

Interview with Manker Harris

FM-A-L-2007-040

Interview # 1: July 23, 2007

Interviewer: Elizabeth Simmons

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Simmons: My name is Elizabeth Simmons. I am interviewing today, July 23, 2007, Manker Harris. Today we are speaking at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's History Project on Oral History and this is about social history. Manker, can you tell me a little bit about your parents' background. Tell me first about your father.

Harris: My father was a minister. He was a pastor for well over fifty years. He was a country pastor in Hills of East Tennessee. He had a church part of the time but he did a lot of revivals all over the mountains of North Carolina and east Tennessee. And he'd be gone from home days and days on these revivals. In those days they had month-long revivals, as you are well aware. So that is where he spent most of the time. He never owned a car. He was called a walking preacher and he would ride buses and trains to get to the place he was going to for his revivals. It is very interesting how he got paid very often. He kept a diary every day of his life. So we have these diaries, we can find out where he was what he preached about, how many people were there, how many people were saved, how many people were baptized, the whole thing. He often put down how much money he got at a place. And very often what he would get would be a sack of flour, a peck of beans, and things of that sort would be his pay instead of money. I was born just at the tail end of the Depression so I don't have a recollection of a lot of that stuff except that he was still, obviously, pastoring when I was there. He had a church. As a matter of fact, he taught school, although he didn't have much of an education, in Etowah, Tennessee and they even named the school there the John Harris School in Etowah. And then in Englewood he started a church. He had a revival there; it lasted, I think, two months and he started a church after the revival. That was the same as many the places he preached back into the mountains to do this kind of stuff. He was pretty much a hell-fire, brimstone type preacher.

Simmons: Now tell me a little bit about your mother. How did your parents meet?

Harris: My mother was born in western North Carolina, one of about seven girls in the family. And one of her sisters –she wasn't the oldest –one of her sisters moved in to Tennessee and she came to visit her sister and met my dad and they got married. She outlived my dad and she bore seven children. She never had a job; she was strictly a homemaker and didn't have much time to do much else. So she was a homemaker and had all of the skills of a homemaker back in those days – sewing skills, cooking skills, homemaking skills of all sort. Basically though, that's where she came from and they settled in east Tennessee then.

Simmons: Now tell me a little bit about your own self. Where did you go to school?

Harris: I was born in a little town called Englewood in Tennessee; that's in east Tennessee in the mountains there. Well, first of all we moved from there to Chattanooga, Tennessee. Dad became a pastor there. And I spent my first eight years in school in Chattanooga, that's pretty much during World War II. At that point all of my older brothers went to service, so it was a war time, ration time and all that kind of stuff. After the eighth grade we moved back to Englewood, Tennessee. So I went my high school years at a little school called Englewood High School in Tennessee, graduated in 1951. Pretty active in school including the football team. Had a lot of good days in my little country school. I think there were eighteen of us in my graduation class in high school.

Simmons: That's a pretty small school.

Harris: Pretty small school. It doesn't exist anymore, but we still have town reunions every year.

Simmons: Now can you tell me, Manker, a little bit about your interests or your hobbies.

Harris: A major interest I have is in traveling. I've been to all the states except Alaska, and I've been in all the continents except Antarctica and I'd like to go there some day, so I travel as much and as often as I can. I travel not just to –I don't like beaches, I don't go to those places –but like my recent trip to Europe, I went to like Germany, Poland and visited places like Auschwitz and any place I can see, especially places like Poland and all where I can get some ideas of how the Second World War was fought; ended up in Budapest there at that time. So I love to travel, love to read. Right now I read a lot of Lincoln stuff, of course. My other great interest and hobby are my grandchildren. I try to spend as much time as I can with my grandchildren.

Simmons: Right. Okay, you're talking a little bit about your grandchildren is one of the things you really enjoy spending time with. Where do your grandchildren live right now?

Harris: I have two grandchildren in the Springfield area, one in Springfield, one in Cerro Gordo. My granddaughter is fourteen years of age; my grandson just turned sixteen on Saturday and, as a matter of fact, that's why I'm back in Springfield. When I retired I was thinking seriously of going back to east

Tennessee, but then I said, No, I'm going to where my grandkids are. Best decision I ever made in my life to come back and be with them.

Simmons: And that answers my next question, what brought you to Springfield? Now earlier in your life, what brought you to Illinois? Because it sounds like pretty much your family is solidly rooted in Tennessee and North Carolina. But now you've spent, it seems like, most of your adult life here in Illinois.

Harris: In college I married a young lady from Decatur, Illinois. As a matter of fact, my firstborn was born in Decatur, but we both went to Anderson University in Indiana. And when I finished university we went to Lansing, Michigan where I was a pastor at Pennway Church of God.. I later became Director of the Council of Churches in Lansing. Then there was an opening for a Council of Churches in Decatur, Illinois, and so they selected me as the Director of the Council of Churches there in Illinois.

Simmons: Can you tell me a little bit about the goals of the Council of Churches at the time you were working with them.

Harris: It's an ecumenical movement, so it was an attempt to bring churches together to do things that churches alone could not do, a lot of social activities, of course. By that I mean working with the poor, the handicapped, racial issues, issues on war, things of that sort. So it was pretty much main stream churches that belong to it. More fundamentalist, real strong evangelical churches didn't become a part of it because they thought the Council of Churches had too large of a liberal agenda for which they didn't want a part.

Simmons: For example?

Harris: For example, really getting involved in social issues with the races. Lot of evangelical churches didn't want that to be done. There were, for some reason, there was more main stream churches, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, what have you, took more of an anti-war stance like during the Vietnam War and things of that sort and evangelical churches didn't want to be a part of that. And also, the very fact that the Council of Churches looked on all these churches and members as being Christians without having to go through a long process of the—for instance the Baptist groups who, you must be born again, that type of thing—that wasn't a tremendously powerful movement in the part of the Council of Churches. But more than anything else, they didn't like the types of social involvements that the Council of Churches involved themselves in.

Simmons: Now, what time period were you involved with the Council of Churches and how long were you a part of that organization?

Harris: With the Decatur, with the Lansing area Council of Churches in Michigan, I began there in about 1964, having left a pastorate which I began in '62 and then '64 then moved to Decatur and was there until about 1968 and well, I was in

Michigan until '66, so I came to Decatur in 1966 and then was Director of the Council of Churches maybe three or four years then.

Simmons: Did I understand correctly, were you yourself also a minister?

Harris: Oh, yes, I was an ordained minister in the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana.

Simmons: Did you continue your ministry after you left the Council of Churches?

Harris: I continued it for a number of years, but I left direct pastoral ministry in Michigan and, it's a crude way to put it, but I left that because, the way I put it, "I got tired of holding the hands of little old ladies of both sexes." The reason I put it that way was that I saw mostly in the church, people wanted to be comforted instead of challenged. And I just didn't see that as the role of church. I knew the church was there to bring some comfort at times, but it was more there to be challenged and to make people uncomfortable. The church that I was in didn't see it that way so much and didn't like the activities that I was becoming involved in and sermons and all was one to not always bring comfort. At times of funerals and stuff I could bring comfort better than I could in the regular pulpit. And so our new Council of Churches were more involved in things of this sort so I decided to go that route instead.

Simmons: And so then at that point you left your active ministry?

Harris: I left my actual pastoral ministry with local churches, yeah.

Simmons: And about what time period was that?

Harris: I graduated from seminary in 1962, so I went directly to Lansing, Michigan, from seminary and was there in the church about three years.

Simmons: You attended which seminary?

Harris: Anderson University School of Theology.

Simmons: Located?

Harris: Anderson, Indiana.

Simmons: So after you left the Council of Churches what did you do then?

Harris: I left the Council of Churches to work in the civil rights movement, specifically at that point to become Communication Director of the United Front in Cairo, Illinois.

Simmons: What was it that caused you to become further involved with the civil rights movement?

Harris: It goes back a long time. Back in the late 30's, early 40's when I was living in Chattanooga –the town, you know, is a segregated town –we had two black areas of town. Just to say what they called it there: we had one area called Black Bottom, and another one was where, well, the “N –town” word was what they called it. But where I lived in Chattanooga was about four blocks down the street from where some blacks lived.

Simmons: Would you say the name as a, the historical name of the second area, was what now?

Harris: The Black Bottom was one section of town where blacks lived, the other was called Nigger Town.

Simmons: And that was the historical name in the 1940's?

Harris: That was it exactly, yeah.

Simmons: Thank you.

Harris: Four blocks from where I lived in an all-white section of town there was one block of blacks that lived there. And they had black kids and the black kids was right next to the bus line in Chattanooga. Kids would come there to catch a bus and we, often in the lot next to our house, would be playing football and these kids would come and we'd play ball with us, football or whatever we were playing. We were all using the word “nigger” then and one of those kids said, “I don't like that word, please don't use it.” So I asked him why he didn't like it, and he said, “Well, it's not a good word, it's a bad word, it shouldn't be used.” And he said to me, “How would you like to be called white trash?” I remember that very vividly. Well from the standpoint of growing up in towns that didn't have any black people ever and in the town that was segregated that did have black people, to hear that and to accept that young boy's feelings and to know his feelings and to transfer that to me from what he said he could call me, started making a change even way back then. And then from Chattanooga, I moved back again to a town Englewood. Still they're no blacks that live there. As a matter of fact, a black could come in to Englewood to work but he had to be out of town by nightfall. That was the way it was there.

Simmons: Did you continue playing with those little boys after you had this experience?

Harris: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. 'Till I moved away.

Simmons: Did you ever feel any pressure or criticism that you played with the black children? Or was there any comment since your father was a minister?

Harris: No. There weren't a lot of people that probably knew that fact. Now, of course, in school, blacks didn't go to the same school that I went to. They were totally segregated schools. So the only time we saw the kids, and maybe once every two weeks or whatever at most, that we would see them and play with them and

what have you. But my parents never said anything about it, about not doing it and most of the neighbors weren't that much aware of the fact that it was going on.

Simmons: So just a very casual thing that children meet each other and they play ball or football and have fun.

Harris: But it's interesting from the standpoint that... In growing up in the town I grew up in there was no such thing as a black person or even Negroes. They were either "colored" or "niggers"; that was the way it was used then, always was, there. It is interesting that we played with these kids even though they were black but we still would say, "Nigger, catch that ball better" or something of that sort. It was just a natural thing to do. And that was the first time I was ever challenged by the word by anybody. No white ever challenged the word.

Simmons: So this is perhaps, as you've mentioned, one of your first experiences that made you think carefully about this word and how you treated people in using that word. So would you say that that word and that sort of attitude that was carried around was almost indigenous, or it was just, as you mentioned, natural.

Harris: Totally natural to use the words.

Simmons: So people would, perhaps in your town during the time you were growing up in the 40's and early 50's, would likely have a very difficult time seeing themselves as doing anything wrong or anything that was prejudicial.

Harris: No, absolutely. '30s, '40s and especially in the early '50' that's absolutely correct. It was, that was just the word. They used it that way, all over. That was in the days when they were still doing, of course, lynching in the South. I remember there when I was growing up in Chattanooga that there was a black guy that got on one of the city buses and stabbed a white woman, and the town went up for grabs. Of course, the blacks in all those neighborhoods wouldn't come out, wouldn't come out of their homes. They were afraid to come out and get buses. A lot of them didn't go to work or anything else during those days because they weren't sure what was going... Even the newspapers were printing stuff and printing in a very racist way.

Simmons: Can you give me an example regarding a particular incident: some things that you recall that were printed in your local newspaper.

Harris: Well, that, that particular thing I was talking about with the... By the way, there were two papers in Chattanooga: the *Chattanooga Times* which was owned by the same man, Adolph Ochs, that owned the *New York Times*, interestingly enough. And it was the more liberal of the two papers in Chattanooga. The other was the *Chattanooga News Free Press* and the *Free Press* is the one that really played up the fact of the, and they used the "N" word occasionally in there. They played up the fact about this black." It just shows you this is the way blacks are, blacks will do this to white people. This is another reason why we

can never do things together. This is why we cannot go to school together, why we cannot live together,” the usual kind of talk that went on back in those days. People like to think maybe it ended in 1900. It was still going strong in the ‘30s, ‘40s and ‘50s, obviously.

Simmons: Moving on, as you got older and went through high school. What were the particular influences that caused you to make decisions that, of course, led to your life-long career, and also your involvement with the Council of Churches.

Harris: Well, obviously, my dad was a minister, so that had to have something to do with it. But after I graduated from high school I was supposed to go into the service; I’d had a football injury so I couldn’t go. All of my class went in to the Air Force during the Korean War. I was waiting for my leg to get better so I could go in. September the nineteenth of 1951, I was hit by a car and was in the hospital for about a month and was unconscious for about a week. From that accident and that started my mind to thinking maybe about things a little bit and what life was about and how it should be lived. I went then to school one year at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee. After that one year they were advertising in Flint, Michigan; they wanted people to come and work at Buick Motor Company. So I went up there and worked a year.

Simmons: Now if I’m saying correctly, you worked at the Buick...

Harris: At Buick in Flint, Michigan for a year.

Simmons: And was in the car manufacturing plant?

Harris: Yes. That was it. Actually what I did, they were closing out the straight-eight motor plant and I helped close it out and helped start the V-8 plant (laughs) and worked on the motor line actually in Flint. I lived there a year. I went to church and was very active in a Church of God congregation. I sang in the choir and all that kind of stuff and that’s when I decided to go to Anderson while I was there. And I wrote and told my dad, –I remember that correctly –“Dad, I’ve decided to go into the ministry as you have.” So, naturally then I went to Anderson University since that’s the church’s main university. While I was there, since I’d had that injury, I tried out for football and was doing well until I went to the doctor’s office, and he said, “There’s no more football for you.” So he made me stop playing that and I was manager of the football team and manager of the basketball team. We had a lot of blacks on the basketball team. One fellow I remember very well. Bob Culp was his name. What a tremendous person he was and is. He’s pastor of a church now. He and I used to sit together on the bus trips all the time and we’d talk about race. Now remember, in high school, and even at East Tennessee State University, there were no blacks, so it’d been “sans black” all these years until I actually got to Anderson. And at Buick there were no blacks that worked when I was in Flint. So here again I was really among blacks. They were in the dorms, they were on the teams and on the buses we would ride. We’d talk about it and he helped as much as anybody in the

world to help get my mind on the way life really ought to be instead of the way it was and what was happening to them. That, as much as anything, helped me to see that things had to change. And this is just when there's just rumblings of things that were about to happen. This would be back in like '53, '54, in those years.

Simmons: How old were you at that time?

Harris: I would have been twenty-one.

Simmons: So you were just a young man then.

Harris: Still a young man, sure. Yes, would have been about twenty-one. And so that made a big difference, as well, probably got my mind set as much as anything on race. In those days, interestingly enough, the coach and I, when the guys would be hungry and want to get something to eat and we'd stop at the restaurant, we'd tell everybody on the bus, "We're going to go in to check the restaurant, I mean check the rest rooms and check the kitchen." And what we were actually doing going in to see if they allowed blacks in the restaurant. I remember one time we played Eastern Illinois University and we were coming back home and we stopped in Paris, Illinois, and went in to check the rest rooms and the restaurant, and they allowed blacks in, and so we all came in. There were some white dudes that came in and they started fussing and fighting and yelling at the owner, yelling at the blacks with us, and threatened and all this kind of stuff. One of the white basketball players happened to be a Golden Glove boxer and he let them know right away that they were on. He hit one of them and knocked two down and that was the end of that. They didn't bother us any more and we finished our meals and got back on. But all the way through in those years, we always checked the kitchen and checked the rest rooms before we'd go in. Back in the mid-fifties we were still doing that kind of thing. It's interesting, the different schools we went to when the blacks would be booed and all, when they came on the floor.

Simmons: And that was because these were predominantly white institutions, or because your team was racially mixed? What do you think is the reason for that?

Harris: Well, the reason is, obviously, racism. But, still a lot of schools didn't have many blacks in them in those days. And a lot of the schools, lot of the teams we played, were all-white teams, no doubt about that. When we'd play an all-white team the blacks would get beaten up a lot more. I mean by that, you know, get hit harder as they went up for shots, or whatever the case may be. And they'd come back with their bruises and all from those games and you can tell they just didn't like to have to play against the black players.

Simmons: To move a little bit forward again, we had earlier talked a little bit about your involvement in the Council of Churches. You mentioned that after about 1966 you had decided to leave your ministry where you were involved with the

church congregation, but you didn't stop your involvement with social issues and you, in fact, had developed, as you explained, over a period of time from your childhood onward, a very strong idea about social justice. After you left the Council of Churches, because you felt that perhaps your interests and your desires to be more involved in social justice issues was greater than the Council, where did you go next?

Harris: Well, just to clear up a couple of things. It was actually when I made the decision not to do churches; would have been about 1964. In seminary I remember how the Holiday Inn wouldn't allow blacks to stay in it and a few other of the hotels around Anderson, and we used to do protest marches around that. That would have been in the late '50s, early '60s we were doing that. And so even several years before I went to Lansing to the church and the Council of Churches we were doing protests and things in little old Anderson, Indiana. Those would be more the days I did serve in the church as a pastor: '62, '63 and '64, and that's when I decided to leave church and go in to the Council type work. What did I do after that? Well I worked in civil rights until the early '70s.

Simmons: Can you tell me what you mean about the term "civil rights"?

Harris: What I mean by "civil rights." I mean civil rights is the rights extended to one person should be extended to all people. The basic rights guaranteed in the Constitution, the rights for equal education, equal employment, equal treatment under the law, those basic civil rights that should belong to everybody.

Simmons: After you left the Council of Churches you did continue your involvement in the civil rights of other individuals. Can I make the assumption that those individuals were black?

Harris: Yes. The United Front was. I was the only white person involved with it at that point.

Simmons: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit more about the United Front and where it was located and what their goals were?

Harris: There were, interestingly enough, United Fronts in several different places. I remember I went to Boston once and met with United Front in Boston, black United Front up there. But the one in Cairo... [locally pronounced kay ro]

Simmons: Cairo, Illinois?

Harris: Cairo, Illinois. Reverend Charles Koen, a Baptist minister, lived there and there was one –among others they were the NAACP there –one of the leaders of the NAACP, Preston Ewing was his name. Those two felt that things just weren't happening fast enough in Cairo and that something had to be done. So they started getting together, organizing protests, organizing marches, coming to Springfield, going all across the country talking about the needs of blacks, especially the needs of people in Cairo. Poor, poor, poor community it was.

Even the whites there didn't have a lot –most of them –and the blacks had even less. And what little the whites had, they wanted to hold on to it, I guess. But anyway, Reverend Koen and Preston Ewing started seeing the need of something beyond NAACP and other stuff and they wanted it church related in some way, or at least related to the Christian church, or religion. So they formed the United Front. It was strictly a local organization and, again, it was done in such a way to lead protests. What they hoped to do was to desegregate the school which was still segregated even after the Supreme Court decisions, to get some jobs, to get better housing. They were all crowded into one section of town called Pyramid Court, which was a public housing project. And they couldn't really live outside of that, except north of town (chuckle) was a little town called Future City. Oh, my Lord, how run down and awful it was, but they could live there. And so there was economic reasons, reasons for housing, education, the court system, the law enforcement system, was all aimed against black people.

Simmons: Now tell me a little bit –you mentioned Pyramid Court –tell me a little bit about what you recall as the lay of the land, the geography surrounding Cairo, Illinois.

Harris: Cairo is the very tip end of the state. It has levees surrounding it..

Simmons: It has levees?

Harris: Levees surround it.

Simmons: And the reason for that is?

Harris: Keep out the Mississippi and Ohio rivers.

Simmons: So it actually is a river town and it's located at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers.

Harris: That is correct. At the north end of town it had this huge, huge, iron gate that, if things were flooded, they could let that gate down. And this was always a fear on the part of the blacks that they'd let that gate down and try to keep them in there and not let them out even if things were going strongly. Whether it was a rational fear or not, it was still a fear on their part that that would happen—the massive gate.

Simmons: So the outlying area of Cairo was low land and it was very prone to flooding and perhaps it was swampy?

Harris: They call that section of the state Egypt, because it's a lot like Egypt with the delta and, as a matter of fact, a lot of the towns there like Cairo, and Karnak and several other towns have Egyptian names. But, until they built the levee it used to flood there in the times the rivers were high, both the rivers, to several feet. With the levees it kept the waters out pretty well.

Simmons: And now it's the town proper of Cairo. For example, the United States Customs House was located. Was that a flood-prone area as well?

Harris: Yes. Actually, just south of Cairo they had a park there and it was even lower than Cairo itself. It was right, really, at the conjunction of the two rivers and that would still flood. And the levees were up just a little bit more than that to protect the city itself.

Simmons: Can you tell me a little bit more about the major employers that were in Cairo that you recall during your time there?

Harris: When I was there, there were really no major employers. It had gone down to where there were a few little shops down town, and even they were closing. While I was there the restaurants were closing and had closed several of them. Downtown was pretty much just an empty place where maybe ten, or twelve, or thirteen shops all together. The town had been, at one time, a city of some forty or fifty thousand people and by this time it had gone down to around five thousand people and now I think it's even less than that there. So you can see what happened to the town over the years.

Simmons: Now being it's located at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, was Cairo at one point a transportation center? Did railroads go through Cairo? Or was there any barge traffic or anything like that, that you recall?

Harris: It used to be a major center for river traffic, and as you said, there's a Customs House there, but they all pretty much have to stop at Cairo before it went on up the Ohio or down the Mississippi River. As a matter of fact, General Grant had his armies there at one point to block off the river from the south. But it was highly used with river traffic, both from the Ohio and Mississippi, and it was that kind of town. But by the time we were there, there was no river traffic that stopped in Cairo.

Simmons: So by the 1960's the town had reduced in population dramatically. I'm wondering, in what way did the people of the town, from what you could tell, how did the few people that were left support themselves?

Harris: Welfare was a major supporter.

Simmons: And were blacks who weren't allowed to live in Cairo, but lived in the surrounding area, how did those people support themselves?

Harris: Welfare, pretty much. Some would drive to, like Cape Girardeau, to work. But there just wasn't much to do around there; obviously, no farming. East of there, the State started, oh towards the end of this, a trade school type thing, but there were no trades or anything to deal with it. This was before the interstate was built, so traffic still came through there. Now the interstate has bypassed Cairo which makes it an even worse place to live in a lot of ways because there's not

even traffic. They depend a lot on the traffic, the gas stations, the restaurants, depended on those when they came through.

Simmons: This is a little side note, but Cairo in 2007, with the interstate gone through for about thirty years now, has given even less economic activity to the community. When you were there in the 1960's how would you characterize the social organization of the community? How were things run in Cairo? Sounds like it was a pretty devastated community.

Harris: Blacks and whites both depended on their churches.

Simmons: And the government with their federal welfare programs.

Harris: Yes. But most of their social activities were built around the churches and what the churches did: going to church on Sunday, going to prayer meeting on Wednesday night, going to church on Sunday night, different events that they might have. The blacks were heavily religious people, I mean, very thorough and, as a matter of fact, the United Front had church services every Saturday. Their rallies every Saturday were built around –just like a church service – gospel singing and preaching and all this kind of good stuff. But there were no movies there. The Cairo High School teams were usually pretty good teams in football and basketball and people went to those pretty well. But there was not a lot of other organized activities there, to tell you the truth. It just didn't exist outside of the churches and school.

Simmons: So the blacks that lived around Cairo –I take it that most of them did not live in the town of Cairo, they lived in the surrounding area –did they attend the public schools in Cairo?

Harris: They did. That's where they did go to school. A lot of them were drop-outs, very few of them finished high school at all. Very few ever went to college, I can't recall, except people like, of course, Preston Ewing and Charles Koen; they did, but not many of the kids at the time we were down there were going on to college.

Simmons: Sounds like on the whole the place was very economically depressed when you were there and just getting involved with the United Front. When I listen to you talk I'm thinking to myself, well there seems to me there's a lot of things to be done there but then it seems like well, what could be done because it seems that Cairo, as you described it, was in a pretty desperate situation. So can you tell me a little bit more about your impressions of Cairo when you arrived. And how and what activities did you get involved with and who spurred you on or inspired you to continue working in a town like Cairo.

Harris: I think you know that those years were really active years with the Vietnam War going on, with just prior to that the march from Selma to Montgomery. Incidentally, I was in Lansing, Michigan at that time, Lansing, Michigan at the time of the riots. They had a major riot in Detroit as there were riots all over the

country at that time. And Lansing had its riot right after Detroit had theirs. I got ministers together; we wore our collars and walked in the streets in those neighborhoods at night.

Simmons: Was this in Lansing, Michigan?

Harris: Lansing, Michigan. We brought the pastors of the black churches together with white church pastors and tried to see what we could do to try to alleviate the tensions and stuff. Now, Lansing at about that time –and that was just the time as well when Martin Luther King was trying to march across the bridge in Selma –and all those riots happened. And I organized a group to get food and clothing and even money to take to Cairo, so we got a whole truck load of things. We had the government put a seal on the door. I drove down in front of the truck to Selma and was in Selma.

Simmons: Now let me stop you for just a moment. You were in Michigan and you organized and coordinated a group of ministers in Michigan. Not only did you walk in protest of some of the activities that were going on in other parts of the country, but also you organized a truck and loaded it with supplies. Were they supplies that were provided by the general public or by the government?

Harris: By the general public, right.

Simmons: Then that truck was driven down further south from Michigan to –what was its destination?

Harris: Selma.

Simmons: And at that time there was no interstate system, so did you go through Cairo, Illinois at that time?

Harris: No. We went west of Cairo, down more west of there to go down to Selma.

Simmons: Okay so you went through St. Louis through 66, Route 66?

Harris: That was probably right.

Simmons: Because the two main routes to go that part of the south at that time would have been through U.S. 45 to Cairo or it would have been Route 66. Then you would have transferred to Route 61 which would take you...

Harris: Well, we got the truck there and unloaded it and then I stayed and marched on with them into Montgomery and that was quite an experience itself: the rallies we had at night and then the marching in itself. And to see what was happening, to see the visible hatred on the part of police there in Selma, and all along the route in to Montgomery, was really something to see. Then as we marched into Montgomery and through those black neighborhoods where they still had dirt streets, the kids were barefoot and shotgun houses. Shotgun houses –I think you

know what they are? They are straight-back houses. And then when we marched in, it was funny to look at the capitol building and then to see it was the Confederate flag that was the one that flying high over the dome of the capitol. The U.S. flags were much lower down and sure spurred some people into some real action as well. Of course, a real gigantic rally there at the court house that day as well with Martin Luther King and several other...

Simmons: Okay, I'd like to come back to Selma later because that is obviously something that's very important. But you mention these experiences and you also mentioned that prior to this you were in Cairo Illinois.

Harris: This was prior to Cairo.

Simmons: Okay, this was prior to Cairo. So let's go back over your chronology one more time. You were in Michigan and then you got involved with this group of ministers who loaded up a truck at one point. At least one truck, if not more, were loaded with supplies and were taken to Selma. And then you marched in Selma. Why don't we talk about Cairo just because we were started on it. And I think we were going a little backwards. Can you give a few years ...(both talking)

Harris: What I am trying to do is to lead in to the question was how did I get interested in Cairo. And that's what I'm trying to bring you up to.

Simmons: Okay Selma was what year now?

Harris: Selma would have been about 1963, wouldn't it?

Simmons: Okay, and so you were in Cairo after 1963 then?

Harris: Oh yes. Yes.

Simmons: So after the march we'll go into a little bit more detail, if you will, about Selma a little later on. Because Selma, I'm sure, is a big topic. So you were involved in Selma. And how long did you stay there?

Harris: I was just there about a week altogether, because the march concluded and then everybody started heading back to their homes.

Simmons: And then later on, in 1963, or was it even later than that, that you arrived in Cairo working with the black United Front?

Harris: Somewhat later than that because I came to Decatur in '66, with the Council of Churches there. You want me to bring you on up and lead you again to how I got to Cairo?

Simmons: If you would, because we first started talking about Cairo and you have a lot of topics that we can talk about in detail individually. But we'll stick with Cairo a little bit, since we started talking about it.

Harris: How I got there. Let's get to that. While I was at the Council of Churches the word about Cairo became known across the state.

Simmons: Okay. So you had already heard about Cairo when you were at the Council of Churches.

Harris: That is correct. That's where I got involved with it there. There was a group of Lutheran ministers, young Lutheran ministers, who said we need to be doing something up here to help Cairo; so we started talking it up. We came over to Springfield and protested at the state capitol to get them to try to do something, send help to Cairo to get involved with it. And the Illinois Council of Churches, which was located here in Springfield, they were trying to get involved and they had a person that was Director of their Human Rights group who was really involved and helped us –I can't remember his name now, I've been trying to think of it –helped us get involved with Cairo and get the word out get more people involved. And the Council of Churches –I'm not even telling you about when I got arrested over at the Capitol; skip that for later, too. Anyway, the Council of Churches asked me if I would go down to Cairo and to pose as an interesting minister to see what the situation was, to meet with Reverend Potts at the Baptist church, to meet with members of the White Citizens Council.

Simmons: And that was located in Cairo, Illinois.

Harris: In Cairo.

Simmons: The White Citizens Council. How would you describe the White Citizens Council, at least as you knew it in Cairo, Illinois?

Harris: It was known as really the Ku Klux Klan, just taking on a more quote "acceptable" name. They were also called the "white hats" because they wore white hats when they got together, big white cowboy hats.

Simmons: So your experience with the White Citizens Council or what was also called the white hats was actually that they were the Ku Klux Klan. And the Ku Klux Klan: what were their goals and why did they...

Harris: To keep the blacks down.

Simmons: So in Cairo, your experience with these people who called themselves the White Citizens Council –which you actually saw to be the Ku Klux Klan –were really organized just to keep the blacks down.

Harris: Yes. Basically, as much as to perpetuate the white race as to slow down the movement of the blacks into being more accepted into society. To keep the

town as all white as possible as far as jobs were concerned, the police department all white; to keep, as they would have said, to keep the blacks in their place. And the place for blacks was Pyramid Courts and that was pretty much it.

Simmons: What brought you to Cairo was a variety of factors as you've already explained: your own upbringing, your own religious and personal convictions, your belief that people should all have equal rights. And then what actually finally brought you there was when you were here in Springfield, Illinois, and the Illinois Council of Churches had made various people, including yourself, aware of what of things that were going on Cairo. So you went to Cairo in what capacity, and how long were you in Cairo?

Harris: The first time I went was at the behest of the Illinois Council of Churches. When I first went down there I met a representative of the Department of Justice from D.C. and asked him to give me a briefing on how things were there.

Simmons: What year was this about?

Harris: This would have been in about 1965. No. No. I'm sorry; it would have been more like 1967 that I went down there. I met with Reverend Potts, I met with the State Attorney when I was going for the Council of Churches, and as much as anything was not only getting their opinion of things, but to be able to translate that back to the Council of Churches who would also then see that that got back to the black community. In almost essence, I was almost a spy there.

Simmons: What was your initial reception by the officials of Cairo and of the surrounding area, and what was your impression of the officials and the surrounding area as you went into Cairo?

Harris: It's hard for a racist to keep his racism under cover, or under his white hat, in that case. And as you talked to them you could quite quickly see how racist these people were. There was no problem with that. And to see what their attitudes were, deep attitudes toward blacks and towards what they were doing. They were still using the word "nigger" in those days as well against the blacks. And their first impression of me was well, you know we'll help him as much as we can, do what we can to help him know stuff, but it sure came back on me when I went back down there later.

Simmons: So initially you felt that they were friendly and perhaps rather open towards you because you were with the Council of Churches

Harris: Because they thought I was just there to get basic information and they thought maybe what we would be doing is to come back up here and to tell their story, *their story*. And they thought that might happen.

Simmons: And then the racism that you observed while you were in Cairo on that first visit, do you think it was perhaps –like what you described earlier in your life

where it was just unconscious –that people just didn't realize, or do you think this had a deliberate purpose, that they were aware of it and very focused on it?

Harris: By this time there had been enough in the newspapers, on the radios and in TV about what was going on all across the country with race, that it couldn't be –it may have started out as just a part of their life –but it became then a conscious racism to them at this point, I think. And they knew it was there, but they still had the idea that they were superior, the blacks were inferior, and it was a very conscious thing at this point. With the fact of enough knowledge they should have gained by now to know that all people should be equal, but not yet they weren't able, weren't willing to, nor able to give that up at this point.

Simmons: And so you returned with your report to what you had learned and seen in Cairo, Illinois to the United Council of Churches or, I'm sorry, the Illinois Council of Churches. What was the occasion or the reason for your next visit to Cairo and how long did you ultimately stay in Cairo, or maybe did you just go back and forth?

Harris: While I was there of course, I met also with the people from the United Front and they knew I was there really working with the Department of Justice people. And the Department of Justice people were there, by the way, at the point to really help the black community as much as they could. It was a good time for that with them.

Simmons: Was this during the administration of President Lyndon Johnson?

Harris: Yes. So when I got back to Decatur –I was living in Decatur at the time and continued my work at the Council of Churches –and Decatur was pretty much up in arms at that time and riots taking place in the schools and a lot of different places in Decatur. The Council of Churches would try to put itself into that and to work on situations. At the same time we were still coming to Springfield to protest race in general. An aside to it which we don't have to get into now, but also heavy, heavy protests against the Vietnam War. We had a radio program called "Chat with the Clergy" where I was on it, a rabbi was on it, a priest was on it, a Presbyterian minister and we talked race there a lot about what was going on, as well as the Vietnam War, and what have you. But anyway, all this was going on and Reverend Koen came to Springfield, or to Decatur, and asked me if I would come and work with the United Front. He had met me while I was down there; he saw what I was doing and all and he felt that I could be of some help to him in Cairo. I thought it over a long time, and then resigned from the Council of Churches and went to Cairo.

Simmons: So you actually first met the Reverend Koen on your first visit to Cairo when you just went down to learn a little bit about the community and then reported back to the Illinois Council of Churches. Then later, Reverend Koen who was from Cairo, came up to Decatur and you met with him again and then he invited you to work with them and you then became from him more involved with the

Black United Front. And, of course, he was based in Cairo, and that's what brought you to Cairo. Is that correct?

Harris: I had met him before at some of our demonstrations here in Springfield. Those were the days we had also, like Jesse, [Jesse Jackson, a black leader] coming down from Chicago, and other groups coming in as well, to help us in our protests here. But I'd met Reverend Koen during that process as well. The idea was to come and live in Cairo and to be a part of the black community and to be a part of the United Front. Yes.

Simmons: Did you actually go and live in Cairo?

Harris: I did. I didn't take my family with me. It was much too dangerous a place we felt and they felt. Went there and we lived in the rectory of St. Patrick's Church. There were two Catholic priests that were there, younger ones: Father Bodewes, Father Trojack I think the name was. The diocese, Belleville diocese, the Catholic Church was allowing them to be involved in the community. There weren't a lot of black Catholics there, but they felt that the church could serve that community well by being there and being a presence and they thought it would be totally wrong, the Bishop did, to close that down with all the needs that were in Cairo, and the membership, even though it wasn't much. So we had those two priests there to help minister to the community as well, so they invited me in to live there and I lived there in the rectory.

Simmons: By this time, as you've alluded to, you were already married, and did you have children?

Harris: I had three children.

Simmons: And they were living with your wife during this time in Decatur, Illinois.

Harris: That is correct.

Simmons: After you arrived in Cairo and you settled in to the rectory what was the description of your daily typical activities?

Harris: The Catholic Church had a school there and they let United Front use that as their headquarters in the school next to the rectory. We had offices in there and I was trying to set up a communications system with them and for them to get the word out, to get the news out, to get press releases out to publishing newspaper and to help coordinate the marches and things of this sort, and the protests that they were having there. My role was pretty varied to be a part of all of this, to be a part of the organization and to participate in their strategy meetings and everything like this as well, to be a real presence and be available for whatever else they needed.

Simmons: As a white man coming into a community where you were previously unknown and a community, as you describe, where it's very divided according to one's

skin color, how did the local whites perceive your involvement or your arrival in Cairo? What do you recall was the typical reaction to you?

Harris: As I said earlier, when they recognized that I was a person that had been down with them before –the Reverend Potts, the State Attorney and the different whites that I had met with –both the local newspaper and the paper that the White Citizen Council put out really banged away at me. As a matter of fact, usually in our marches and in our protests, anything like that we had, they'd always come after me, a white person for being there in the middle of this. It was easy to come after you. I got beat up a few times frankly, go to the hospital, get fixed, and what have you. But that was just a given that that's what was going to happen and any chance they had they'd always put some very derogatory stuff in their newspapers.

Simmons: Do you think it made any difference to the local population that you actually originally came from Tennessee rather than from a northern state?

Harris: They wouldn't have known that. They wouldn't have known that. That was nothing that particularly would have made it necessary to have said where I had been before. All they knew is I came down from Decatur and was interfering with their stuff as far as the white people were concerned. It the usual thing, you know: go home, this is our affair; this is our business; as they did with the marchers who came in. They'd stand with big signs on the side of the road, "Go Home" and this kind of thing. No, they wouldn't have ever known that I was from Tennessee.

Simmons: Previously you mentioned that there was a local chapter of the NAACP. What does that stand for and what were their goals in the community as you recall when you were in Cairo.

Harris: The NAACP had been there for years and years and it's like the NAACP wherever, originally stood for National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. And, of course, now it's just NAACP and it was then. And their goals again were as the national goals: again, to bring equality to school systems, and the economic reforms that were needed in the community, to the acceptance of blacks as people, and what have you, the same goals as the NAACP probably had been for years. It was, as you know, the première black organization for years and years. And I think we are all aware of the fact that it had its beginning after the race riots here in Springfield. [in 1908]

Simmons: When you were in Cairo you mentioned that the United Black Front as well as NAACP and, apparently, the Diocese of Belleville, the Catholic Church in Cairo, were all working in concert with each other. What did you see were the activities that while you were in Cairo that the NAACP was engaging? Were they similar or where did they have a slightly different focus to yours?

Harris: It all blended into one thing with the United Front. That's one reason for calling it the United Front; it involved all the churches, it involved any other basic organizations that were involved in civil rights, including the NAACP.

Simmons: So basically it was an umbrella organization.

Harris: Yes, it was an umbrella organization.

Simmons: And it encompassed the NAACP and the other churches.

Harris: That's correct. The guy, Preston Ewing, who not only had been president of the local NAACP was a regional director of the NAACP as well. He was an integral part of the United Front.

Simmons: What was the event that caused you to leave Cairo, and after that where did you go next? Did you return back to Decatur or were there other places that you were involved with when you were working with the Black United Front?

Harris: We pretty much had accomplished our goals after all of our marches. We'd won several significant cases in the federal courts: the right to march, the right to have blacks sit on juries and had a black on the police force and a whole lot of other things that we were striving for, had happened. Reverend Koen had been arrested, in the meantime was put in jail and was on a hunger strike and it was pretty much an end to that. I went back to Decatur and I went back as Director of the East Side Housing and Economic Development Corporation and the Torrence Park Housing Development Corporation. And served in that capacity for a number of years and those were located in, not just for blacks, but it was for the lower income people, as well, that we were working for. So that's what I left and went back to immediately.

Simmons: While you were in Cairo –you've already recounted a number of your experiences including how you got to Cairo and what brought you there and what your day-to-day life was like in Cairo –I have to make the guess that the local population, once they could identify you personally and came to realize that you were there for reasons that didn't agree with theirs, that they weren't very friendly towards you. Were you ever arrested or you ever assaulted or threatened while you were in Cairo and how and why, and, just generally, what were those type of experiences, or did you not have anything like that happen in Cairo?

Harris: In the marches that we had, there would always be lines of white people along the route; there'd be actually snipers on all tops of buildings downtown as well.

Simmons: Who were these snipers? Were they citizens or were they police?

Harris: There would be Illinois State Police on top and there'd be some of the White Citizen Council on there as well. But we always marched with those guys in mind; they were up there watching like were all these people on the side. I recall

one day especially, some guy had a camera with me in the march and some guy came up, grabbed that camera from him, hit me over the head with it and made a big gash in my head.

Simmons: Was this a public official that did this?

Harris: Just one of the citizens in that case. So they took me to the hospital, and in the hospital there at Cairo they were treating me and they wanted to give me a shot, and I told them there was no way in the world I'd let them give me a shot. I didn't trust them, didn't know what they might be doing or anything else. So we got to where that, when somebody needed to go to the hospital in Cairo, the blacks, we would not take them to Cairo Hospital, we'd take them to the Cape Girardeau Hospital across the river in Missouri. I recall one time I took a lady over there to the hospital to be treated and came back home and was sitting on the front porch. It was after dark and there was one of the police cars coming down the street loaded with policemen and they shot at me while I was sitting there on the porch and I could literally hear the bullets go by, like a bee buzzing by, and I reported that to the State Police. And a few days later we were having a meeting there at the rectory and we got a call from the State Police; they'd like to come and meet with us. And so we told them to come on in. When they came in they said, "Mr. Harris, you're being charged with attempted murder." And I said, "What are you talking about?" and everybody else said, "What are you talking about?" Preston Ewing was there, Reverend Koen, several other brothers...

Simmons: These were citizens of Cairo.

Harris: Yes. So they were going to charge me with attempted murder and I said, "How's that?" They said, "Well, the other night you were sitting on a porch and the police went down through there and you shot at them." And I said, "Oh?" I said, "I called and reported that they shot at me." They said, "We know that, but they said you shot at them first." And I said, "I don't own a gun, I've never owned a gun, I suppose I could pull the trigger, but that's nothing to do with it". They said, "Well, you're going to be charged anyway." So my lawyers, again, it's the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, that was there for us. The head of the group with us was came from Portland, Oregon, to be there and to help us in the legal cases. He said, "Well, we'll arrange for you to go up there." And so he arranged for me to go up and make a plea at the arraignment...

Simmons: Where was this proceeding held?

Harris: At the county court house in St. Clair County. That's not the name of the county. What's the name of the county? It's Cairo anyway. Geez, why can't I remember that?

Simmons: I believe it was the Alexander...

Harris: Alexander County Court House, which was, by the way...

Simmons: Where was it located?

Harris: It's located right up about two blocks up the street from where we were. There's the...

Simmons: So that's in Cairo then?

Harris: That's in Cairo, yes. There's a big federal building there as well, interestingly enough, with the federal court house in it. But anyway, so I go up and plead not guilty to that and they let me out on recognizance bond. So that hangs over me for a while. Of course, the papers reported it big time and all the papers around reported it. Then, it's interesting, one day I get a call and says, "Manker", they called me Manker by that time, "would you come up to the court house." I got one of the brothers and went up there with them and they said, "We're dropping all charges on you. It's done and over with." They gave me the papers and I walked out and the brother and I went back to Pyramid Court, and when we went to Pyramid Court it was completely surrounded by State Police. They were raiding Pyramid Court trying to find weapons and anything else that the blacks might have in there, ammunition or what have you. That was one time...

Simmons: Can you just remind me one more time, Pyramid Court was what...

Harris: It was the public housing project for the blacks.

Simmons: Located in Cairo, or outside of Cairo?

Harris: In Cairo. Right in the middle of Cairo. It went up against the levee on the western end of the town; the levee was between Pyramid Court and the Mississippi River. But they used to arrest us for almost anything. I was arrested a couple of times for disturbing the peace and one other time for having something on the window of my car that you weren't supposed to have on your car. They were arresting all of us just as often as they could for almost anything they could. What we did to beat the system there and to get that kind of thing stopped was to demand a jury trial for every time we were arrested and had to go to court. And, by the way, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law that I mentioned earlier had gone to court for us and won the right for us to have blacks on the jury. Before, they did not let blacks on the jury. They had ways of excluding them and they did. And so what we were pretty much guaranteed was that every jury that would be empanelled would have at least one black on it and we could have the case thrown out, or have it found not guilty. The county was a poor county and couldn't afford to have that many jury trials and since we were demanding and getting jury trials for everything they slowed down arresting us from what they were, just for any little thing that we did. Almost any time we sneezed they'd try to arrest us and that did slow down appreciably. But there was another time that...

Simmons: So what you're saying is that your response in demanding a jury trial and your extensive involvement in the judiciary in that county was very expensive for the county government.

Harris: Yes. Very, very, very expensive. When they empanelled a jury, to get twelve people on there they'd have to call a couple of more hundred people and even for these smaller cases, and to call anybody in they had to pay them for at least one day of jury duty. It wasn't much but it was enough that they just couldn't afford that. It was literally about to bankrupt the county; they just couldn't keep on doing that.

Simmons: Do you recall if people who were involved in this organization that were doing things such as you were doing, do you recall anyone being convicted of anything?

Harris: We didn't have a conviction.

Simmons: So basically this was a situation where the county was arresting people and then spending a lot of money because, of course, the Constitution required a jury trial and they had to follow that procedure and then you were acquitted.

Harris: That's correct. If it went that far, yes. There was one time there were probably forty or fifty of us arrested the same day. We had a major march downtown and it got out of hand and there were a lot of shots that were fired and it was just a mess. It had just gone crazy –people running and carrying on –and the police grabbed me and threw me in the back of a police car.

Simmons: Was this the Cairo Police or the Sheriff or...

Harris: It was the Cairo Police in this case and this was pretty early on. I could hear some shots, but they arrested me quite early and took me to jail, and they took me in and put me in the cell. They took me, all the usual things they do, take your belt off and all that kinds of stuff. So I was in there and then I kept hearing other people, other members of the United Front coming in, and I didn't know what was going on. Every time somebody would come in we'd be yelling at each other saying, "What's going on? Has anybody been shot? Has anybody been hurt? What's happening?" And this went on and on. They kept bringing the brothers in and I guess there were a couple of people that were shot, not killed, but shot before the day was over. They kept coming in, we kept yelling at each other. We had no other way of knowing what was really happening in there. It got dark, everything apparently calmed down downtown. They called me up front to their office –the police chief did. And he said, "Here's your belt, we're letting you go." Now remember, this is directly across the street from the rectory where I was living. So I said, "Why am I leaving?" They said, "We want you out of here." So they gave me the belt and opened the front door for me. There was a long flight of stairs down to the street, Washington Street, I think it's called. As I was going down the steps I looked back and they had their rifles

trained on me. And I thought, they're going to get me for trying to escape. I just waited a minute for a bullet to tear into me. It didn't and I ran into the rectory. It was interesting. There were about forty people in the rectory and every one of them had a rifle, every one of them armed to the hilt, pistols as well.

Simmons: Who were these people that were in the rectory?

Harris: They were members of the United Front – Cairo Citizens in there, Reverend Koen was in there, and other members from the projects, the local black community people, were in there.

Simmons: Were these Catholic religious people? Or were they people that the church had allowed to use their rectory for that occasion?

Harris: It was just members of the community were in there. The two priests were in there that I mentioned earlier—Reverend Montroy and Reverend Bodewes. But everybody thought that this was the day it was all coming down, and felt, well, we're going to defend ourselves. Their motto was, you know, that we were non-violent, and this is the motto they used there at the United Front. "We're non-violent, but we will defend ourselves." One of the pictures that went out all over the country showed a Bible with a pistol on top of that Bible, and they used that in the sense of saying, you know, we're going to be non-violent, but we're going to defend ourselves. They got a lot of criticism for that; they felt it should be much more like Martin Luther King which was understandable from a non-violent standpoint. But after they'd had their homes fired in so many times and fires set and everything else, they just felt that there was a necessity of doing that. Interestingly enough, it did calm down that night. They finally let the brothers out of jail; none of us was ever brought to trial on that kind of thing. But that was the day that everyone really felt that everything was going to happen and it was going to be about the end of it all.

Simmons: So that was one day where you clearly felt that you were personally in danger.

Harris: Oh, absolutely. Well, I felt that several times, but you know, when you're at the house and they go by shooting in it, you're not certain what's going to happen at those times either.

Simmons: Did you think they were really trying to injure, wound or kill someone by shooting or ...

Harris: Oh, I think so. I think they were doing this to more than scare us. One thing I didn't mention on here was the fact that the rectory was right across the street from the police station. The police station was about three stories high; on the top was sort of a slanted roof with a cupola on top of it, and they actually had a .50 caliber machine gun installed in that. Occasionally at night they'd just start taking shots at us. And those bullets would rip into the house. We collected a number of the bullets that we were able to find to show as proof they were doing this. Of course, there were holes in the wall as well, all on the east side of

the house. And it wasn't infrequently that they did that. I had a habit of dropping the tape recorder outside the window when that was going on to record the sound that that thing was making and it was loud, even a hundred feet or so away from that police station.

Simmons: How do you suppose those bullets that they fired would strike either the church or the rectory which was the residence for the religious people, the priests and all who staff the church.

Harris: I'm sorry, what..

Simmons: How often do you suppose the bullets actually struck the church or the rectory?

Harris: It was a minimum of once a week that that would happen.

Simmons: Did they break windows? Did they damage the property?

Harris: As I say, there'd be bullet holes in the side of the house. We did have some windows that were broken, yes.

Simmons: What was the...

Harris: Some of them hit the roof of the house.

Simmons: What was the Catholic Church who owned this property, what was their reaction, as you recall, to this machine gun fire?

Harris: Well, they thought about closing the house, the rectory and saying, it's just too dangerous since it was that close. And then if they'd have done that, of course, the priests would probably have left. The priests went up and just earnestly begged them not to do that and saying, we can take that and we can live with it; let us stay 'til this thing is resolved in one way or the other, which they did. They listened to the local priest in that case.

Simmons: So then, despite the fact that you had this sporadic gun fire and despite the fact that it was from your rather unfriendly neighbors, the police across the street, you continued to do your business out of the Catholic Church's rectory there in Cairo.

Harris: Yes. That and the school building, as I mentioned earlier where we...

Simmons: That was operated also by the same church?

Harris: Exactly. It belonged to the Catholic Church. The church was still there --the rectory of the church and the old school building. The school building wasn't operating as a school any longer, but as I say, they let us use it. And we used it for the collection of... There were always drives being held by different groups from Chicago and different parts of the state to bring clothing and food down

there and that would be the place where we would –in the school – where we would be able to come and bring the stuff. Then we would mete it out to the people in Cairo.

Simmons: Now you mentioned something much earlier in our conversation about how the majority of people at that time period in Cairo supported themselves by living off of charity of various forms, including government welfare programs, whether they were black or white. And you thought that the majority of the town lived on some form of assistance. So it seems to me that there's some sort of an irony in the way the people regarded each other. Economically, I don't know that the white citizens were any different than many of the black citizens. And, I would gather, that the people who had the most paying jobs were probably people who were government employees, whether they worked for the local government or the county or the state government. Is that the way you saw it? What did you deduce was the effect of all this type of economic...

Harris: Yes. There's some real truth to that. There's one thing that did happen from all the things that we were doing and saying. The state began to hire some of the brothers to work in the Department of Transportation. They pretty much were using those mowers on the highways and what have you. We did get a lot of them to get jobs with the state in that way. Pretty much with the Department of Transportation. I noticed recently, for instance, that one of them died in Hillsboro, and it said he was still with the Department of Transportation. So he lasted with it a long time.

Simmons: Thirty, forty years.

Harris: Yeah. That's where several of the brothers went to work at least and were able to make a little bit more money. But it just wasn't there for them except to, as you say, a lot of the whites were the same way. There were some awfully, awfully poor whites there.

Simmons: But yet somehow the majority of the white population perceived itself to be on a higher plane than the blacks and that led to a lot of structures in the community that resulted in all this conflict.

Harris: That's correct and poor whites at their lowest level always seen themselves as being a little higher on the scale than black people were and would fight to no end for what ever jobs that might be there and were usually favored –almost always favored –with whatever jobs might have opened up for which they had no particular skills, but to get the jobs before a black person could get the job.

Simmons: So would you agree that this whole conflict was pretty much centered around economics and that the hostility that you encountered and the personal threats to yourself were most severe coming from those who were at the highest economic level – those who were employed by the municipal government and so forth – more so than the average person in the streets of Cairo?

Harris: Not necessarily. I think when you'd see the people that were lined up when we were doing our marching and stuff, there weren't too many there than just for the upper class of people of town, wherever that upper class was. There were people from all levels of society with the white community that were there that were taunting and yelling and making their signs and throwing things at the marchers or trying to break up the marches and things like that. It was a cross section of it. I have a feeling also the ones that started the fires in Pyramid Court or in the warehouses that were around us weren't always the high ones. I think maybe somebody talked to lower class people sometimes into going and starting those fires as well that we were constantly battling.

Simmons: So those fires you mentioned were actually arson and they would set homes and businesses on fire?

Harris: Yes. They did that. I remember very well one night. I had a picture of it –hope I can still have that picture some time –but they started a fire around Pyramid Court. The firemen came out and I have a picture of a fireman that was behind some kind of a wall there with rifle pointed at Pyramid Court.

Simmons: So they weren't actually putting out the fire?

Harris: No. No. And they were... it almost seemed like they were waiting for some blacks to come running out so they could take a shot at them. So even the fire department you couldn't trust. Usually what would happen was, something caught on fire, they'd just let it burn. Wouldn't even try to fight it.

Simmons: Back to the thought about that perhaps that this is partly an economic struggle: you say that it wasn't entirely just those at the highest level, that average people were involved, too. This is an interesting thought to me. I'm wondering then about the role of the White Citizens Council which you also have indicated is actually the Ku Klux Klan; how did they interface with this whole system? Because you mentioned that those were a lot of poor, disadvantaged whites who were involved with the Ku Klux Klan, but then also you mentioned that that was also the faces of many people who were indeed taunting and opposing you during marches on the street.

Harris: The leadership of the Klan was, well, like Burblin who was the State's Attorney, and Reverend Potts, pastor of the Baptist Church. You had no way of knowing what the full membership was; obviously, they didn't let you know. You'd know they'd be meeting, but you couldn't go in on the meetings. We tried to recruit some whites at one point to sort of be spies for us at those meetings. We didn't succeed in doing that because we wanted to know what was really being said and going on in there, but that didn't succeed. So I'm not at all certain; I think I'm pretty certain that it was people like Burblin and Potts who helped make the decisions of what they would do and then the other members ...

Simmons: Reverend Potts was involved with the Ku Klux Klan?

Harris: Yes, ma'am.

Simmons: Was he was someone that also assisted your organization?

Harris: No. The Baptist Church there, he was the pastor of the Baptist Church in Cairo and he certainly did not participate in any way with us. He was pretty anti- us.

Simmons: So he was in favor of the status quo.

Harris: Yes. As was the newspaper. The newspaper: we met with the editor at different times and tried to get some information across to him, but any time there was stories about what was going on, they were pretty much anti- the Black United Front and what we were doing. So we didn't have any support from the newspapers down there. There was a radio station in town, as well, and we met with that reporter a number of times and couldn't convince him to even make announcements about the things that we were doing and having. He just wouldn't go along with us at all, with anything.

Simmons: As far as the Ku Klux Klan role in some of these violent and threatening experiences, how do you suppose they functioned within the community, being that some of them were known members such as, you mentioned the State's Attorney of the county, but then there were many members that –you mentioned you couldn't actually know who they were –but yet there was a lot of violence and unrest going on. The Ku Klux Klan must have played some part or some role. I'm wondering what you suppose that was.

Harris: Well, I think they're the ones that had their strategy meetings, obviously, where they put out a lot of communications; they put out a lot of press releases and stuff, which were all negative towards what we were doing and tried to play up how wonderful the whites were and how if we would just stop that is would be a good community and this kind of thing. They did a lot of that. And I think they also –there's no way we can say this for sure –but they also were the ones that plotted what to do with us when we were marching, how they were going to handle it, what they were going to do with that, even maybe to the extent of – subtly at least, or more undercover in some way –arranged for those to do the arson that they were doing against us.

Simmons: So in that way, even though they may not have been the most economically privileged members of the community, perhaps you could agree that the Ku Klux Klan provided an important function in equalizing themselves with the other members of the community, even though, oddly enough, many of them subsisted –from what your estimation is –on welfare, no different than the blacks?

Harris: Let's put it this way. The White Citizens Council controlled the City Council; they controlled the Police Department; obviously, they controlled the law

enforcement division with the State's Attorney; and probably the County Board as well. So when you get all the governmental aspects of the thing –outside of the state –were all arrayed against the blacks as well and took, pretty much their directions from the White Citizens Council.

Simmons: So you would say it was fair to suppose that the Ku Klux Klan, in the final analysis was the umbrella organization, if you will, for all these activities against the people who were working for the civil rights of the local black population.

Harris: Yeah, yeah, no doubt about that, no doubt about that. They had been very effective there for a long time and in controlling things. It took something like the United Front to get that all broken down eventually.

Simmons: So then, therefore your perception was that the Ku Klux Klan was a long-standing organization that had been involved in economics and politics and other social aspects of the community for quite a long time prior to your arrival.

Harris: From what I had heard when I was there, they traced the White Citizens Council at least back to the early '50s.

Simmons: 1950's.

Harris: Yes.

Simmons: Because in other areas of the south, of course, the Ku Klux Klan, which is not limited just to the southern states, but it was, of course, initially known there first, was traced back as far back as the Civil War and the end of the Civil War. But in Cairo you believe that perhaps the organization became more active much later?

Harris: What I'm saying the White Citizens Council, I think it's predecessor was actually the Ku Klux Klan itself and then they took on a new name for more acceptability back in the 50s.

Simmons: So then they very well were, likely were, an established organization that had been operating in that town for more than just ten or twenty years.

Harris: Oh, sure. (Tape one ends.)

(Tape two begins.)

Interview with Manker Harris

FM-A-L-2007-040

Interview # 2: July 30, 2007

Interviewer: Elizabeth Simmons

Simmons: Today we are at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library at Springfield, Illinois. It is July 30, 2007. My name is Elizabeth Simmons and I'm interviewing Manker Harris. Manker, I'd like to continue our conversation from our last interview where you were talking about Cairo, Illinois.

Harris: Last week I was talking some about the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law and I'd forgotten the name of the lawyer who was heading that up there. His name was Aschenbrenner. He was from Portland, Oregon. I didn't want to leave his name out of this because he was so important to us and all that we did. It was interesting in Cairo, in the black community they sort of formed their own little government there within the city. They did not feel they were getting any response from, of course, the government of Cairo and I was able to sit in on a lot of their meetings in which they had sessions. They even had a court that was involved with it. If one of the brothers or sisters had done something wrong, for instance, if one of the sisters had complained that one of the brothers had, let's say, sexually molested her or something of that sort, they'd bring their court together and bring in the sister to say what had happened. And had the brother and anybody else that knew anything about it and have a little jury there amongst themselves and would make decisions as to what should happen to that brother or to whatever the count was against whoever the individual was. And it worked pretty well. It kept things pretty calm in those very, very hectic times as far as any inappropriate behavior, any illegal act that might ordinarily have occurred, that they were sure the city wouldn't handle correctly, that they would handle themselves. Those were interesting to sit on. They also weren't careful about who came in and they thought maybe at different times there were spies that came in to the community from outside.

Simmons: Manker, was this in Cairo that you were talking about?

Harris: I'm talking about Cairo, yes.

Simmons: Okay.

Harris: One time there was a man that came in from Indiana right close by Chicago, on the Indiana side. He came in and said he wanted to do this, he wanted to do that. And they did a little investigating and found out he was nothing that he claimed he was. They asked me to sit in on his hearing. They actually stripped him down to his waist and had him sitting in the chair with his hands cuffed, talking to him. They were really grilling him and he was trying to say he wasn't in there as a spy for the federal government or someone else, as the case may be. And they kept pushing and pushing, and pushing and he finally admitted that's what he was and they put him in a car and took him to the edge of the community and let him out and told him to never come back in to Cairo again. It was fascinating how they would try to keep things under control there in a situation where it was

pretty much out of control to a large degree. I was very impressed with how they did handle those kinds of things.

Simmons: In what ways did you see, when you were there, that the situation was pretty out of control? What were some instances that led you to that kind of a thought?

Harris: Well, like I said the arson fires that were going on at all times. It was something else. They were constantly arresting people out of the black community for vehicular charges. They could hardly do anything except they were pulled over. Any little thing wrong with the car they'd pull them over, arrest them, give them tickets, or even take them to court or take them to jail. They kept doing this kind of thing as well. It came to be a very touchy, tense situation. As a matter of fact, I don't know whether I mentioned last time or not, I was arrested once for having something in the window of my car. They said you can't obstruct the vision. They arrested me for that and gave me a ticket; didn't take me to jail, just gave me the ticket. It was out of control from the standpoint that, you know, the whites could just feel free to come in and go through the community honking their horns, calling the people "niggers", doing a lot of other things trying to stir up and roil people in to some sort of reaction or response to them. This kind of thing just went on continuously. There was no protection that was given to the black community, especially into Pyramid Courts. They just didn't have it. I think I mentioned last time about one fire in Pyramid Courts and where the fire department came, but they came with rifles and didn't really go in to fight the fire. The brothers themselves had to use fire extinguishers and stuff to put out the fire that night in Pyramid Courts.

Simmons: Now for the record, can you explain a little bit more about the phrase, "the brothers."

Harris: "Brother" would simply refer to a male black member of the community and "sister" would simply refer to a female black member of the community.

Simmons: Are you familiar of where the origins of those terms are from?

Harris: It's probably somewhat biblical. In the churches they refer to members of the church: the women are referred to as sisters, Sister Smith, Sister Jones; and the men were referred to as Brother Jones, Brother Smith; this kind of thing. And this was a deeply religious community. They were committed in their religion, quite frankly, and they probably just carried that on over in to the community as they would have used it in the church. It's still used in a lot of churches, down south especially, maybe other places. But when I grew up in the church, people were always Brother Jones, or Sister Smith and this kind of thing. I don't think we ever used the word, Mother Jones, Mother Smith, but Brother Jones, Brother Smith.

Simmons: Okay. Is there any other thing you would like to share with us about Cairo in particular?

Harris: Hold on just a second (Pause on recording) We can go back to Cairo.

Simmons: Ready?

Harris: I can't emphasize enough how important that our marches and other types of protests were in Cairo. I mentioned before about the fact that almost every week before we'd have a march we'd have somebody in courts and federal court in Danville, Illinois, to try to stop us from marching. We'd have people in court there to try to get an order from the judge to let us march. I remember one time, especially, that we were all lined up just outside of Pyramid Court getting ready to march downtown Cairo. We had one brother in the rectory. The lawyers would call us to the rectory and let us know what the judge had ruled. We were all lined up and ready to go and the police were all around us, and I had my tape recorder and little camera there and they called me over to the car. We were talking. I had my tape recorder going and one of the policemen knocked that tape recorder down under the hood of the car and took a billy stick and started beating that tape recorder like crazy (Chuckle) while we were waiting. While that was going on, the brother that was back at the rectory came running and said, "Judge has said you've got to let us march. The judge has said you've got to let us march." And so we put it together; we were all lined up any way. And we started to march, and the police – you should have seen the looks on their faces – they were so disgusted. What they do is immediately jump in their cars and head downtown and they'd stand along the route with their rifles showing all while we were marching on any given day. And we had those almost every week. It attracted a lot of different people, literally all across the country. It attracted newspapers and radio stations, especially coming in to report on those marches. Very often with the marches, on the day of the march there would have been a truck load of food, truck load of clothes, or something, would come in from some part of the United States. In the afternoon we'd distribute those and after that was done, we'd have our church service. We had a good choir that sang; they would sing good gospel music and get everybody revved up and happy. As a matter of fact, we produced a long-playing record of the songs they sang there and a long-playing record of the sermons that were given on the different Saturdays of those. Those were always something that we planned to bring a little more life and good feelings in the community and they usually always worked. Then during the week, since we would be planning our marches, we put out a newspaper, *United Front News*. It was an eight-page tabloid size newspaper that we put out on a weekly basis in which we'd talk to the community about what was going on and what had happened and what to expect. And we'd also send that to a lot of our supporters across the country as well. At the same time we were doing that the White Citizens Council had their paper that they were putting out and it was almost a debate society going between the papers, each claiming this or the other; very interesting how they would do it. I remember one week their paper came out and had a picture of my wife in the paper and said, "Harris' old lady's coming (both laugh) to Cairo to march this weekend. Go and cheer her on."

Simmons: Manker, just to remind us, about what year was that that all this that you are recounting what's happening?

Harris: It was the late '60s or early 70s, those years.

Simmons: Okay, so it wasn't just one year; it was over a period of time.

Harris: Oh, yes.

Simmons: About '68 to '70?

Harris: Yes. Something like that. I was down there several years. My family was back home, by the way, during this time. They'd come down and visit me occasionally and..

Simmons: Apparently, your "old lady" got caught on film. (both laugh)

Harris: I had three small children at the time, too. I have three children now; they're not small. They'd come down. One night they were there when the police or somebody went down the street in front of the house shooting into the house. It wasn't coming from the top of the police station and my kids and everybody had to hit the floor from that. I'd go home occasionally and visit as well, and when I did I kept a pad by my side with a pencil so in case there was a car and sometimes I'd be followed out of town and I'd take license plate numbers so in case something happened to me it would be written down on that pad to show what had been there. While I was down there, back home interesting things were happening; my house was fire-bombed at one time and there was graffiti written all over my garage. I lived in a pretty nice part of town at the time.

Simmons: This is in Decatur, Illinois? So while you were absent and working in Cairo, these things were going on in Decatur where your family was living?

Harris: That is correct. There's a friend of ours that lived a block away from us. He was at the Adolph Meyers Center in Springfield; he is a doctor there. He had a visitor in from the Justice Department in D.C. and that friend from the Justice Department told my friend that my house was under 24-hour surveillance trying to see what was going on and what was happening. That was after the fire bombing and the graffiti was written on the house. I used to say, "I'd probably never see that happen again with that much surveillance going on at least." But yes, I was constantly watched. It turned out, I sent for and paid for my FBI files and it said that kind of thing was happening. And it talked about when I used to speak at different places, I'd always say something cheerful and friendly to the people there and welcome them to the speech and always say welcome to the FBI agents who are in here as well. And, sure enough, there had been FBI agents that were in the sessions wherever I went and talked. It was interesting, too –from some of the things that were in those –it put in there that I should be considered armed and dangerous, which I thought was hilarious afterward –but armed and dangerous, and actually the words "Shoot on sight, if necessary" was

there. It said I couldn't leave the country; they were not to ever let me leave the country or anything like that. I was, very frankly, the last one in the world that could stir up too much trouble and too many problems. But the other interesting thing they put on, like when I spoke to the University of Illinois..

Simmons: Now this is part of the FBI files?

Harris: Yes, the FBI files. I was there just to tell them about what was going on in Cairo, giving them some facts and information, answering questions. And the FBI agents there said, "Harris was not able to stir up the students to rioting."

Simmons: Well, that was good.

Harris: Literally, that's what it said, and that wasn't the purpose for which I was there, but they had to put a little dig in there of that sort as if that had something great to do with the thing. But we'd do that during the week a lot. We'd go out and speak at different places to get our story across. Went to several places, several cities as did others there. By the way, every time I went I had a body guard, one or two of the brothers that went with me, the big burly ones, and when I was speaking they'd stand on either side of me. That was some sight to see as I was speaking with these people – brothers there to protect me. I don't think anything would have necessarily ever happened to me, but they were there anyway and did that. But we got the message across pretty well and then we'd get more support, more people coming in for our marches. That way more donations of food, clothes and actual money as well to keep us going and keep us moving. We had a pretty good, I'd guess you'd call it public relations system, going from that standpoint, keeping everything happening. We fed pretty well in to the national news, national media, got this story across and we got some pretty doggone positive stuff going with us which would really, really, really anger the white community. And in their newsletters they'd always refer to the many packs of lies that we were telling and how it caused more problems and more troubles to them in Cairo, and this whole process.

Simmons: It sounds that you served as a potent form of encouragement for people who were deep down wanting to have these equal rights but didn't either know how to go about obtaining them or had been intimidated or afraid, but together you all made a very potent force and you moved forward from there.

Harris: Well I think I mentioned earlier, some very significant things happened because of what the United Front was doing there in Cairo. We did get the court system to where we had blacks on the juries. They stopped arresting blacks just for blinking their eyes or for almost anything they wanted to. We were seeing fewer and fewer blacks go to jail. The school system starting hiring black teachers finally. There was a black we even got on the police force, who, by the way, was very helpful to us in letting us know some things while it was happening and what to look out for, things of this sort. And since that time of course, they have blacks on City Council and other things as well. But there were some very

significant things that did happen because of what we did there, because of the fact that we carried it up to Springfield. Another thing we very often did was come to Springfield and talk to the legislators. Wyvetter Younge, who I think is still a legislator from East St. Louis, we talked to her a lot and she helped us out in the legislature. And there were two or three other legislators who helped us out. Occasionally we'd do a little protest at the Capitol in front of the Governor's Office and things of this sort. It wasn't just a matter of our weekly marches, our weekly parades, which were a big part of it. But we had things going on at all the other times as well. One of the fellows from the Illinois Council of Churches who was helping sponsor this had a plane and he would pilot us to different places across the country as well so we could get the news out a lot faster at some places and at some times. People made all kinds of donations including that kind of a thing as well to help us out in getting the story across.

Simmons: So there was a lot of different ways that you were to provide encouragement and support for the processes of the civil rights of these people who had previously been denied their rights. Manker, I wanted to ask you, as I'm listening to your story, it's really fascinating and I'm picking up a thread of the story. I don't know if you've thought about this much before, but I'm noticing that the state government all the way down to the various police agencies, from the State Police down to the county sheriff's office, down to the Cairo City Police, that they seemed to form a group or a block, and perhaps there was even stirrings of that in the Governor's office, being of course, it's the Governor that controls the State Police that was actively seeking to thwart your efforts, and in effect to reduce the effectiveness of your efforts to give these civil rights to these people. Do you see that these people formed a sort of status quo and what was your experience with that?

Harris: Quite frankly we thought Governor Ogilvie was part of the whole situation. Of course he had control over the State Police ultimately and we felt very strongly that he helped keep them involved, and we felt strongly that he took the part of the White Citizens Council and others there. We made accusations against the Governor quite often in the newspapers. He'd respond to it some ways and some times, but not always. Sometimes we got criticized by some of the local newspapers for making the accusations that we did against the Governor, but it's true.

Simmons: Excuse me for a moment. What were some of the specific accusations? Can you give me an example of just one or two you might recall?

Harris: We felt that he listened to and would have audiences with the White Citizens Council members: Berblin, the mayor those...

Simmons: Of Cairo, Illinois, Berblin?

Harris: Yes, Berblin, the Attorney there. And he'd have audiences with them and listen to them and he never really let us really come in and talk to him directly. Now, on the other hand, in those days, you know, in the state the Governor and the Lieutenant Governor didn't have to be from the same party; they were each elected individually. Paul Simon was the Lieutenant Governor and Paul Simon was listening to us and talking to us. I think I mentioned earlier how he and Dick Durbin came down and visited. He visited not only the White Citizens Council and the merchants there, which is the same as the White Citizens Council, but he visited with us and talked with us as well and was listening to us. But there was very little power, of course, that Paul Simon had as Lieutenant Governor.

Simmons: Paul Simon, as I recall, came from that part of the state. Was he not from like right around Carbondale?

Harris: He's from Troy, which is a little more around St. Louis. He wasn't quite that far deep, but he knew southern Illinois real well, obviously. And so, yes, he wasn't all the way down from Carbondale however.

Simmons: Do you suppose at least some of the citizens of Cairo considered him to be one their own because he did come from the southern part of the state?

Harris: It could be to some degree that they did. And speaking of that, one wonders if there were many whites that were at all understanding of what was going on and favored more rights for the blacks down there. Frankly we did not run into many, we did not run into many; they just seemed like the whole white community was arrayed against the black community.

Simmons: So that was as far as you can tell?

Harris: Yes.

Simmons: And then you mentioned that from the highest level, the Governor's Office, that the status quo was really, really working against you. You have also mentioned about the assistance and help that you got from various other politicians such as Paul Simon and Dick Durbin. Dick Durbin coming, I believe from the Springfield area. Then you mentioned several things. I think it was so interesting in your first interview about the local police in Alexander County and the Sheriff's Deputy or Deputies as well. What are some more things that you recall about how they all seemed to kind of work together, as I'm listening to you. There is some sort of concerted effort to thwart you.

Harris: Well, when you take the State Attorney; Berblin, is one of the leaders in the White Citizens Council and he could help control most all the rest of them in the county itself and the Mayor for the White Citizens Council, I can't remember his name. By the way, just as an aside to this, I was part of a law suit against the Mayor and that went all the way to the Supreme Court.

Simmons: Is that the Illinois Supreme Court?

Harris: The U.S. Supreme Court.

Simmons: And the lawsuit pertained to?

Harris: When you Google my name in, sometime that will come up on some of the sites as saying I was part of that suit against the Mayor for not letting us march, not letting us protest and what have you. We won in the lower courts and they took it all the way to the Supreme Court. It's interesting that some of the suits that we brought did even go all the way to Springfield.

Simmons: And then, of course, if I can interrupt you one more time, the State Attorney a lot of people wouldn't immediately recognize, but he is, as you're bringing out, the chief law enforcement officer because the police can charge people for crimes at will, but it is the State Attorney who must prosecute. So that would be a very potent deterrent or, if you will, obstacle to your progress.

Harris: Well, inasmuch as the State Attorney was again, basically the highest official you can get there in the county –County Board Chairman might have been, but again he was not elected as County Board Chairman. But that's what we knew we had to do with the whole law enforcement part, is to break its back. And that's what I mentioned earlier how what we did with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law to bring lawsuits for them to fight every arrest that we had, to fight it in court, to ask for a jury trials and what have you. And that helped to break the back of it as much as anything did because you got to the head of the snake, if you please, Berblin. And in a sense cut that off and it ultimately brought us into some real victories there.

Simmons: Now when you first got involved with this business in Cairo, had you anticipated that the level of obstruction, if you will, towards your efforts was going to go as high as far as, for example, the State Attorney or the Governor's Office or the State Police?

Harris: Well, if you recall, I'd gone down there a little earlier as a representative of the Illinois Council of Churches to view the situation and see what it was like. It was, at that point, no doubt but what was going on. And also, of course, in meeting with the people that were there from the Justice Department, trying to see what was going on. They gave me a lot of information as well. They helped me to see who was in charge and what was in charge. So when I finally went down there I had no doubt but what was happening and who was pushing it and what was pushing it. We constantly exposed that in our newsletters and in every place we went to speak and all; we certainly let people know what was happening and what was going on.

Simmons: You had some advanced strategy and planning in place on your second visit when you stayed there for a period of time. Is that a fair thing to say about it?

Harris: Yes. It's like with any group, you have certain strategy sessions and do strategic planning and we certainly did do that. Based on what we knew you build your whole plan around the best way to defeat the group. This is where the lawyers helped us as well, The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, to see what our plans would be, how we'd best exercise those plans.

Simmons: Now were you able to achieve your objectives, your initial objectives in Cairo, Illinois, during the term of Governor Ogilvie, or did this continue beyond his term?

Harris: I can't recall how long he was governor now, so I'm not sure. I'm not sure who was Governor when we finally sort of closed down the major part of our operations there. Sorry about that.

Simmons: Okay. Because I was curious about this whole concerted effort in your experience was from the Governor's Office on down and how that affected the progress of your efforts. You started talking a little bit of Decatur, Illinois, and about how your house was fire bombed. You, of course, were a resident of Decatur; your wife and children were living there even while you were absent. And when you returned to Decatur, can you tell me a little bit more about the activities that you were involved in Decatur and more about what your usual work, life, or other daily activities were when you were in Decatur?

Harris: Prior to, or subsequent to Cairo?

Simmons: After Cairo.

Harris: After Cairo. Well I came back. There had been created in the community the East Side Housing and Economic Development Corporation and the Torrence Park Housing Development Corporation. The people in those communities asked me to come back and be the Executive Directors for those two organizations.

Simmons: Are those what we would commonly call Public Housing?

Harris: No, it wouldn't be called public housing. It would be just basically seeing what programs you could get into that could bring in funds that could help improve housing, in this case, in the low income community, which in that case, translated to the black community, east side of Decatur. However, there were those federal programs that were available for us and that is what we were going to act upon. I think I mentioned Housing and Urban Development and their FHA [Federal Housing Authority] program and Sections 235 and 236. And, of course, the Illinois Housing Development Authority. We got involved with them as well to give us loans to build homes for the low income people in Decatur which they could purchase under those federal programs. We really had this thing going with somewhere around fifty, I think fifty something houses planned. Here's where the Illinois Housing Development Corporation really, really proved its worth. They really helped us, they saw the need, they were

going to give us funds, they gave us some direct grants. Governor Walker, he was governor then at least, gave us some grants for staff and we had as well the Peace Corps workers that were on our staff, so we had a really large staff to get some of these programs going. It wasn't just housing that we were doing, it was economic development. We formed a food cooperative, for instance. We would go to St. Louis to the markets there and buy the produce and stuff for the market for the cooperative and have produce at about half of what they could get it in the store. They could use food stamps to get it with as well. We developed job training for them. We even set up a thing where we had a tool loaning place: a building where we had all kinds of tools that people could use to help fix up their own homes – drills, saws, hammers, anything you can imagine. They could come in and borrow those, go home and build, had ways of getting building materials. Several of the places there would cooperate with us in getting those. We had quite a program going: housing development and economic development both in the east side community. I think it was being pretty successful. I mentioned earlier then, President Nixon cut off the 235, 236 program and we only ended up, I think, building six homes. That's all we got, with all the other plans that we had to cancel, because those funds were no longer available. The programs were not there to assist and we could not exist without that, the funding for the Housing Development Corporation, as I say. A lot of the staffing came from the state, Peace Corps, churches; here again is where the Catholic Church gave us a lot of funds, the Presbyterian Churches gave us a lot of funds to work this and it was a great program. It just couldn't last. It was really interesting, before that program was over, Nixon, of course, became President and it changed the structure of HUD [Housing and Urban Development, federal agency] and different people were working it and different people were in charge of it and they started accusing me of somehow, in some way letting people in without proper care and whole big lot of stuff like this; I mean, it was a big deal. The FBI came in and they got all of our files, went through them, didn't go through them as much they just asked me to duplicate everything that was in the file, which we did for the FBI. And I was called to the federal Grand Jury in Springfield.

Simmons: Do you recall what year that was?

Harris: I'd have to look somewhere and see right now. It was again, just a couple of years after Cairo. Anyway, I had to come to Springfield to testify and we were all on edge as to what the Grand Jury was going to do and say. Had no idea. Again it was like when Nixon came into office he pushed on this kind of stuff; his people did anyway. Well, the Grand Jury finally came back and said there was nothing there; wasn't sure why all that was brought or anything else, but they didn't make an announcement in the newspaper. They just sent me a letter saying that everything was dropped, and newspapers didn't clean up the fact that of course before that, all this was going on. Anyway that was that. But that program couldn't go on. We had no way of keeping the housing development going. Even Illinois Housing couldn't come up with more funds for us; change

of Governor again, end of Walker's regime. There just were not funds for this kind of stuff anymore and I was through with that then.

Simmons: I have an interesting thought that occurs to me. After accounting your story about how you were brought before the Grand Jury in Springfield during the Nixon administration, if your experience with the state government had been then, perhaps Governor Ogilvie as part of the status quo wanted to prevent this change, would you also theorize or suspect that perhaps President of the United States, Richard Nixon, was not very much in favor of these civil rights activities?

Harris: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Simmons: So you would say that he was certainly, in terms of the political world, at the top of the status quo and certainly the chief policy maker, if the President was not in favor then...

Harris: Until the War on Poverty started coming through under Johnson

Simmons: Which had been prior to Nixon

Harris: Yes. There was not much available at all. But Nixon cut a lot of the funding in the War on Poverty. The Democrat congress would try to keep it going, but he would not give approval a lot. And like I said, those housing programs and things like that, he just very easily cut them off and stomped them. So a lot of movement sort of slowed down after a period of time during Nixon's regime. Of course, the other things starting picking up to some degree as well, but on the other hand, a lot of the movements and things, we were just fortunate that things had happened and been completed when they had and could not be reversed. On the other hand, he could stop programs, and did stop some of the programs, especially where we could have afforded housing. I think it couldn't have been too much after this when groups like Habitat for Humanity started coming about, helping get those programs going for housing. Housing was just miserable in Decatur, Illinois, for blacks. They had the Longview Projects and when I was there as Executive Director of the Council of Churches, and even when I was there as the Director of the Housing Development Corporation, just terrible housing was in poor communities, lower income communities. And nothing was really being done to improve it. There were almost daily riots, both when I was Executive Director of the Housing Development Corporation and the Council of Churches before that, there would be riots inside of Longview.

Simmons: Longview was what?

Harris: It was the housing project there.

Simmons: The federal housing project?

Harris: Yes. You hear people say they live in “the project.” Well Longview was “the project.” So even after I got back in working with housing development I was called very often when there’d be a riot in Longview or a riot at Eisenhower School, or wherever it was, to try to help them ameliorate and lessen the effects of those things. We got caught in tear gas many times in those days, even with police coming in and spraying the gas around.

Simmons: So you were working as part of city-wide and well known organizations in terms of economic development and with housing for low income people, yet the police in Decatur would come in when there would be unrest and disturbances and would sometimes use tear gas. Are you saying, that you also personally, if you were present, would be tear gassed as well?

Harris: Sure.

Simmons: So the police, by your estimation, were they indiscriminate in their use of tear gas, or there were other circumstances that caused that?

Harris: To some degree indiscriminate. You know, like if there would be a riot after a football game at Eisenhower, they’d just go in and throw that tear gas no matter who was there or what was there, and try to break up what was going on. It might be a small, it wasn’t a big melee as such, a couple or three start fighting and they’d come in. Crowds would gather as they do, and boy, would they use that tear gas big time. And the same would be true in the housing project if somebody there started a little bit. And there would be protests to the Housing Authority about not improving the housing, not fixing them up. They’d been there for years; flat roofs, the places leaked a lot and they couldn’t get anything done so they’d start protesting, nothing would happen. Police would come to break up the protests. Interesting thing about all that, too, from the housing project director, directly across the street was a storage area, I guess for the National Guard, Army Reserves or something. There was a big block-sized lot full of tanks, army carriers and this kind of thing. We always felt that was put exactly there to intimidate the people that lived in that housing project.

Simmons: Is this, by chance, off of Eldorado Road near the Armory in Decatur?

Harris: No.

Simmons: Ok. So this was farther...

Harris: It was directly across the street from the housing project which is..

Simmons: Farther east.

Harris: Yes. North and east of there. But it always amazes that they just started moving those in there like that and we always felt that was a means of intimidation to the people in the housing project especially.

Simmons: I have a couple of questions to ask you. I was listening to your story and I'm wondering, how did your economic development aid in the civil rights work that you had been engaging in? How do you see that as an aid or a help or was this a different type of effort? (talking away from the microphone)

Harris: Well, we talk about a lot of this happening in the low income community and for the most part, the people in these communities, in Cairo and the east side of Decatur, were people on welfare. I mean that's the basics. They had food stamps, but not much more. There weren't too many jobs available. If you recall, in Cairo I mentioned the fact that we were able to start getting people on to the Department of Transportation, getting jobs, and some of them did get some jobs in the city and this started helping right there. So they had some real income coming in. In Decatur we worked with a group called Dove, which the Christian Church started. Dove was –is still going over there now, by the way – was formed to help in the economic development as much as anything as well [and to promote peace]. As a matter of fact, the same people who formed East Side Housing and Economic Development Corporation were the ones who formed Dove. And that came from, again, Lutheran Church who sent people down there to help out in the community, help out with eastside housing. Then they involved some people with the Christian Church and the Christian Church put in the money for Dove. Dove has been tremendously successful in a lot of ways. It wasn't a hand-out to them, it was giving them a hand to help them learn skills, to learn trades and to get involved in the community better. The union started to see what was going on, started letting more blacks into the trades, which they hadn't been before. They had to go through the apprenticeships and all which was a little bit of a slow process. A lot of this came about because of what started with the Eastside Housing and Economic Development Corporation. I would never ever forget Dove and its involvement in this whole time. These kind of agencies suddenly were able to come into Decatur and help get things moving and make a world of difference. Longview is gone now, for instance; they were able to get out. And just like here in Springfield, they tore down that housing project and they built other kind of housing for the people. It's still not perfect there, but it's been a lot of changes from groups like this. This is where it really started making a difference with the whole economic development part of it. Without that nothing's going to really change.

Simmons: Now let me ask you, as far as you recollect, two of the major employers in Decatur are, of course, A. E. Staley and ADM. [Archer Daniels, Midland] What do you recall were their positions on these types of issues and were they actively hiring minorities or how were they just responding to the changes in the community there in Decatur?

Harris: ADM had really just moved in to Decatur from Minnesota when a lot of this stuff was going on with the corporate offices. ADM's First Vice President was on our board of Eastside Housing and Economic Development Corporation and one of the persons that was working with us on that, by the name of Livingston, David Livingston, they hired at ADM right away to come in and work there.

And they did. They were good community, a good part of the community. They started hiring. Staley wasn't hiring as quickly. As a matter of fact, when you go to the City Council, the members of the City Council were people from high up, like in Caterpillar, Staley's and groups like that, and you'd go in and talk with them about what you needed and what needed to be done. And it was just like talking to a wall. We had one confrontation after another in City Hall. Now this was when I was there as Executive Director of the Council for Churches, also with Eastside Housing. We would take fifty, sixty, eighty people in the City Hall to try to get something across about economic development or changes in the City's laws and what have you. It was just fighting like crazy. That's the other thing we did: we were able to get the first black on the City Council and the first blacks on the school board. Now, the Superintendent of the schools over there is black, interestingly enough. Back in those days you couldn't imagine that. We'd also go en masse to Board of Education meetings. Lot of different things happened with them. They started making some changes. As a matter of fact—there were several of us—we started a cooperative nursery school at the Jewish Temple, and the first one they had in Springfield and this group of parents...

Simmons: Excuse me, this is in Springfield, not Decatur?

Harris: This is in Decatur.

Simmons: Okay, thank you.

Harris: We tried to get some changes in the school system and they just weren't moving, weren't moving. So we told them we'd give them one year. If they didn't make changes we were going to start our own school. Well, they came back to us with some changes, which were really not changes. So a group of us families started our own school. We called it the New School. We got together in a school building outside the city and after a year then the school board started with Oakland School tried to bring some innovations in there and to bring us back in the system. We still didn't think that it was well enough to come back into the system and we kept our school going. We probably had New School going for about five years, run by ourselves. We had good teachers, certified teachers, and it was just an amazing change that we made in ours. And finally made some changes in the Decatur school system by having done this kind of thing.

Simmons: Now, going back to employment. You briefly mentioned Caterpillar, and I didn't mention Caterpillar because, of course, they are present in several Illinois cities. When you consider the major employers of course, A. E. Staley and ADM are not the only ones in Decatur; Caterpillar is in that number. And then I think many would consider the hospitals and Millikin [University] to be significant as well as some other mid-size manufacturers such as Mueller and so forth. If you take the group as a whole in Decatur, would you say that most of the large employers were open to minority employment during that time period?

Or were some perhaps more open than others? And what do suppose were the reasons for their choosing to be open to hiring minorities or not to hire them?

Harris: And, by the way, don't forget Firestone was going strong back in those days.

Simmons: Yes. And Firestone as well.

Harris: Very major employer back in those days. ADM was the most progressive of all of those companies, I would say. Staley's was the most foot-dragging of the groups that was there. Both Caterpillar, well Caterpillar came around a lot better and started hiring blacks more than they had before. Wagner's, of course, being the kind of industry that it was, a foundry, a lot of whites didn't want to work in there, so they were able to hire more blacks in there. But the thing that did change there was the wages. Talking about low wages: at first, they really had them there at Wagner's. They did increase the wages to some large degree. They had a nice strike there that helped things out at Wagner that finally improved on it. Mueller: Mueller was just so-so in those days, but like I say, the best of all of them would have been ADM. They were much more progressive in their hiring practices and were coming in new and wanted to be the best kind of citizen they could. And as I say, their members, their officers, got involved with different agencies like this in the city and it made a difference.

Simmons: How did the local newspaper react or respond to the efforts that you and your group were engaging in?

Harris: The editor of the newspaper during much of this time was fellow by the name of Robert Hartley. I noticed something in the paper about him the other day; he's out somewhere west of here doing something. But Bob had a pretty progressive mind, and was pretty positive about the things we did pre-Cairo, Cairo, after Cairo. We got some pretty positive press during this whole time out of him. Occasionally, Bob thought we might be a little off base on things. The reporters, boy were they good. They really came to our meetings and reported positively. I can't believe where he got all these reporters that he did, were really interested in this kind of things; and dedicated to this kind of thing. Very positive press out of the Decatur papers. The WDZ, one of the radio stations, was very positive toward everything we did. WSOY, on the other hand, boy, they had some talk shows and those guys that headed those talk shows, just beat us down in any way they could and very negative for us. So we had this difference WDZ, like I said, was very positive for what we did. Those were the two major stations there then; I think there is a lot more now. But when you talk about then, that was it. WAND-TV: at first when they opened they would have different panels which we'd be involved in those panels which were very positive towards us. I think most of the time WAND was pretty positive. Believe it or not, all this in Decatur, Illinois, was pretty good for us.

Simmons: So you'd say through the media outlets there was a lot of information out there for the average Decatur citizen to read and to be exposed to, to know about what your efforts were.

Harris: Yes. And of course a lot of times it brought out a lot of negative reactions and responses from the community on the other hand that they would be that positive toward us. And then really what we were doing was not right, shouldn't be upsetting the community in this way, that we shouldn't be coddling the criminals in the east side or in Cairo, as the case may be. That was a favorite term to use against the brothers in Cairo. People in the east side who were involved who lived in the east side, the criminal element.

Simmons: So, once again, would you agree that those were expressions of the status quo in Decatur?

Harris: Yes. Sure.

Simmons: Let me try and switch to another interesting topic that we've not discussed in Decatur. I'm thinking as you're speaking that there must have been some, if you will, home-grown black businesses in Decatur. What do you recall about that? And there must have been some blacks who had been able to come to some sort of understanding or agreement and operated businesses pretty freely within the community. There must have been at least a few. So I'm wondering, you know, if they were and what they were, what type of businesses and just what you recall about it.

Harris: Incidentally, in saying all of this and speaking of that, I have to go back to the Slaw brothers who years before we were involved in things like this, would go...

Simmons: Is this in Decatur?

Harris: This is in Decatur. Who would go in to the drugs stores, sit at the counters and sit-in; they weren't allowed to come in. This was a few years before we were doing our stuff. And a lot of the whole movement there really in Decatur began with those people who wanted to see change. Paul Crutchfield, Horace Livingston, the Slaws, they just have to be mentioned. Horace Livingston started the newspaper, weekly newspaper, *Voice of the Black Community*. It was a tremendous help in the whole black community. He still has that going as a matter of fact. I went over to a celebration the other day for his, I think it was forty years as editor of that newsletter. It was just a fantastic celebration. I was fortunate and honored to speak at the thing and say what I knew about Horace, what he'd done, how much difference it had made in the community. There weren't a lot of black businesses in those days. A Slaw, a different Slaw than I'm talking about, had a barbeque place. Geez, I can't think of...

Simmons: Did you have like any funeral homes or hair salons or other perhaps...

Harris: There would be some hair salons, but there was no black funeral home at that time, unfortunately.

Simmons: So you didn't know of any black funeral homes?

Harris: Not at that time. No.

Simmons: Not in anywhere in Decatur, Illinois.

Harris: No. No. There was none.

Simmons: So there'd be like black restaurants, you recall black hair salons, barbers?

Harris: Not any black restaurants in Decatur at that time. No, there were not.

Simmons: There were a couple. The newspaper.

Harris: Trying to think where there would have been black restaurants. Well, black restaurants -- Slaws was a catering company and a restaurant. There was nothing. I know that one of my friends tried to start a clothing store for blacks. He went to one of my, our really good Jewish friends who went to one of the, Gersh Cohen. I went to Gersh and asked Gersh if he could help this man get started in the store. The trouble was he wanted, and did start a store, but he just had in it dashikis. Well, a dashiki is a kind of shirt or thing from Africa, I think, wasn't it? And there just wasn't enough business to keep that going. Gersh tried to tell him, you've got to have more variety, you've got to expand your services. He tried real hard to help him go with it; he just wasn't choosing the right thing, the right product to make his store go. And there was an attempt to start a credit bureau at the time. I think they finally did get it started and I understand it is still a going thing in the black community there now which has made a difference. But there weren't many businesses for blacks in the community.

Simmons: So you don't recall any financial or banking institutions?

Harris: No. Nothing like that.

Simmons: So it would seem that then for the average black person in Decatur during this time period, in the sixties through the early- mid-seventies, that having access to, for example, credit to get a mortgage, to get a car loan, to start a business, it was practically non-existent and that there was very little economic activity being generated for the black community within the black community. And I'm wondering as you're speaking, what the ramifications of that would be in your mind for the people at that time in Decatur. Did you think that this compounded the poverty or was this sort of another layer of the poverty or how do you see this for Decatur?

Harris: Everything was establishment based. Literally, everything. City government, financial, community, everything. The only thing blacks had going for them

pretty much was the churches, the black churches. Black churches would get together as much as they could to sponsor whatever they could. Some of the pastors would get involved in the community to some degree. Some other pastors felt as Christians, they shouldn't be out protesting and what have you. Obviously, this is part of the whole suppression; they had nothing to look forward to, they had no goals to aim for, they had no heroes to look forward to, they had no role models that they could look to and say, I want to be like this person, I want to go like this. It just wasn't there for them. The school system – very few black teachers in the school system. In city government, there were none. No businesses to look for. It was all part of the whole thing to keep them suppressed.

Simmons: But this is in the North. This is Decatur, Illinois. Even in the South they'd traditionally have a black funeral home and they'd traditionally have a black teacher and they'd traditionally have a few black businesses, a hair dresser, and other things that in a community. We're in Decatur, Illinois. I'm having a hard time imagining that so little... there was virtually nothing.

Harris: And, we're talking about as late as the seventies this was true. As I said, earlier this was true. Now you go there, the Superintendent of Schools is black, there's blacks on City Council, on County Board there are blacks. You go right down the line and you'll see it. In politics there in Decatur, it was pretty much there were black Precinct Committeemen with the Democratic party. There were no black Precinct Committeemen with the Republican party. It was something else. It was how it was and not too many of those in the Democratic party. It's amazing, in the late seventies this was all still true. A lot of changes have happened in Decatur since this time; blacks are becoming more prominent. I don't think any of them, from attending that meeting with Horace Livingston or the celebration with Horace Livingston the other night and hearing some of them talk about what still needs to be done in Decatur. Obviously there are still a lot that needs to be done, but there have been a lot of changes since the seventies.

Simmons: One last question. Going back to this earlier conversation talking about black businesses and so forth, would you say that this is an extension or a type of segregation in the way that you described the situation in Cairo, Illinois? Or was this its own animal in Decatur?

Harris: Its own animal in Decatur, probably.

Simmons: So you didn't see it following any patterns of perhaps your earlier childhood growing up in Tennessee and the upper South? You didn't see this to be anywhere like it was in Cairo, so very much its own animal.

Harris: I'd back up on that. If you take Decatur and go south from there, not a lot of large cities between Decatur and Cairo, but the Mt. Vernons, the Marions, the other towns through there, they'd be somewhat like Cairo. Cairo was probably

the epicenter of all of it. Decatur wasn't that far in between, and the rest of them were more like Decatur all the way down through there. So it, my god, you know, in the fifties Jim Crow was very popular...

Simmons: In southern Illinois?

Harris: In southern Illinois. In like in Decatur, Illinois, as well. As I say, it was sometime in the sixties when these brothers went to the drug stores there and sat on the counters until they were arrested and thrown out to try to break the color barrier there. The red lining that was taking place in housing in Decatur; they couldn't go west of Fairview Avenue. Blacks were red-lined out of that. It was no way they could go there and this was true of so many places. They just were not allowed to become part of the establishment in any way; they were pretty well kept out.

Simmons: So apparently, if we can use the term, racism in the North was alive and well and perhaps, in it's own variegated form from what we so more often hear about it, is racism in the South.

Harris: Well, we know that even during the Civil War, southern Illinois was more pro-South than they were pro-North. As a matter of fact, if you realize it, Cairo, Illinois is actually farther south than Richmond, Virginia and other parts of Virginia as well. And it had a southern mentality and to some degree, still has a southern mentality.

Simmons: And that extended northward in the State of Illinois then?

Harris: Sure.

Simmons: Very interesting.

Harris: Sure.

Simmons: Why don't we pick up right there then.

Harris: I think before going on I left out one organization that probably was as vital in bringing some changes into the whole situation in Decatur as any other, was the Decatur-Macon County Opportunities Corporation, which was part of the anti-poverty program. It started, of course, under [President] Johnson's War on Poverty. Our director was Mary Piper, who was an Apache Indian, and was going to make sure that she would do as much as possibly can to displace racism as well as to bring in some economic power to the black community. We used to laugh and say that our summer programs, our Job Corps programs, was riot insurance. The reason for that, we said, was because we brought so many people from lower income community, many black youth into the program, gave them jobs during the summertime and that way they had something to do. Otherwise they had nothing to do all summer, just be there, be on the streets, really nothing to do. The cops would get really upset with them and things

would happen. This way they had jobs, stayed out of trouble, brought us some peacefulness to the community at the time. Back to the churches: the black churches in town had not been on the forefront of the whole civil rights struggle for some number of years. When the Slaws and others sat down in the drug stores and would not leave because they would not be served, they'd just sit there. The churches were not the leaders. The blacks were bringing themselves into it and that was true to some degree when I was there at first. They were slow getting going but they heard the drum beat, and they saw what was happening to their people, their members. In a sense, the fear of God was put into them; the churches then started coming to the forefront. The Church of the Living God, Pillar and Ground of the Truth: the pastor there was one of the leaders. Union Baptist: that pastor came out and started leading. The pastor at the AME Church. These were some of the early leaders that really started seeing what was going on, saw the need of doing things, and started getting together with meetings; formed themselves into an organization and started getting involved with the NAACP, which again for a number of years hadn't been active there, but was brought to life and became a more meaningful organization. Those kinds of things started happening with the black ministers and the black ministers started standing up. They started going to City Council meetings to speak. They started going to other kind of organizations. They started trying to even get in the business clubs, such as Kiwanis and Rotary and clubs of that sort where they could get involved more with the business people, business leaders of the community. I remember though, one sad part of that was the Rotary Club. I was a member of the Rotary Club and one of the black ministers there was bishop of his church, and with Rotary Club you can be only one basic person from a category, a member of that club. So you got a wide spectrum of people there with different positions in the community. Well, I was sponsoring this bishop into membership. There were no blacks in those groups, and I was sponsoring this black minister, Morgan, Eddie Morgan was his name. I thought we had it going and that he might become a member; they did not have a bishop in the membership role so it was a legitimate spot. Well, I had with me sponsoring him the pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Warren Hoffman, and we were pushing to get Eddie in as a member and they voted him down. That's the point that Warren and I both resigned. It made a lot of newspaper space and got a lot of publicity on it about the fact that this organization would not allow blacks. So here was another way that they were hamstrung from really getting involved from the standpoint of these people obviously talk business at those meetings. They also are the ones who go together on golf courses and talk business. The blacks couldn't do any of this so this was another way that kept them oppressed and from really getting involved in the financial aspects, the leadership aspects of the community. As hard as they tried, it would not happen. So you can see how interwoven all of this is to close them out in so many ways. Your whole business community, your...

Simmons: social out...[both talking]

Harris: There wasn't even a black lawyer in town; there wasn't even a black doctor in town. So you can see that everything the blacks do, they had to depend on the white man to do it—whatever it was.

Simmons: Is there anything else in particular that you recall about Decatur, Illinois that you would like to bring out.

Harris: There were a lot of things that were going on at the time. There were all kinds of organizations that started to come up. There was the Decatur Association for Racial Equality, which is basically a group of white women who felt things weren't going right and doing right and they started meeting. And, boy, did they start raising holy hell (chuckles) in so many ways: in leading protests, in having blacks become a part of them, and start moving on it. There was the Black Central Coordinating Committee that was organized; they started trying to get together and see that things happened and things were done. The Council of Churches, which I was Director back in the pre-Cairo days, we had a committee that was really working on civil rights and economic opportunity. I think I mentioned earlier, we had the weekly radio program called "Chat with the Clergy" in which we had a rabbi, Catholic priest, Protestant minister and myself as members and we very often talked of civil rights and trying to get a message across. We had a black member who came in once a month; he was part of us once a month. Eddie Morgan, I mentioned earlier. These kind of things were going on that the community was just not able any longer to sit back, the whites, and pretend this didn't exist, pretend that there was no racism, pretend there was no reasons for the blacks not becoming what the blacks could become. We tried to shatter the myth with all these things that were happening. We slowly, but surely, started to see that happening and things going on. And all of these organizations moving the people couldn't overlook it. The press we were getting, they couldn't overlook it. We would do our marches in Decatur and then we'd come to Springfield and do our marching. At one point we were protesting at the State Capitol. We had then several of the nuns from Springfield that were involved with us. We were there and I was inside the Governor's Office, protesting, and finally they told me to leave and I crawled under a table and sat instead of leaving.

Simmons: What Governor do you recall as that?

Harris: That would have been Ogilvie probably.

Simmons: So this is going back a little bit.

Harris: Yes, this is pre-Cairo again.

Simmons: So this is the mid-, late sixties?

Harris: Yes. So they arrested me and I just went limp. And they had to carry me out and they took me to the county jail here..

Simmons: In Sangamon County?

Harris: Sangamon County Jail and the Sheriff called me in his office, didn't put me in the cell. He was really upset and perturbed; he said he was Catholic and he just couldn't stand the thoughts of nuns being arrested and ministers being arrested, it was just getting to him. He wasn't sure he wanted to stay Sheriff with this kind of thing going on, but gave me some coffee, and in a while they let me go. But I had to go to trial for that one. This was after I got to Cairo; they set a trial date and I came back and was on trial. I asked the judge what would happen if I was found guilty of the charges. He said, "Oh, there would be a fine of two or three hundred dollars." I said, "Then I'm going to defend myself." So we had the trial and went through the process and at the end of the state's presentation I asked the judge to dismiss the charges as they hadn't proved anything. He said, well he'd sit overnight on it. So we went back in the next morning and he called us up in front of the bench and he said he was dropping charges, that I was right, they hadn't proved anything against me and it was stupid to go on with the trial. He dropped it and we got out of there. So my one attempt at lawyering I won my case. (both chuckle) And I was real thrilled with that happening as well. But that is just sort of an aside, but it got a little publicity as well. But the big thing was, I wouldn't for a minute want it to be thought that I was anything more than a part of this whole program in Decatur. Because once we got things going all kinds of organizations begin to form and we had the anti-poverty program going, we had DOVE going, and we had the churches, white churches. Even some of the white churches, more mainstream churches, started getting involved more than they ever had before. Things were bound to start changing, and in the process we had someone finally west of Fairview Avenue –that was the red-line. They could never get a mortgage for a home west of Fairview. We had people finally break that barrier. We had blacks on the police force there. As I said earlier, we had a black man go on the City Council. So I think those were some of the beginnings of some of the changes there in Decatur, at least.

Simmons: So is it safe to say that a lot of these changes were occurring in the seventies and eighties.

Harris: A lot of them in the early seventies. Late sixties was the beginning of some of them and then the eighties. A lot of this, of course, was happening at the same time Martin Luther King was moving in the South. At the time he was murdered in Memphis, some of us went down to Memphis and became part of that whole situation and were involved with that as well and helped get the story back across about you know, how deadly racism was and how we really need to do all we could to change it. So a lot has changed in Decatur, obviously, and in Springfield and in Cairo. But I wouldn't swear to God by any means that racism is dead.

Simmons: And by racism, you would define that as the preference for one's own color, if you will, and perhaps the thought that you are better than someone else?

Harris: Yes. I think absolutely that's it, where your race is it, the top race and you're not only better, you're superior and the other race is inferior. You live by that and you go by that – whether it's open or covertly done.

Simmons: Manker, I'd like to thank you for your thoughts and recollections today and I look forward to interviewing and speaking with you again. Thank you, Manker.

Harris: Thank you.