have been while I was still in Chicago, it was 1938 to '39?

DePue: Again, I believe it was 1940, because a year later they renewed it, and it was right before December seventh.[7]

Black: Selective Service Act comes in the '30s.

DePue: Okay, we can make sure that's correct.[8]

Black: It may have been a renewal. It may have, you know, gone out a year or so, but I registered at Carter Elementary School in either 1938 or '39, and I was subject then to the draft. Then I moved up to Milwaukee, and then came back. So, to avoid the draft in another way because the young men of draft age in Milwaukee, young blacks, had families. Most of those who had gone up there with this team did not have families except for George Easter. We were single' fresh out of college or high school. So, most of those guys—including my brother—were drafted almost right away, in the early part of the draft.

I came back to Chicago in the summer, I think, of 1941, and on December 7, 1941, I was sitting in my favorite bar on Sixty-Third—411 Club—with a good friend, Joe Bowls(??) who became a prominent doctor, and George, who became a playwright. I forget George's last name. We were sitting in the bar just having a good time—which was right around the corner from where my mother and father moved. This was quite a beautiful neighborhood, with lots of entertainment and things up and down the streets. The jazz has now moved primarily from Thirty-Fifth to Forty-Seventh to

[7] On December 7, 1941 the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, thus causing the U.S. to enter World War II.
[8] Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 was passed by the United States Congress on September 25, 1940 and was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt two days later. *Wikipedia,* 2011. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selective_Training_and_Service_Act_of_1940.

Sixty-Third because that's where the people who had the money to support a lot of this new stuff lived.

We heard—there was no television—we kept hearing over the radio, "Pearl Harbor has been bombed. Pearl Harbor has been bombed."

DePue: Did that mean anything to you at the time?

Black: I said to George and to Joe, "She shouldn't have drank so much." My thoughts were that Pearl Harbor was a woman because in those days, "bomb" and "stone" meant you were drunk. And I thought, Well, why are they putting it on her? She shouldn't have drank so much, why are they talking about it so much? When I got home, being the kind of woman my momma was, she had found out—she knew already—she had nephews and I had cousins in Honolulu, and she had called the Red Cross right away to find out what happened to her babies. Everybody was my momma's baby. She found out that they were okay because they were not in the Navy. They were working in Honolulu. So, she had to find that out. She had Red Cross get in touch with them and have pictures taken. One of my cousins, John, had his hand behind his back. Momma said, "Oh, they broke my baby's arm! What are they going to do now?"

So, that was kind of the attitude, and then, of course, when that happened and the President made the, "We live in infamy"[9] the next day, then they put over the whole city, the attacks on Asians across the city became more in the notion. Didn't know whether they were Japanese, or Chinese, but Asians in general, there were physical attacks all over the city. Then, we began to get en masse signals. Sirens would go off, and then we were supposed to prepare.

DePue: How quickly did you get to the point where you realized, This is going to have a direct impact on my life?

Black: Well, I knew that was possible because my brother and the younger guys up in Milwaukee, they began to get drafted. It took a while—I was selling insurance, I was coming back to Chicago. I came back looking for work, and one of my friend's father-in-law was the president of a burial society. We had burial societies—Jackson Burial—and I have him in one part of my book. I forget his name right now; he's in the first volume. He had married this owner's daughter—he'd been to college and she had too. He was making a pretty good living, and so he said, "Well, why don't you come over and work for us?"

I went over, and then, another fellow I bumped into on Forty-Seventh Street showed me his check from Metropolitan Burial Society. His check was

[9] In his speech to the nation, President Roosevelt said, "December 7, 1941 will live in infamy…"

bigger than the other from Jackson; I went to work for them, (laughter) and immediately began to make four times as much as ordinary working men.

DePue: Wow, all that time learning how to negotiate and bargain with people came in handy at this point.

Black: Oh, very much so. I could just knock on somebody's door. In those days, you could knock on a door and people would always open their door and say, "Who is it? How are you doing," stuff like that. Seems unbelievable now, but that was not unusual. So, I could canvass. Then, the debit(??) where I was, was a prominent debit(?) because jazz has moved down to a place called Oakwood Boulevard, and the Du Sable Hotel has opened, and so you're getting Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald and Fats Waller and all those people coming down to stay in the hotel, but hanging out at the bar. So, I would hang out in the bar a lot, in addition to my clients on the street, and they liked me so they would come in and they would pay the premium on the year. They didn't care—that was because they liked me—they paid a year's premium, you know, to make me feel good.

DePue: Are you telling me that some of your clientele were some of these famous singers and artists at the time?

Black: They were clients of mine. Yeah, so it was, you know, enjoyable. Then, I had all these clients—the week-to-week, month-to-month clients—that liked me very much, and all they had to do in particular was keep their girls away from me because I was still practicing. (laughter) So, I was pretty popular. When I got my notice to be drafted, there were many people who felt bad. They sent me, while I was at service, nice letters and things.

DePue: When was it that you got drafted, then?

Black: Well, pulling it up, so, 1941, I was starting work for Met. Then, in 1943, after I'd really built my debit—I'd doubled the size of my debit in terms of income, and it was going forward even further—then, as I was doing that, many of my friends were being drafted and all, and I was being forced. In June of 1943—this is two years after my brother had been drafted, and almost two years for many of my friends—there was a race riot in Detroit and in New York, and other places. It was in that period. What had happened is, many whites and blacks were leaving the South to get better jobs in the war industry, and they had built new housing. Like, the Brewster Homes in Detroit. These were built for war workers, but the whites did not want to live with blacks, period. When that began to happen, the riot broke out. Again, they didn't understand: you could do that in the South to blacks, but you weren't going to do that in the North.

The riots broke out, and I had—and still have—a very large number of my mother's people were in Detroit. They didn't live in the area where the

riots broke out, but we didn't know that. Guys like me tried to get up to Detroit to see what was happening, but the public transportation would not let us get on the train to go to Detroit because they felt… Now, there were guys that I knew—pimps, and like that—something was happening. They'd taken their girls up there early before the riot, and they had their guns with them, so the fight back was... So, my daddy, making his sense that you don't need to be in it. Because he knew how I was and he knew my brother could handle himself diplomatically much better than I could. So in order to discourage me from going with the draft, he said, "You don't need to go overseas and fight; you need to go up in Detroit and fight," but we couldn't get up to Detroit.

Very soon after that, guys like me, in New York as well, got our notices. "Greetings, you have been selected by your Uncle Sam to serve your country," and all that. I sent mine back saying, "I don't have an uncle named Sam. My uncles are named Henry and Will." They sent me another one, and my mother said to my dad, "You better leave that boy alone!" (laughter)

DePue: They didn't have a sense of humor about that?

Black: Oh, no, no, no, no. So, that second [notice] I got, I think I was drafted in August. When they cleared the streets of young blacks in the cities—this was happening in New York as well as in Detroit…

DePue: What was your attitude about service in the military in a country where you were clearly second-class citizens?

Black: Well, it was ambivalent. That can be explained as I went up—You know, I had friends who were volunteers. Some of my friends were in the old Eighth Regiment of...the what-do-you-call-it?

DePue: Well, the Eighth Illinois was the—

Black: Yeah, the Eighth Illinois, the National Guard. That's the Eighth Illinois. I had a lot of friends in. They wanted to be in combat, they wanted to be on the front, they were...like the guys in World War I, they wanted to be in—

DePue: This is the neighborhood where a very famous regiment—I think it's the 370th, it used to be the Eighth Illinois, went to the 370th [U.S. Infantry Regiment]; it fought as combat.

Black: You know, part of the Ninety-Second and Ninety-Third Divisions. They wanted to be, but just like in World War I, when Pershing didn't want them to be in combat and they had to go into the French Army to be in combat, the Ninety-Second and Ninety-Third Divisions, which were trained in Arizona and had black officers, were guys that I grew up with—they were military-minded. Some of them, of course, became members of the Tuskegee Airmen, who were just dedicated to saving some of their planes of that period to make a museum.

My brother wanted to be in combat. He was a college graduate, he was qualified to go to OCS [Officer Candidate School], but no, he couldn't go to OCS. Partially because of his experiences—my experiences, as well—in helping to organize the Fur and Leather Workers' Union at that plant, and the national director for the *Fur and Leather Workers* was a devout member of the Communist Party. So, my brother and I both got—and the whites, as well—in organizing a union, we got accused of being affiliates of the communist party. That's happening with Barack Obama right now. My name gets laid onto his, with that background, as being that he must be too far to the left, and he is not even in the center, in terms of his political feelings. He's a good guy—I'm not saying that—and I should have brought a personal letter that he wrote to me on my birthday.

Now, we went into service—I think I was drafted—I know it was in August, and very soon, we wound up in Camp Custer. My mother had demanded that I come home with an honorable discharge, and my dad didn't disagree with her, so I felt that sense of obligation to my love of both parents. I went to Camp Custer, and from there, we went to—after we had been screened and whatever else they needed to do, formalized—to Camp Lee, [Fort Lee?]Virginia.

DePue: Camp Custer was in Michigan?

Black: Camp Custer's in Michigan, yeah.

DePue: That's where you received your basic training?

Black: No, that was, you might say, the center for processing. They asked me, Did I want to be in the Air Corps? It wasn't that I was afraid because I had friends in the Air Corps and I'd been up in planes—it was my feelings about wanting to be in the Army at all, and I wanted to come home. As my mother had indicated, I wanted to choose a unit, choose a kind of service that would put me in less danger, and that was the Quartermaster. That's what I thought, the Quartermaster. They were just beginning to open the doors for blacks in the Air Corps as well as in the Navy and in the Marine Corps. They were just beginning to open the door, but I had my position: I wanted to get out of this thing.

DePue: Did you receive basic training at Fort Lee, then?

Black: Yeah, that's where my basic training was. That was my first experience—beyond Fort Lee, we had that experience at Camp Lee—that was my first experience of personal, what I considered viciousness, racism. I'm in my soldier suit, and any white civilian could come into wherever I was, and get in front of me. That was the...habits and customs of the South I had never [experienced]—I had been South, but it had always been sheltered. Our high school teams would go play Southern black high school teams during the

Christmas holidays, but we were protected. They knew we didn't know what we were doing out there, so we never felt that kind of... It was shocking. I'm supposed to be back at my base at a certain time. Ordinarily, given my idea of time, I can get back to my base. But then, I'm standing there, and three or four times while I'm moving up, some white person—they're often my same age—would come and get in front of me, which was a custom. I couldn't believe it. The anger was... Many of the blacks from the North were similar because they had never had—that's when they began to have—

Like, the late Dempsey Travis, not only in the South but in the North, the segregation. He went to go to a theater with his friends up at Camp Shenango, near outside of Pittsburgh when he went to go to a movie on the campsite, and the MPs stopped them from going to that movie—tried to stop them because they were who they were. They weren't going to be pushed that way—and the white MPs killed two of his friends and shot him. He served, but he didn't go overseas. But that was in the North, but many of the...non-commissioned officers and privates and PFCs, white, were from the South. They were from the South.

DePue: In basic training—I know this is during a time when the Army is very much segregated—

Black: Mm-hmm, for sure.

DePue: —were your training NCOs, were your drill sergeants white NCOs?

Black: No. My NCOs generally were—in that camp—black, but they were from the South, and there was a resentment towards us Northerners.

DePue: That even the black NCOs resented you because of that?

Black: Because we were Northerners, not because we were black. They thought we thought we were better than them, and maybe we did, because on all the tests we outscored them. Particularly guys like Leon Dash, myself, and others. They knew that. There's been always class segregation, class feuds. Now, they had joined the Army—they were not drafted—they had joined the Army to escape what many kids do today, the poverty that they were living in, and they thought we thought we were better than them. Now, when I was overseas, I had to prove that to one of those guys who was going to kick my butt because I thought I was better from the North, so I just kicked his butt really quick, and so…

DePue: Having the drill sergeants have an attitude about you in the first place isn't necessarily good in basic training. It sounds like they made basic training pretty darn tough for you.

Black: Oh, they did. They did, but we had Leon and friends that I began to meet from New York and Detroit at that time. Our determination was that we would—

not everybody did that—but that we would have to make the adjustment, that we were not going to be in basic training forever. We'd have to make an adjustment.

DePue: Were the officers there at Fort Lee white?

Black: All of the officers were white. There were no black officers. Most of them were from the South.

DePue: Okay, but I would guess that in basic training, at least, your exposure to the officers was rather minimal.

Black: Very much so, unless they were trying to collect some funds to put into… They had a general fundraising kind of thing, you know, that's what it was. It wasn't them, it wasn't for them, it was for some other cause, which I had made major contributions to when I was in civilian life. Working with insurance companies. I made substantial contributions, but they were making this as a demand, a command: coming from the Commanding officer of that base, and, see, you'd have to really know me. Though I had given more money than most others who were being… I was going to refuse to give a—not a—their demand was not that you voluntarily give what you wanted to give, that you give a certain amount. That was the demand, and I was not going to do that. So, the CO [Company Commander] called me in and I told him why. I told him, "Check back now." Many of my fellows, my colleagues who were angry with me because I had put a little disruption into the situation, yet, you know, I did basic training and came through it all right.

That was when we thought we were going to go to a camp in the Northwest, around Nebraska some place, and they told us that's what was going to happen. Gave us leave to come home and I came home; we all went for a week. When we completed our basic training, we had leave to come home, and we thought we were going to come home and then go to another camp after we had completed our basic. But, when we came home and went back to the Camp Shenango—there where Dempsey Travis had [been shot?]—we learned we were getting ready to go overseas. Then we shipped out from Shenango, preparation to Fort Dix, in New Jersey. Fort Dix, then overseas.

DePue: Most of the other people you went through basic training with, were you all already determined that you were heading towards the Quartermaster Corps?

Black: Well, that was the Quartermaster training operation. That was the Quartermaster training operation—we knew we were going to be in Quartermaster.

DePue: Did they train you in Quartermaster skills as well as going through basic training there?

Black: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Did you know what kind of particular unit that you would be assigned to at that time?

Black: No, I didn't know that until we...let's see, when we, I think, got up to Shenango, that's when we were...no, maybe we were down...

DePue: It wasn't unusual for people to be assigned to a unit only after they got to the theater of operation.

Black: No, we were—

DePue: Before that?

Black: —we were 308th Quartermaster Railhead. I think we were shipped overseas as the 308th Unit.

DePue: Okay, so the unit of your assignment was the 308th Quartermaster Railhead Company?

Black: Yep, mm-hmm. Quartermaster, yeah. That was our unit. We first went up to...Wales, and that was a solidifying of the unit, getting our minds ready for what might happen.

DePue: What timeframe would this have been that you shipped?

Black: We left the States in, I think it was January of 194….

DePue: Would have been '44.

Black: 1944. I was in the same unit with—Now, some of the guys who had not been assigned, they went to North Africa, but the unit that we were assigned to was scheduled, and we had to go up north and come around to escape the German attacks in the sea. When we came up north to Wales, we were there, and from Wales, we again became certified now. By this time, Leon Dash Senior had moved up to Corporal. I'm a PFC, which I continued to be, and what we had learned was that the guys who were in our unit from the South knew how to handle the racial prejudice better than we did. We followed the rules, as we thought about it; they knew how to slip and slide. They kind of resented those up north, again, so we had to learn how to get along.

DePue: What do you mean by slip and slide?

Black: Well, they knew how to bullshit the CO and stuff, and get him to be able to go and get in the camp, go on leave, or something. Very plausible reason—they knew how to operate. (laughter) They'd lived that way; they'd lived in the South. See, there was a different culture—they'd lived that way. They would

laugh at us because we didn't know how to do it: we were not going to bend down to get what we wanted; we were going to stand up like what we considered men.

DePue: So, they were more deferential in their treatments or their experiences with the whites?

Black: With the white officers. They didn't do that with [lower ranks?]. By this time, all of our non-commissioned officers were black. Well, it had always been that way, but our officers were all white, generally, most of the time, from the South. So, they appreciated their Southern inductees or soldiers more than they did those of us from the North. They had to keep us in our place.

DePue: Were some of the white officers resentful of the fact that they had to work with black troops?

Black: They may have been; I don't know. They may have been.

DePue: How would you characterize their treatment of you?

Black: Their treatment of me and others like me, particularly those who didn't adjust so easily, that they had to keep me in my place, and I wasn't ready to adjust, so it was not easy. It was not easy, but I had to remember that my mother and dad wanted me to come back home with an honorable discharge, so I kept that in my mind. Before I went overseas, I knew I was going, and I wasn't even thinking about it—I went to go see my brother, who was at Camp Butner, I think it was, in North Carolina. I wasn't even thinking—I wanted to spend a little time with him because I hadn't seen him in a while. He'd gotten married, and his wife was living in Durham, which was very close to the camp. He'd be home on weekends. He was a master sergeant at this time, he was doing training, in the... What is it called? The engineers! He was in an engineering unit.

DePue: Well, then, he had moved up very quickly. I would assume in part because of his college degree.

Black: Well, he should have—oh, yeah, yeah, he should have been an officer. Now, my mother wanted both of us to be officers so she could brag to her friends because almost all of her friends, their boys had become officers, some of which come out of the ROTC at the University of Illinois and other places like that, but they were officers—they were combat. I didn't want to be an officer, but I wanted to please my momma. Then, I was restricted because of my previous labor activities. So, he was an Advanced Service Varial(??), and he was a master sergeant—what do you call it? Three stars? Whatever that is. Three... Anyway, he was as far up… He was in a position where the lower COs almost had to obey him because he got his orders from the major or the colonel, and this kind of thing. So, he was higher than them.

My brother was kind of naïve on the race issue because he had been in so many things where he was treated because of his abilities. He knew how to handle [race] in many ways. But anyway, his wife, who was from a prominent family in Shreveport, Louisiana, helped him. Well, I went to Durham, but when I was getting ready to go there, I got on the bus—I wasn't even thinking about it; I wasn't trying to break anything—I got on the bus after I had gotten into Richmond, Virginia, and the bus driver didn't say anything. I was the first one on the bus. As we're going along and he picks up his first passenger after I'd gotten on—a young white man, and I guess his girlfriend or his wife—he immediately began to go towards the bus driver, and I knew—I thought what he was going to say. My feelings, my emotions, my daddy's attitude came to me immediately, without me screening it out. I said to myself, in my feeling, "It's time to die now. I'm going to die."

The bus driver came and stopped the bus, and said, "You're sitting in the wrong seat." I said, "What do you mean?" as if I didn't know. He said, "You're supposed to be sitting in the back." I said, "Well, why didn't you tell me that when I got on?" He said, "It didn't matter then." I said, "Why does it matter now? You mean to tell me, I, with my American soldier uniform on, am going to let someone get on the bus and tell me where to sit, that I'm going to give my life so he can do that? No, I'm not going to do that." Fortunately, we were close to the train station, and I got on the train, and I knew where to sit.

I hadn't thought of it on... But then again, one of my Southern soldier friends—because we were treated very nice by those who knew the South, had relatives in the South, we were treated very nice—so, he thought, and I had a lot of experiences with young ladies at the colleges at Virginia State and places like that. So, he asked me before I left Virginia, "How do you like the South now?" since I'd thought I had a good time. I said, "I like it so much that I would marry a woman named Virginia, Georgia, or Carolina." (laughter) That's how deep my feelings were towards that. That experience, however, helped develop me into what I am today, attitudinally.

DePue: Did you move to the back of the bus, then, after that?

Black: No, I didn't move. I mean, my feelings were so strong. It's time to die—death isn't the worst thing that can happen to a human being, in terms of his or her personality, and that's my dad's attitude. I wouldn't take my mother's diplomatic—my mother wouldn't have disapproved either because she would have known, of her own experience, there was no diplomacy people could work. That this white guy, by his culture, had a responsibility to make me move to the back of the bus. By my culture, no, no, no. My Northern, Chicago culture. So, the conflict was not just still black; there were a lot of those, and a lot of black guys lost their lives because they didn't make the adjustment. That's in the records.

So, now, I go to this church with my sister-in-law that Sunday morning, and the minister—well-trained guy, it's a Methodist church—the text of the sermon was, and there were enough of us soldiers in the congregation that morning, "For I am a part of each, and each is a part of me. And so far as my brother suffers, I, too, suffer. My brother prospers, I, too, prosper." He was dealing with the whole idea of brotherhood—human brotherhood. That stuck with me, just like my friends said, "Be cool, be cool." So, when I got back, we went up to this place and then across the ocean into...uh, not Ireland, but—

DePue: Wales?

Black: Wales. And one day, we were put together and we shipped out to—the the shipping port down in Britain, down in England—Southampton, I think it was. Southampton. We learned in a day or so that Eisenhower was preparing to go into Normandy. A few days later, we went into Normandy. My unit didn't—right away. We went a few days later. But the unit that went in like, _____(??) earlier... See, a lot of people think that because you were in service units, you were not close to the combat: uh-uh, not in my time.

DePue: Just doing some research and getting ready for this interview, I noticed… this might be a good time, I see you checking your watch. We're into this already two hours. We've probably got at least another hour to go. That's longer than I generally like to do these. Would you like to pick it up in another session later on?

Black: Yeah, let's do it that way because I have some other things I need to do at home, so I'd rather do that. I hope our conversation at this session has been okay.

DePue: Well, this has been outstanding.

Black: With wild card.

DePue: This is important history, and I know you've told these stories before, but I really appreciate that.

Black: Not when it's special—not with a person who specializes, like yourself, in terms of—

DePue: Yeah, the military aspect.

Black: —the military aspect, which is a part of American history, and our understanding you get out of this, both black and white, when we began to return home. I was at Buchenwald; I saw Buchenwald. I wasn't a liberator. I went up with my Commanding officer, but we couldn't believe when the guys came back to tell us what had happened at these camps. It was unbelievable, though we had been in combat. So, when I was preparing to, at the bombing of Hiroshima and all, I would've preferred going to Japan. We were prepared

to go into Japan. I would have preferred to go into Japan then we drop that bomb at that time, but most of the guys didn't feel the same way.

But then, they were getting ready to take us home, and another unit comes in—a white unit—they were just getting there. Then they reorganized it so that they would go back home first. And one of the white young men, he said, "You mean to tell me you're going to let them take you off that ship, and you've been here all that time, and I'm just getting here? You're going to let them do that to you?" I'm speaking with an attitude, now. You see, many of us came back home (laughter) with his attitude and my attitude. (laughter) We made a difference way before Dr. King!

DePue: One last question before we end the session today. I'm going to ask you about an attitude before you would have shipped out overseas. What did you and your buddies think about going to fight Germany with these racial policies that it had?

Black: That was not a problem for us. I'll give you one example: when I was up in Belgium, near Liege we were moving supplies for First, Third, and Ninth; we had a depot with ammunition, all the stuff you needed. Air Corps guys had preferences at that time. If they come to get something, you had to give it to them! (laughter) Well, one of the guys that I had who did that, he had had culinary training in one of the good schools in New York, and that was his job—he was in charge of making up the food and stuff. So, he'd come to pick up supplies, and he'd bring me a bottle of booze—you know, typical salesman (laughter) —and I'd give him more than he ordered. So, one day a guy came; after he had gotten his supplies—now, he's in the Air Corps, they had preferences. Now, we're near the end of the war, and this guy says, "You know, Hitler was right after all." And I said, "Whatever you want, we just ran out of." (laughter) My Commanding officer agreed: "Whatever you want, we just ran out of that."

I don't know whether that helps to answer your question, but the social/cultural experience of my war overseas and in America made me less anxious to get rich, as I could have done at Metropolitan. When I came back there, they had to fire me because I was organizing the clerks and organizing the whole unit.

DePue: We're going to cover that a lot more in the next session. After this one today, I'm really looking forward to that.

Black: I hope it's been worthwhile.

DePue: Oh, absolutely. Thank you very much, Mr. Black.

Black: And I'm not saying in any strong resentment because when they would ask me in Europe, “Why do we see white officers over Negro troops, and we don't see any Negro officers over white troops?” then my Americanism would come up,

like, That ain't none of your goddamn business, you know? (laughter) Over the race!

DePue: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Black.

Black: Yeah.

(end of interview #1)

Interview with Timuel Black

VR2-A-L-2009-027.2

Interview # 2: September 9, 2009
Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Thursday, September 3, 2009. My name is Mark DePue. Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here for my second session with Timuel Black. Good afternoon, Mr. Black.

Black: Oh, good afternoon, Mark. I'm so glad to have this opportunity.

DePue: I wonder if you can tell us very quickly where we are, and then we'll get into the second part of your interview.

Black: The building where we are has its own history: it's now called the Charles Hayes Family Investment Center, but the first time that I remember it was in the 1920s when my family lived in the neighborhood, and a man by the name of Bacon bought a parking garage and converted it into an entertainment center. So, we used to call it Bacon's Casino, but it wasn't gambling. It was very upscale; invitational affairs were held here. I saw such people as Duke Ellington and Count Basie and others of that level in the days of big band jazz, in this building. Later, it became converted to a recruitment center during

World War II, for the soldiers, when they were on leave. I forget what they call it...

DePue: Pass, maybe?

Black: No, it was—they came here on weekends. Soldiers in World War II, we had weekends when we could get away from the battle line, and so we had to have a place to go. When we got into the city, there were people who were sympathetic to the military. So, there was that, and then after World War II, it became an organizing center for the labor union, the Amalgamated Meat-Cutters' Union [Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America]. So, many, many famous [people] here, including this was one of the first fundraising sites that Dr. King used when he came north to raise money.

DePue: OK, very good. Well, where we left off your discussion before—it was probably about a month ago when we last talked—we had gotten you through the first part of your military career. You had talked about your experiences down South and getting an exposure to a different kind of prejudice and discrimination. So, I want to start by having you talk about being shipped overseas.

Black: In January, right after Christmas of 1944, my unit—along with others—began to organize to be shipped out of New Jersey where we were stationed temporarily. We knew we were going to be leaving, so we boarded a ship, and we went far north, and I understand that was to avoid any possible—as much as possible—bombing by the Germans and the Italians.[10] We wound up in Wales. We were stationed there during some training, but awaiting—which we didn't know at that time—the invasion of Normandy.

DePue: Were you assigned to a unit when you were shipped overseas or once you got there?

Black: I was already assigned, as far as I can remember. The 308th Quartermaster. We were the supply unit, and the 308th Quartermaster, and so as far as I can remember; I didn't pay too much attention. Maybe they did put the unit together after we were overseas, but I knew that very soon, we'd be 308th Quartermasters.

DePue: OK. 308th Quartermaster Railhead Company. Is that the total, full name for it?

Black: That would be yes, and our mission was to get the supplies to the front line combat troops, so we were never very far behind.

[10] At that time there was still concern about German submarines, although the earlier "wolf packs" had been generally cleaned out.

DePue: Well, from just the title of the name of the unit, it sounds like you would be a terminal for a railhead, and would be unloading from the railhead onto trucks—is that what the unit was all about?

Black: That was part of our unit. But the railhead or loading on the trucks, after we began to get deep into France and Germany with German prisoners, they did the actual, physical work, and ours were supervisory. But the enemy forces made special efforts to knock out the railhead units because they had the supplies. In a couple of cases, they hit the ammunition supply area, and our guys had to go in to try to detonate those bombs.

DePue: That gets a little bit dicey. But that's a little bit ahead of our story here. I want to spend a little bit of time talking about what it was like to be an Army-in-training in Wales. Now, did you spend all the time there, or did you move later on to England as well?

Black: We spent whatever time we had. When we went to England we were prepared at that point to go into Normandy, so we didn't spend much time doing any further training when we were down in England. I forgot—we were in Southampton, I believe.

DePue: Southampton?

Black: Yeah, I think that's where we shipped out from to go into Normandy. But, when we went to Southampton, we were quite aware that it wasn't going to be long before we moved from there to actual combat zones. I don't know how long it was; it wasn't very long.

DePue: What was it like? How did the local population receive you?

Black: At the point when we went into that area—I forget how far—we had been going to London on occasional visits, and the Blitzkrieg[11] was going on in England. They were very friendly. So many of the young British men were in service. Generally speaking, it was the females and the older men and people who had been brought in from the British colonies who were doing much of the labor, so they were as foreign to the natives as we were, from America. The one thing that was noticeable when we first went into England was the fact that the people—the residents—expressed surprise and shock that they saw white officers over Negro troops, but never saw any Negro officers over white troops. That was to them—I had to remind them that they had… Because I'm a good American, I don't let folks fight the family battle. (laughter) You know, that they had large numbers of units from Africa that were in combat that never had even non-commissioned officers/ I wanted to get them away from that subject, so I had to remind them that Yes, we lived in the places in America all over the United States. DePue: When you were

[11] Blitzkrieg is German – literally *lightning war* – meaning a swift military offensive with both ground and air forces.

on pass or leave and going to different places—London or other English towns—were you still a segregated army?

Black: What happened, and that was shocking, is that when then-General Eisenhower was promoted to be the Commanding Officer of the Allied Forces, in order to break up the conflict as much as he could between African-American soldiers—between black soldiers and white soldiers—he relegated blacks to one town and whites to another town. Because when they'd go into town, there would inevitably be some confrontation, whether it was over girls or whatever it was. Generally, the town that the whites had an opportunity to go to was much more exciting in all kinds of ways, and the ones that the blacks were assigned to was kind of crummy and agricultural and things of that sort.

So, there were blacks who would just break the rules and go to this larger place where there was more fun. That was a violation, of course, of the military rules, and they could be court-martialed. It was that obvious. We were glad—I was—that he had intervened into the physical conflict. I didn't go into town that much, it wasn't something that I wanted to do, but I had a sense of what's fair and what isn't, in my own way.

DePue: Were any of the whites checking out the black areas? Did that happen?

Black: Almost none. The areas where we had the freedom to go were just dead; there was nothing there.

DePue: What was the perception, among you and your fellow soldiers that you knew, about the military justice system: did it treat blacks fairly?

Black: Well, an example would be: a lot of our soldiers, a lot of our guys, were young men: eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old. Now, in both the British Isles and particularly England, where we were there were a lot of young women whose boyfriends or husbands were in service. (laughter) So, there would be a relationship between a young woman who might be sixteen, seventeen years old, and this young man who was eighteen or nineteen. If that was caught, the girl had to say that she had been raped.

DePue: Pressure from her own people, her own society?

Black: From the United States, from the United States Army.

DePue: Oh!

Black: You see, we were supplying them with food. They had a dependency factor that they had to look at, in a rational kind of way. Now, the girl and the guy liked each other very much, but he would be court-martialed, and usually sentenced, even though she said he did not rape her. You know, she would say, "This was consensual and it was not rape at all." She loved the guy and he loved her. That was very, very bitter.

DePue: From your perspective, that was much more a factor of the way the American military was working, versus English society?

Black: Very much so. Very much so, because the elders of these young women, they were glad for their daughter or niece to have a boyfriend. Race did not factor into their lives as much as those of us who had grown up in segregated society. Their society, the blacks who were there—the Africans—fitted into the general population. There weren't that many that made a difference, so there were quite a few blacks who had stayed over in Italy and France and England after World War I. It wasn't something they were unaccustomed to seeing, so it didn't bother them that the new arrivés were mating with their young women.

DePue: That's an important point because I don't think Americans understand. We don't know much about the First World War, and we certainly have lost sight of the fact that for France and England, they had their entire empire fighting that war for them.

Black: Yeah, that's right. Absolutely.

DePue: OK, let's get you over to France then. D-Day obviously is June sixth. You'd been in the country for a few months, in Wales and then England. June sixth would obviously not be the day that your particular unit landed, but how quickly after that did you get to France?

Black: I think we came and went in about six days later, but there were Quartermaster units that went in on D-Day. The 307th and the 308th: my commanding officer and the commanding officer of the 307th wanted to go in on D-Day, and so they flipped a coin or something as to who would take the assignment. 307th won, and they were literally wiped out down in Normandy.

DePue: Wow.

Black: The first wave that went into Normandy. I don't know whether you've been or not?

DePue: I have not been there.

Black: There were hills and mountains.

DePue: There's a commanding bluff on Omaha Beach especially, and of course, Omaha was where it was very tough going for the Americans.

Black: Yeah, well, fortunately, my unit went into Utah, and that's about six days later. But there were landmines as we went up into… What was it, young Roosevelt, who was at least a major.

DePue: Well, I think it's Theodore Roosevelt Jr. I could be wrong, but he was Assistant Division Commander.

Black: Yeah, yeah. We thought we were trapped down on the beach, and he said—I'm glad I remember it so well—"You're staying down here and getting killed. Let's go in! Let's go inside and get killed!" (laughter) I remember that so well because that was publicly announced that way, and that made sense! (laughter) But as we went on up past the—and I forget this town—we were very welcome. Some of us who spoke French a bit were welcomed. The hedgerows as they called them, the hedgerows… They had good wine, and so they—(laughter) if *parler le français un petit peu*, (laughter) you could get some extra favors. (laughter) Food, because you know, another thing—

DePue: Did you know a little bit of French?

Black: I had a little bit, and I learned a little more. It's gone now because I haven't used it on a regular basis. When I was in high school—and that's a thing that the teachers should say to young people today—You never know where you're going to wind up. My French teacher, as we were playing around and kidding, she said, "Stop, young—bourgeois, I think, whatever…" But anyway, she said, "You don't know when you might have to use this." That's 1936. A little while later, we were hitting the beach, and the fact that I could speak a little French… In my unit we had a couple of guys who were from New Orleans, and they, you know, had exposure to what they call patois, which is a mix between French and something else. So they understood, and theirs was much more folksy. In our division, the Parisian-trained interpreter spoke perfect French. We spoke (laughter) the lower-level, so we were more acceptable than the officers who were the translators who did Parisian-style French. Ours was much more folksy.

DePue: Do you remember landing on Utah Beach, your first thoughts of, Okay, now you're getting close, you're right there in combat? What were your first thoughts at that time?

Black: As we waded in, we had our rifles over our heads; we had to wade in. Some of the guys swam it, but most waded in. My feelings were, Somehow, I'm going to make it out of here. Somehow, I'm going to go home alive. In a humorous way, I had to obey my momma. She demanded I come home with an honorable discharge, you know? (laughter) So, I had to obey momma. But, having served yourself, you know that there is no relationship that is as passionate and sincere as your fellow soldiers—comrades—and I was as concerned about them as I was about myself. It's different now, but it's hard to have someone that you have been with and eaten with the night before, and they step on a landmine or a sniper knocks them out.

DePue: Do you remember any specific incidents, especially in the first month or so, —you're kind of bottled up in the Normandy beachhead—that you saw some actual combat where you saw casualties?

Black: Yeah, yeah. Particularly when we were unloading, reloading—unloading from the trains and reloading on the trucks. The Germans—I forget what they call those—but anyway, they zeroed in on the trucks where the supplies were.

DePue: Artillery?

Black: No, from the sky.

DePue: Aircraft? They had bombers?

Black: Yeah, and fire—I mean, machinegun fire—zooming in on these trucks and particularly the drivers of the trucks; put them out of operation. Well, I was on one of those trucks and saw some of our guys get hit. Also, the Germans bombed one of the supply ammunition dumps and it exploded. Some of the guys in our unit were ordered to go in to isolate the bombs and other weapons from the ones that were exploding. I guess you could say it's similar to what we see out in California now, with the fire going on. You try to isolate what's happening to keep it from happening even greater, so we had some of our guys in the unit… Again, that's the reason you see in my discharge four major battles. That's how close we were to combat almost all the time.

DePue: Okay, I'm looking at this. How quickly after you landed at Utah did you and your unit actually start performing the duties that you had always been trained for?

Black: Oh, right away. We had to be warned that there were young Germans who were going to be dropped behind the lines who spoke perfect English and knew what the New York Yankees were doing, and we had to find a way to detect. One way we did it was look at their shoes. You know, at that time, you had—what-do-you-call-them that hold your stockings and shoes up? Usually, they would seam them in on the wrong way, on the wrong side, and we had to look at those differences because otherwise we'd never know.

DePue: I know that that was a factor of the Battle of the Bulge; there was a lot of that kind of activity.

Black: Oh, yeah, much.

DePue: Was this going on in Normandy as well when you first landed?

Black: Did it in Normandy. Drop behind, and they would drop these young men who, as I say, spoke perfect English. They'd lived in the United States, and their mission was to destroy the supplies as much as possible, particularly the

ammo. So we were in combat. Then, when Patton came in to take charge of—I think it was the First or the Third…

DePue: You landed and I'm sure you were part of the U.S. I (First) Army; Patton came in about a month or a couple weeks after the landing, and when he came on, it was the III Army.

Black: Yeah, well, when we began to move up, his mission was, I think, to get up through Belgium as quickly as possible, so we outstripped our supplies. We were literally going up into central France without any supplies, and the idea would be we'd get up there so fast. Well, the Germans blocked that whole area off, and they were firing. One of our guys—it seems impossible for young people to realize—stood up so he could find out where the fire was coming from. He got hit. He was willing to give it up.

DePue: Where did he get hit?

Black: In the head.

DePue: How close were you to that?

Black: Well, they didn't have trenches, but we called them...

DePue: Foxholes?

Black: Foxholes. We were in foxholes, so we were all in close together; you were in a different foxhole, but he was in a foxhole not too far from where me and my buddy were, his foxhole. But he stood up to take the fire. He was eighteen or nineteen years old, a youngster. See, you hadn't seen as many people die as I have. (laughter)

DePue: Well, how do you process that? You're a couple of years older, but not that much older at the time. How do you deal with that?

Black: Well, you're in the army. Psychologically you've been trained to expect almost anything, and to deal with that. We had special training because I guess they anticipated that we were going to be going into some area of combat. They had special movies that were designed to get you ready; even within your own unit you might have somebody go crazy—start shooting around in the unit itself. I can only say this: If you don't have hopes and dreams about the future, it's very difficult. But if you have a belief that somehow—whatever the religion you may have—God will take care of you, then you're saddened. But there's no way to be as safe as you want to be. You're saddened, but you're going to avenge this comrade who was suddenly taken away.

DePue: I'm trying to find the way to ask you this question. In the United States you'd grown up in a society where you're [treated as] second-class citizens. You'd gone down to the South and seen it firsthand in ways you'd never seen before.

Did that affect the way you and your buddies looked at what you're now being asked to do by the United States military?

Black: Well, many of the guys in my unit were from the South—from rural Mississippi and Arkansas. Rural. The army, for them, they felt… They volunteered. Most of them couldn't read or write; I had to write letters for them back home. They thought, I think, that this is a chance to become liberated, and this is part of the risk. Most of them had either heard of people being lynched or brutalized in the South, so there was tearful, but not as dramatic as… In fact, two guys in Texas, good friends, playing with a gun, playing with... We had…

DePue: M-1s?

Black: M-1s. Playing, like they were just being cowboy and Indian kind of stuff. The gun went off, and a good friend was dead. Well, the guy who hit him—both from the South—he was stunned and saddened, but he had to be—of course—taken in to be court-martialed. He had to be taken out of the service. But the thing that kept most of us like myself was the kind of leadership that we had from people like Leon Dash Sr., whose son was down at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. The relationship that we had with one another kept us with some degree of—though it was painful—optimism. It's hard for one who has not been in a situation to imagine how you can be pessimistically optimistic. (laughter) You know, Tomorrow is going to be a terrible day, but I'm going to make it through!

DePue: Well, maybe a fatalistic attitude towards it.

Black: It may be that, too; that's the more accurate description. So we tried to help our less fortunate brothers and sisters from the South to understand that tomorrow is another day, and it's a good day. But they were playing games and they were more accustomed to using weapons than those of us from the North. That was part of their culture in the South: it's fishing and hunting, and stuff like that, so those guys can fire, they can really... But to see it happen in your own unit between guys who had been in a tough situation was very, very painful. Very painful. But again, it was the optimism of the future, that I say, "How can I go to sleep?" Well, nature takes care of that. (laughter) When I first saw that, bodies and heads and arms, God, I'm never going to go to sleep. I'm never going to eat again. Nature makes you do it. (laughter) When I smell it, you know, I'm never going to be around that again. Well, it's not going out, and nature's going to make you do certain things. Nature made no provision for a war.

DePue: After Patton got there, the line started to move pretty quickly.

Black: Oh, very quickly.

DePue: Did your unit go through Paris?

Black: Yeah, mm-hmm.

DePue: Tell me about that.

Black: We were there at the Liberation of Paris. Our unit went in with the Liberation of Paris.

DePue: I know they let the French go in there first of all.

Black: Oh, yeah, the French went in. The FFI—Fighting French of the Interior—[French Forces of the Interior] went in. I'm trying to think of this writer that was very famous who was in the underground. He became a famous playwright.

DePue: This is a Frenchman?

Black: Yeah, along with the others, whose loyalty was steadfast to their country. Because there was division in France after the Germans came.

DePue: Yeah. Vichy French were more closely aligned with the Germans.

Black: Yeah, yeah, that's right. So, when we went into Paris—no way of forgetting, can't forget it—the cries that we heard. We had to stay outside in the suburbs until it was official that the French had [been] liberated. When we went in, the people were in tears: Vive la France, vive l'Amérique, vive la Russie! It was a happy day. One part, when we were going through, they had jazz records that they had kept, and they were waving those records with Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman and Louis Armstrong, and the hot club of France, and all those kinds of things. (laughter) It was joyful, and we just really enjoyed it. We went up to the Arc de Triomphe, and that's where we were lauded, but the prime minister—the formal prime minister, what was his name?—isolated to England, then he came back. Too bad I can't remember.

DePue: Paul Reynaud?

Black: Yeah, but he came back; he was there to cheer and cherish and give a sense of victory to not just the troops, but to the people who had lived, who had continued there. In Paris during that period of time when we were there a few days we went to the left bank—le banc gauche— pardon my poor accent. The reception was just phenomenal, of the people in France. Then, there were American entertainers, like Josephine Baker and others—

DePue: USO entertainers?

Black: Yeah. Some of the people that had lived in Chicago before they left here.

DePue: Josephine Baker was living there for a long time, wasn't she?

Black: She was living there. Yeah, she was living there for a long time, and she came through. I remember, she came through the unit and she says, "Is there anyone here from St. Louis?" Well, a few hands up. "Anyone here from Chicago?" Oh, hands went up! (laughter) She adopted, I think, about fourteen or fifteen kids of various nationalities. But there were also people who had been entertainers. In fact, I knew two or three of the girls—they didn't want me to know them—who had been what we call chorus line girls here in Chicago at the DeLisa [Club DeLisa] and the Rumboogie [Club Rumboogie]. They played like they couldn't speak English, (laughter) so I had to remind them that I knew. I gave a few incidents they couldn't deny. They were French.

DePue: Now, from your descriptions, your unit, you, were pretty close to the front, but you're still a little bit back from the front. I would imagine you're seeing some French citizens more, French people. Not just the people in Paris but in general, what was your impression of the French people and how they had managed to survive German occupation for so many years?

Black: Their loyalty was so deep that for them, giving into fascism was equivalent to dying. Their feelings of loyalty, enthusiasm for their soldiers and for the Allies was just almost indescribable. We were so welcome wherever we ended up. I mean, the countryside, wherever we went, we were so welcome. The thing that bothered them most was the division on the race lines. That really disturbed them.

DePue: What disturbed them?

Black: Race lines. The division of the American army along race lines. They just couldn't handle it. I mean, they couldn't understand it because some of the American, white soldiers said, when describing us, that we had tails, and so a pretty French girl would grab me from behind. I'd say, "Here, let me show you my tail." (laughter) She didn't know because they'd never—in the countryside—they'd never seen people of color; it was amazing. How did you get to be that dark, you know? You spent too much time in the sunshine. (laughter) They had to explain it some way or another, but the cordiality was absolutely… You felt comfortable.

DePue: What was the physical condition of the country? How much destruction did you see? I know that Paris was pretty well spared from that.

Black: Yeah, Paris, you know—the bombing, there was agreement—but there was a great deal of damage in some of the cities. I'm trying to think again of some of the… Where they thought the French might have combat supplies, those were targets and those were generally in the countryside, so there was a great deal of damage there. The water supply was cut off in so many places. In the countryside, it was pretty rough in terms of physical damage. Then, again, the Germans had snipers; the role of the sniper was to knock somebody out to

frighten all of the other people around so they would feel helpless and not participate. But there was a sense of optimism. I don't know how it was before we got there. but there was that sense of, "It's going to be better, we're going to overcome."

DePue: Are there any specific stories or anecdotes that you remember while you're moving through France, up to the point of getting to the Battle of the Bulge? I want to talk about that in more detail, but in those first few months, when you're liberating France?

Black: As we were moving the supplies—well, this is after I get up into Liege [Belgium] and we have a supply line on our side—the American soldiers were deeply divided along race lines. Then, of course, there were the male/female relationships, the natives of particular towns where the girls were, created competition and antagonism. Our officers in my units were generally from the South. They brought into that other guys from the South, black guys; they knew how to handle that. But those of us who were from Detroit, New York, and even the cities of the South, we didn't know how to handle it. They could manipulate. These guys who were supposed to be so dumb, they knew how to manipulate these officers so they got the best. Then, the officers would compare these obedient guys to us so-called… So, we had to have some skills that were needed, and we had the skills of distribution of supplies. One of the remarkable things: they could look up at something and tell how many bags are on it; they didn't have to count it. They could look, (laughter) at the quantity and count pretty accurately how many bags of whatever it was there were...

DePue: Was this the officers, or...?

Black: No, the foot soldiers.

DePue: The Southern blacks?

Black: Yeah. Without formal education, they could pretty accurately tell you what was away from them, and you would have to go count it, you know? (laughter) I had to count it. Through their experience, I guess, in working in the South—tobacco and sugar—and working in units, because they had to keep up with how much they themselves brought up out of the ground and packed up. So they were pretty good at that. There was a division along Northern/Southern lines between blacks, and we had to work over that division, particularly in the early days. You know, that was a very territorial division. I'm from the North, so I think I'm better than them. That was an attitude.

DePue: Did you think you were better than them?

Black: I am inclined to believe that they would. (laughter) I mean, it's like, in the big city in the same nationality or the same race, you have class divisions, and it

was something like that. So I had to prove that I didn't think I was better than them.

DePue: Well, I have heard stories also that there would be divisions among African-Americans about how dark or light your skin might be as well. Was there any of that?

Black: Oh, yeah, mm-hmm. Yeah, there was that. Well, in other units they had black officers so they were usually light-skinned. In my unit, we didn't have any black officers but the non-commissioned officers were generally light-skinned. You know, the sergeants, they were usually light-skinned. With my unit, at least, it didn't make that much difference because we were all from the North; (laughter) we combined our feelings towards those in the South. So, it was that kind of pigmentation as well as regional divisions.

DePue: Well, Mr. Black, you're describing a pretty dynamic kind of a relationship that's going on here. I want to give you time to talk about what you experienced during the Battle of Bulge as well, so let me ask you one quick question: As you're getting into the fall and the armies are moving so quickly through France, what was the expectation among the soldiers in terms of when this all might be over in Europe?

Black: Oh, we thought it was going to be over pretty soon. We had knocked out supplies, so the combat flights that used to come over more regularly, they would hoard them. We were moving up, and we thought after we liberated France that the war was going to be over. Very quickly, that was the general attitude. We got up to Liège, Belgium, southern Liège. We didn't expect what happened, but Von Rundstedt, who was the [German] Commanding General of that area, had taken the idea that if you knock out the supplies, you don't need as many planes flying. At about the same time, the Germans had created a missile that was undirected—they just fired it. We didn't know where it was going to land. They were really trying to fire to London.

DePue: The V-1s or the V-2s?

Black: That was the V-1, I think, the V-1. I think it was the very first ones. And the few planes they had the fuel for were bombing sites like hospitals. Hospitals had Red Cross striped across, and I know guys who got hit but they wouldn't go in the hospital because that was more dangerous than just trying to patch yourself up.

Then, the dropping of the young men behind the lines, getting into the supply lines. Now, this is interesting because we treated the German prisoners pretty nice, and there was a friendliness. So, one of them came to me and said, "We have," whatever the word is, "here to rig up." Now, they have a little piece, and rig up. The feelings towards officers were different with the Germans than they were with the Americans. That's the reason we never shot

first when we first went on the beaches. If you had that star on your cap the sharpshooters would shoot it, so our officers had to take their stripes off of them.

DePue: The officers took their brass off?

Black: Took their brass off.

DePue: But you said that the Germans treated the American officers different than they treated (overlapping dialogue, unintelligible).

Black: Oh, yeah, they treated American officers different. Going back to this theme, the Battle of the Bulge, things are tightening, and the Germans are dropping these young men who spoke English and all behind the line. So, the commanding officer—I think it was a colonel—he took the German prisoners out of the operation almost completely. It meant that we had to then unload and build. Then the white soldiers—since we didn't know the difference—at night our orders were if [we saw] a white soldier in an American uniform, you either captured him or killed him. That meant that white soldiers had to stay in barracks away where they were quartered.

DePue: So, the white soldiers knew that as well? So, anybody who was white and was walking around in an American uniform you figured was a German soldier?

Black: Mm-hmm. That's what we had to figure; that's what we had to deal with.

DePue: Well, the situation that you're describing most of the time that you're performing your duties while the army's doing this very quick movement across France, it sounds like most of the time it's Germans who are actually doing the hard labor, then. The German POWs?

Black: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. As soon as we got enough prisoners, they did the heavy labor. At first, with the discipline that had been a part of their military life, they were resistant but there was sort of a class division between the officers and the enlisted men, or the enrollees, that you began to feel. After they found that we were not bad Americans, we were nice Americans, we just happened to be soldiers, they softened their attitude towards those of us who were in charge of them on a daily basis. Sort of almost a friendliness.

DePue: Yeah, by that time in the War, the lucky Germans were the ones who were POWs and knew, essentially, the war was over for them.

Black: Right. That's about right. They didn't seem to be unhappy about that—I mean, the enlisted men—maybe because we treated them like human beings and all.

DePue: I knew by that time in the war also that the Germans had incorporated tens of thousands of other foreigners into the military: Russians, Poles, and Ukrainians. Did you see some of that?

Black: We got on to it when we got up close to German soil. Yeah, that was a pretty common sight. Then, of course, also women. The Russian soldiers, women, were acceptable to French and Americans as well. These were tough gals. They were (laughter) good, they were good soldiers. But There were prisoners who were women who had been captured too because they were combat. They were not service; they were combat troops. They were infiltrated into the combat units. My belief that the war was going to be over pretty soon was shattered. I remember the bombing—that I was afraid to go to the toilet, you know, to the latrine because you never could tell what was going to be happening. That's how fearful it was. And Christmas, holidays, in that same period of time.

DePue: Let's talk a little bit more in detail. Pick your brain about what you remember of the Battle of the Bulge. It started, I think, around December sixteenth. What you described before—at least I think you were assigned to the III Army which was well south of where the Bulge occurred—but of course, there were a couple of fateful meetings. Eisenhower asked Patton, "Can you give us some support?" And Patton—this is about the twentieth of December—said, "Yeah, I can move an entire corps up north and then come in on the south side of the Bulge." Was that where you got involved with the Bulge, then?

Black: It's where we were. I forget… There was a unit, dominantly white, which was heroic. The French and the Belgians hadn't changed their signs on their houses yet, you see. At first, they had welcomed the Germans, (laughter) and the Americans, they had to come up, they changed that. Then, I forget what that's called; it's a famous battle in that period of time that sort of broke the German line. Oh! Hürtgen Forest.

DePue: Hürtgen Forest, which was a real meat-grinder for the American troops, but it was tying a lot of Germans down as well.

Black: Mm-hmm, yeah. Well, we went up. Then, as we got further up into Germany itself after—well, the battle was pretty well settled by then—I saw Buchenwald, but I wasn't a liberator. What we heard was so incredible we couldn't believe it.

DePue: Had you heard stories about Buchenwald before you got there?

Black: Yeah, Buchenwald, Dachau… I couldn't believe it, that human beings would systematically do what they were describing. So, my CO and I went up—he drove up in a Volkswagen—and smelled it. They hadn't extracted all of the detainees, and you could hear the cries. When you got in and you saw people—human beings—you could almost see their ribs through their skin.

I… My first feeling was, Kill all the Germans. Kill them all. I really thought it—somewhat painfully—that we had Germans who were in charge: Eisenhower, Eichelberger, on and on. They were Americans. Then, my mind became confused, and really, in one way, it reflected back on my heritage, as a child of former slaves, grandchild of former slaves. The brutality that went on, not only in America, but before you got to America; that more Africans died than were actually brought and landed on the soil.

I must say, at that moment, without putting it down on paper, without… recording it in any way, but instinctually, I made up my mind, the rest of my life was going to be spent trying to bring peace in the world. I'm not the only one who felt that way. That was my mission, and it was, has been, and is. Always will be. When I asked the people—I could speak a little Yiddish and a little German—"Why would you let this happen?" They're living with it. "Mister, it wasn't us. It was the Führer." Moving the responsibility.

DePue: You're talking about not the prisoners—the German prisoners—but German villagers?

Black: Residents, residents. The villagers, yeah. "It wasn't us. It was the Führer." Yet there's no way that they could have been that close; they were the beneficiaries of Buchenwald, as bad off as Germany was economically in that period of time. So, the experience of the Battle of the Bulge and the Buchenwald, and just war itself… brought me to another level of my own fulfillment of my own life, as a result of that.

DePue: I'm going to ask you a couple of tough questions here. You said your initial reaction was, after seeing this and seeing what the Germans were doing—

Black: Had done and doing.

DePue: —to all of these prisoners, was to kill them. Did that deepen a resentment or hatred towards whites in general, or just towards Germans?

Black: Not just Germans. Anyone who would do that to anyone. I had another experience—I think we were in Liège or right outside of Liège, it was bigger than a railhead. A guy, a nice white guy who happened to be Jewish, he was in the Air Corps. See, the Air Corps had privileges because they came into the flat(??) and they got whatever they want. He had brought me a bottle of booze, and he'd come in. He was a New York guy in the Air Force unit, and had been trained in culinary. He'd bring me a bottle of wine; we were friendly. Another soldier, a non-commissioned officer, came in and he said, "You know, Hitler was right." And I said to him, "Whatever you wanted, we just ran out." (laughter) The rules break down in a combat area, and I was a pretty good—what do you call it? not a supplier, whatever you call it. The CO said, "Whatever Private Black said, that's right." We had a stock of a

million supplies or more of every kind, but he said that, and I was so shocked. He didn't know me.

DePue: It came out of the blue?

Black: His idea was that I'm anti-Semitic. He assumed because I was black I was also anti-Semitic.

DePue: Oh, OK. He was saying that because he thought that you would identify with the same comment, then?

Black: Yeah, yeah. That's what he thought. That's another item that's stuck in my mind, too. We're near the end of the war. The war has been about fascism, Semitism, and he comes, assuming because I'm black that I have anti-Jewish feelings. So, you know, as I say, we're at the end of the war, so he didn't get his supplies that day. (laughter)

DePue: From what you've described then, would it be fair to say that at the moment you saw Buchenwald and then had that epiphany—and maybe that's the wrong word, but I'll use that—is that perhaps the most important, defining moment of your life?

Black: … … Yeah, I think this gave definition, more definition. It helped me to articulate what I saw, what I'd experienced, and then this comment. I wasn't confused on the race; I know there's racism in America and I've learned how to handle that. I just… When we were preparing to go to Japan after all this and we were in Marseilles, we dropped the atomic bomb. My first reaction: I would have preferred going on to Japan. It shocked me. I'd been in places, and saw twenty-ton bombs dropped. I couldn't imagine a weapon the size of a golf ball killing a hundred thousand people.

DePue: But why did you want, at that moment in time, to go to Japan?

Black: I wanted to go before.

DePue: OK, but why?

Black: At that point, I would have preferred. My imagination told me, "If we can do that, then they can do it, too." It was not long after that when Einstein said, "If man can't destroy the bomb, the bomb will destroy man." He had been the one to split the atom; he had been engineering to split the atom. What I've learned from people who knew him, his advice to America was to drop it on Berlin, but we dropped it on Hiroshima, and then two days later, Nagasaki.

DePue: Well, that was in large part a matter of timing as much as anything. It wasn't ready when the war in Germany was wrapping up. I want to go back and—

Black: We're going back into this race thing.

DePue: Well, I ask you again why you were wanting to go to Japan before the bomb was dropped.

Black: No, when it happened. Oh, before? I was just on assignment, and I was expressing to my fellow soldiers when the bomb was dropped that I'd rather take my chances than have the Americans do this.

DePue: Oh, okay.

Black: No, I was just going to Japan… I didn't want to go! (laughter) No, I didn't want to go. We were going to go through the canal, then through the Suez, and then on down to… But no, that was my assignment. I was going to go because I had to.

DePue: So, what you're saying is, you would have preferred to have you personally go to Japan rather than drop the bomb?

Black: I would rather us, the army, battle it out on the ground or in another way than to have a weapon, a hundred thousand die. You know, the fact that a hundred thousand people are alive and then seconds later they're dead, and some of them fall so fast they couldn't even… Their shadows are on the walls most places. My own feeling, again, there's no monopoly on intelligence. If you have intelligence, you'll get knowledge. If you have knowledge, you can do a whole lot of things if you want to. So that was just my general feeling. I am fortunate to have had good teachers (laughter) when I was in high school, and we had learned from Mr. Lucas that one day—he was our physicist—somebody's going to split the atom. When they split it I wasn't surprised, because Mr. Lucas had told us that a few years earlier. The use of it was the thing that disturbed me.

Now, we were down in Marseilles and everybody was jubilant—almost everyone was jubilant. I had a lot of points; I had more points than my brother, and he was in the army two years more than I did, but most of his time was spent in America.

DePue: You earn more points because you're near combat, in combat?

Black: Yeah, that's the way the points were made. You know, four battle stars and the Croix de Guerre.

DePue: And the battles that you were in, the combat you were in were: Normandy, Northern France, Ardennes—which is the Battle of the Bulge—and Rhineland, which is Liberation of Germany.

Black: Even with that, I would have preferred… I have never really taken that back. Then, they rescheduled us to be able to come home. They had white troops who had not been in combat who were coming over because the war wasn't over when they were shipped, and they rescheduled them. Took us off the

boat that we were going to come back on, and rescheduled them to be on the boat. And a young white guy says to me, "You mean to tell me that you've been over here all this time and I just got here, and you're going to let them take you off that boat so I can get home?" That was refreshing. I said, "But see, the difference is you're white and I'm a Negro." (laughter) I don't know whether he understood what I was saying. Again, you see, that reinforced my commitment. I couldn't say all white people are bad—here, this guy flew in, he's saying, "I wouldn't do that!" But there are others, I admit, through my lifetime, who were like that. When I was growing up, I had a lot of white Jewish friends particularly, so it wasn't like I had been isolated.

DePue: You've done a very good job of explaining the impact of Buchenwald and the end of the war and the realization of what the Germans were doing to people, and your commitment to do something about it. But how specific was your idea of what you were going to do now because of this experience?

Black: Well, when I came back home, I went back to the same job that I had. I was an insurance agent, and actually, I was making more money as an insurance agent than my brother who was a college graduate. My mother kept nagging me to go back to school. Now, I don't have anymore excuses because I had the G.I. Bill of Rights, and she's in competition with her friends about it—(laughter) —how far their children are going in school! So, I was asked to come back because I was promised to get a promotion to become a district superintendent. I saw that the officers in that company were playing golf and they were doing all the things, but we were bringing in the money. So I decided that maybe I'd organize the agents, and I got fired. Best thing that could have happened. I didn't have the promotion and then I got married. But then, at the same time, my political life became more active. I became a member and an activist in an independent party called the Progressive Party, and we worked very hard to organize. For four months, I was taking care of all agriculture—a man who had been a Vice President became our candidate to be the President. I have to remember his name.

DePue: Are you talking about Wallace?

Black: Yeah, Henry Wallace. Thanks to you young people for keeping my memory sharp (laughter) because it's falling apart. Yeah, Henry Wallace. He had been dumped in the convention right here in Chicago.

DePue: Well, for a while, he was Vice President as well.

Black: Yeah, Secretary in the U.S.; Vice President. Then many of my friends who had been in the service and their girlfriends or spouses were active in the Progressive Party. Then there were people who I admired in many ways, kind of like my idols, like Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois, and locally, there was Oscar Brown Jr.'s father, the actor. So, there were those kinds of hero figures. my daddy was my best and greatest hero, but outside that, I had a

sense of integrity and courage from these hero figures. These were men and women who didn't have to be activists. They were making money in their professions, good money. Then there were the Studs Terkels, and people of that caliber, and that gave me kind of the foundation to begin to be more active than I had been before I went to service. I've been pretty active since then.

DePue: (laughter) Well, pretty active is one way of saying it. I'm not sure that's the adjective most people would say, that you've had a very full and enriching life. You mentioned Studs Terkel—it's worth mentioning here on the record that you're part of his masterpiece, *The Good War*.

Black: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Your story is captured there as well. I know that we have a little bit of a time limit here, so let's kind of wrap things up in terms of still keeping focused on the war. At the time you came back, and maybe still today, are you proud of your service during the war?

Black: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I am very proud—I conducted myself, I think, in a way that I could feel that—since I'm a good American—I must be accorded the opportunities that all Americans might have, and just go beyond the color line. That everybody who is American should have equality, justice, and freedom, and that's my commitment. Sometimes I have conflict with a couple of my black friends on that— (laughter)—on that level. I said, my lifelong commitment, small as it has been, is to work to make this a better world for everyone. Not yet—we might have to fight back in order to give the crazy man a chance to get sober, but make that as nondestructive and educational as possible.

DePue: This is awfully impossible to determine, perhaps, but I'll ask your opinion: If you hadn't had that experience in the war, how would your life have been different?

Black: It would have been quite different. I would have spent the major part of my time making money and chasing ladies, or letting them chase me. (laughter) By this time, I'd be dead. It globalized my feelings and my experiences. It took me beyond the old Black Belt of the South Side, though I'd physically been outside. But psychologically and emotionally it enlarged my worldview. I look at situations rather than people because the situation most often creates the people. I look at Africa now, and what's happening: black Africans, you know, go through that. Well, how is this different than fascism in Germany or Nazism in Italy.? How is this different? Same kind of behavior with improved technological instruments to do it with.

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Black: I'm looking at South Africa right now: the privileged blacks' behavior is not very different than the oppressive whites who were in command. I know that's a little vague, but that's my poorly-expressed attitude about the world we live in.

DePue: Again, we're talking in September of 2009. We've had an African-American as President [Barack Obama] now for the last several months. What's your assessment of the amount of progress that the United States has made since the time you came back at the end of World War II—if that's the word you use—and where we have to go from here?

Black: Well, there's been a lot of progress, along race lines particularly, and gender lines particularly, but there is an increased rejection of those in the lower class, economically particularly, if they can be identified by ethnicity or color. Though in a sense, maybe, I'm better physically, economically. I'm my brother's keeper, wherever he may be. So, the measurement, quantitatively—particularly looking at blacks as an example—you say, "Oh, yes, I'm better off. I came back, my mother kept on nagging until I went back to school and I had a pretty good education. My children—my late son and my daughter—went to the best schools in the country Stanford, Bennington, all that crap. My brother went on to become a prominent lawyer. He was a college graduate when he went into the army. So, if I measure myself by the past—two generations removed from slavery—that's very good.

But then when I look at the young men and women, black and white—not so much Asian, but certainly South American and all—their condition has not improved. When I go to Cuba or look at Cuba… I went to Cuba before the war with friends. I would have preferred Castro to his predecessor.

DePue: Batista? Batista.

Black: Batista, who happened to be a man of color, by the way. I would have preferred that, and I want the United States to begin to look at this in a broader sense, a more humane sense, not listen to the exploiters who happen to be of Cuban background, and there are many of those. They'd like to take Cuba back to the olden days in Florida. Fortunately, the younger Cubans are not like mom and daddy, and I see the symbol of victories by minorities as being an advantage of showing the world.

See, I'd look at Eisenhower because Eisenhower was brought into the position of being Commander-in-Chief. We were losing—well, we weren't losing in North Africa—and he said, "The impossible, we do that immediately. The miraculous sometimes takes a little longer." (laughter)

So, in my time, I've seen the impossible achieved. Even five years ago, who would have thought that we would have a black man as the President of the United States? Not using him, but using my own

generations—two generations removed from slavery. That's impossible. The President is (laughter) one of the most powerful men. So, if that can happen, then we can do the miraculous, but we have to keep the optimism and keep on going, and looking at spirituals: "I'm so glad that trouble don't last all week. Oh, my Lord, oh, my Lord, what can I do? What shall I do?"

That spirit injected, and that's what's missing with so many of our young people. Maybe they know too much. With greater opportunities, they are less optimistic, and that was so… beautiful about Barack getting nominated and then ascending to the Presidency. Now, he has a big load on his shoulders, and I hope he can carry that load. I hope he has people around him who will help him tote that load because some of us laid the groundwork for him to be able to be where he is. That goes across race lines, ethnic lines—you know, just marvelous to see the young people, how the enthusiastic young people who had never thought about voting, registering to vote. Listen, I think we better get ready here.

DePue: Yeah, I'll ask you one more question to wrap it up, and you've been there already, but I'll ask it this way: what wisdom, then, would you pass on to the future generation? What advice?

Black: Well, I'm philosophic, but it would be—in the language of the streets—Keep on keeping on, and you will accomplish the impossible, but be prepared. See, Barack was prepared when the door opened. He was prepared to walk in through that door. The young woman who is Puerto-Rican background, when the opportunity came, she was prepared. Now, there's friction and all that, but no one can say she doesn't have the credentials, except for her ethnic background. Now, she is going to make that—

DePue: Are you talking about Sonia Sotomayor? [U.S. Supreme Court Justice]

Black: Yeah. I'm just using her as an example. Being prepared, from poverty to the top of the ladder in the judicial field.

DePue: Thank you very much, Mr. Black. Black: Well, I hope this has been of some interest to your project.

DePue: It's fascinating for me, and what an opportunity for me to sit down and talk to somebody with your history, with the experience that we talked about here and the Second World War. But you have just as colorful a story to talk about what happened after that time. That's beyond the scope of this project, but it's been a rare privilege for me, and I've really enjoyed it, so thank you.

Black: Thank you. Thank you very much.

(end of interview #2)