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Woodrow Wilson

Race, Community and Politics in Las Vegas, 1940s–1980s

An Oral History Conducted by
Jamie Coughtry

Edited by Jamie Coughtry
and R. T. King

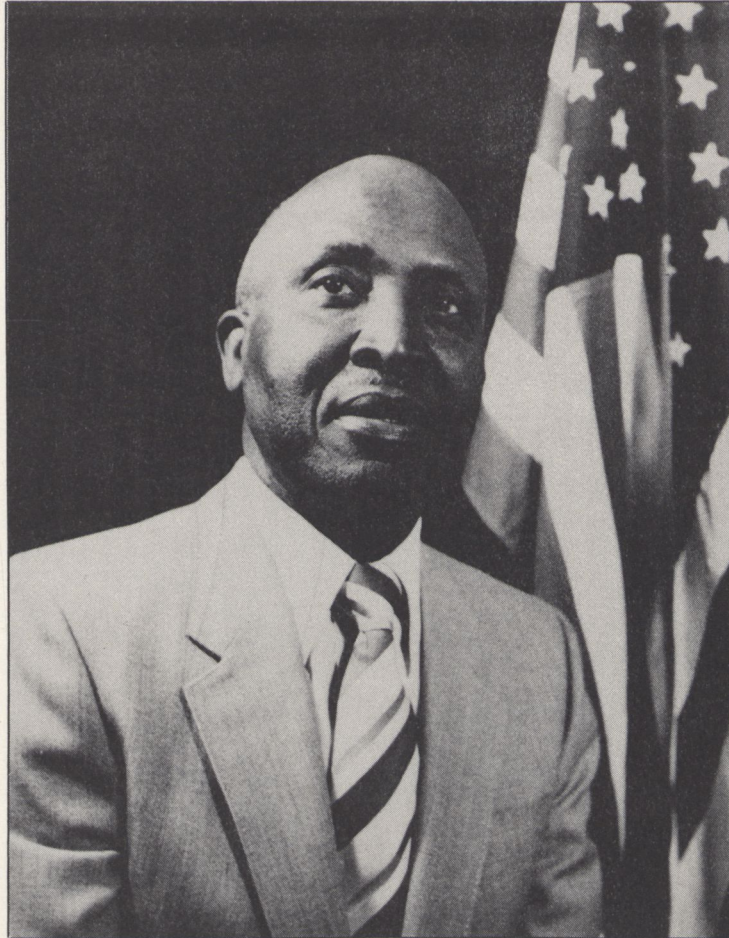
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Woodrow Wilson, ca. 1980
Courtesy of Woodrow Wilson Collection

A NOTE ON THE PRODUCTION OF THIS ORAL HISTORY

SINCE 1965 THE UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA Oral History Program (UNOHP) has produced over 200 works similar to the one at hand. Following the precedent established by Allan Nevins at Columbia University in 1948 (and perpetuated since by academic programs such as ours throughout the English-speaking world) these manuscripts are called oral histories. Unfortunately, some confusion surrounds the meaning of the term. To the extent that these 'oral' histories can be read, they are not oral, and while they are useful historical sources, they are not themselves history. Still, custom is a powerful force; historical and cultural records that originate in tape-recorded interviews are almost uniformly labeled 'oral histories', and our program follows that usage.

Among oral history programs, differences abound in the way information is collected, processed and presented. At

one end of a spectrum are some that claim to find scholarly value in interviews which more closely resemble spontaneous encounters than they do organized efforts to collect information. For those programs, any preparation is too much. The interviewer operates the recording equipment and serves as the immediate audience, but does not actively participate beyond encouraging the chronicler to keep talking. Serendipity is the principal determinant of the historical worth of information thus collected.

The University of Nevada's program strives to be considerably more rigorous in selecting chroniclers, and in preparing for and focussing interviews. When done by the UNOHP, these firsthand accounts are meant to serve the function of primary source documents, as valuable in the process of historiography as the written records with which historians customarily work. However, while the properly conducted oral history is a reliable source, verifying the accuracy of all of the statements made in the course of an interview would require more time and money than the UNOHP's operating budget permits. The program can vouch that the statements were made, and that the chronicler has approved the edited manuscript, but it does not assert that all are entirely free of error. Accordingly, our oral histories should be approached with the same caution that the prudent reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries and other sources of historical information.

Each finished manuscript is the product of a collaboration--its structure influenced by the directed questioning of an informed, well-prepared interviewer, and its articulation refined through editing. While the words in this published oral history are essentially those of Mr. Wilson, the text is not a *verbatim* transcription of the interview as it occurred. In producing a manuscript, it is the practice of the UNOHP

to employ the language of the chronicler, but to edit for clarity and readability. By shifting text when necessary, by polishing syntax, and by deleting or subsuming the questions of the interviewer, a first-person narrative with chronological and topical order is created. Mr. Wilson has reviewed the finished manuscript of his oral history and affirmed in writing that it is an accurate representation of his statements.

The UNOHP realizes that there will be some researchers who prefer to take their oral history straight, without the editing that was necessary to produce this text; they are directed to the tape recording. Copies of all or part of this work and the tapes from which it is derived are available from:

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INTRODUCTION

WOODROW WILSON WAS BORN in a sawmill town in Mississippi in 1915, the son of a mill worker. His mother owned and operated boarding houses, and the family was somewhat more prosperous than the average black family of that area and time. Following the eighth grade, Woodrow was sent to a private boarding school to complete his high school education. He went on to finish two years of junior college work, but his plan to get a college degree was thwarted by the declining economy. He entered the Civilian Conservation Corps, was trained as a cook and baker, and became the mess sergeant for a nearby camp.

In 1940 Woodrow left Mississippi and the depressed South. He joined the growing migration of Southern blacks who were drawn to employment opportunities offered in the timber industry, public works projects and nascent defense plants of the West. After a year in the timber camp of McNary, Arizona (and a brief sojourn in Chicago), Woodrow traveled to Las Vegas, Nevada, where he found employment

with Basic Magnesium, Incorporated (BMI). Thousands of other blacks settled in Las Vegas to work in this major defense plant during World War II, forming a large community known as the Westside. Woodrow Wilson became a prominent citizen of the Westside, active in his church and the local NAACP chapter. He soon found himself speaking out about segregation and the open racism that was common in Las Vegas at that time.

Following the war, Mr. Wilson worked for over thirty years as a warehouseman for companies that occupied the old BMI site. He founded a federal credit union on the Westside, was elected president of the Las Vegas NAACP, and became increasingly active politically. In 1966 he was elected to the state assembly, becoming the first black legislator in the history of Nevada. During his three terms he was a vigorous and effective advocate of open housing legislation, anti-discrimination regulations, welfare reform, and civil rights in general. In 1980, Mr. Wilson was elected to the Clark County Commission, from which he resigned in 1984. He continues today to serve as manager and treasurer of the Westside Federal Credit Union.

As conducted by Jamie Coughtry, this 1989 oral history concentrates primarily on the struggle for social and political equality by black citizens of Las Vegas, from the 1940s to the present. Within the context of Mr. Wilson's personal experiences, the reader is provided with informative, detailed description and analysis of segregation at BMI, life in the Westside in the 1940s and 1950s, the role of the NAACP in politics, the Moulin Rouge agreement of 1960, race and politics at the state legislature, and a host of other related subjects. This oral history is the second in a series intended to document much of the history of the black community in Las Vegas. The first in the series was the 1988 *Lubertha Johnson* oral history. For subsequent volumes to be published

after 1989, the reader should consult updates to the Oral History Program's *Collection Catalog*.

R. T. King
University of Nevada, Reno
1989

Chapter One

GROWING UP IN MISSISSIPPI

I WAS BORN ON August 28, 1915, in Morton, Mississippi. Morton is in Scott County, a rural county. My father was Oscar Wilson, and my mother was Caroline Barnes Wilson. When she married my father, my mother already had two children: my older sister Annie Mae and my next sister Viola, who is just older than I am.

My father and mother separated when I was approximately a year old, and I stayed with my mother. She remarried a man called Clarence Nichols. My next sister was Ollie V., and I have a brother Odell; my next brother was Claudie Douglas. I also had one smaller sister who died when she was just a tiny tot. They were all by my stepfather.

I did not know any of my grandparents. They never lived with me, and when I became old enough to know them, they were dead. The only name that I knew was Lolly, my mother's mother. I did know my stepfather's father, but we were never close. His name was Samuel Nichols. He was a

very industrious man, and for the time that I knew him he was actually still working...in his sixties or seventies, and he was very active until he died. He was at least eighty when he died, and he never was a person you had to support. He maintained himself *very* well; he supported himself very well. One of the things that actually prevented me from knowing him better was that after I got large enough to really know him, I went away from my little hometown to a boarding school.

My natural father lived until I was approximately twelve years old. I visited him, but our relationship wasn't too close. We had that recognition that he was my father. My mother worked, and he would provide a little support every now and then, but not consistently.

Scott County was logging country in central Mississippi, the pinewood belt. Sawmills were throughout the area. My father worked in the timber country; he worked as a loader in the logging camp where they cut the logs. He was a tong thrower who hooked the logs to load them on the cars to transport them to the mill in the little town of Morton. He did that most his life.

I had a very, very close relationship with my stepfather. He actually was like my father. We had that kind of closeness, and he assisted me and offered me the kind of protection a father would provide. My stepfather worked in the lumber company, too, and he also worked as a tong man on a log loader. (They called them loaders at the time.) My stepfather was highly professional at this job. He could take a set of tongs on a line, throw it and hit a log with it. The machine operator, the loader operator, would snatch it, and they'd grab the log, pick it up and throw it on the car. He was very good at his job. It was typical employment, because that was piney woods country, and lumber mills were throughout the area. Some of the finest pine lumber in the

world was manufactured throughout that area of the country at that time.

Other blacks worked at the sawmill--various jobs there. There were all kinds of jobs in the sawmill industry, from sawers to lumber stackers, all types of jobs that were in the lumber manufacturing area. It was heavy labor--hard work, hard work. The beautiful thing about that area was that it was a very heavy farm area, too. It was good farm land and great timber country.

My mother was really a very industrious woman, and she was very businesslike. She ran a boardinghouse; she ran a cafe and things like that to make a living for the family. She would also give fish-frys on the weekends to help supplement the income for the family. That was in the little towns of Morton and Forest.

Morton was a little sawmill town, and the people who worked at the sawmill lived in the community there. Some lived in the sawmill quarters, and there were those who lived in the other sections of town. We had a section of town where blacks lived that wasn't in the regular sawmill quarter. The mill company provided quarters for most of the employees who worked for the mill company. Those were the people my mother served. Most of them were black, but some white. Some white workers would go there to carry out food. They did not eat anything in the cafe, because it was a totally segregated situation.

The kids were always doing something to assist with the family income. For instance, I remember there was a gentleman who did the repairs on the roof of the homes in the sawmill quarters. I assisted him by helping him to heat his tar pot and provided him with the tar that he would spread to put the paper on to seal the roofs. In and around that

little town there was a lot of farming: cotton, corn, vegetables and things like that. I used to go out and hoe, chop and pick cotton. The other kids did some of that, too, to help supplement the income. I was about eight years old when I started working.

My family did not farm; we just had a garden. We'd call it a patch where you'd plant extra food--stuff like corn, cucumbers and other vegetables. At that time we bought most of the supplies for my mother's business. She would have fish-frys on Saturday nights in the yard, and people would come by. When she was running the little cafe, it was in the small towns. She did not own the facility; she would rent.

My mother and stepfather always owned property. They bought property in Morton, and my mother paid to have a house built. We owned that home all of her life. She was running a boardinghouse in the logging camp, and she paid for the home by the month with the money she made at the boardinghouse. It was a big five-room house with a hallway and a kitchen and a dining area.

I was probably about six, seven years old when we moved to Forest, Mississippi. There we lived in the company houses in the mill company quarters. We rented in the company area. We had our house, and then we had a house for the boarders, the sleeping quarters. (We also kept the house in Morton, and we did not sell it until after my mother died.)

As a child I felt comfortable, and I was well provided for. We never had to suffer for anything: we had food, we had clothing. I remember that while my stepfather was working in the lumber camp and my mother had the boarders, we had a T Model Ford. Yes, we had a car! I started driving a car when I was eight years old. Owning a car was extremely exceptional. Few people had cars and things like that. My mother paid \$524 for the car. She bought it from

Cook Motor Company in Forest, Mississippi. The only other difference in my life was that I was one of the few youngsters who had an opportunity to go away to school. I would say we were above the average, compared to other black families.

We were also better off than some white families. I remember one time in Mississippi a young white lady came. Her husband had put her out, and she didn't have any place to stay. She had met my mother, who was a humanitarian. She'd just help everybody. Oh, that woman! This lady came over and told my mother she had to have some food. She said, "I don't mind working, helping you." So she helped my mother. I remember my mother gave her food. She had a little boy, too, who I played with. My mother gave this young lady food and some money. Money was *money* then. I don't know how much it was; it wasn't much. Later on the lady remarried, but she never forgot about that. She was a friend of my mother after that. She was very nice to the family.

After the timber manufacturing slowed down a bit, my stepfather went to what we called the "one-horse sawmills." They had cut the timber so much, used it up. They went to the little "one-horse" sawmills to mill what little was left. My stepfather decided to come west. He started traveling around all over the country. He left home, and then he'd come back maybe once a year or something like that. After the logging industry declined, my mother was able to survive by opening a little cafe downtown in Morton.

The Great Depression affected everybody in the South. I was away at school most of the time. Conditions at home weren't as good as they were before. My mother did suffer some; they didn't have all the things that they had had before, but she was able to make it through.

I enjoyed playing with other children. The kids used to get together, and if we didn't have enough for all of us to go to the show (it was a dime then) they would make sure that I went to the show. [laughs] We had a large tree in front of the house; I'll never forget it. When we came back from the show, we'd all get around this oak tree. Even if they had gone to the show, I would have to tell what happened in the show. I would narrate the whole show. "All right, Woodrow, come on tell us now. Let's go over the show. Let's tell everybody." So I'd tell them all about the show and what actually happened, putting in the thrills and everything. We used to spend a lot of time at the show and doing things like that.

All the ladies knew everybody. Their kids played and were together. A lot of people liked me very well. I would run errands for the ladies. All the ladies in the community would send me to get groceries or pick up something.

When I was eight years old, I started driving. My mother had to make a special pillow because I couldn't sit down to drive. I had to stand up, and I used the steering wheel to hold me up. A friend of my stepfather (we called him Son) taught me how to drive the car. It didn't take very long, because I had watched him, how they operated the car. Kids usually pick up things very fast if they're interested, so all they had to do was tell me the basics, and I was able to handle it.

It got so that the chief of police--then the marshal of Forest, which is now the county seat of Scott County--saw me downtown in this car. He stopped me. He said, "If I catch you uptown in that car again, I'm going to put you in jail."

I said, "OK, you can tell my mama."

He said, "You heard what I said, boy!"

I said, "Yes, sir. I heard what you said." I went home and I told Mama.

At that time there weren't any laws on the books saying how old you should be to drive. Highway 80 came right by our house, and that very afternoon the marshal came by with his little boy in his lap. He might have been a year older than I was, and the marshal was trying to teach him how to drive. My mother said, "Uh-huh," because we saw him. She said, "He's just jealous because you can drive that car."

I said, "Well, he's going to put me in jail."

She said, "If he puts you in jail, we'll see. I'll get you out. You go on." So the marshal saw me again.

I said, "My mother saw you teaching your son how to drive, and you had him driving. You just don't want me to drive. You can go see her. You can put me in jail if you want to."

He said, "I'll see her. I'll put her in jail."

I said, "All right." He didn't bother me anymore, and I drove that car.

When I was about nine we drove over to Jackson, Mississippi; that was the capital. We were at the Central Union Station. Here came this policeman on a horse. I'm getting under the steering wheel fixing all these pillows behind me.

He said, "What are you doing?"

I said, "We're fixing to go home."

"Where are you from?"

I told him.

He said, "You mean to tell me that you drove this car from Forest, Mississippi, to Jackson, Mississippi?" (The roads then were terrible.)

I said, "Yes, sir." [laughs]

He said, "You won't drive in our town." My mother had to hire a guy to drive us across the Pearl River bridge, because my mother couldn't drive.

My stepfather was jealous if I was talking about how I could drive and how I was using the car more than he was. When my stepfather was gone, he told them, "I don't want Woodrow to drive my car around here every day. I don't want him driving it." He told my mother to keep me out of the car. The next day we went down to Cook Motor Company; my mother bought *me* a car for \$524. She bought me a Ford car. My family had two cars. I had a car; I sure did! Mine was new, and his was old. He wanted my car! My mother said to my stepfather, "OK. You're going to help me pay for it." So he sold his, and then he used the new car.

We were religious, but not overly religious. We belonged to the Baptist church, and we went to church on Sunday. I think my mother and I went to church more than any of the rest of the family. I think I was closer to the church than the rest of the family. Later on my brothers Odell and Claudie D. became officers of the church.

Something happened to me when I was between eight and nine years old. At this lumber mill they had what they call the dump. The saws in the mill would cut all of the bark off of the trees, and then it would come out on the chain to the dump. A lot of the people at that time would set up a small fire pit and make charcoal, and we would go and set up a pit and make charcoal. I went out one morning with my cousin, and I stepped off into one of these hot pits of charcoal. I tell you, they came near having to amputate my feet! They got infected. At that time there was no such thing as antibiotics to kill the infection or the germs, so my

mother used home remedies, kept my wounds clean, and dressed them every day.

This gentleman came to run a revival at our church. I hadn't walked in about six weeks or longer. The minister came over to pray for me, and he said, "Do you think you can walk?"

I said, "I have faith that I can."

"Do you think that you'll walk again?"

I said, "Yes. I have faith that I'm going to walk."

He said, "I'm going to pray for you, and I want you to get up and *walk*." We prayed, and he said, "Now stand up."

I stood up.

He said, "*Walk!*" And I walked. That was the first time I'd walked in six weeks. Faith is tremendous, has tremendous powers. If you believe, you can do something; if you have faith in God, you can do it. I've never been fanatical, but I know what the power of the spirit and God can do for you, because nobody can touch you if He's got His hands on you and is protecting you. I know that. That experience was important to me at that stage, and it has stayed with me all my life. As far as religion is concerned, that's where I am.

My mother never drank. I've never seen her dance, but she had no objections to it. She told me I shouldn't drink or gamble. She thought they were sinful. She wasn't a person who would put you down if you did those things, but if you'd ask her what her opinions were, oh, she'd tell you. I don't drink, I don't smoke, and even though I own a club I don't gamble. I've never even shot dice in one of the clubs since I've been here.

My stepfather drank. He wasn't a church person, but he didn't object to the church. He never attended, but he did

not try to hinder anyone else. He would help *you*, and he would promote you, but he just wouldn't go. [laughs]

It wasn't possible to have an interest in politics, because my parents couldn't vote. They got beat down, a lot of them, if they tried to register in Mississippi at that time.

I'll tell you something--one of the most shocking things, one of the things that awakened me to the political process and how unfair it was. They had what they called a company commissary where you go in and use coupons. I did most of the shopping when I was a boy. One day I went to the commissary downtown, right across from the Scott County courthouse. Theodore G. Bilbo was running for governor of Mississippi, and he was speaking on the courthouse lawn on a platform there. People from throughout the country--Smith County, Scott County, Newton County--all came to hear him. He went on in his speech talking about why he wanted to be elected governor. I forgot why my mother sent me to the store. I was back up in this store front near these white people who were at such a pitch. He had them so emotionally upset that I believe that if a black man had walked across that courtyard, he probably would have been killed or lynched. I was back in there scared to death.

He ended his speech by saying, "If you will elect me your governor I'll keep that nigger on the farm. He will be *your* servant. He will do *your* bidding." Then when he concluded his speech, he said, "God bless the white man and God damn the nigger."

Well, this is something for a kid; I was nine or ten at the most. When he said that, you could hear the emotional screams. I was trying to push through this wall, attempting to run away from the store, because I didn't know what was

going to happen. I didn't think they would bother me, but I didn't know.

I said to myself, "You know, in a country like this...." Even at that age I said, "I just can't see how they would let him say things like that." But that happened. When I came out of the commissary I eased on down and got out of the way, because I could have been hurt. Those are the kinds of things that happened. It's hard for somebody to actually realize these things unless they witness them. It's totally impossible for me to really *express* the kinds of emotions I was feeling. To see the kind of *change* that has come about, the change that has been made....

My mother and stepfather never instructed me on how to get along with white people, but one of the things that I think was a saving grace goes back to my religious background: I've never been able to hate. I don't care what color you are, I don't see white or black. If you do something to me, I'm not going to say you did it because you were white and I'm black. I have never been able to hate a person, or deal with a person on the basis of the color of their skin or their race. I think that has been a saving grace for me.

I remember when I was a teenager, there was a white guy who had a black family living on his place. This black family had a beautiful daughter, and the white man insisted on the father letting this girl go with him. The father said, "No, this isn't going to happen." The white man came and was going to break in the black man's house. This black guy shot the white man. He ran for his life, went to Chicago, but they finally caught him and brought him back. Instead of letting the white deputy handle him, take him to the trial and to the court, they deputized a black guy to be his body guard. At that time I had my first experience of any white man or woman speaking out against injustice. The *white*

women of this community became enraged. If that hadn't been the case, they'd have lynched this guy right off the bat.

There was a little chair factory up above us. A black guy named Jesse did chairs. He made the chairs, laced them out of strips. This man Jesse was the best. He told the owner, "I feel that you should give me a little more money. You are not paying me enough."

The owner said, "That's all I'm paying and you are not going to quit. If you do, you're going to regret it." This guy was a power because he had a very good income, access to money.

The white owner was going with a young white girl who lived not far from there. She had her own butter, vegetables and stuff. Jesse lived between where he was working for this white guy and where the girl lived. The white man set Jesse up: he said to the woman, "When Jesse comes by, call out to him and ask him if he wants to buy something." He said, "I want you to say that he asked you for a date."

This girl took Jesse's money. Then they had blood hounds and everything else after this boy. They were going to kill him. He just escaped, got away. He had to leave home, and it was about ten years before he was ever able to come back. The girl finally told the truth on this white man because he got sick and was nearly dead. She told them that he had put her up to lie on Jesse.

I came home from boarding school during the summer sometimes and stayed two weeks, a week. When I was home, I got mail from the school, and I would go downtown to the post office to pick it up. I would travel up north four or five times a year with groups from the school, and some of my friends were white girls. They'd send pictures. I was just fortunate that the postal workers never opened one of

the letters that had one of these pictures in it. One of the guys at the post office once said, "Look, nigger, you are getting more mail than the president. You've got to stop that," or they'd start opening my mail.

I wasn't afraid of whites when I was young. I've never been. I've had fights to protect myself. One day I was downtown, and these kids were going to whip me. I said, "Well, you've got a fight. You are not going to whip me." I thought, "I know I can whip two or three of them." By that time here came the constable.

He walked up and said, "What's going on, boy?"

I said, "Mr. Moore, they were going to whip me for nothing, and I'm just going to...."

He said, "What are you doing?"

I said, "I'm not doing anything."

He said, "I've got some work I need done around my house. I need my garden hoed. Where are you from?" I told him who I was. He said, "Oh, you're Caroline's boy."

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Will you do it?"

I said, "If you pay me."

He said, "All right. Come early in the morning. You guys leave him alone. Go on home, boy."

I went up there and I did his yard. He wanted to give them an excuse and opportunity to jump on me, because he thought I would say, "No, I'm not going to." But I said, "Sure I will." And I cleaned that garden. I did a job! I did a good job!

He came back. He said, "I can't believe it. Boy, ain't nobody's ever cleaned my garden half as well."

He had a daughter. I was about fifteen or sixteen, and she was about twelve. She was sitting out there, and she was watching me do this yard. Noon came. She said, "Don't go anyplace. Dad is going to be home...." She'd been asking

me about school, and I was telling her about places I'd been. She had gone back in and told her mother about all of the things we'd talked about. Her father invited me in to have lunch with them. I really would have liked to pass out then! [laughs] Her father watched those guys who had been bothering me and he said, "You go where you want to go. You ain't bothering nobody; you're all right. You ain't one of these guys who's stuck up." He said, "They better not bother you." Next year came, I did the yard job again.

As a boy I had several people who I admired, people who I had come in contact with. One person who made an impression on me was a black woman: Mrs. Karen Lamb. She was a highly intelligent individual, respectable in every way, committed. I'd seen her when little boys and little girls couldn't get their lesson, or didn't have a book, she bought the book. Not only that, she would go to their homes to help them, to provide guidance and assistance. She taught at the elementary school, and she was my first teacher. She did things that she didn't have time to do, nor was she required to do. She went out of her way to create an educational atmosphere.

There was also a gentleman who was not an educator, but a fellow who had all the mother wit that you could ever expect. (That's what we called common sense, at that time.) His name was Mr. Moore; we called him Uncle Doc Moore. He was a black man who knew how to accumulate resources, and I'll never forget him. When I was a little boy, I used to go uptown on Saturday evenings. He sold peanuts up on the corner every Saturday. He talked all the time. He used to talk to the kids when they'd come by, and he'd try to sell. He said, "Peanuts, hot peanuts, five cents a bag. The best peanuts you've ever had." He said, "I'm not joking, they'll

clean your teeth, and they will curl your hair." He said, "Really, they'll make you feel like a millionaire."

I said, "Now, he makes people believe that peanuts will clean your teeth. You know, he has a tremendous ability to sell, that he can put that over." I used to think about that. As a kid I'd listen and watch these things. [laughs] There was another gentleman who lived in my hometown: a black man we called Dr. Preston. I call him a gentleman because he always carried himself in a manner worthy of respect--physical, and in every other way. His demeanor and conduct warranted that kind of consideration. He was one of those fellows who probably was born during the latter part of slavery. He wore his top hat sometimes and his tails when he'd go to church. He was a highly respected, highly intelligent individual. He was a schoolteacher. I'd hear him talk all the time about how important it was to be a part of society and make a contribution. He said, "You don't have to do a lot of things to make a contribution. You make a *solid* contribution just by being what you are, certainly by offering proper advice and proper conduct within your scope of people who need guidance." He had taught school, but he had retired by this time. I had respect for him.

Tuskegee Institute was right over the hill from us. I knew of Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver and a few others...Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois and the struggle he had. [Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) was a black American educator and organizer of Tuskegee Institute, a leading black college. George Washington Carver (1864-1943) was a black chemist and director of agricultural research at Tuskegee Institute. Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was a black nationalist and founder of the Negro Improvement Association. W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) was a black civil rights leader and cofounder of the National Negro Committee, which became the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People.--Ed.] Dr. Preston had all this material, books and newspapers and things like that. Actually that was my first avenue--outlet--to that kind of information. I'd go to his house as a boy. Mr. Preston would think I was playing and fooling around with the kids, but I was there watching him and reading his stuff. They'd play, and I'd be there looking at his books and other things to find out what was going on.

I was very interested in Du Bois. It seemed to me that during that time he hit on the pressure points that awakened the sleeping giant in this country. He just scared the living hell out of the whole system. Du Bois struck the nerve of this country. I actually think that he probably was the first black who awakened America to the fact that the black man wasn't completely asleep, not knowing what was happening.

I read a lot about how the slaves came over from Africa and what happened to them, how many were lost on the way over. I learned what part of the African continent they came from, but I did not tie that in like today, when we have a feel for what's going on in Africa and that we have an opportunity to get ourselves politically involved in what's going on there.

The first school I attended was a little elementary school in Morton, Mississippi: Morton Elementary School. This was a black school. Then we moved to Forest, Mississippi, and I attended a little elementary school there until I was about eleven years old. I think that it went to about sixth or seventh grade, and I wanted to go on. I thought that Piney Woods School, a boarding school, was a better school than the one I was attending.

I asked my mother, "Could I go to the boarding school?" She said, "All right, if you want to go."

I think my mother wanted the best that I could get for myself. She was really surprised at some of the things that I was able to accomplish, and she was proud. She loved me, too, as she loved all the kids. I opened a lot of new avenues, new areas that she had never had the chance to peek at.

My mother left education to me mostly. My mother could just write her name; she couldn't read. But I wish today that I was as smart as that woman. She could count fast--do figures in arithmetic just like that [snaps fingers] in her head! My stepfather was able to read and write, but *just* read and write. My brothers and sisters all learned to read and write, but none of them went to college. They had the opportunity, but it was tough. It was rough. Any black kid who really got out and went to a university or went to college at that time, oh [sighs].... It was a struggle.

A young man who lived in my hometown had gone to Piney Woods School. He was there but he came back, because he had contracted tuberculosis. He died. I had had an opportunity to go there to visit him. We also went there with some people when I was about eleven.

My mother sent me to Piney Woods Country Life School when I was twelve. She was determined that if I wanted to go, she wouldn't make me come home. I was talented enough to work, do things to provide my tuition in the little boarding school. You have probably read about some of the schools in the South at that time. People from the North, black and white educators, came down to open schools for blacks. In my hometown there wasn't a high school for blacks. If you went to high school, you went to Meridian or Jackson or someplace like Piney Woods or Prentice, or one of the other boarding schools.

Laurence Jones, a graduate of Iowa State University, was the founder and is the present owner of the Piney Woods

School. He is black. He decided he wanted to improve the educational opportunity of blacks in the South, so he started the school. (I was commencement speaker for Piney Woods School in 1984. Dr. Jones and I spoke in Reno around 1970, 1971 at a big affair, and we raised quite a bit of money for Piney Woods.)

Dr. Jones was a tremendous human being. He generated that kind of support...people wanted to come and be a part of his program. Retired university people, retired people who had been in high school systems and university systems came down there. Some of them gave four or five years of their service to the school. I had some of the best teachers that you could find anyplace. It was a good school.

When I went there, the student body was probably about 1,500. The majority was black--maybe five or six whites. We had both southern and northern white students who did attend. Some of their parents were there on the faculty at the school, and we had several local parents who sent their children to Piney Woods. The South at the time was totally segregated. You just didn't have intermingling of races at the time, but Piney Woods attracted some of the truly fine teachers from the North. They came down as missionaries, or people who wanted to make a contribution to the blacks in the South because of the status of black education in the South at that time. From kindergarten to elementary and high school and into college, you found many white people who wanted to help improve the plight of blacks taught at Piney Woods, Utica, and several of the black universities and colleges in the South. I would say the Piney Woods faculty was approximately 12 or 14 percent white.

We supported the school with Cotton Blossom Singers, baseball teams and things like that. We had twelve, fifteen groups on the road every year during the summer raising money, doing this throughout the country. I always was

athletic and was talented athletically. I played baseball and football. I wasn't a basketball player, but I lettered in baseball and football, and I was on baseball teams traveling throughout the country.

The school decided to send out several baseball teams. I was young; I was sixteen. I made the team, though. We'd play 120, 130 games. The Little Brown Cubs was the first team I played with on the road. We played semi-pro teams. We went out to the Midwest, north central states. It was a black baseball team, but we played mostly white teams. We even played some white teams in Arkansas at that time. What we were doing was earning our tuition and raising money to support the school. The school booked us, and they owned the team. It was the school team.

I was in groups of singers that the school had traveling all over the United States. We sang Negro spirituals, semi-classical, some classical. But it was mostly black music. The first time I left the school, I traveled with a group of singers: the Cotton Blossom Singers. It was my fifteenth birthday; I was in Detroit, Michigan. I never will forget singing at a church there. They gave me a little party in the basement of the church for my birthday. We would sing extra, out of the regular routine schedule for the school, and we made a little extra money. For instance, if we made four or five dollars extra the boys would split it; if we sang at someplace that wasn't scheduled, the fellows--the quartet--would split up a dollar, two or three dollars. We could make a little money that way. Sometimes we'd make two or three dollars a week. I knew what was happening back home, so I'd take half of my money or two-thirds of it and send it to my mother to help to provide assistance, keep her going. I helped her like that, and in that way she was able to survive.

Out of the regular school band, we organized a group. And we had an opportunity to travel throughout the area

with our band: central Mississippi, western and eastern Mississippi, southern Mississippi. We didn't travel abroad or anything like that, but we did play several engagements in Louisiana. In this band we tried to play mostly jazz, syncopation and African music, because we had several young men there at Piney Woods from Africa. They were very helpful in demonstrating and helping us put together the African music, the beats, and the syncopation that was prevalent in Africa. So we played several pieces with the African tempo and syncopations. The performances were attended by only blacks, because it was a totally segregated situation in the South; even though we had several white students attending Piney Woods School.

The band would travel in the local rural area advertising the school and enticing young men and women to come to Piney Woods. If there was a festival or something, if a dance or picnic was going on in any of the areas, we performed. We had a large school band that played in competition, and we played against the other colleges and high schools in the area on various occasions.

Later we organized the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, a girls' band, that traveled throughout the United States...Hawaii. They made one trip to Europe. The International Sweethearts of Rhythm represented the school until they broke away from the school. They were enticed by a promoter and they finally left the school. They became professionals after they left. They made recordings in New York, in Washington, D.C., and Chicago. They had headquarters just outside of Washington in Virginia. I think they made a recording on Decca. They were famous, and they developed into a really professional unit. They did singing and instrumentals. I would say that after the International Sweethearts of Rhythm left Piney Woods, they stayed together approximately three years.

Traveling was an awakening. Can you imagine a little boy coming out of the sticks, looking up at the skyscrapers and trying to see how to keep from getting run over? I had never been anywhere. Can you just imagine? It was another world. It was a world that I never even *thought* existed.

To an extent blacks in the North lived differently. We had an opportunity to go to some of the blacks' homes, people who had moved up and out of the South. But it was shocking, too, because some of them were living worse than what was going on in the South. I had a chance to see it both ways. I looked at the whole apple.

While playing baseball, I traveled to Washington, Detroit, Chicago. I'd been up around all the Great Lakes states, all the way around Michigan and to Wisconsin. I was through all of the major cities in Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota. We would play 100 to 130 games each year. We'd have our itinerary two or three months in advance, and we knew where we were going to be. It was tremendously educational. Traveling plus going to school...it opened a youngster up to all kinds of new ideas--a new world.

One of the things that was so beautiful about Piney Woods was that they brought classical music, artists and things like that to the school. Kids had no idea what it was, what it was about. I've seen the kids sit and laugh, and then the next year they would be... [claps hands]. You understand? Growing...the growth. The beautiful thing was what actually happened, how human beings can develop and grow. I don't care who they are. It was an exceptional school, and we had an opportunity to grow. We had exposure to things we otherwise could not even get close to.

I used to get a bang out of the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar. In school I used to read him quite a bit, and I saw Langston Hughes at Piney Woods. He had a recital there. I was late because we just got back from a game. He was

leaving immediately after the recital. A host of them came to Piney Woods. [Dunbar (1872-1906) was a black American poet and novelist. Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was a black American writer and major literary figure in the Harlem Renaissance.--Ed.]

I was very interested in the sciences and mathematics. I got my high school diploma from Piney Woods, and then I went into the two-year junior college program there. My degree was in the sciences. I had planned to continue on to a university, but my mother was getting a little bit older then. I went home and I saw how things were. I said, "What I'm going to do now is support her a little bit, and then I'll go back to school." That isn't advice that I would give anyone. If you're going, continue. I don't know what would have happened for me if I had gone back to college, but I'm not bitter. I have no regrets, because of all the things that I've been able to accomplish. They have been tremendously rewarding. It has been very fruitful. I've been able to help a lot of people do a lot of things.

When I finished junior college at Piney Woods, I came home. My mother wasn't doing well, so I checked around for a job in the area. In 1936, I married a young lady who had attended Piney Woods School with me. Her name was Cleo Walker. Her home was in Lake Providence, Louisiana, and we married in Louisiana.

The Lutheran church had a mission at Piney Woods, and they taught Catechism, the Bible. Piney Woods wasn't a religious school, but they taught religious principles. You did not have to join the Lutheran church, but if you wanted to attend the mission or accept Lutheranism, you could. I joined the Lutheran church. There wasn't a Baptist mission. There were a lot of Baptist students who belonged to the Baptist church who never considered joining the Lutheran church. Back in the area I lived in, in Forest and Morton,

there wasn't a Lutheran church that a black could attend. Churches were segregated. The mission at Piney Woods was integrated on campus, but if you attended a Lutheran church in Jackson or wherever, it was a segregated congregation.

The minister who was in charge of the Lutheran religious program at Piney Woods was named Reverend Schmidt; he was German. We were very, very dear friends. He told me that if I ever decided to get married, he would like to have the honor of marrying me. Shortly after I left school, I called him and told him I was getting married. He and his wife lived in Jackson, Mississippi, which was only twenty-two, twenty-three miles from Piney Woods School. He said, "When you get ready to go over for the wedding, I will take you over to Louisiana. I will marry you and bring you back to Mississippi." So we were married.

Jobs were scarce, so I applied to go in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as a special enrollee with local experience. I went in knowing that I was going to get training and become a mess sergeant to camp KF-23 in Forest, Mississippi. Just south of town was a forestry camp replanting the forest that had been cut over. I stayed in the CCC camp between three and four years before I came west.

Once I was coming from the camp quarters going home. These guys came down and were going to jump on another guy and myself. We were just walking up; they had been up on the tracks at a house. A black woman had a house close to the track, where she sold liquor. White guys would go up there, and sometimes they would fraternize with black women. Something had happened and they were mad. So the white guy was going to jump on us. A guy kicked at me and missed. I hit him, and I can bet you I really knocked him; I really hit him. The guy was saying, "Come on, we'll... we'll..."

I says, "You come on; come on, let's go...." We went into a crowd and continued arguing, and they started running. The crowd didn't know what was the matter. They were running over everybody, trying to see who hit who. They couldn't find us in the crowd, so we were OK. I usually tried to talk myself out of trouble, unless I was attacked. If I was attacked, I'd defend myself. Those are the kinds of things you have to recognize in the South: that you could be innocent, walking along, taking care of your own business, and get killed. I've seen it happen.

I was in district G, and there were thirty-five camps in that district. After I learned my trade, I was instructor at the cooks and bakers school. I'd go over and assist the commander there. There was a boy, George Winston, and another kid named Gaddis and myself. We took an examination for the Coast Guard school. We had to take it in one room; it was a segregated test. I guess we were taking the same test as whites were. All of the CCC camp guys who were sergeants and so forth came from all of the camps to take this examination. Believe it or not, we came out one, two, three in ranking--the *blacks*. I never will forget the corps area commander's response after we came out one, two, three. We automatically should have been qualified for enlistment. He sent out a special order saying, "No, as long as I'm corps area commander, no nigger will be accepted in the Officer's Training Program in this corps area."

A few weeks after that a black guy kidnapped a family on the Mississippi, down near Natchez, along the river. He was hiding in the woods, and they couldn't catch him. I don't think he killed anybody, but he kidnapped a white guy and a white woman. Men from all over--law enforcement, armed services--converged down there. They were trying to track him down and get him. My commanding officer volunteered to go in the posse looking for this guy.

I said, "What the hell, I can't stay here with this guy." He had no business doing that, but that's the way he felt. I said to myself, "This is no place for me. I'm getting away."

When he came back, I told him. He said, "You can't. I'll give you a dishonorable discharge."

I said, "That's all right. What is it going to do to me? From a CCC camp it can't hurt me in the first place." I said, "I'm giving you ample time. I'll take thirty days and I will bring a man up and train him. I'm not going to walk off and leave the company, because I love the guys and we've had two beautiful years." So I gave it to him. Instead of giving me a dishonorable discharge, he gave me an honorable one.

My wife, Cleo, died in 1939. She had long had fainting spells, and the doctors could not figure out her problem. It turned out that she had heart trouble, a leaking heart.

After my first wife died, I married Emma Blackwell of Morton, Mississippi, my hometown. In that marriage we had a daughter, Jo Ann, who was born in Las Vegas. She's married now, and her name is Jo Ann Conner. She lives in Las Vegas. I also have a son, Carl Douglas, who was conceived by another young woman, and he lives in Las Vegas.

My present wife and I have been married almost thirty years and live in Las Vegas. Her maiden name was Nora Jane Peoples. She was born and reared in Louisiana, but she came to Las Vegas married to another man. We have no children together.

Chapter Two

WARTIME EMPLOYMENT AT BMI

AFTER I LEFT THE CCC camp, I guess I was in Mississippi another day or two before I headed west. I had a sister in Arizona whose husband had been working around lumber in Arizona. They had a big lumber mill in McNary that was set in a piney wood, in timber country. Oh, you talk about lovely! My, that was the most beautiful place. I said, "Oh, this is heaven on earth."

I caught a ride in a car to Arizona, because a fellow came to Mississippi and was going back. There were a lot of blacks from Mississippi who went to work in Arizona when the lumber mills went down in Mississippi. They had the experience and background. The company that was at McNary was from Louisiana. There were mostly blacks in McNary. It was a camp with houses built by the company; it was a company town. The lumber mill was there; and you worked at the lumber mill, you lived there, and you paid rent. There was a little place called Pine Top, just off the reservation, where the people would go for recreation. They

could get something to drink and shop for food. They also had a commissary at McNary.

So I got to work over there sorting pine lumber. The guy showed me how to do that. You sorted it by the thousands. I had never worked in a lumber mill before. Never! If I do something, I try to do it well, and do as much as I can. Shortly, I started making good money. I was making about as much as those guys who had been there awhile. I was on the rough lumber, then I got to smooth stuff. Then a fellow taught me how to grade, and I started grading lumber.

After I had been there about eight or ten months, I received a call from my godmother in Mississippi saying that her son in Chicago, the owner of Ernie Henderson's Chicken Shack, was ill. She wanted me to go to Chicago and help manage the business. Before I left Arizona he had died. I ran back to Mississippi. My godmother said to me, "I want you to go up there to Chicago and I want you to represent me." Then I ran to Chicago. I got up there, and one of my godmother's brothers was up there. She wanted me to represent her and her family, but all the kids, about four or five of them, converged on Chicago, because Ernie was wealthy. He had a flat; he had a Dusenberg; he had a stable and horses, and he had this chicken shack where he delivered chicken.

There was a young fellow called Horace who was managing the place. Horace wanted to manage the place in the daytime. He said, "I can teach you in a week, and you'd be able to manage the place at night and take care of it." But the brothers and sisters came in and started meddling. A crooked lawyer had gotten with one of my godmother's brothers. To make it short, they had set up a deal to take the property from the family.

I saw a feud brewing between them, and I had to jump between one or two of the brothers to keep them from shooting. I said, "Why should I take a risk like this?" Actually, before I left McNary I had made up my mind that I was going to California and going back to school.

I left Chicago and I stopped by Las Vegas to talk to a friend of mine. I had a sister in Las Vegas. She had come from McNary with her husband. The BMI plant was being built outside Las Vegas for war purposes, and they needed workers, so the federal government advertised throughout the country. [Basic Magnesium, Inc. (BMI) was a major defense plant which processed magnesium ore. The plant, begun in July, 1941, operated until November, 1944.--Ed.] They advertised all through the South and everywhere.

There were hundreds of black people who came to work at BMI from McNary, Arizona. Really, we had all kinds of people, but a lot of the people who came they recruited from the South. They recruited from the South because it was manual labor, and people were wanting to migrate and get out of the situation in the South. BMI offered good money. It was more money than they'd been making, better opportunities here. They could readily get employment in the industry here in Las Vegas.

So I stopped in Las Vegas on my way to California. The day after I got here, this friend of mine asked me to go out to BMI or McNeil Construction Company, and put in an application for a job there. "You can put in for a job," he said. "You're going to California, but you could wait and go out there with me." We got to the BMI site and got to talking with the people in personnel. They wanted to hire me instead of him. He said, "Well, look, I came out here for the job; he didn't."

I told them, "No, I'm going to California. I want to go to school this fall. If I get down there and get everything set

up to go to school, I can get a job on the side where I can go to school and work."

This guy talked to me, and talked. He talked and he talked. He said, "Listen, Woodrow, what you could do is get your school information, send it in and get everything set up. You've got a job; you'll be working. You won't have to be looking for a job. It isn't but four hours, five hours, from here to L.A. You can go on down to L.A. when school starts."

I said, "OK, I'll go to work."

I went to work in refractories. That was where the masonry, the bricks and stuff like that, was stored. I went to work there on June 20, 1942. I worked at that plant, though not for the same outfit, until December 31, 1980. Thirty-eight years at that plant. [Since World War II, the Basic Magnesium site has been occupied by a number of concerns, including Stauffer Chemical, Titanium Metals and Kerr-McGee, and Western Electro Chemical Corporation.--Ed.]

When I went to work at BMI, unions had contracts with the company. The AFL (American Federation of Labor) had a contract. In order to be employed you signed an agreement or labor card. You went through the hiring hall to get on in the plant, and you had to be cleared. Most of the time you were given a card. You had to become a member of the union, because it was a closed shop. I was a Teamster.

I was kind of a steward in the union. There were several black men out there who were involved with unions, and also there were several black men working as lead men --lower foreman positions in various departments in the company.

Organizers came here to work with the unions, like Bill Williams from Los Angeles, whom the AFL brought in. He was a union executive organizer who did not work for the

company. Actually, he was with the Teamsters union, specifically. As a steward, I was confronted by issues. If somebody thought that something didn't go like they thought it should have gone, they would complain. As a steward, you were a union representative; you *were* the union, and so you were to blame when there were problems. A lot of whites came to me.

If someone had a grievance or anything like that, I helped to straighten it out, or I helped to make sure that the people who were employed were members of the union. If they had a problem I would help to resolve it. For example, if they felt that they were being asked to do something out of their job classification, then they would beef.

A steward was actually a liaison person between the union and the union members. I was appointed to that position by the union. One of the members who appointed me was named Black; I don't know Black's first name. He was white. I participated with both black and white workers. I went to the union meetings and made my report; I reported to everybody in the union. I remember one night I was up making a report, and a white guy jumped up and said, "I don't see why they have that nigger up there making a report like that." I was young then and a little bit hot-headed, too. They had to stop us. It was going to be a physical fight, but they got between us before.... There were small incidents like that quite often.

I found out quick what my prospects were at BMI. In one of the departments, I was lead man. A lead man has a crew that's doing special jobs. A lead man would have maybe ten guys under him. A foreman might have two groups or three groups of ten people that he'd oversee. The lead man reported to the foreman. Maybe two or three of the lead men reported to a particular foreman. A black man could not be a foreman then.

Over a period of time during the construction period, it came out that I was in line for foreman, also in line for superintendent. One of the superintendents of the department was being transferred. The reason I knew that I was qualified was because I would go to staff meetings with the foreman and the superintendent. I was answering most of the questions for the foreman and superintendent. But I was told emphatically by management that they could not make me a superintendent or foreman because they would lose the people under me. They wouldn't want to work for a black man, I was told by Vobriel, my foreman. Oh, God, I was told that so many times by various people all the time. I don't remember the specific names. Yet, I was doing the job. I came to find out, later on as things moved along, that others came up the ladder and weren't able to be a foremen because of race, too.

I was surprised to find that situation at BMI. When I went to work, I was transferred down with a group. I don't know why I was transferred down there, unless it was to protect the white guy who was responsible for digging and laying out forms. (This was during the BMI construction period.) You had to be able to measure, use the level, use a telescope, and all that kind of thing. I didn't have to do any digging or anything like that, but I did his paperwork for him. I came to find out that this individual couldn't keep time. He couldn't keep information necessary to dig the forms, and he was using me for that purpose. He was nearly illiterate, and I was carrying him.

Generally, blacks got the manual labor jobs. Especially, they were assigned to the jobs in the units where the hot metal was being handled and down in the preparation building where it was hot--the menial jobs. Few blacks were able to get anything in a supervisory position. There wasn't a big

turnover, though, because it was so much better than what they left in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Arkansas and other places they had worked.

We occasionally had racial skirmishes within the plant area, but nothing major. They had little canteens down there, and workers usually segregated themselves. If a black was sitting over here, most of the blacks would go and be seated there.

At the latter part of the production period at BMI, they had separate change houses: one for black, one for white. You couldn't take a bath in the same change house as a white. It started as an integrated change house, and then boom: it split up. They separated them--one side for the white and one side for black. I think protests by some of the whites, objections by some of the whites, made them do this. Some white workers favored it. That's what brought the problem on. You would always have one or two white people who opposed segregation, but they were in the minority, and they weren't the outspoken type usually. The decision to segregate the change rooms had to be at the top level. It had to be management, because no one else could make a major decision like that. A major policy decision of that nature had to come from management. I'm not sure that the federal agency knew about it. I doubt very much that they did. I'm talking about top management personnel there at the facility. That would have been Frank Case. [Frank Case was the general manager at BMI.--Ed.] I knew Mr. Case and Mr. Case knew me. I never had a close kind of a relationship with him.

The blacks at BMI (and I can't say that it was a right direction) were grasping for any kind of support they could get because of discrimination. You could positively tell that the administration was pro-AFL. Some of it was because they had a contract with AFL. They didn't know what kind

of changes would be made, or what proposals would be made with regard to job opportunities, wage scales and things like that, if they were forced to sign a contract with the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations). So I can understand their position in a way, not knowing what the future meant to them as far as a contractual agreement with the CIO.

The CIO came in, and they wanted to organize, so many of the blacks signed up with the CIO. Most of the members who really went all out for the CIO were the minorities--the blacks, the Hispanics. There were quite a few Hispanics--not as high a percentage of the work force as blacks--and quite a few of them turned to the CIO because they felt that they would have a better opportunity. The CIO came in and said that they would make job opportunities open for everybody, and there would be no discrimination as far as advancements if the person was qualified. Those recruited by the CIO here were predominantly black. It was attractive to some white workers.

The AFL hadn't shown the initiative, willingness to actually go after the various types of discrimination and mistreatment that had occurred at the BMI plant. That was the major thrust. The blacks flocked to CIO to get support. The company then joined forces with the AFL in order to defeat the thrust by the CIO.

I stayed with the AFL. My reason was this: Where were the CIO people all the time when these things were happening? They were just going to come in and do all of these things at once. It just didn't make sense to me that all of the blacks would take a chance on uniting forces with the CIO when it was an unknown factor. This was a gut feeling and my opinion was based on the manipulating things that the CIO tried to do...exploiting people. The kind of information that the CIO was giving black workers, a lot of it was untrue. I investigated it for my personal reasons. When it

really got down to the nitty gritty, black workers weren't given the kind of support from the CIO that the CIO had promised.

The majority of the CIO organizers were white; some of them were black. They actively recruited. They'd contact leaders, propose leaders in the rank and file in various departments. They'd get a key guy in each section and recruit him and have him do their bidding.

I guess every black in the plant was asked to join the CIO, but I didn't attend any of their meetings because I was AFL. I got some calls. They would tell me how lucrative it was and what they would be able to do for the membership if they could replace the AFL. But I said, "I just don't see any track record that will prove what you are telling me." I said, "You can tell me anything." Some of them were very angry, cussed me out, but that didn't bother me, because their cursing couldn't hurt me.

[The Fair Employment Practices Commission records indicate that James Johnson, Wayne Bell, Elijah Lee Star, Isaiah Williams, and L.J. Davis comprised a committee representing black workers.--Ed.] They were workers out there. Actually, all of them were members of the CIO group. This group was the CIO nucleus, and they were organizers. They had been contacted by the CIO, and they had been meeting with the CIO representatives. They called their meetings "underground," because they called on certain people to have secret meetings. The management discouraged the CIO, and they did some things that indicated they weren't in favor of it. They would limit their access to the facilities. You couldn't come in to meet with certain people if you were associated with the CIO. If I'm an AFL representative, for example, I might be able to go in to see my shop steward, while the CIO guy couldn't.

I would say that when the CIO came in and started recruiting, they were able to recruit more blacks than whites. That was one of their weak points as far as getting certification and building their strength. They might have appealed to the white workers, but they really went after the black workers. They thought that they would be able to get that contract away from the AFL, just by getting blacks in numbers. There were so many blacks.

The CIO program was attractive to blacks because the CIO would promise them anything but the moon. The AFL hadn't been active in participating and communicating with their membership, in doing some of the things like eliminating segregation that would have reduced any possibility of the CIO taking hold. Segregation: *that* was the key.

Management couldn't just come out forthright, but they did indicate in a lot of ways that they did not support the CIO. They didn't know what the CIO had up their sleeve, [laughs] and it scared them, you understand. They thought the CIO was communistic, had communists in it. I didn't think that they were radical. I did think that their push in disseminating their information could have been done a little bit differently. They were telegraphing their moves to the company, to the AFL, so that they would know everything that was going to be, what direction they were going. Then they could be blocked. They were amateurish, you see. They were too open. I don't think they were too aggressive necessarily, but the manner in which they went about it was part of their undoing--telegraphing the pitch. For instance, if I'm a baseball pitcher and I'm going to throw a curve ball with two fingers, and I'm going to show my two fingers every time I'm going to wind up, the guy knows what I'm going to throw, so he gets ready for a curve ball.

Jim Anderson was a union organizer who was a personal friend of mine, and a very intelligent man. Originally he was

AFL, but in the end I think he was flirting with the CIO. (He did not work for BMI.) He used to stay with me when he'd come over here from Los Angeles. We were friends, even though we had different ideas about certain things. Jim thought that if you wanted something, it had to be done, and he used a direct approach. I think that that approach at the time wasn't the proper move to make. In the first place, the AFL had a signed contract with the company. This contract extended through the duration of the war, and it was tough to try to break this thing. You have to realize what your options are and what you're up against. To break a contract, somebody has to default; if you don't have an overwhelming majority of information that would give you the tools to destroy or to change that contract....

I'm sure Mr. Anderson was for breaking the contract. He felt that the leadership in the AFL local community were dragging their feet on segregation. And they were. They challenged the contract, and the CIO won the election. The AFL was outvoted, but they forgot a clause in the original contract stating that this contract would extend a certain period of time. That was the saving grace for the AFL. They came back. After the AFL lost, the lawyers looked at the contract and found out what it was all about. The election was null and void. As far as the contract was concerned, it was declared illegal.

[As the result of a workers' election held in April, 1943, the National Labor Relations Board voted to certify the CIO. However, BMI never recognized the CIO as the official bargaining agent, and the CIO never exercised its right as bargaining agent. On October 20, 1943, 200 black workers walked off the job to protest discrimination on the job.--Ed.]

I tried to get them not to walk out, because they fell right into a trap. I got cursed out, because I told them, "Don't do that. Don't give up your brass [work badge]."

Don't give up your right to enter this facility, under no circumstances. That's what they want. Once you are out, you have no power at all." If they were going to do anything, sit in and let them put the workers out. A sit-down strike rather than a walkout, because when they walked out, they had to give up their pass to reenter the plant. They had to give up their identification, whether it was brass or plastic or whatever, and they could not enter a facility of that nature without proper identification. Quite a few black workers opposed the walkout, but they weren't vocal about it. We had some who didn't walk out.

The group that was with the CIO was behind the walkout, and I think Mr. Anderson was in favor of a walkout. There were a couple of other guys I talked to who had a great influence on it--the Dobbins brothers, Eslie and Leslie Dobbins, who were for the walkout. I wasn't in the group when they organized it, but they had called a time for the walkout. When I heard about it, I ran up to the gates and caught up with the Dobbins brothers. I said, "Fellows, you can listen if you want to. But what I would do if I were you, I would not give up my badge. I wouldn't give up and I wouldn't walk out. This is the wrong time to do this!"

They said, "You go to hell."

I said, "OK, but I'm telling you what I know. It's best for you and all the people concerned."

I don't think they realized that they could lose their jobs. I think that they thought that they had that much power, that they needed them to be inside of the plant; that the company so needed the production, that they would have to call them back in. They thought they couldn't move ahead without them.

I'm sure that BMI management knew what my opinion was, but it wasn't a thing of trying to indicate to them what I felt or how I felt. I never tried to use the things I was

doing to push myself out in front. I operated by actually trying to get things done in a manner with the least friction and keeping down a lot of action and publicity. Publicity can be positive or negative.

BMI management knew where I stood, but they did not look to me as someone who might try to talk to the workers, persuade them not to walk out. I never made that kind of contact with management, because I felt, being involved with labor, that I should not have that close a liaison with management on a business situation. We would not try to wheel and deal with management in that particular category.

My interest in the whole thing was the welfare of the people who needed to have a job, and how they were going to fare after this whole thing was over. They would be fired because the union politics would force them to be fired. Also, the local white politicians were pro-AFL. After the walkout they gave them a certain deadline to return to work and then terminated them. The walkout was a failure, and it was also to the local politicians' advantage, because at the time BMI was decreasing the production and they didn't need all the capacity that they had. They could get ahead without the workers who walked out. Some of them who had been there for a long time, for a year or several years, would have been transferred into something else, had they not walked out. Afterwards, quite a few of the guys left and went to the state of Washington. Something was going on there at the time. There were war projects going on, and that's where they went.

There was some violence in connection with the union conflict, of course, but not any major tragedy. A couple of times some guys had to crawl all the way along the fence to get away. They were trying to hurt them, shoot them. But as individuals, we didn't know who they were. There were some scuffles and things like that, but no major injuries.

As for eventual improvements in the segregated situation, there was one: an order came down that they had to change their changing room facilities back.

Ragnald Fyhen was always involved with the labor movement in Las Vegas. I don't know exactly with which one of the organizations, but he was always on the board of the Central Labor Council. [Ragnald Fyhen came to Las Vegas in the early 1930s to work on Hoover Dam. He helped to organize the First Labor Council, an umbrella organization for local AFL craft unions.--Ed.] He was always one of the people who was sophisticated enough to understand. He wasn't one of these guys who was ready to jump up and fight. He was a very shrewd, very smooth operator. For instance, if the council was meeting, he would always be a part of that group.

Even some of the local political people were involved with the labor union movement, like Pat Clark. There were several of them, but Pat and myself were pretty close. Sailor Ryan was in labor, and he was a county commissioner, too. They thought the CIO was radical. They were on the Central Labor Council and helped to advise. I remember several times at the council meeting, Pat was there. Especially when it got real rough, they would call in the politicians. By rough, I mean when major decisions were being made. I'm not talking about physical fighting and this kind of thing, but major decisions that would affect the community. Then local politicians were involved. It will always be that way. It's the same thing we're having today: the governor is involved in PEPCON. [Mr. Wilson is referring to the 1988 explosion at the PEPCON facilities in Henderson, Nevada.--Ed.]

Housing for workers at BMI was initially pretty primitive. Anderson's Camp was barracks and tents. Some housing there had wood sides, then a canvas over. There were about four or five thousand people living at Anderson's Camp. Just about every other day someone would get killed crossing the highway coming to work. There had to be some blacks living there, but I'm sure they weren't living in the same tents with whites. The mess hall was big.

When Carver Park was being built, the job of managing it came up. [Carver Park was the black housing project associated with BMI.--Ed.] The hiring of Carver Park administrators was tied into local politics, but the plant manager, Mr. Frank Case, made the final decision. I was involved with the AFL at the time, and my name was strong in the group of prospective managers, but Frank Case had brought Herman Barnett's name in. Case had personal friends who were black to whom he gave certain recognitions and support. Mr. Herman K. Barnett was one of them. Mr. Case and Mr. Barnett had worked together on a project, a business deal, down in California. I would have liked to have had the job of managing Carver Park, but I knew that the competition was stiff and that probably the person with the management connection had the inside track. I was recommended by labor; Barnett was recommended by management. Mr. Barnett was in a better position.

I really think that one of the reasons Carver Park never filled up with black residents was that people were not close to the action in West Las Vegas and in Las Vegas. In the evenings they could not get downtown. They had a couple of little clubs over here they could get to. There wasn't anything out near Carver Park that was close. There wasn't any action, and I just think that they thought they didn't want to be bothered by staying that far from the action. I

should think that that was one of the reasons why Carver Park truly failed.

Those who lived out there at Carver Park had good housing. It was excellent housing for the time, and they enjoyed it very much. But they did miss..., because at the time there wasn't anything going on in Henderson. Henderson was discriminating just like Las Vegas. [Henderson is the town that developed adjacent to the BMI plant.--Ed.] So blacks were isolated. They had little recreational things going on in Carver Park.

[Lubertha Johnson held a position as recreation director at Carver Park. Her story was recorded by the Oral History Program in 1988.--Ed.] Mr. Barnett had worked with Lubertha Johnson back in Illinois and California, so they were friends. Urban League was their connection down in California. I don't know about Mr. Barnett's past too much. I met him here several times. It never was a tight relationship. But Lubertha and I became very dear friends. (I met Lubertha before she went to Carver Park when she first came here. Since then, we've been friends for many years.)

I would have had to live in Carver Park if I had gotten the management position. I wouldn't have minded living there, because I would have been managing it. That was a pretty good job at the time.

[The Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) came to Las Vegas in October 1943 to investigate segregated conditions at BMI.--Ed.] It was through the media that we learned they were here. They called people in. I think I either appeared or I sent someone to appear. Anyway, I complained about plant discrimination. [The FEPC files contain a statement of complaint by Mr. Wilson.--Ed.] Management tried to get the least number possible to appear

before the committee. For example, if I'm superintendent or a head of a department and I've got ten guys working for me and one or two of them are involved, I call them aside and say, "Well, I was talking to the office and they said that you were involved in this. They'd be pleased if you didn't..." Management wasn't pleased. They were very much upset, very much upset. I think they called around and talked to several department heads. They got on the telephone and talked to those folks.

If you made a statement, I feared...let me say, it didn't *intimidate* me, but I feared that some type of reprisal or some type of problem would arise from making a public statement with regard to what actually transpired at the plant. That has been a position that I have taken all my life: to tell the truth about a situation, whether it was in the area of racial discrimination or whatever. If you made statements like that, if you are going to stand on a position like that, especially in a totally negative situation, you could expect the very thing that I feared would happen: loss of a job, or demotion. What actually happened was also involved with the union. They picked up all of the badges of those persons who they thought were leaning towards the CIO at the time when we had the confrontation there at the plant. They would not let those fellows return to their jobs inside the plant.

A number of the black people who made complaints to the FEPC were very active in organizing the CIO at BMI. Many of them had exceptional leadership qualities. Capon Hill, Rufus Drake, Arthur Terrell, Condale Walton, Jack Thomas, Leslie and Eslye Dobbins, and Leroy Duckworth... they were leaders. Many were very, very outstanding people.

I was the one who complained to the company and to the local unions with regard to employment for black women. At that time they did not have any black women employed

at all at BMI. After I didn't get any positive response from BMI with regard to hiring black women, I went to the AFL Council. I told them that I thought that if we were going to make inroads and prevent the CIO from coming and recruiting at the plant at the time, that I would advise them to consider getting some black women on the payroll at the BMI plant. White women were employed in numbers as clerical workers, stenographers and clerks, bookkeeping and that type of thing. Also there were quite a few women forklift drivers, toll car drivers and things of that nature. (Toll cars were pulling little carts with metal on them.) Women weren't loading and unloading; they were just driving the forklifts and equipment. I went to the AFL Council and told them, "Look now, you've got a thousand people working at BMI and related construction. You've got white women, you've got other women working." I said, "There isn't a black woman working in that plant, and I want to know why." None of them thought about that, because they just took it for granted there weren't any black women supposed to be out there. [laughs] So I said, "Why is it?"

One of them said, "None of them have asked."

I said, "Would the company hire them if they ask?"

"Well, we'll see."

Come to find out, some black women had been out there and had tried to get in, but they weren't hired. They said, "OK, so let us check this out." They checked it out and we met the next day and they said, "OK, Woodrow, we'll start off.... You get five black women, and we'll put them to work." [laughs] I had to do the recruiting, and that was a job, believe it or not. I went *all over* this community. I finally came up with *three*. I went as a last resort and got my wife, which I didn't want to do. I had to beg her, if she would consider.

"All right," she said. I got the only four black women who worked during that period of time. One was named Ruby; two were named Emma. They put them all in the warehouse with me.

My sister Annie Mae Bunton had gone out and applied for a job at BMI prior to moving from Las Vegas to Washington state, where she was later employed somewhere near Hanford. There was construction of a plant going on up there for some war production. They went there after she wasn't able to get employment at BMI. [Mr. Wilson's sister also made a statement on the subject for the Fair Employment Practices Commission.--Ed.] My sister returned to Las Vegas immediately after the war, and she worked at one of the hotels.

I stayed out of the army because during my tenure at the plant I had received three deferments by the company. When the plant went off of essential production, quite naturally the deferments were cancelled. I was called up, and I went to Salt Lake City for my examination. I had made the necessary arrangements, did most of my packing and everything to move my wife back to Mississippi. The day before I was to be inducted, the Japs surrendered. We had a special message from the induction center not to report. About three weeks or so after that, I received another classification.

I had no problem with going into the army and fighting the war, although among some black men I knew, I heard talk of fighting a white man's war. I remember hearing discussions of that nature, quite naturally, because I was around groups of active young men. But as far as I was concerned, it was a war. As far as I was concerned, I was an American citizen. I felt that I had a responsibility to my country to

fight the war over there for the cause, and then fight the war over here for my cause. I did my fighting for my total freedom *here*, but first we had to get this other thing settled. Anybody who was attacking my country was attacking me. However, there was quite a bit of controversy about being segregated as American citizens. That was discussed extensively. Here we're in a battle fighting the enemy, and we can't live together at home.

There were black soldiers stationed in Las Vegas during the war era. We had a cadre of soldiers guarding Boulder Dam, and they would come into town. There were major problems. Downtown was segregated. Las Vegas was strictly segregated right down to each little grease joint, as far as the clubs, the hotels, the cafes, any recreation, even the city facilities like the swimming pool and things like that. There was not a swimming pool for blacks in the early days. Later they built Jefferson Avenue Community Center. That was the first swimming pool for blacks.

We had a couple of serious incidents involving black soldiers. I remember they had a confrontation with law enforcement downtown. Discrimination was the cause of the problem. The soldiers wanted to be served in the cafes and the clubs. When they would try to enter, they were confronted by the security. Then they would call law enforcement and the police would come in. The police would side with the security at the establishment. To keep it under control, they had to call in MPs (military police) to move the soldiers out. For a while they put certain areas off limits to military.

In one of those incidents, one black soldier got killed. Tensions were very high. It was just like sitting on a powder keg for a while. Then came the clamp down of the military

and putting certain areas off limits. I think they started limiting the number of military they would let come in to the community at once. That kind of brought it under control.

Some white people minimize the racial problems of this period in Las Vegas because they had the upper hand. They had the majority, you see. They wanted to keep the name of this city as not having this kind of situation. When discrimination was rampant in Las Vegas, when it was at its worst, you would ask someone in authority about it. They would say, "I didn't know that was the case. I didn't think that you were discriminated against."

To show you what the attitude of the community was and what the actual conditions were as far as discrimination was concerned: If you went to a picture show, they had a restricted area for blacks. If you attended that show, you had to sit in that particular area. I remember once Minister Kinnard of the Zion Methodist Church, and his wife, Dorothy, and my wife and I went to the movie downtown. I think it was a picture named *The Bells of St. Mary's*. We went in and we paid for general admission seats, and we sat in general admission seats. The little usher at the show came in and said, "You're in the wrong seats. We have reserved seats for you." Minister Kinnard had not lived in Las Vegas very long. I knew that we would have a problem, so I sat next to the aisle. I said, "We did not pay for reserved seats. We are very comfortable where we are. We would prefer sitting here."

She went back and told the manager what I said. She came back and said, "The manager said that you must move to the reserved seats or else he will call the police."

I asked her, "Are these general admission seats?" She said, "Yes."

I said, "You tell the manager that we are not moving." She went and told him what I said. She came back and

asked me to come and talk to the manager. So I went out. I just told the others to keep their seats. I went and I told the manager. I said, "Now, listen, we paid for general admission seats, and we are sitting in general admission seats. We are not going to move into the so-called reserved seats because we didn't pay for reserved seats."

He said, "I'll call the law."

The police station then was down on North First Street. I said, "It's down on North First Street. You call them."

He called the law. They came. He sent them to our seats. I said to the others, "You all just hold your seats," and I went out.

The law said, "The managers say that you were disturbing the peace."

I said, "I'm sorry, but I beg to differ with the manager. The manager is the one disturbing the peace. I paid my money to come to see this show. I paid the general admission fee, and I'm sitting in general admission seats. The manager said that he has some reserved seats. I don't need any reserved seats; I've very comfortable where I am. Now, gentlemen, if you want to sign a complaint against me, fine. If you're *not* going to sign that complaint against me..." I said, "I haven't disturbed anybody. You've disturbed me. I'm going back to my seat. Officer, do you want to take me to jail?"

He said, "No, you haven't done anything." So I went and sat down.

I think that if someone called a bluff, they felt that they might have a legal problem, because no crime was committed. The officer didn't want to get himself in the middle of something like that without any obvious reason to do so. He had asked the manager, "Do you want to sign a complaint against him?"

The manager said, "No!"

That was the end of it--that night.

This incident was at the newer theater. It was downtown just above the El Portal. I'd had that same kind of problem at the El Portal. The El Portal belonged to the mayor, Ernie Cragin. There was a problem in all the theaters and all the clubs.

One evening, when my daughter was about four or five years old, I took her with me to the bank, and she asked me if she could have some ice cream. So I said, "Yes." At that time there was a drugstore on the corner of First or Second Street and Fremont. We went in, and I sat on a stool at the counter. They refused to serve us. They said, "We do not serve blacks at the fountain here. We will have to give you some ice cream to go."

I said, "No *thanks*. We won't accept that." You can imagine.... I didn't fight, because I would automatically be placed in jail. We moved on ahead. I had my baby, and I wasn't going to jeopardize her welfare at that time, but I had quite a time trying to explain to her why she couldn't have an ice cream cone or malt. There were many similar incidents. It was a pattern. You just were told to move on or move out; you couldn't be served; you couldn't gamble; you couldn't frequent the clubs unless you were a porter or a maid.

I really don't think that whites in Las Vegas were ever very fearful of blacks--of race riots and so forth. I think there was simply a concerted effort by the establishment in Las Vegas to keep and hold the status quo. When the casino gaming started developing after the war, they felt that if they permitted freedom of public accommodations in the clubs, that it would hurt the tourism, hurt the business in the clubs. They were using every possible means to prevent blacks from using the accommodations. They thought that

if they would relax this pattern in any given area, that would overflow and that would change the status quo.

The first major private housing project here in Las Vegas was the Huntridge area. [Huntridge was a World War II-era private development.--Ed.] A young white kid from Arkansas came here. He had saved \$150, and I had about \$500. He was working in stores and I was working in stores [warehouses] at BMI. We were riding to work together, and we came by the Huntridge area. He applied for one of the houses over at Huntridge. They were asking for a \$300 deposit on the house. He had \$150.

I wanted to buy a house, too, and I told them I had \$300 I'd deposit. "Sorry, we can't accept your \$300." They were asking \$300, but they accepted his \$150 deposit.

I thought that it was totally ridiculous to set aside a housing project and segregate it, but they refused my application emphatically. They weren't permitting blacks to live there. They weren't accepting black applications. They were that bold! They were that bold all over Las Vegas!

Those Huntridge houses were nice houses and cheap--they were dirt cheap. They were a tremendous buy. Blacks were forced to live in West Las Vegas. You could have had the First National Bank and it didn't matter. Black people had money. Money wasn't the problem; it was a restrictive, discriminatory practice that was the problem.

Black workers had to get from the Westside to BMI. Some had the initiative to buy a car. Some guys bought little pickups, and they would carry five or six guys in the back of the pickup out there. They would pay so much a week for a ride.

Blacks did push for federal housing in Las Vegas. At one time we thought we might be able to pull it off, but

politics as usual.... I believe that the political powers in the area at the time felt that a community of blacks of that size would have too great an impact on Las Vegas. When I came here they were talking about maybe eight thousand people in Las Vegas. You see, blacks in numbers would have had a tremendous impact on the political situation. Providing them housing was an incentive to stay and to get involved. It would have established a permanent black community.

I was involved and I had an opportunity to talk to a lot of whites, from the average guy on the street to the politicians. Some of them thought the large number of blacks moving into Las Vegas during the war was a political threat; some thought that it would increase the crime situation. It would change the whole nature of the community if blacks were to come in and stay. It would be disruptive. I really believe they thought that blacks would move away after BMI closed down. But what really happened was that as the town grew, casino gaming grew. The clubs and hotels started developing, being constructed. There was great employment, and they found out that many of the blacks made very, very reliable and responsible employees, and they liked that.

In the early 1950s, Marble Manor was helpful in providing better housing for people on the Westside. Prior to that, before we got consideration from the federal government, people were building themselves makeshift housing. The city wasn't requiring specific specifications, and there were shanties and shacks built all over. Some crossed lot lines. Most of them were substandard with no heat, toilet facilities, adequate kitchen facilities. [Based on a number of housing surveys, federal funding for Marble Manor was approved in 1950.--Ed.]

Bonanza Village was totally white at the time. Bonanza Village was located near the Marble Manor site. It was one

of the better housing areas in the Las Vegas community. They did not want federal housing coming in. They said that it would lower their property values and that it would soon be substandard, but that didn't develop, because the administrators of the project kept it at very, very high standards. They kept the outside as well as the inside of the units in a very, very good manner.

However, somehow the power structure agencies working through the federal government didn't function at the level that we thought they should have in trying to integrate housing. There was a large amount of federal housing that came in, and it was segregated, totally segregated. We do not feel that everything was done to provide housing for the minority community.

BMI had advertised for employees throughout the South, because of the nature of the war plant. It was hot and involved handling this hot metal. It was dirty, and it was tough, heavy. Many of the jobs were undesirable; a lot of people who had basic education could do other things. So I think that in the back of some of the white people's minds was that black workers would move on. They would come and make some money and move into larger communities and areas where they could secure employment. California was attractive; Washington was attractive, very attractive, more so than Arizona. Arizona wasn't attractive, because it was farming. Blacks had left the farms to come here. There was shipyard work in California. A lot of construction was going on in northern and southern California at the time--the war plants. There was a military industry up in Washington, Oregon. So many of them moved out of Las Vegas into those sections of the country when things slowed down a little bit at the Basic Magnesium plant. [In April, 1944, the government ordered magnesium production cut.--Ed.]

I was passing through. I never intended to stay here. I was on my way back to school. I'd stay for a year, maybe. I was in a position thinking that I would be drafted at any time during my early tenure at the BMI plant. After that I felt I would probably be moving on, but I got involved in the total community--religiously, politically, helping to bring about a change. There was a tremendous challenge here for anybody black who had something to give.

Chapter Three

LIFE ON THE WESTSIDE IN THE 1940s

PRIOR TO THE WAR there wasn't what we call a black Westside. Right up here there were Mexicans, Indians, and Chicanos. There weren't that many blacks. Maybe a house here and a house there, a tent here and a house there. When I came here *I* would estimate there were approximately 300 blacks in Las Vegas. Now, you're looking at something entirely different.

When I first came to Las Vegas, my sister Annie Mae Bunton was here. That was one of the first places I stayed. She had a husband and two sons. We rented from Mrs. Hughes right in the center of Jackson Street. They had built a little shack there. They put the top on it, but they couldn't get enough boards to put them completely together, so they would spread them out. Sometimes they'd be four to six inches apart. Then they'd put tar paper over these boards to prevent the sun from coming in and to keep it from raining on you. One of the things I never will forget: If you did

not roll up your bed--and many of us slept on the floor--tar from this roof would fall in, get on your covers and your mattress. That is the kind of thing that many of us moved into and endured in the early days when we moved into Las Vegas. People would go from place to place to get any kind of building material they could possibly buy, and would build a room or two rooms, whatever they could.

I had established a residency in West Las Vegas and bought a little piece of property before Carver Park was completed. I had \$100 or so when I came here, I didn't have to pay total cash for the property. Land was very reasonable at that time. You could buy a lot in West Las Vegas from \$50 up, so I was able to afford a lot. Blacks were able to afford lots, and most of them bought the lots here. Of course, we weren't able to build, because you couldn't get the construction material at that time. During the war they had certain restrictions on the type of material that you could get, so you had to wait. But you could buy a piece of land, and that's what some of the people did.

I bought my house from another black man. His name was Willie Johnson; he moved to Pasadena, California. I tried to finance it, but at the time that was out. Mr. Johnson wanted \$2,400 for it, so I was going to buy it. I had about \$600 in my pocket, and I had approximately \$2,000 in the bank. The bank said, "If you leave your bank book, we'll let you have \$2,000 on the \$2,000 that you have. You have to leave your bank book with us."

I said, "Leave my bank book?"

"Yes, leave your bank book."

I said, "No."

I worked out a deal with Mr. Johnson. He said, "Listen, Woodrow, I'll tell you what. You pay me \$500 and then you can pay me off on that." I was so angry at those people and the bank I went and drew all my money out and paid for the

property. This incident involving my trying to borrow the money to buy my house was the incentive for my starting the Westside Federal Credit Union in 1951.

I was very lucky. The place that I bought at 313 Van Buren Street had a little two-bedroom house on it that was livable. We added on to that piece by piece until we got an inside bathroom and toilet facilities. I had running water. I had a good situation to be in a substantial structure.

Originally, my house was a little cabin; it had a kitchen and a living-bedroom. The people I bought it from were able to purchase enough lumber to construct the house. Fortunately, it was on a concrete foundation, and that was unusual, because when I came to Las Vegas, all through this area there were tents. Some of them had wooden floors; some of them were without floors, with canvas tops. Many of the women were cooking on a communal-type stove outside of the tent. They would pool their efforts to prepare food for their families and for their husbands in this manner. There just wasn't any adequate housing in West Las Vegas for anybody.

All through this area was mesquite brush and trees...not large trees but mesquite; they were a funny type. People would seek shelter from the sun under these things. Tents would be under them. I had a swamp cooler in my house. We did not have any circulating pumps at all at that time. (Only a few people could get those.) We would run the water from one of these taps through the cooler pads, and it would run on the ground. We would have wet spots all over. I did not have standard electricity, but we would have an electric wire coming in with a connection with maybe two or three outlets or receptacles off of it.

Those people who got here who were fortunate enough to buy a lot would sometimes have just one water line, one tap put on that line. Everybody got water out of the

common tap. You could go get water because the owner was charging you enough rent.

People were renting land space, a space for their shack. There were outhouses; people would dig a pit and build a structure. They used lime and anything they could get. These were often communal. This was before the sewer was extended to every structure. Wherever one or two places had the sewer, you would find communal toilets that were connected to the sewer line. But prior to the sewer being extended down the alleys here, we had the outhouse at first, then soon the sewer came down.

We had some fires, but in most of them, maybe one place would get burned. It wasn't something that was a total threat to the area. We never had a disastrous fire that destroyed several units at once.

The streets weren't even paved. Dust sometimes was four or five inches deep where they had graded the streets without any oil. If it rained, you had mud above your ankles.

Several of the families had hogs, and they kept them in a pen somewhere near their shack or back of the home. There weren't a great many, but a few did have hogs that they maintained and killed during the winter months. They would butcher them. There were a couple of slaughterhouses here. I don't know the exact address of them, but they could take them to the slaughterhouse to have them butchered and prepared for keeping and consumption. I did see one or two people butchering a hog here in the early days. That was in the mid-1940s. People had chickens, one or two people had cows, and then several had horses, and there were a few goats in the community, too.

Many people had little gardens in their back yards, some in the front yards. There were quite a few of those where they raised a few vegetables, like turnip greens, collards, cabbage, tomatoes, beans, mustard, and a few carrots, things

like that. Sometimes it wasn't over three or four rows of vegetables, but many of them had small gardens. There was so much alkali in the soil, they would haul in this blow sand from the desert in pickups or dump trucks and put it in and fertilize it and water it. This blow sand seemed to neutralize much of the alkali that was in the soil. Some of it became very good soil and was rich enough to raise most vegetables.

When people would go south, they'd bring back some of the vegetables and fruits that were grown down there and a few of the animals that we raised--opossums. They would bring those back from Mississippi, Louisiana, and have a feast. People went back frequently. It wasn't a month passed that some family or another wasn't going south, going back to their home in Louisiana, Mississippi or Arkansas. A lot of them made it an annual event. Today the Fordyce, Arkansas Club is very large in numbers. They have several events, probably one here every year, and then they go to Arkansas quite often for a reunion there. It's a social event. You have to live there or have relatives from there to be a part of it.

On the Westside we would have festivities, especially Fourth of July, Nineteenth of June, a school closing, or a homecoming for people who had been out of the community for some time. On the nineteenth of June a lot of the people would have parties in their homes. The Emancipation Proclamation was in January, but the word didn't reach many of the areas in the South until June. So they would have this great celebration on the nineteenth of June in Texas, Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama. On the Westside it became something that a lot of people recognized and celebrated and had a gathering. Sometimes in those early days here, we had a baseball team and would have parties and would have a social hour at the community centers. We had a community center here on Jefferson Street. Then sometimes they would

even celebrate at one of the small clubs here in West Las Vegas.

We had bars on the Westside, even though some of them weren't elaborate and beautiful structures like we are building now. We had several clubs that developed here, and people would frequent them and spend their money there.

When I came to town, Jake Ensley's was one of the first black businesses. He had a club on First Street. Jake Ensley also had land around where people lived on the Westside. He had lots, and people rented from him. Jake Ensley was Boysie's daddy. Boysie's wife still lives right here on the Westside.

We had a couple of community stores. One on Van Buren between D and E Streets was run by Roland M. Johnson and Mrs. Johnson. The Hughes family had a little grocery store on Jackson Street between E and F Streets. They were black families. Then there was another little store there on Adams just off of D Street between D and E Streets owned by a Mexican family. I can't remember their name. I knew them at that time. These were little grocery stores, little community stores. You could buy emergency items that you needed, a little meat, not a lot of staple things.

We would go into Las Vegas to buy clothing--particularly the women, several of them. If they wanted to try on something, they couldn't. If they saw something they wanted to buy, they had to pick it up. They would not let them try on an item in many of the stores.

I remember when the Harlem Club was built on the Westside. The Harlem during its day was one of the best. Then we had the Cotton Club. There were three or four more. The Star Bar was out of this community, down in North Las Vegas, I believe. North Las Vegas was sometimes

called Vegas Verde; it was North Las Vegas much later than that.

Harry Lee, a Chinese man, ran a very successful operation over in West Las Vegas on H Street, but most of the people who worked there, they brought in to the community. I mean their help--most of it--especially on the gambling tables. There were Chinamen, but not very many blacks were dealers and pit bosses until later. The Chinaman Club; that's what they called it. It was the El Rio, but we referred to it as the Chinaman Club. It was active later, actually after the war years. They did a very good business. They had an active business. Very few Orientals went there; they were just the owners and employees.

The clubs did *very* well, because people had money from working at the plant or working around various places here. They weren't working *in* the casinos early on, unless they were janitors or something like that. During the war they had good money from the Basic Magnesium plant and the construction trades that were going on here. So the clubs were flourishing; they were making the money. They made very good money.

During the war years, there was an effort by the organized groups--NAACP, church groups--to get an official black police officer in the city police. We had white officers coming in and policing the area here, all the clubs and things like that. We had a few black "special officers" appointed by the department, but not officially hired by the department. Special officers were deputized, not by the city, but appointed in a deputy position by the chief of police. He was taking that authority. There were a few deputized blacks who were here in the club area, Jackson Street. They served as bouncers in the clubs. If you were outside they would stop

you, detain you, and call the white officers to make the arrest. Only when we had a major crime or something got out of hand, would they send in the white officers. If they *had* hired black policemen, I'm sure that in most cases, those black officers would have been servicing the Westside.

"Poison" Smith was a deputized person of that special officer nature, never officially on the police department. Poison Smith was a big, burly person who would do the bidding of the police department when it came to a situation here in West Las Vegas. He served for a very long time in the community here. His job was to detain and subdue anybody that he felt was breaking the law, and call the police officers from downtown to come and make the arrest. Blacks looked on Poison as very oppressive. Certainly, they were not in favor of some of the things that it was possible for him to do in making arrests. He was very brutal to black people in *many* situations. We had another one, same category: Cortez. I don't remember his last name. He was a bouncer and was one of the people who was deputized by the chief-of-police to serve as a special officer.

I don't see very much difference in the attitude of blacks in the area at the time of World War II towards the white police officers than I do now. They respect a few of the officers who come in here and conduct their business properly, and they speak harshly of those who are repressive, who come in and misuse their authority. Some time ago, we had an officer or a representative of the police department who would come and talk to the NAACP. [†] The Production Company Police were organized during BMI production here. Some of the guys would go around to the clubs and get high, and they wouldn't get to the job. A group of concerned citizens met. The idea came from black workers in town. We organized twelve, fifteen black men. We would go to the clubs and tell them, "All right, buddy, you've had enough

now. Let's go. Let's go home and get ready so you can get out on that job out there." Five or six guys would work one night; five or six the next night and run these guys home. I think they did a swell job. Management publicized it and thought it was a good idea, commended the people for doing that. I don't know whether whites did the same thing.

The Production Police idea worked very well, and I think it served its purpose. It was very beneficial, because it wasn't anything like they were forcing people, but they would use persuasion to get the people out of the clubs and back home, so they could make their shift.

Just looking back, I am very pleased to a certain extent with the lack of violence here in West Las Vegas. You could holler loud and the *Review-Journal* would say that a riot was going on. One person could attack another one and you'd have a fist fight, and a totally destructive picture was made of it. The media was very vicious about whatever happened in the black community and with black people in the Las Vegas area. Now, that's one of the things that I *never* understood. They would not tell the truth about a situation.

During the war years welfare problems were handled through a county agency. Mrs. Fleming, who was employed by the county, was a Caucasian. I remember people going to her to get assistance and help. Through donations from various agencies she had funds and she would have the ability to grant people money for food and emergency types of things. Some people have made negative statements, but the overall benefit and service that her organization rendered was *very good*.

The Catholic Church was quite helpful. Some of the nuns assisted in every area that they possibly could. The

Catholics were interested in the community to the point that the first black scout troop in the area--Troop 67--was sponsored by St. James Catholic Church. Eventually, one of the church departments started an account in the credit union here--had a very nice amount, where they put money into the West Las Vegas area.

Several of the other churches were able to help people. Most of them were in-house types of things for their individual members. More recently several of them have extended themselves to provide free meals and things like that for the poor, but during the war years they weren't that strong.

At that time, in the 1940s, if you needed a doctor and didn't have the money to pay for it, most of the doctors would give you service and you could pay them later. You can't do that anymore, but during those days that was a practice that was acceptable. Doctors were all white until Dr. De Hay. He was the first black doctor to come in here. He was from the islands. White doctors took care of blacks, and there was no problem. You could go to the hospital. Actually, there were only two at the time. One was down on Eighth Street and Memorial County Hospital. Patients were segregated. In other words, they wouldn't put black and white patients together.

There were quite a few children born at home here. A few people preferred to do it that way. That's what they had done all their lives, and most of the people who came here at that period were from the South, and midwives took care of that. My daughter was born at the hospital. By the way, my mother came here in 1943. She had been a midwife in Mississippi. She had been licensed by Mississippi. Midwives had to take an examination, and they gave them a state license. My mother could just write her name, but she passed that examination orally.

The people who came here, many of them had religious backgrounds. Some of them were people who loved entertainment, loved the freedom of gaming and this kind of thing, and they'd also frequent the clubs. We had more churches then per square block than any area in the state, particularly in Las Vegas. We had construction of many churches and organizing of many churches and church organizations. People attended church every Sunday. Some of them went to the clubs on Saturday night, and Sunday morning they were at church.

The people who had gone to churches even frequented the clubs. Yes, we had that type of thing; it wasn't any different from any other section of the community. That's the kind of community it was.

The Church of Christ Holiness under Reverend Lester Cruise was at D Street and Owens Avenue. It's still there. They paint it to keep it up. They've added just a little bit to the building, but not much. It hasn't changed that much. Reverend Cruise, the pastor of that church, had a fine congregation; had a wonderful, wonderful service. His wife was a tremendous musician. He had a couple of sons, I can remember. He left the church and went to California. He came back here later, but he wasn't in the ministry. Mrs. Cruise had died, and he lived with another wife. We used to talk all the time. If I remember right, he told me he was from Kansas. He was a fine man--wonderful person, a very intelligent man, highly intelligent man.

Reverend Lester Cruise was active with the CIO group at BMI. He was at the same level, I would say, that the Dobbins brothers were. They had known each other for years, and they were friends. The Dobbins brothers and their families belonged to Reverend Cruise's church; that was the tie.

I stayed with the AFL, but I really had a lot of respect for these CIO people. They were fine people! Their affiliation with the CIO union didn't deter or make me feel in any way that they.... They believed in it, and that was their privilege. The Dobbins brothers had a little hangup with me, but Reverend Cruise and I were always very close friends.

The Church of God and Christ is on Madison. They have rebuilt the church--it's larger now. Reverend C. C. Cox will go down as one of the outstanding ministers in this community and several of the other communities. He was known statewide and nationally. He didn't get out and beat the brush, but whenever it was necessary, he injected himself into activities as an activist when we needed him in civil rights things. For example, when the NAACP organized the march on the Strip, we had our big fundraising drive at his church. He will forever be remembered as one of the true noted religious leaders.

Reverend Simmons was a Baptist minister here. He was from Louisiana. He was involved quite a bit in politics. He also had a job at St. Rose de Lima Hospital, where he was in charge of several of the porters and things like that. [St. Rose de Lima Hospital is located in Henderson, and was originally constructed to serve the needs of BMI employees. --Ed.] He was quite active in the Baptist ministry here. Reverend Simmons was interested in Carver Park, and he was going to try to establish a congregation there, he told me. That would have worked well, but I don't know if he really got it organized. He would have had part of a congregation out there, then a congregation here on the Westside. Some black ministers, you know, especially from the South, had three or four churches. They would be at one church on the first Sunday, one on the second, one on the third, one on the fourth. In that way they were able to survive and made the circuit.

Reverend Mayfield and his wife started the Second Baptist Church here. He was a founder of the Second Baptist Church. The Second Baptist Church was the first black Baptist church in the state of Nevada. Reverend Mayfield was from the South, from Texas.

The church was organized in the home of a local black policeman. They were having prayer meetings and services there. It was organized in the house, and then they bought this lot and built a tent. Reverend Mayfield did very well, and he moved out of the tent. The tent was where the church building presently stands. The tent wasn't as big as this building. [Mr. Wilson is referring to his credit union building, which is about 25 ft. by 40 ft.--Ed.] It had wood about four feet off the ground, then it had a canvas top over it. It had a wooden floor. Holding church in a tent or a home was not unusual.

There weren't that many churches in Las Vegas when I joined Second Baptist. I joined in the tent. When I was a kid, I was baptized in the Baptist Church. Then when I went over to boarding school, I joined the Lutheran Mission. Here in Las Vegas they had a Lutheran church, but it was in discrimination. I didn't want to be involved fighting discrimination every day and on Sundays, too, so I joined the Baptist Church. It was close and I liked Reverend Mayfield very well.

Second Baptist was the first black Baptist church in Las Vegas. It was here before Reverend Simmons. Reverend Simmons's Baptist church and Reverend Mayfield's Baptist Church belong to the same conference. Their beliefs were the same, just different congregations. They were of the same beliefs, spiritually. If I had to choose between the two --Reverend Simmons and Reverend Mayfield--I would have picked Reverend Mayfield. Reverend Mayfield continued here for several years, and we built the first frame church.

When the church called for another minister, he moved to Reno, Nevada. He died in Reno.

When I came here, Zion Methodist Church was downtown. It was down on Second Street. It was during the war that the church moved to the Westside. The downtown property became very valuable. It was just across from Pat Clark's Pontiac dealership at the time. I think it was because of the value of the property that they moved. They would get enough money for that property to build a much larger church. The clubs and the casinos and things needed that downtown property for business purposes. They sold the white churches that were downtown, too. I knew Reverend Cook, pastor of the Zion Methodist Church.

We reorganized the Las Vegas branch of NAACP in Zion Methodist Church downtown. That was in 1942, 1943, not later than 1944. The NAACP had died down; it had just become inactive because of lack of membership. There were just a few blacks here. That's what happened in some communities: They use it whenever it's necessary, then the people, when everything is cozy and everything is kosher, they tend to relax. And that's what had happened; they had relaxed. Then with all the activity going on--new people coming, the things at the plant, and the activity in town where discrimination was coming up--they needed the support of an organized group *again*. So we were reorganizing the NAACP.

Reverend Cook was outstanding in those efforts at that time. In that day, he was more interested than the other ministers, but later other ministers were just as interested. Reverend Cox was interested in the NAACP, but he didn't take the leadership role in the NAACP that Reverend Cook took. He was supportive.

Reverend Simmons wasn't active and supportive of the NAACP. He attended NAACP meetings, and if they had a

function where he could be seen, yes...but actually supporting the NAACP and its total activity, he didn't give it everything he should have. I think he was interested in *change*; I don't doubt that at all. But I'm saying, if a person can effectively help change things and yet reap personal aggrandizement, personal benefits, materialistically, *then* the order changes a little bit.

The church sponsored picnics and things like that, programming for youth programs, adult programs, educational programs teaching family worth, family involvement. The church has been instrumental in education, both spiritual *and* secular. People always contributed money. Some members tithe, and some make a weekly contribution or a monthly contribution. In that way the church has been able to survive financially.

One of the outstanding things at Second Baptist Church is our Sunday School program. When you come to a program and fund raising and education, they have a tremendous Sunday School. A young man who is the Sunday School superintendent has an educational program through the Sunday School department. Not only that, he has a tremendous fundraising thing through the Sunday School department. The Sunday School and its fund raising are the most outstanding things I've seen. They average near one thousand dollars a Sunday in Sunday School. The Sunday School superintendent is a member of the church who volunteers. They are elected annually, appointed by the church and elected by the membership to serve as superintendent of Sunday School.



A 1980 political gathering to support Woodrow Wilson in his bid for a seat on the Clark County Commission. *Front row left to right: Mrs. Paul Laxalt, Senator Chic Hecht, Mrs. Robert Kaltenborn. Middle row left to right: Governor Paul Laxalt, Judge Guy Adelier, unidentified. Standing left to right: Woodrow Wilson, Commissioner Dick Ronzone, unidentified, former Las Vegas mayor Oran K. Gragson. Courtesy of Woodrow Wilson Collection*

Chapter Four

WITH THE NAACP AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION

I FELT THAT I would have good prospects after the war. When BMI closed, I went directly to the company that was maintaining the plant for war assets. [BMI ceased magnesium production in November, 1944.--Ed.] I worked for them in helping to inventory surplus materials. The supervisor during the period when war assets took over the major plant said, "We're going to be closing down, so you can take an hour, two hours, three hours, whatever is necessary, and check around, see if you can find a job." I went over to Stauffer Chemical, which operated in what had been the BMI plant. I knew a lot of people there. It was in the same plant but not in the specific area. I went over to see them; they knew what my qualifications and background were. I had no problem--I didn't lose a day. I went to the stores department, in which I had a tremendous background, and asked them for a job. I was told by the storekeeper that he would like to help me, to go to personnel. I went to

personnel and I signed up and was hired. I worked for Stauffer Chemical Company for approximately a year, going from yard laborer up to chief warehouseman in that length of time. Not a lot of blacks made the transition, but some did. Some who had special training or special background were able to do it. Stauffer eventually had a cutback, and the foreman, storekeeper, Jack Olson told me, "I want you to stay. I won't terminate you, even though you were the last hired. You're a good man." There was a fellow there named Charlie Butler, who had been in stores before I went over. His wife was sick. He was a very nice man--a white fellow from Texas, probably. Jack was going to move him and retain me. I told him I wouldn't do that, that I could get a job. Since I was working on a special project for him, he said, "You finish that project for me, and every day I'll let you go out and see what's available."

The first day I went over to Western Electro Chemical Corporation. That was the Gibsons' operation--Mr. Fred Gibson was with a group from California. Fred Gibson was the father of Jim Gibson. Jim and Fred, Jr., were with the company at the time. I knew the Gibsons very well, and they knew me. We became very, very close friends--very dear friends.

The Gibsons operated the company. They were very fine people. I couldn't have worked for a group of people, a company, that were any better. They were very nice to me, very considerate. They knew that I was involved in a lot of things, and so they made concessions for me to participate. For example, I was the president of NAACP. If I had a meeting I had to go to, all I had to do was ask for permission to be off for a period, and they would give me that time off. The first time I was elected to the Nevada legislature my job was kept for me during the session. I could have all the time that was necessary to serve as a legislator.

The majority of the employees at Western Electro Chemical were white, but I think that if a black person had a good record and the ability to perform, he would have no problem being employed. I was treated well, and I advanced in the company, but when you got to a certain point in all the companies [laughs] that was in their area, you ran into a situation. *Before* I went to Western Electro Chemical Corporation, when I was over in war assets, I wasn't given an opportunity to move up there at that time because they said that there would be too many whites working under me, and that it would create a problem or conflict. So I was denied that particular job. At Stauffer's I was told by Jack Wilson that he would like to promote me, but under the circumstances of the policy of the company at that time they couldn't. Seven years later on after I left, the company changed their policy and they *did* promote a black in that department.

At Western Electro Chemical I remained assistant storekeeper for many years. Then American Potash came in. It was a subsidiary down in California that joined the Gibson unit and made cement and potash. I continued in that position, assistant storekeeper, but actually I was responsible for just about everything. Then Kerr-McGee Chemical Corporation from Oklahoma came in, and I worked for them. (I served three terms in the legislature, and they permitted me to take the necessary time off to serve.)

When people came in who were from the company inspecting and checking job classification and qualifications, I was told several times that I should be head storekeeper, but it never came about. I served as assistant storekeeper all of that time. In one case, however, they gave me an additional raise--the classification of assistant storekeeper was one figure, but they gave me a figure between that and the head storekeeper. I didn't feel very good about that. I

thought that it was wrong. I considered that they were nice enough to give me time off and that kind of consideration; they made concessions, too, because when I was gone three or four months, a lot of things were not done. They really didn't *have* to do it, but they did it. So in some ways it kind of balanced out. I had a very fine relationship with Stauffer, with Western Electro Chemical, with American Potash and also Kerr-McGee. We made it fine.

When I was with Western Electro Chemical, I asked for permission to come in to meet with the NAACP group that was going to be meeting with Senator Pat McCarran at the Jefferson Avenue Community Center. It was supposed to be at 12:00, so I got time off. I was there and I had some information, some things that I wanted to ask him. He was late getting there; about 12:30 he arrived. He came in and he said that he was very happy that we'd come to meet him and greet him, and that he certainly wanted to solicit the support of all of the people in the area and the NAACP as well.

"But I'm sorry," he said, "I just don't have time to really go into my program, my political program, and spend much time.... I'm running about thirty minutes late."

I said, "Senator, I'm Woodrow Wilson. I represent the Las Vegas branch of the NAACP. I can understand. We don't want you not to be prompt and on time, but I have some things to discuss with you with regard to your legislative work in the Senate. I want to discuss your stance on some of the things that actually have come up before you."

He said, "All right. So what have you got?"

I said, "You know, your records show that you have voted right down the line with all of the Southern senators, especially dealing with human rights and civil rights, anything

that has been meant to relieve the pressure and the oppression of blacks in this country. You voted right with them, with Senator John Stennis and all those guys from Mississippi and Georgia."

He jumped up and said, "That's a lie!"

I said, "Never. That's not a lie."

Then he came at me, and I didn't back up! [laughs] His secretary ran between us, and he said, "You're not going to get away with that kind of thing."

I said, "No, Senator, *you're* not going to get away with it. The Congressional Records don't lie. I have the information here in my pocket. I can tell you every bill you voted on, how you voted and when you voted." He came at me and I didn't move. I stood my ground, and people went out the doors, under the table--everywhere! [laughs] Reverend Simmons, Reverend Parks and all the ministers and everybody else who was in the place ran out; they were *gone*. [laughs] Senator McCarran got quieted down and he said, "Hey, listen, you should tell your people what are really the facts."

I said, "That's *exactly* what I'm doing. I'm telling them the facts. Now, *you* are the one who is not telling them the facts." We sat down, and I said, "That's the way it is. The thing that you should be doing is trying to tell these people what you're going to do with their vote when you get back there, because their vote helped to send you. You have abused your vote when it comes to a segment of the citizenry in this state." I said, "This is utterly ridiculous! You are not a Southern senator."

He said, "I just want you to know that I'll be seeing you."

I said, "We'll be seeing each other, Senator. I had to tell you. That's my responsibility, and I told you." When things cooled down, here came Reverend Simmons. "You

are the damndest fool I've ever seen; you were going to hit a senator?"

I said, "I was going to knock the hell out of him, because I was telling the truth. Look, the truth is the *truth*. That's my business. I'm going to tell the truth." Simmons sided with the senator against *me*. He wanted to say that he represented the senator and that he helped to elect the senator, because he thought that he would get a stipend, assisted financially. That's why. Things in it for him personally.

Anybody that wanted to be elected, Pat McCarran and all that bunch, they'd look up Reverend John L. Simmons; Reverend Simmons would help to direct the campaign and involve his church in the organization. He would put on events and have them come to the church and speak. He didn't look at the whole individual, what the individual politically stood for as far as black people were concerned. By that I mean that he promoted politicians to the extent that he ignored what the politician really meant to the total people. I have to tell the truth, you know. I think that's as mild as I can put it and let you know. His congregation would follow him. He was a strong leader in that way.

That next morning I went to my job. I *knew* Senator McCarran would try to do something, but I didn't think he would be that quick. In the morning about 9:30 or 10:00 I had a call from the main office; it was Fred Gibson. He said, "I need to see you. Can you come up to my office for a few minutes?"

I said, "I'll go tell Bob and my storekeeper...."

He said, "Fine, come up. It won't take you too long."

I went, and his secretary asked me to come in. He said, "How are you this morning?"

I said, "Fine, sir. How are you, Mr. Gibson?"

He said, "Oh, I'm feeling very well."

I said, "I'm doing OK."

He said, "Where were you yesterday?"

I laughed. I said, "I was here until about 11:30. I went in to a meeting with Senator McCarran and a group of citizenry from the black community. You know, I'm president of the local NAACP, and so we were meeting with him."

He said, "Yeah? Well, that's good. How did the meeting go?"

I said, "It didn't go too well, Mr. Gibson. We had a little confrontation. It was all right with *me*, but it didn't please the senator very well." I told Mr. Gibson what McCarran had been doing back there with his vote.

He said, "Hmmm. Well, what did you tell him?"

I said, "I told him that he hadn't used his votes for all the citizens that he represented. I told him he had been voting with the Southern block that were against civil rights, that were anti-black. On just any legislation that came up he was voting to keep the blacks from having opportunities."

He said, "Oh, really?"

I said yes. I said I asked McCarran, "Are you calling me a liar? He said yes, and I called him one, too."

He said, "You did! You called the Senator...?"

I said, "I sure did, Mr. Gibson. I told him he was a liar."

"My God," he said. "So it got kind of hairy a little bit?"

And I said, "Yes, it sure did."

He said, "Let me tell you something. I had a call from his office this morning. He said he wanted you terminated immediately."

I said, "Is that right?"

He said, "Yes, he did. But the senator doesn't run this plant."

I said, "Well, I'm glad of that."

He said, "Let me tell you something. You've worked for us; you've done a hell of a job, and we appreciate it. We

know who you are and what you are. I want you to know that neither Senator Pat McCarran nor anybody else can take your job as long as you do the kind of job that you've done for us here."

I said, "Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Gibson."

He said, "You're a man, and let me shake your hand, because you don't have an opportunity to shake hands with a man very often." He said, "Go ahead and do what you've been doing. Do your job and everything will be all right." That's the kind of man he was.

At the time that the NAACP reorganized during World War II, it was involved in trying to bring together a cohesive group of people to work on discrimination in all areas. We were trying to attack discrimination in public accommodation, hotels, the legislature and city hall...every area. Along with the NAACP I also supported integration of the Shamrock Hotel; I led the march to city hall to intercede for Horace Heidt in his battle to get the license to integrate the Shamrock Hotel in 1942. I was president of the NAACP in 1951, and also served on just about every committee involved with the NAACP. I was on a special committee of NAACP presidents that actually set up the mechanism by which we brought down discrimination in public accommodation on the Strip. I was part of that; we met with the governor, we met with everybody. I was a part of all of this.

In about 1951 or 1952 I attended the national convention of the NAACP in Atlanta, Georgia. They gave me thirty-four dollars for my wife and I to go. (At the time the NAACP didn't have any money, so if the president went, he had to take care of his own expenses.) We drove to Atlanta in my car. We dropped our little daughter off in Mississippi at her grandparents, and they kept her until we came back.

That convention was quite rewarding; it was a great thing because at that meeting I had an opportunity to meet and to talk, have a special session with Mary McCloud Bethune. [Mary McCloud Bethune had been an advisor to President Franklin Roosevelt.--Ed.]

I used to take groups in my car to conferences in San Francisco at my expense. I would always take one or two people with me. I remember a lady (I don't even remember the young woman's name) who worked with my wife and I. She wanted to go. She'd never been to a conference and we carried her. I thought she had some money to pay for her room, but I had to pay for her hotel.

We worked on *every* area of discrimination. For instance, Reverend Marion Bennett of the Methodist Church (Zion United) and I went down to Davis Dam. We had gotten information from the NAACP national office in Washington saying that blacks were being discriminated against during the construction of Davis Dam. Someone had made a complaint that the discrimination at Davis Dam was inhuman. The blacks couldn't eat in the dining room and they couldn't stay in the quarters--barracks--there. They had to live out there in the mesquite brush where the rattlesnakes were. I asked Bennett to go down with me. They thought we were representatives from Washington! They were scared to death. They came out and were telling us what they were going to do, that they would certainly fix a barracks for the blacks and that the blacks would have a chance to eat in the mess halls. Until then the blacks were denied any kind of consideration as far as accommodations at the Davis Dam project. We didn't tell them we were from Las Vegas. We went down there to ask for the manager. I think we met with a senator from Washington, too. We told them that we were making a report for the NAACP, that we had gotten this information from Washington, and

they changed. They opened up the mess hall; they opened up a separate barracks for the blacks. There was just so much to do here.

The NAACP had white members. There was a lawyer here named George Rudiak. George was a *tremendous* human being. He worked like no one could imagine to help bring about civil rights laws to relieve the discrimination and pressure on blacks, and to address the issue of blacks not having access to public accommodation. George Rudiak made one of the greatest sacrifices as a member of the NAACP. In 1953 he introduced a public accommodations bill in the legislature, and they defeated him after that. [Rudiak had been elected state assemblyman in 1952.--Ed.] Not only did they defeat him, he lost a lot of his clients after that.

We got quite a bit of support from the Jewish community. Rudiak is a Jew. Eileen Brookman is a Jew; we served in the legislature together. She's running for the legislature now. She was on the battlefield. Flora Dungan was a Jew --tremendous fighter.

The importance of white support was immeasurable. It was just fantastic. A lot of them were privileged with information that we needed, that we never would have been able to get. They would know a lot of times who was for, who was against the bills or who was just sugar-coating. Whites could give us the insight on people to contact; key people who were necessary to move things along. We *had* to have white support in order to survive, to reach the position that we did, and accomplish what we did in Nevada. For example, H. Clyde Mathews, Jr. (he was a northern Nevada man) was appointed chairman of the Equal Rights Commission. [The Nevada Equal Rights Commission was established by a bill passed in 1961.--Ed.] Clyde Mathews was an outspoken advocate of civil rights and served on various

committees and in organizations involved in trying to promote civil rights. He was one of the movers as far as civil rights in the state of Nevada was concerned--a fine man.

Prior to the influx of blacks in the 1940s, the local citizenry lived admirably and quietly. Prior to the influx, there wasn't as much discrimination in Las Vegas as there was when the masses came. Automatically, with the masses of blacks, the black leadership had to change and fight to eliminate all of the prejudices and discrimination that came in. We had that confrontation because of the influx--whites coming in from the South, blacks coming in from the South.

From time to time we would try to go to a show on the Strip, but we were refused. The security would not permit us to come in. In the 1950s when Josephine Baker came to town, she had in her contract a no-discrimination clause. She had to force the hotel to live up to it. We were able to attend her shows each night, because she *did* have that clause, and she would not perform unless they kept their agreement. Lubertha Johnson (Warden at the time) and I had the privilege of soliciting members of the black community who would go to the shows to see her perform. They were comped [given complimentary tickets]--they didn't have to pay anything. We had a wonderful time. That was just an unusual situation because of her status in the entertainment world as an internationally famous woman, she was able to withstand all the pressures coming from the hotel industry and the hotel that was involved and force them to live up to that agreement. When we went, we were seated in reserved seats. She had reserved enough tables for her guests. The first evening the show was held up for an hour and a half, because she told them that she would not perform *unless* her guests were in the audience.

In 1960 Dr. James McMillan, the president of the NAACP, formed an executive board outside of the regular executive board of the Las Vegas branch of the NAACP, which consisted of *all* of the ex-presidents. They were the policy-making group on the Strip situation; they would feed back to the regular organization all of their information and did all the planning for our thrust to end segregation on the Strip. The march on the Strip was an idea of the board, of the total group. I don't remember any one individual who came up with the idea. I'm sure Dr. McMillan wanted to push it. He was a dynamic president of the NAACP. I think that even if we had had Bill Stevens or any of the other presidents--Massey, Kinnard--at the time that they would have done the same kinds of things that Dr. McMillan did. Dr. McMillan was a tremendous force within the organizational structure, and he was involved in helping to do all the planning. A lot of strategy was used even to keep the group together.

We had other community leaders involved with the NAACP. Bishop C. C. Cox of the Church of God and Christ provided his facilities for us for meeting after meeting. During those meetings we raised the necessary monies to assist in legal fees that we had to pay, and to bring the group together and to keep everybody informed on what to do and what not to do. Everybody was advised not to create a disturbance but to be forthright and adamant in their position that segregation had to end.

Some of the young people were more militant, but we were able to keep the lid on; we were to keep the hotheads from getting out of hand. Some of them said, "Well, let's go to battle. If they don't let us in, let's *push* our way in." I think there was a certain percentage of white people who feared violence, but we knew we were overpowered; we didn't have a police force, nor did we have the necessary

ammunition to challenge the power structure. So we used means by which we felt we would get the most mileage.

We had the support of the churches for a while. (Reverend John Simmons was a member of the NAACP, but he wasn't really active. We didn't like it, because we thought every minister should be a part of the action. He had a following, and we felt that he could keep those members under control and certainly that he would be able to push them to participate. I think that he was so wrapped up in his own politics....) We started meeting at the churches, telling the ministers that we could not afford *not* to follow through with this effort in bringing down the walls of discrimination. It was humiliating and it was certainly destructive. It prevented black people from getting jobs that they would be able to get if we brought down this discrimination.

Most of the ministers supported the idea of a march. When we got down to the wire, though, just before D-Day, some of them got very shaky and started backing off. Bishop C. C. Cox in one of the oldest black churches (House of Holiness Church of God in Christ) held on. We had our last meeting there. We contributed money and we finalized our goals and efforts. Some of the ministers were working ministers. They had jobs in the community. A lot of them didn't have a church supporting them completely, like Bishop Cox. I'm sure that they feared for their jobs. I'm sure that was the case. Some of them had been talked to by the power structure in the hotel industry; some of them had menial jobs there. They were told that people would lose their jobs and they wouldn't be able to maintain and take care of their families. No one told them that this would open up an avenue for better jobs, new jobs and greater incomes.

We arranged for a meeting at Bishop Cox's Holiness Church to finalize plans. We realized that some of our leadership in the rank and file of the people was kind of

getting wavy. They didn't know if they would follow through or *not*. We stepped up the effort, and we really communicated and pressured these people, letting them know that it was too late. We were too far to back down at that point. We just had to move. We gave word of when the march was going to be, how it was going to be, and we had everything together. Then we knew we had to move and move fast, because we were losing. Some calls had come from the other side, from gaming and white politicians, that this march wasn't a good idea and what it would do.

What really made a tremendous impact was Hank Greenspun coming into the act. [Mr. Greenspun was owner of the *Las Vegas Sun*.--Ed.] Mr. Greenspun warned Governor Grant Sawyer and the hierarchy at the Strip that we meant business, and that it would be to the advantage of Las Vegas and the state of Nevada to try to negotiate and prevent this thing from coming off. He conveyed to the power structure that we meant what we said, that we would actually go nationwide. We had contacted the national branch of the NAACP and asked them to ask the international media and the media throughout the United States to come in here to see what was happening and to see the condition of the black community in the Las Vegas area as far as economics, as far as entertainment, as far as having an opportunity to participate throughout this community. So Mr. Greenspun interceded, contacted the governor. The governor came back and we had this meeting at the Moulin Rouge. It was done: we put it together and it worked.

Our executive board meetings weren't secret. Now, we had several executive board meetings where all of the ex-presidents got together to formulate plans. Then we would bring the plans to our big meetings. There were 300 people or so at the Holiness Church the night that we were really finalizing the plan. You can't keep a secret like that. The

whites who had power knew. That's the reason they had gotten to some of the ministers. And Hank Greenspun, as I say, was communicating with the power structure. When Governor Grant Sawyer came, it was on the wires throughout the world, not only here. We had people coming in here from England, and Germany, and France, Italy.

Having Mr. Greenspun mediate was agreeable with most people, because Hank had shown an interest in trying to bring about unanimity and cooperation within the community. He had a role and he played it very well. He was there at some of our meetings with the executive board. He was at the meeting with Governor Sawyer when the governor was at the Moulin Rouge meeting. (Governor Sawyer was in New York City. He cut his trip short to get back and attend the Moulin Rouge meeting.) We invited him to meetings. A black wasn't in a *position* to take the kind of role that Hank Greenspun had, because we had no one who had a tie into the power structure, the system, the resort association, the political entity at that time.

At the Moulin Rouge we all met--the leadership, especially the executive board of the NAACP and interested members--with Hank Greenspun representing the hotels and the governor. We discussed the situation and the governor said that he thought that a march like that would be detrimental. He knew there were probably some hotheads and that there might be a confrontation. He was going to do everything he possibly could to prevent that and get back with us on work of a settlement, and then we would set up a mechanism by which we could test the authenticity of the decision.

At the Moulin Rouge meeting everyone had their say. The governor said that he would do everything he possibly could. He felt that we should be in the mood of negotiating. He felt that it was right to protest the conduct of the Strip.

He felt that every man should have an equal opportunity, and that it wasn't any rabble rousing.

After this meeting Hank came back and communicated with us that everything was OK. We had another meeting, and we appointed groups of three, four, or five to go in each one of the hotels on the Strip downtown. There was only one hotel that we couldn't get in; it was Sal Sagev. They had their security to prevent blacks from entering. We tried them. We had people to test it, but we didn't create a confrontation. We backed off.

I'm happy with the way things ended, because you can never predict the outcome of a confrontation, such as the march on the Strip that we had planned. We were able to successfully sit down across the table and come to some conclusions as far as how integration would progress. It wasn't all we wanted, but it sure was a tremendous advance from what the condition had been previously. I felt that it really hadn't been easy, because we sacrificed a lot. It was a commitment made by the people involved; we sacrificed a lot of time, a lot of money, and a lot of effort and a lot of worry. In no terms could it have been described as an easy battle, because when you go up against the power structure that existed at that time in Las Vegas, it wasn't easy. After the agreement, I thought that we would have more resistance from the hotels in committing themselves to integration, in some ways trying to prevent it from happening. But I thought that it went *very* well, and I was surprised that it did produce a true conversion from total segregation to integration.

[The formation of the Southern Nevada Human Relations Commission was part of the Moulin Rouge settlement. Representatives from the black community, police, government and business served on the commission.--Ed.] I wasn't a member, but I knew the members. They were trying

to act as a liaison between the groups at the time and bring about a cohesiveness within the political entity. Jobs was one of the things that we pushed for. We knew that if we opened up integration, automatically jobs that had been denied blacks before would be open because of the black clientele coming in. That did not go as smoothly as we had hoped, but it did improve. The numbers weren't enormous, but we did get people into categories of employment that they had not been a part of before.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has always been prominent in the political arena, but it was against the constitution and bylaws of the organization to endorse candidates. So we decided to organize a fringe organization, or an organization that could direct and institute the policies without using the name of the NAACP. So we decided to organize the Nevada Voters League in 1957. The Voters League was the political arm of the NAACP. It *was* the political aspect of the NAACP. I was involved. I was one of the first members of the board with Perry Fortson, George Fortson. Several of the black ministers--Bishop Cox--were a part of it. Whoever was the Methodist minister at that time was part of the Voters League. Martha Hillyard, Dr. James McMillan and Dr. Charles West came later. They came in and joined forces with the Nevada Voters League to help maintain it and keep it strong. The Voters League made an impact on the political scene, because they established a program where they screened candidates from both parties. It was a nonpartisan operation, and they endorsed candidates. They would endorse candidates regularly--black or white. The Voters League endorsed Howard Cannon. At the time I did not give the senator my support. Earlier, in 1953, when he was

Las Vegas city attorney, we introduced an anti-discrimination proposal at one of the meetings of the city commission at city hall. He came back with information advising the commission that it was unconstitutional. So I never could give him my support.

When Oran Gragson, mayor of Las Vegas from 1959 to 1975, ran against Mr. Wendell Bunker for mayor, we screened the candidates. Each one had been over. On the night of endorsement, the Voters League endorsed Mr. Bunker. The Bunker family was known, and he had been involved in the political arena. Most of the people thought that he was a shoo-in. I went along with the endorsement, but I did not really support it...I didn't agree with it. I'd met both of them, and I had business with Mr. Gragson because he had a used furniture store. I had an opportunity to talk to him and to understand him very well. I knew from what he had said what his attitudes towards blacks were. At his business he had a humanistic attitude toward blacks. I knew that he would be open at least to suggestions to assist in bringing about an equitable situation in the area of discrimination here in Las Vegas.

I knew Wendell Bunker. He had political ties, and his ties would not *let* him be as free to address discrimination. I mean the arm of Las Vegas that controlled the city politically: the city commissioners, the people in the gaming industry who he had ties with. I felt that he wouldn't be free to exert himself as Mr. Gragson was.

I was a Republican; Mr. Gragson was a Republican. Mr. Bunker had strong support within the Democratic party structure. City elections were partisan, you see. You had five black Republicans and two thousand black Democrats at the time! [laughs] [Officially, city elections are not partisan. Candidates are listed without party affiliations.--Ed.] I was selected as the person to *tell him* that we did not vote to

support him. Mr. Gragson came over and made his last appeal. He said, "Even though you do not endorse me..." (he was speaking to the Voters League) "if I'm elected mayor of the city of Las Vegas, I will do everything in my power to change the attitude and the conduct of the political structure of this community towards your people." He made that statement. I think they knew--the majority of them, not *all* of them--that he probably would do a better job. When the poll closed and the vote came in that he had won, he came right back to West Las Vegas to headquarters and said, "Now, I'm mayor, and I reiterate. I want to emphatically state to you, I *meant* what I said. I will *show* you that I meant what I said."

Oran Gragson was elected to the office of mayor of Las Vegas at the right time. That's putting it mildly. [Gragson was mayor during the period of Strip desegregation.--Ed.] He was in the right place at the right time. I found Mayor Gragson to be very truthful, dependable. Mayor Gragson loved the city of Las Vegas and the people in the state of Nevada, and he wanted to see all citizens have an opportunity to enjoy the things that were provided by this community. Those are the kinds of statements that he made at the time of his election, that he would work to bring about a cohesive community, put it together so that all of the people in Las Vegas would benefit from the economic, social--all of the other entities that might be a part of living in a community of this kind.

I was an appointee of Eisenhower to the Nevada Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Bill Horgan was chairman of the state advisory committee prior to my chairmanship. I was chairman up until about four years ago. I actually think that I was recommended for membership on the Advisory Committee by some of my political friends who had known me from various meetings

throughout the country, southern California, Chicago. I was a Republican and the administration would ask for prospective candidates for the committee. They wanted to keep the political balance there. I was a rare commodity, being a black Republican in a totally Democratic situation in Nevada, so I was a good prospect to be on various committees that were appointed. I could get support from anyone on the national level of the Republican party, national committee, or from an elected official in the state government. I would have been a natural because I was known; I attended all of the county political functions, I was a part of the central committee. I was also active in recruiting candidates for the Republican party in Nevada. I was very well known.

We had some people on the committee, as you have in most cases, who were there because they had been asked for prestige purposes, and to fill a commitment to their political party. Then we had some who were actually committed, wanted to do something about the problem, knew the problem. They were there trying to get the necessary information to the U.S. Commission so that the Commission could function properly and then take steps to eliminate discrimination wherever they found it.

During the war, blacks had gone to work in Hawthorne, Nevada. An ammunition dump was going in there, and they had employment, but not for a large number. They had the living quarters right there. They had the clubs and casinos. Hawthorne was discriminating just like Las Vegas. Blacks couldn't go in the clubs. During the war, we were going to Hawthorne and Reno. I was going up there all the time. At that time I was quite active. Any time we stopped at a place on the way to the legislature (NAACP members would relay during the session of the legislature), you might have to pay five dollars for a cup of coffee, ten dollars for breakfast. A cup of coffee really should have cost you about twenty-five

cents. That's the experience we had. It was a battle to survive all over this state where blacks moved, where blacks lived. Hawthorne was on the road to Reno, so we had quite a battle there with Linda Smith, the owner of El Capitan. This state was something! There were several of us who were in a battle. It was a battle for survival.

This incident happened around 1960. I was holding a hearing in Hawthorne, Nevada. A black female had gotten killed near the ammunition depot there, and they white-washed it; they didn't investigate it properly. I asked the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights to send out some attorneys. I wanted to have a hearing and try and get some information on this thing.

We moved into Hawthorne with my committee. The committee met at the little courthouse there. We had two lawyers from the U.S. Department of Justice. When we got into the thing, we couldn't get witnesses to testify. Anyway, we did the best we could. When we finished to go to lunch, we went over to El Capitan. One of the owners, Mrs. Smith, was standing in the door. I was with Lillian Collins from Boulder City, another member from Reno and the other three or four members on the committee. The owner said, "All of you can have lunch here, but he (indicating me) can't." And here were two U.S. attorneys.

One said, "Why?"

She said, "Well, he's black and we don't serve blacks."

He said, "Do you know he's chairman of the Nevada Advisory Committee on Civil Rights?"

"We don't give a damn."

And so they refused to serve me. Everybody refused to eat there. We went back, reconvened the meeting and adjourned. The legislature was in session in Carson City. We went to Carson City and I called a meeting, and we passed a resolution to ask the U.S. Attorney General to send

representatives into the state of Nevada to investigate discrimination.

Lillian said, "I will not vote on that resolution. I'm not going to." She said, "I'll resign first."

Another said, "Well, you'll have to resign because we're going to pass it." She objected to it, and she resigned. We passed the resolution.

I remember, we had a situation here in Las Vegas. We had representatives from the Indian tribe come to the Advisory Committee meeting. They told us about a situation that existed at the Indian village on North Main Street. I think they were Paiute Indians. They had no running water, no toilet facilities. There were outside privies. It was a terrible situation, and they couldn't get assistance. The federal government didn't do anything about it, nor did the City of Las Vegas, because that was the Indian reservation. The city couldn't legally act, but they could have taken action from a humanitarian standpoint. That's the only way they could have taken action to eliminate or relieve the problem.

I brought it up because I had been down there. I asked the commission to take a drive down through the reservation to see if what I was saying was true, and so we did. There were two carloads of us. I didn't realize that we had a very serious situation, a life-threatening situation. Some of the young Indians were upset with being mistreated and not getting due process. When we drove into the reservation I looked to my right about thirty paces off of the drive. (It was just a trail through which cars could go in.) This young Indian had this double-barrel shotgun levelled on us. I said, "Don't move, anybody, and don't stop. Just keep driving along." We signalled to the other car behind us that there was a problem. We kept driving, and we finally drove right out. They didn't shoot or say anything, but I believe that

had either of us stepped out of the car or stopped within the reservation, there could have been a very serious situation.

We had public meetings; we went to the city commission; I wrote letters to the Bureau of Indian Affairs protesting the situation on the reservation. Soon after that, things started moving, and we were able to eliminate that situation. But still, it wasn't the kind of situation that anyone felt was near up to par. The conditions that the Indians lived in were still deplorable.

A Civil Rights bill came up before the legislature in 1953. (George Rudiak was one of the legislators who spearheaded the bill.) The NAACP spearheaded the effort. Those of us who were involved with the NAACP and desegregation throughout the community were interested. During the legislative sessions we would actually shuttle to Carson City--one group would go one time, and another group would go the next time to meet with the legislative committees, contacting them, lobbying them for passage of the public accommodation law. We had many problems--anything you can imagine. We had people blatantly stating that it was reverse discrimination and that there just shouldn't be any law that granted blacks this kind of consideration.

When a civil rights law finally passed, Grant Sawyer was governor. [In 1965 the legislature passed a civil rights bill outlawing discrimination in public accommodation and employment in places with fifteen or more employees.--Ed.] I remember we went to Carson City to solicit his help and support of the bill. We had called a meeting that morning at 9:00 in Carson City. I never will forget that morning when I was thrown right in the middle of a political situation that I never expected to be. We were talking to the

governor. He said that he thought he had enough votes committed in the lower house to pass the bill. His problem was in the Senate. He looked at me and said, "Woodrow, you'll have to contact the lieutenant governor to see if we can get the necessary support to pass the bill in the Senate." (Paul Laxalt was lieutenant governor and a Republican. Governor Sawyer was a Democrat.)

I said, "Contact the lieutenant governor?" I said, "Governor, I have never met him." I said, "I knew he ran, and I met his people...."

He said, "But you know Paul Laxalt probably knows you. You probably can get him." He said, "You check with him and then you find out if we can get his support in trying to bring around those senators."

Well, we had James Slattery from Storey County and all of them. Slattery was one of the big opponents. We had a lot of opponents, but he was the main one. He represented the hotel and gaming industry. They lobbied him and he was their boy. At that time the cow counties controlled the senate--they had nine of the seventeen votes.

I asked Bill Bailey and Mr. Woodard to go with me. Bill Bailey was a black man from Reno and Woodard was a black man from Reno. (I don't recall his first name.) I asked them if they would go in with me to see the lieutenant governor. We went to the lieutenant governor's office, and he said that he would be back after he opened the session and talk to us. He came back and we talked about discrimination. He said, "You mean to tell me that...?" He didn't really know that it was like it was, honestly did not.

I said, "Mr. Laxalt, where have you been all the time? You're lieutenant governor."

He said, "Woodrow, you mean to tell me...? I can hardly believe that."

I said, "That's the fact." I said, "Well, come and go with me and let me show you. When I come to my U.S. Commission meetings up here I have to live in the home of one of the members. I can't even get a hotel or a motel room."

He said, "What?!"

I said, "I can't go but one place and have a meal."

He said, "You've got to be kidding!"

I said, "No, I am not." I asked him, "Would you intercede for us with the senators? Most of them are from the cows." [Referring to the rural or "cow" counties.--Ed.]. We only had one Senator from Clark County at the time. That was before reapportionment.

He said, "Well, you know, we were discriminated against, too." (He's Basque, you know.)

I said, "Yes, but it's a little bit different. Unless you told somebody you were a Basque, they wouldn't know it." [laughs]

He said, "All right, I'll try. I'll see what I can do. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. We don't have much time. I'm having lunch with the cow county senators. I'm going to go over to lunch...." (There was a little cafe across the street from the capitol in Carson City.) He said, "If I give you the sign that I've got their vote, you'll know everything is OK."

I said, "At least we appreciate your consideration. I'll be there."

He came in a little bit late. I was getting very down because I didn't think he would come. I saw him looking around. I raised up the thumb and he gave me the OK sign, and he wanted me to come over. I went over to talk to him. He said, "I've just got enough, I think, Woodrow, if you can hold the one vote from Clark County, I think we've got enough." I was jumping for joy then. I was very happy that we were able to do it, that we stood a chance to get enough

votes. I don't have any idea what he had said to the Republican senators, but he got their vote.

I was leaving--going to try to get back home because I was working every day and I didn't want to lose another day. He said, "What we're going to have to do, after the session, I want you to go on the air with me. We're going to have a press conference at my home." He set up the press conference at home, so we left it like that. He called me back that afternoon. I told him I had to get back to work. He said, "But you can't go now. We've got to see what we can do about this thing. I'll need your support and your expertise in pushing this thing and getting it through. You're going to have to stay this evening until after that press conference."

I said, "OK." [laughs] I stayed and we went on the air. We had the press conference, and we passed the bill.

I've met a lot of the politicians, most of them in the state in the last forty years. I have never met anyone that's more genuine, fair-minded, straightforward than Paul Laxalt. After I sat in the legislation, he gave me the same kind of support to get my open housing bill passed.

There was a young white man named Don (I forget his last name) who belonged to St. James Catholic Church. St. James wanted to sponsor a boy scout troop in West Las Vegas. I didn't belong to St. James; I belonged to the Second Baptist Church. Don said, "I'll start it if you will be my assistant scoutmaster." He said, "I've had experience in scouting." We got together and we recruited boys and had a wonderful group of kids; they were fantastic. I was scoutmaster of Troop 67. I started going to the Scout headquarters to get all the material and attended all the training meetings and things like that. I became efficient in the area. So Don and I developed this troop. We trained the boys.

I had a friend then, a Mormon fellow by the name of Oran Woodruff. He was in insurance. We became very good friends. He had a very fine background in Scouting, and he would go out camping with me and my boy scout troop and help me to prepare them to earn their merit badges.

One night we were laying in our bags talking about the situation. I said, "You know, it's a shame. Blacks can't buy stuff on credit. They can't get any money from any of the banks." I said, "I just don't think that's right; I don't think that's fair. You can't get any money to do anything but buy an automobile. That's a shame."

He said, "You know, I was just thinking, Woodrow, as you're talking, and that is a shame. Maybe we can do something about that."

I said, "How?"

He said, "You know, we have a credit union, Deseret Credit Union. Why don't we start a credit union in West Las Vegas?"

I said, "I don't have any background in that area, but maybe we could do something about it."

He said, "*You can do anything*. I've never seen anybody like you. You can do anything you want to do. Let's put it together. The next time Mr. Davis, the organizer from CUNA, comes to town, I'm going to bring him. I met him the last time he was here, and I'm going to bring him over to your house." (CUNA is the Credit Union National Association. The headquarters is in Madison, Wisconsin.)

I said, "All right."

About a month after that somebody knocked on my door at 11:30 p.m. I asked, "Who is it?" I flipped on the light and peeked out, and there was Oran [laughs]. I let him in the house. "I'll tell you what," Oran said, "you can do anything that you want to do. So, why don't you go ahead and

organize. Can you get five or ten guys together and give me twenty-five dollars for the charter, and CUNA will process the things, and you'll get it. In the meantime you could be soliciting members, you could solicit eight or ten guys and the guys could serve on your board or on a credit committee and supervise it. What you could do is start from scratch and just build it up. You can do it. You get together ten guys and meet me back here tomorrow night at 7:00."

I said, "All right. I'll try."

That next day I went to work and I'm calling and running, and I got ten guys to commit themselves, but there were seven who showed up! Seven showed up. I made the eighth one. What we needed was \$2.50 each from them. I had to pay another \$5.00 for the other two who didn't show. We wrote up a charter. That was in 1951. I was president of NAACP, so I sent the charter in.

CUNA said, "Look, that's too broad. That would reach all the way to Reno." (The original charter included the description: "families and members of families of Westside.") The CUNA representative said, "Fill in the specific field of membership." I was president of the NAACP, so I asked my board to give me permission to say "members and families of the Las Vegas branch of the NAACP." That's how the Westside Credit Union got tied in with the NAACP. (It still is "members and families of the NAACP.") So, we got the charter.

During the period that the war factories were moving out and disposing of stuff, I had bought two typewriters; I bought all kinds of ledgers and record ledgers and some adding machines, and one calculator. I bought all this stuff and had it stored and didn't know what I was going to do with it, just that I was going to use it. So we didn't have to buy any office equipment. I had to order forms from CUNA, so that's what I did.

We set up in my house. The people would come to my house and join. We had two or three recruiters, guys who went out in the field to sign you up: pay a quarter and then pay on your five dollar membership. You weren't a member until you paid your five dollars. That's how we did it. We started like that with eight guys, and we kept the credit union in my home.

Once somebody broke in there and tore up the thing looking for money. They knew that we had a little money. My wife and I weren't at home. My wife said, "Woodrow, they came in with their dirty clothes on and just destroyed our furniture in the living room. You're going to have to get the credit union out of here."

Mr. Roland Johnson was a credit union member, and he had built this little community store on the Westside. (Roland Johnson was Lubertha Johnson's husband at one time.) He let me work in his office.

We got our charter in January of 1951, and before the year was out we made a loan. The first loan we made was to a Harold Jackson for twenty dollars. He was paying two or four dollars a month on it. We now have over \$2 million in assets in the credit union. We own the building. We loaned a guy some money on the building, and he lost it. We had moved from my house to the Community Store, then over on the corner of Monroe and E; then we moved back to the community store. Mr. Johnson had built an office attached to the Community Store. We moved in there for a while, and then when we got this piece of property we moved here. We've been here ever since. We've been here about thirteen years. I've been treasurer-manager ever since we organized.

We have made housing loans. We've made just as many as we possibly can. In the last federal examination we were warned not to proceed with making real estate loans at this

time, because our loan portfolio was too heavy--top heavy--in real estate. They said that it would be advisable to cut it back to approximately 36 percent of our total loan portfolio. We were above 50 percent at the time of the last federal examination. I'm sure that the federal examiner was within his rights to chastise us with regard to loans.... A lot of this area is red-lined and people cannot get loans. *But* good members can certainly pay their bills, and all they need is an opportunity to improve their properties with monies. We felt that we should do as much as we possibly could in that particular area.

The majority of our loans would be Westside property. We have some out in the outlying areas, but the majority of it is Westside property. We can extend a personal credit. A person can borrow on their signature, they can borrow against their shares, they can borrow for providential needs, they can borrow for furniture, automobiles, education--most any type of loan that can be made by the banks or other financial institutions. We are able to make small business loans.

The federal examiner would like to have a well-balanced loan portfolio: some automobiles, education, personal loans, and furniture loans. When you get a *large* percentage of your loans in one category, if something happens they feel you are putting yourself in a position to lose the whole ball of wax, or lose too much if, for instance, the real estate goes bad. But here in the community that we live in, we know these people personally to a great extent, and we know that they can't get many loans out of the area for real estate purposes. Other Las Vegas banks make some loans to Westside housing, but they are not eager, and you have to be very lucky to get the kinds of loans that are needed in the community at this time, to refurbish the homes and even to purchase homes.

In the early years when we first organized, there were several things that came about that made me think maybe we had a major problem and that it was possible that we wouldn't make it with the credit union. These things were brought about by other people coming in and trying to discourage and take over the credit union by organizing or soliciting support from various groups to remove the people who were actually involved in organizing and supporting the credit union. Several times we had that kind of thing happen. They saw the possibilities of the Westside Federal Credit Union and they would have liked to take it over by putting their people on boards, credit committee, board of directors, probably treasurer, manager and that type of thing. They wanted to take it over from the inside. They saw a good opportunity. At that time we didn't have a large sum of money, but we were moving ahead and we had people who were *very* much interested in seeing that the credit union would be a success. These people who wanted to take over were involved in political groups and also wanted to be influential leaders, and they thought that this would enhance their position.

The first try as far as someone taking over was made by a young attorney who came into town. He was very energetic and he did some good here in the community, but he wanted to take over everything. That was Charles Kellar. Being involved in the credit union would have definitely enhanced his position in the community, and money was involved. Fortunately the people had confidence, those people who were members of the credit union. Mr. Kellar felt that he might be able to really move the credit union along and become a tremendous economic power in the black community.

He did not necessarily want a position on the board. To begin with, it wouldn't have been that much of a financial

gain, say to subsidize his own activities. But in time, if he had had his people in charge, the credit union could have been used in many areas to promote his position in the black community. He may not have had political ambitions to run for public office, but he would have liked to have had the political influence and call the shots as far as the community was concerned.

I learned about his interest just prior to the annual meeting, when a friend came and told me that there would be an effort by a group to organize a number of votes and structure the election to move in and take control of the board of directors. What we did was ask the people to come out and support the credit union and the candidates that the credit union committee had recommended for re-election, and in that way we were able to defeat the effort of this group to get their people elected.

There was another incident later on, several years after that. It was an effort by a group...I don't know exactly all of the people who were involved in that group. Without knowing that, I'd rather not call any names, but at an annual meeting the same type of effort was made to get their people in a position of power within the board of directors, probably in the treasurer position and on the credit committee.

Charles Kellar was a lawyer who came from New York to Las Vegas and made a tremendous impact in the community by serving the NAACP and the Voters League. He got involved in real estate--owned properties. He was a very competent man, very excellent attorney. I think that if he had used this to benefit the people in the community, he would have had a much greater impact than what he had on the community. He went and represented us at the legislature; he was a lobbyist. He did accomplish some good, but I think in the end that his impact would have been much

greater had he had a different motive. His motive was mostly personal aggrandizement.

Mr. Kellar's style of leadership was quite different from mine. My method was to go into a situation, reason with the adversary, show them that what they were doing was improper. If we had a confrontation, we should sit down and try and work it out without a major clash. I felt that the things that we were able to accomplish were done by negotiations and by education. In most cases when Mr. Kellar was involved, it was a direct confrontation. When you got down to the facts and the root of it, *maybe* our aims and aspirations were much closer than we had ever thought or anticipated.

From the time that blacks moved into Las Vegas in the early 1940s--I mean the *masses*--it was a confrontation; it was a battle all the way up and down the line. I've had to stand my ground in many situations and say no, that this is as far as we're going. What I'm saying is this: If there was an occasion to reach a compromise, I'd rather that than to create a fight and lose the whole thing. After working with the legislature, I felt that we had moved up and had allies, that we had built some favorable forces that were in favor of assisting us. I was afraid that the method that Mr. Kellar was using would destroy that and not give these allies we had developed an opportunity to do what they could do to help move the situation. We didn't have the vote in the legislature. If you could pick up an ally who would work with you, you didn't want to alienate that individual and destroy it with a confrontation. I am not saying that you had to bow down. I thought that in trying to compromise and work with those who had committed themselves to work with us, I didn't want to destroy that support.

I actually think Mr. Kellar did some damage when he lobbied the legislature on certain occasions. I also think that

he was able to do some constructive things. What bothered me most was that several times when we had things we thought were squared away, Mr. Kellar's attitude made it very fragile. It could have been the straw that broke the camel's back.

Although Mr. Kellar and I approached things differently, our differences did not disrupt community unity. I think it was always a situation of compromise one way or the other, because we could not afford to have the kind of division that would make us lose sight of the aims and aspirations of our people. I think that even though we had turbulent times, when we didn't agree on situations, we would come back and find mutual ground. I think that we were able to compromise, because he was an intelligent man, and we could get together and find mutual ground along the way.

My nephew and I opened a club on the corner of Owens and H Streets in the 1960s. It was named Reuben's, after my nephew; he and I were partners. Later I named it Woody's. I sold the gaming and liquor license to Sarah Ann Knight and Joe Purdy. The licenses are now being used at 805 Owens and at the Moulin Rouge. I didn't let anybody know that I had an interest in it. Only the family knew at the time. After I served in the legislature, it wasn't running as I thought it would, so I moved Reuben out and I took over the operation to try to recoup some of the money that I had expended, put in the venture.

In the 1940s and 1950s there were always some whites who would come into the Westside bars, especially those that had music. Not in large numbers, but you had them coming over. They would meet a friend, and would come in and socialize and be entertained. In the late 1950s, there were several of the bars on the Westside that had a large percent-

age of white clientele, especially when they had real good entertainment.

I think that the idea that there could be integrated clubs on the Westside has been a problem for a very long time. You know, it was in the 1960s that integration came about downtown. The police frowned on integrated bars. That has always been the case. They definitely didn't want whites coming into predominately black bars for entertainment, and they discouraged it very much. Actually, a major portion of our income, at the height of the business, was generated by mostly white patronage. They would have drinks, and they would listen to the music and visit. We had a very, very large white clientele.

In the 1940s the schools were segregated, all but the high school. Black children attended Westside Elementary School. They loved the school, because they had a woman there who had the interest of the kids at heart. She loved them, and she tried to see that the teachers gave them an opportunity, an education. Miss French was her name; she was white.

I was here when Mabel Hoggard came. She was the first black licensed teacher in this county. (There was another black teacher. She taught up towards Utah at an Indian school. It was out on a little railroad stop.) Mabel told me the predicament the Westside school was in. They neglected it; they didn't keep up the water, the drinking fountains, the toilets, the windows, the faucets, and this type of thing. The district let it run down. They did not maintain the school well. So Mabel came to me and said, "Woodrow, I'd like for you go down to that school board and tell them that the school needs to be brought up to standard. Somebody will get sick. The toilets are inadequate; there are

water problems, spurting and spewing all over the place, and it's time we going to...."

So I went to the school board. They said they didn't know it was in that condition and that they would make necessary repairs. So they did. Actually, they came over and did quite a bit of work on it, repairing the toilets and the water fountains and the windows and that type of thing, to bring it back in fairly good shape.

Black students went to Westside School and then they went to the junior high school--Fifth Street Grammar School. I think they went two years there. From there they went to Las Vegas High School. At that time there was only one high school in Las Vegas. Black students went there. They had problems, but they survived. I understand that some of the students couldn't get the kind of assistance they needed from some of the teachers. Some of the teachers were very good--they were willing to contribute and help the youngsters out--and some of them were negative. A lot of kids don't go to school. A lot of them hadn't achieved in grammar school and junior high, and high school was a problem for them. Anything that created an additional problem would be a deterrent to trying to promote an educational climate.

In the late 1960s there were several occasions down at Rancho High School when they had problems. I think that was during Oran Gragson's tenure as mayor. I was in the legislature at that time, and the mayor asked me if I would come down to talk to the youngsters and to appear at a meeting, and I did. I came down, and we were able to get it smoothed out and taken care of. I met with students, parents and officials. The problem really didn't get as bad as it could have. It could have been much worse.

The unrest was all over the community. It was a very trying time. We had a little agitation from groups outside. That was around the Black Panther period. They infiltrated

groups here within the community. They came from the outside, mostly from California. I didn't want to see anything like a racial confrontation. The people who were in the NAACP and the Voters League and other organizations in the community were involved, and they stood in there. They did not want to see things get out of hand.

The integration of schools was a story in itself, with educators, the media and everybody else getting involved, trying to come up with some solution to integration, or come up with an integration program. That was tough; that was really tough. The leadership of this community was involved --Charles Kellar, Reverend Bennett, myself. *All* the leaders were trying to give support in whatever way they possibly could to bring about an equitable solution. They came up with the sixth grade program. [Under the sixth grade center program, Westside children are bused into white neighborhoods for grades one through five. White children are bused to the Westside for sixth grade only.--Ed.] I wasn't happy with it, but we accepted it because we felt at that point that was the best we could get.

I worked on something that would please me more: to disperse the citizenry in this community through integrated housing. That was one of my key points in trying to pass an open housing bill in the legislature. When you have open housing and people living all over a community, then you eliminate the segregated schools. It takes quite a bit of effort on the part of both state and local officials dealing with the political process and the educational process to bring this kind of thing about. We knew that the young black kids would suffer more than the whites by being bused. Knowing what was originally at Westside School and the condition of the other schools in the area, we knew that they never would be maintained, nor could we get first-class teachers to improve the educational structure in the local school

system, unless we had *whites* coming into the schools here. It just isn't in the cards, unless the kids from the white community would be coming into the area. Many of us knew that it was penalizing the black kids. But I thought that it wasn't as bad as what we had: substandard schools, substandard teachers. (We got the worst teachers.) The education for the black youngsters in a segregated school was not as good as it should have been.

I know that the issue of busing is before us again, at this time. I was hoping, actually, that the legislature might come up with some kind of resolution dealing with that problem all over the state, but I doubt very much at this stage of the game that that will happen. I think that the state board of education should come up and mandate a committee to make another study, a complete study, of what the educational system is all about and how it can best educate *all* of the youngsters in this state, regardless of the community they come from--the black community or any other specific ethnic community. I think when that is done, *then* the school district can get together and try to deal with their suggestions and their outline of how to resolve the problem. I just don't see a time in the near future when the white parents will bus their kids on a grade-to-grade basis to the black community. But whether that is the case now or not, I think that we *have* to look to the future to eliminate the situation that we have now, by making it possible that *all* of the kids will be in a position to receive equal opportunity in the educational process.

I believe that we are stuck with the present busing arrangement for a while. I think that we were rushed into the sixth grade system. I don't think an adequate study was made, nor was adequate legislation passed to deal with it. Now, since we've looked at the situation on a trial-and-error-basis, we should take our time and really go after a solution, but I just don't see it happening tomorrow.

Chapter Five

RACE, POLITICS AND ELECTED OFFICE

I BECAME INTERESTED in politics in the 1940s, but not necessarily in running for public office. I felt that I could make an impact on what people did with their vote, get people to vote for candidates who had some concern for their constituency. I really hadn't thought about running for public office. I joined the Republican party; I worked for candidates; I went to political meetings; I was active in the Republican party. The reason I joined the Republican party here was because when I looked at the total political structure--southern Nevada being predominately Democratic--I saw that they controlled the political entity and had the political power. The Pat Clarks and the Cashmans and all of those...Mayor Ernie Cragin. The unions were Democrat controlled. I thought when you're putting all your eggs in one basket, those that are coming up from the bottom are a mite rotten. It creates a mesh of inconsistency. We have to have an opposition to bring out the best. The Republican party in Las Vegas was struggling, and I thought, "I'm going to join the Republican party."

When I was eight years old in Mississippi, my mother sent me to the commissary, the grocery store where you buy with coupons when you draw company scrip. Theodore Bilbo was running for governor of Mississippi, and he made a speech. He was ranting and raving. I'm in the corner of the store door, back in the hole, just listening.

He concluded his speech with these words: "If I am elected your governor, I will keep that nigger on the farm. He will be your servant; you will control his everyday life, his soul. And I want you to know that I'm going to ask God to bless the white man and God damn the nigger." I found out what party he was in...the Democratic.

Later, I thought, "Even though that's in the South, and I'm in the West now, I can't be a part of that." Senator Eastland had a plantation up in the Mississippi Delta. He sent for blacks...got them out of jail, paid ten dollars and sent them off to work a year or two years on his farm in the Mississippi Delta. He and his father got wealthy. I knew them. I had to pass the house every day. I knew them personally. I said to myself, "How can I be part of a political structure that includes Stennis, Eastland, Bilbo, Talmadge, and all these people...?" I said, "Now, look, there's got to be another way. You've got to have some opposition." Now, I'm not necessarily against *all* of the things that the Democratic party stands for, but I certainly know that they stand for enough bad that it can't be any worse over there on the other side, so I joined the Republican party when I got involved in the political process. I was never a Democrat.

Franklin Roosevelt did some wonderful things. Roosevelt was a leader. Now, he might have had some faults, but he was imaginative. He came up with new ideas for the time. He came up with programs that served as a stopgap to stop us from going down the drain. He was a great president, because he did some things that had to be

done. It took courage to do it at the time. Not all Democrats are Eastlands and Bilbos. I understand we've got some fine Democrats, and I'll vote for them! I've never voted a straight Republican ticket. I'll vote for the individual. I believe in a lot of things that the Republican party stands for, but I vote for the *individual*, and I would have voted for Roosevelt.

In the 1950s and 1960s we had some activity with the John Birch Society within the Republican party, but we had a very strong organizational structure at that time. The fringe John Birch members were never able, really, to come in and take control. They got very active and noisy at one time, but by and large the main-line Republicans were able to keep this fringe element of the John Birch Society from coming in to do the kind of damage that they were capable of doing. They ran for elected offices, and maybe one or two of them were elected, but not to the point of actually destroying the main purpose, the main policies of the Republican party. They were never able to muster that kind of support, although at one point they seemed to have been growing in strength and numbers within the party, particularly in the outlying areas and up north in the cow counties.

After I joined the Republican party here, why naturally, they were very happy to see me--the majority. We had some bigoted people within the party structure who didn't want me to be a part of the Republican party and the Republican organization. But, by and large, I was accepted with open arms. I had a tremendous amount of freedom of action within the party. I was on various committees, because this black community was *totally* Democrat. There were maybe

twenty-five black Republicans, so I always had to campaign. The state legislature was my first elected office. Paul Laxalt came into the party structure. He came here and started campaigning, talking politics, meeting with us. He decided that he was going to run for governor. He said he would like to have one house of the legislature, at least, that was sympathetic, that would be supportive of his program. So, a lot of people said, "Woodrow, you ought to run."

I said, "Oh, my God! What are you talking about? I'm not going to run for public office. Oh, no." The Republican organization had a big breakfast at the convention center in Las Vegas the morning they had Governor George Romney of Michigan to speak. *Someone* included my name as a prospective candidate to run for office. "Woodrow Wilson. Here he is!" [laughs] I bet you there were 500 people there.

Governor Romney went on to tell about a black member of his legislature in Michigan. He had done a tremendous job. From what he understood, members of the Republican party thought that Woodrow Wilson could do a good job at the legislature. They finally dragged me up there and sat me up close; he went on and on and on. He finally said, "You ought to run."

There were one or two other blacks there. They said, "Woodrow, run."

At the time, they elected legislators at large, and there was not a black in the legislature. There weren't anything but whites elected. There were no whites living on the Westside. There was no representation.

One day when I came down Main Street something just told me, "Why don't you take a short cut and go left on Charleston and then go up H Street." (They had moved the Republican registration office over near Alta and H Street.) I turned right on H and headed home. I looked over there

and saw this county registration office. I suddenly whirled my car in the turn lane. When I got in there, I said, "I'm going to look into this and see."

The guy said, "What do you want?"

I said, "Well, I'm just checking to find out. What would I have to do to run for the legislature?"

He said, "Here. All you've got to do is sign up."

I said, "Give me one!" That's the *God's* truth. No one knew. I hadn't spoken to anyone or said anything about a campaign. I signed it. I was ashamed to tell anybody, really! I finally told one or two people.

"You're going to run?" I said, "Yes, I'm going to run." Then the party heard about it. The news got around; it got in the paper that Woodrow Wilson is running for the legislature.

I called some people together and told them I was going to run. I went to the central committee and told them I was going to run and I needed support.

"We'll help him."

A white lady said to me one day after I was elected, "You're the first man I ever walked the street for, but I'm proud of it." [laughs]

Even though they were not Republicans, Westside blacks worked for me. I'd call this person, that person, and formed a committee. After I got going, people started advancing me financial support. I got myself a group, organized them and told them what I wanted them to do. Then I got a manager, Bob Brown, publisher of the *Valley Times* newspaper. I went down to the headquarters, and I got professional advice. They had professional people coming in from Washington.

It was pretty tough being in an at-large situation, because you were running all over the Las Vegas area. I went to white areas, and I was received. I went door-to-door in some of them.

I really did not go to my church and ask for support, but without going I received tremendous support from the churches throughout this community. I attended and went to several churches and church groups outside of the community. I was *very* well received by the Mormons. I never really had any problems. I talked to them, and I was very direct and told them what I thought I would be able to do and my reason for wanting to be elected to the legislature. I thought I could be an asset to the legislature in getting good legislation passed.

I went to several people who were prominent in the Mormon church, because I had that kind of contact, and I'd worked with several Mormons. I had volunteered my service as a worker to assist in building. They were pouring concrete one time, and I assisted in that. I assisted in helping to get the bricks in place. The leadership of the construction job was within the church. For that reason I had direct contact with some of the Mormons in their churches.

As I've stated before, one Mormon was a very dear friend of mine. Oran Woodruff was from Salt Lake City. His family was involved in historical background within the Mormon church and in Salt Lake. His family was here, and we were very close friends. He worked with me to help the boys in my Scout troop get their merit badges. As I mentioned before, he was responsible for interesting me in organizing the credit union. It was through that kind of contact that I was involved in the Mormon religious community. I would take my Scout troops and we would go to the court of honors at the Mormon church. I've been invited from time to time to appear at special services--open services --for the citizenry in the community, and I attended.

Some black ministers spoke for my election. Also I had contact with white ministers throughout the community, not that they supported me from the pulpit, but some of them

did support me, *period*. In other words, my campaign for the legislature was a county-wide campaign. Every group of note, prominent group in the community, I made contacts with, and I attended every meeting I possibly could to introduce myself. The Nevada Voters League worked with me and informed me in my campaign. They supported other candidates, also. It wasn't a black thing.

When you are called in to a specific organization to speak, you outline your platform and tell them what you expect to do at the legislature. All the time you did not agree with the other candidates. Of course, it wasn't a debate-type thing, but you made your presentation and they made their presentation. You appear together with other candidates. You were called at the same time. One organization would have all of the candidates for the assembly, and the other one for the senators. If there were candidates running for county positions, they would be there, too. I introduced several areas of emphasis: my position as far as labor was concerned; employment within the hotel structure; also my desire to eliminate as much discrimination and segregation as I possibly could within Nevada, and to introduce legislation that would improve the situation at our penal institutions and social welfare areas.

If a campaigner in an at-large election was "single shooting", people who were working for him in the field--making house-to-house contacts, organizational contacts--would basically say, "Now, I want you to vote for *my* candidate, and no others, even though more than one position is being contested. If you don't vote for anyone else that vote will count five times, or according to how many positions are in your race." I am sure some blacks voted only for me, but I didn't use the single-shooting tactic. I'd never ask any specific group--even in the black community--to single shoot me. One of the things you must remember, if I was going to be

effective I *had to have* people in the legislature who thought like I did, who supported legislation that I supported. I knew others were going to be elected. I'd rather have those people elected who thought like I thought and were interested in the kinds of legislation that I was interested in.

When I first went to the legislature in 1967, I was an oddity. I was something that they'd never seen before: a black in the legislative body. I was aware of that. After I was there a few days, there weren't any who hadn't had any social contact with a black man, because I contacted everybody. I talked to everybody, and I went to all the meetings that I possibly could--those that I was invited to, and I was invited to most of them. There was a tremendous suspicion of just what I would do up there. How will I act? What tactics will he use to make his point? They were suspicious. Anxiety existed.

There was an elderly lady who told me she had attended the first day of at last twenty legislatures. She said, "I just can't believe that you were elected to this body from Las Vegas."

I said, "Yes, I was."

And she got real close to me and she said, "You know, your mother gave you a million dollars."

I said, "What? Why? My mother was a poor black woman in Mississippi, striving to make ends meet."

She said, "Yes, but that personality that she gave you is worth a million dollars." By that time she stuck her hand in my mouth and caught my top front teeth. She really thought that I had false teeth.

I said, "No, they're my teeth."

She said, "I can't believe it." She said, "I just can't believe it." She did that! [laughs]

They had a place, a little bar down the street. I don't have the name. It was a hangout for the legislators, and

that's where they did their politicking. Some told the owner, "If this black is coming up here, if he's admitted or served here in the bar, we are not going to frequent your bar. We will discontinue it." He was told that. I never asked him who told him, but he would have told me.

He said, "I had to tell the assemblyman that you were elected and sent here by the people, and that as long as you were a legislator and wanted to come, you could come to my place." He pulled me off the first day of the session and told me this. He said, "I've told them that I would not say it. Why don't *they* tell you that they would not like for you to socialize or participate in the discussions that they have and do the politicking that they do at my bar?"

I said, "Yes, I wish they would. I'd like to know who they are."

I found out that the very ones, the legislators who did not want me to frequent the bar, were the first ones who tried to buy me drinks--make me welcome. After that I was just one of the group. On some of the legislation that I introduced we had a battle, but I think that I was most successful in the legislature. I got a lot of things done, and I changed a lot of attitudes.

There was a group of girls that took care of the legislative books, our bill books, everyday. They would come down every morning and make a special effort to greet me, to welcome me. They would come down and say, "Good morning, Assemblyman."

I said, "Good morning."

They said, "We're so glad to see you today."

I said, "Thank you very much. You know, you gals make my day."

This was the first week of the legislature. We'd come downstairs at noon each day. (My wife Nora was there with me for a week or ten days, and we would go to lunch.) The

first day this happened Assemblyman William Swackhamer and his wife were standing at the foot of the stairs as we came down out of the old capitol building. "Boy," he said, "how you gonna make it? You think you are going to make it? What do you think about it?"

I said, "Assemblyman, I feel very honored and privileged to be a part of this august body. The only thing I expect is an opportunity to prove that I can be an asset to the body. I've heard a lot about you before I came here, and I've seen quite a bit since I've been here this short time. I just hope that some day after I've served in the legislature as long as you have, that I might have the respect and the admiration that I've seen the legislators pay you." I turned, and Nora and I walked out of the capitol and went to lunch.

The very next day he was standing there. He looked up when we came down. He said, "Assemblyman, will you and Mrs. Wilson do us the honor of having lunch with us today?"

We had a lot of legislation. Civil rights, open housing, public accommodation, those were the kinds of things that I was interested in. I was interested in social legislation, aid to dependent children, union and labor legislation. I was interested in education. I supported education. I was instrumental in assisting to pass the legislation for the community college system.... I found out that Mr. Howard Hughes was going to assist in the initial financing of the community college system. I worked very close with the educational committee.

As far as social legislation, most of the problems were in southern Nevada. We had to *really* do a tremendous selling job to the rural counties, even to Washoe County, the Reno delegation and the Carson delegation. They didn't understand the problem in the first place. They didn't feel that welfare was necessary; they felt that everybody should be working, everybody should have a job, and that there

shouldn't be those major problems. That's always part of the story, you know: "Well, I made it. Why can't they do the same?" I felt those attitudes *definitely*. Not only did we have that kind of thinking up there at the legislature, but we had some of it down here in Las Vegas as well. It was more prevalent there, though, because they weren't looking at the problem firsthand.

During my tenure in the legislature, I was working to pass an open housing bill and to get relief for disabled persons and women with dependent children. For most of the social legislation that went before the legislature, I was going to and working quite a bit with Jim Gibson, who was on the Senate Finance Committee and the Judiciary Committee. [An open housing bill was defeated in 1969. In 1971 an open housing bill passed the state legislature, which faced federal court action if it did not approve such a bill.--Ed.] With his background Mr. Gibson wasn't really aware of what was going on. I was able to get, I would say, more than what I expected to get from him. He even gave us a budget for the Equal Rights Commission. At first he didn't see it, but I talked him into it. We got a budget--a fairly good budget--for that type of thing. One thing I found out is this: If he promised you something, if he told you something, you could depend on it. He wasn't wishy-washy. That's what I liked about him. He was open, and that's the only reason why we were able to get some of the stuff through in that particular area.

The Gibsons were Democrats, but I found them to be very fair. If I had a problem in the legislature, or I wanted to know something straightforward, or I wanted to get some information on how to get what I wanted, if I really got down to it I'd ask the senator. I'd talk to Jim Gibson. We didn't agree on everything, but I would not have been able

to get the necessary finance to support my open housing bill if it hadn't been for Senator Gibson.

At first he said, "What about it? What if I've got a three-bedroom home and some black comes and wants to rent a room?"

I said, "This is way out of the ball park. This isn't even the situation. The law doesn't have anything to do with that type of thing. It doesn't have anything to do about a house or room that you don't want to rent." Then I went back to 1889 when a civil rights bill was passed in Congress. I said, "That bill is still really in force, so it gives us the *protection* on the *federal* level. That tells us that we are doing what's proper, what's right. We are upholding the Constitution."

I used to go in the morning before the working day, and he was down there. We talked, and we went over these things, *over* and *over*. I didn't get on a soap box. I went to the pressure point. I went to where if anything was going to be accomplished it was accomplished. I didn't need any outside publicity or want to be seen. These are the techniques I used to get what I got. I lost the first open housing bill in the Senate Finance Committee in 1969. They killed it. I told them to kill it if they weren't going to give me the money to fund it, and they killed it.

I introduced it again in the next session. I really was more sophisticated in handling the politics of the bill. Over the years I had created a nucleus of people who would support it and who had done a tremendous educational job on the legislature. They understood better about what the open housing bill was all about. I had talked to them and discussed it with them. When they voted against me, I didn't get angry with them. I tried to sit down and reason with them. I found that I was more successful in giving them the points, showing why it was necessary and what was really happening to the citizenry in Las Vegas and in Reno as well

by not having housing available in every situation. I pointed out that we wouldn't need this tremendous expenditure for school integration and busing and this kind of thing if we had open housing. So we were able to finally get it over.

I didn't go up there to the capitol expecting to turn the world over, turn everything around there. If I found an adversary in a particular situation, I'd invite him to lunch; I'd invite him to dinner. And we'd go right down the line, and I'd ask him why were his attitudes such. He would explain to me.

While I was in the legislature, there was a case where several of the black students had had a problem at UNR (the University of Nevada, Reno). They had been accused of certain unethical conduct unbecoming of a university student. They were going to have a hearing at UNR, and they had invited Senator Slattery, because he was on the Senate Education Committee. One or two other people and people from the university were going to hear the case. It was an open thing. At the last minute I was notified that this session was going to be held and that the students were to be tried in an open situation. Finding out about it, I went to UNR to see what was actually transpiring. When I got there the students were being put into a situation...I would say a kangaroo court. That's really what they were subjected to.

Mr. Slattery's attitude was that they had disobeyed rules and were out of line and that they should be punished. He had a hard line, a very hard line. In other words, knowing his attitude as far as the legislature was concerned and his attitude towards minorities, no one expected anything different, because he was a very prejudiced man. The students just could not have gotten any consideration, even though

they might have been right--they couldn't have gotten a fair hearing under those circumstances. I asked several questions of the people who were involved in the hearing--some questions with regard to what had transpired--and then I asked some questions of the young men who were involved. After we had heard all of this, I had to make a definite statement to the university and to the hearing group and to Slattery. What the young men had done wasn't anything that should subject them to that kind of a hearing...criticism. Then I said that instead of the young men being put on trial in a hearing, the people who were involved in scrutinizing things should have been the ones who were on trial. This was a totally prejudiced setting and the charges were frivolous. After I finished, they dropped it, and the young men were vindicated and went back to class.

There were a lot of problems at the university at that time. Black students were segregated in certain situations and subjected to inhumane treatment. At one point, at one of the hearings I went to, I asked why they would bring these athletes and other students into the university if they were going to let them be treated as they were treated. That question was never answered at any time. The president of the university knew what was going on, and being the president of the university, he let it happen. I don't think the Board of Regents had anything directly to do with it. I didn't have an opportunity to meet in any setting, on any occasion with the regents; I never met with them.

The Reapportionment Act was passed in 1971. I was vice-chairman of the special committee for reapportionment in the lower house of the legislature. Assemblyman Frank Young was an excellent chairman. We had to work out the mechanics in order to present the reapportionment that we felt was justified. Especially, we had to be very careful to reapportion so as not to eliminate people being elected from

various areas and various ethnic backgrounds, particularly the black community. We wanted them to have an opportunity for representation.

We had several legislators come up with proposals on how they would like to redistrict. Then the committee would take under consideration all of these proposals. I think that they wanted to be fair in adjusting the districts, working out the districts, so that people would have an opportunity to elect people with diverse ethnic backgrounds, so we would have the kind of representation that was in proportion to the kind of people that were in that particular district. We had both pro and con. We had legislators who were working to create districts that they felt were to their advantage. I think that we had certain people interested in carving out their own little constituency in various areas. We had some fairly good fights, you know, but we were very careful in developing this overall plan. Clark County certainly changed from an at-large situation to specific districts--senatorial *and* assembly districts.

I found out after I got into the meat of the thing, that they really wanted to be considerate and fair. We were able to set up a senatorial district that covered most of the Westside and North Las Vegas area. The people would have an opportunity to elect a black to the senate. We also were able to cut up at least two Las Vegas assembly districts that would be predominately black. Las Vegas would possibly have two minority legislators. I think it was a foregone conclusion that they were going to carve out minority districts, because they didn't want any lawsuits saying that anybody was being discriminated against. Therefore, things went very well.

Reapportionment certainly did have an impact on my political career. I decided I would move into the race for the senatorial seat. I knew that I had developed my political career when legislators were elected at-large. When the

assembly was elected at-large, I had tremendous support from throughout Clark County, the southern Nevada area. That was how I had been elected. But it was an unknown factor when we moved into a specific senatorial district. At one point of the discussion in mandating the districts, someone said that I was trying to set up a personal senatorial district. That wasn't true, because being a Republican, I *knew* that I had to have support of a predominately Democratic constituency, which I knew was going to be *tough*, regardless of what kind of job I had done and how effective I had been as an assemblyman. I would have a tight fight with most any candidate of note who would run.

In 1972 Joe Neal and I ran, and I lost. I ran the normal campaign without any mudslinging. Joe got very personal in the campaign, saying that I was supported by a predominately white constituency. With all of the things that we had accomplished in the legislative process, he argued that I would be dictated to by the white constituency. He thought that he could serve the predominately Democratic district better than I could. I knew that in any situation--even though it was a predominately black, Democratic situation--that I would run well. But I knew that I had a fight on my hands and that it would be a tough race. I thought that because I had tried to give my constituency representation at the legislative level, I'd done an excellent job.

I have never thought about switching parties just to be elected. If the people were told the facts and they looked and judged me on my record, I believed that I could be elected. Some of the people just did not take under consideration what had actually transpired in the legislature.

In 1980 I decided to run for the county commission. It wasn't something that I had planned for any length of time.

I'd been discussing the commission with several people in the political arena and the Republican party, of which I was a member. Several people had requested that I consider running in the county commission election of 1980. Republican party heads suggested I run. I said, "Well, I don't know...."

The candidate who was in office at the time was Sam Bowler; he was a Democrat and he was the chairman of the county commission. In the district in which I would have to run was a very large number of people who were of his Mormon religious persuasion. In the black community we had a predominately Democratic situation. I knew that it would be a very *tough* campaign. The district included West Las Vegas and the North Las Vegas area over near Cheyenne--a very large district.

I checked with a few people who I thought could be of help to me. They seemed to be enthused. They said, "You've always run a very good campaign and a positive campaign. I think that you would stand a chance." I talked with a few people; I got them together. After I was able to organize a group of supporters, I decided to run, and I filed for the commission. I knew I had to get at least a minimum percentage of the Mormon vote and other voters from the white community. If I didn't, it would be totally impossible for me to win, even with all of the black voters in my district. There weren't enough to elect me.

I proceeded to set up my campaign. We organized with the party. I asked them for their support, and they said that they would support me, and they did support me. Gwen Brown, a young woman, came into Las Vegas from Chicago to work in the community. She had been in Chicago working in the area of organizing the black community economically, politically. She had a very well-rounded background in organizing groups politically and otherwise. I made

Gwen Brown chairman of my campaign. Then we proceeded to organize it and get ready to go. I did most of the fund raising, and she handled the campaign and the monies. I raised the money, but she handled it, and handled it very efficiently. We were able to raise enough money to do the campaign and do it well.

Shortly after I made the decision to run, I decided that I would not set up my headquarters *in* the black community, but rather on the periphery of my district--downtown in the white community. I set up my headquarters on the corner of Bonanza and Fifth Street. We were able to get the place; I rented it for the number of months that the campaign would last. It was a very good location, because of all of the traffic on Fifth and Bonanza.

I would write to all of the organizations telling them that we were having campaign meetings and asked to appear before them, and I was accepted. I made a presentation *everyplace* I possibly could. Also, I did door-to-door campaigning throughout the district. I went to white neighborhoods, where there were a few problems, but by and large, not as many problems as I thought I would be confronted with.

I felt that my opponent had *not* given consideration to the total district. By that, I mean representing them equally and representing them effectively. Issues coming up and requests by the various organizations in the community and needs of the community in specific cases weren't met as I thought I could meet them. That's the approach that I took. My campaign strategy was to point out the areas of concern and present myself in a way that I thought I could impress my constituents. I said that I would be able to do a better job than anyone. In that way I was successful in defeating Mr. Bowler.

I thought that I could beat him, but he never took me seriously until the latter part of the campaign. Then he tried to claim that I used negative tactics. I don't know what they could have been, because in the close of the campaign I used only information about my record and the things that we had been able to do to tell the people how effective I could be in serving them. He personally attacked me a couple of times, but I don't believe in that negative kind of campaign. The latter part of the campaign he *did* attack me. He had been on the commission at least four years. He said that he was prepared, and that he had put together the kind of support that would enable him to get most anything that confronted him readily accomplished. He'd been the chairman of the commission, and he thought that no first-term commissioner could be as effective as he could be.

I had a record. I'd served in the legislature for three terms. I improved the plight of minorities in the state in areas I thought were necessary, and I stood up for those things. But I also was fair in my presentation of the issues involving minority *and* the majority positions, whatever came before me. For that reason, I think that I had built a kind of confidence and respect that it took to actually unseat Commissioner Bowler. I was not the first black commissioner; Aaron Williams had served on the county commission before. He was the first black commissioner.

I was very effective as a commissioner through my tenure in opening up avenues for employment for minorities --for example, the ability to apply and to bid for contracts at the airport. I was vice-chairman of the airport commission; I served as chairman of the Clark County sanitation commission--the disposal plant.

The sanitation commission was a tremendous job, because we had major problems with the contractors there. They were behind schedule on their contracts. The

contractor had blamed the *county* for the delays. The contractor recently won a lawsuit against the county. They claimed that the county was responsible for the continuous delays, and that the contractor wasn't able to execute and to complete the contract on construction at the sanitation district in the time allotted in the contract. They claimed that they had to work *over* and use a lot of overtime because of things that the commissioners didn't do--information that they didn't furnish, monies, and so forth. Now the county is going to have to pay a substantial penalty. The lawsuit would have been much less had the county agreed to it at the time, but the interest and penalties on top of that has made it an exorbitant amount of money.

I really thought the case was worth pursuing, because I didn't think the jurors would vote with the contractor. I just can't see how the county lost the case. I really can't explain it. The judges voted for the contractors and against the county. That shocked me and many others who are in county government.

The airport was a major effort. The concept was there. Most of the drawings and everything had been completed when I came on board. It was a basic idea. We were largely responsible for the monorail people-mover system. We were able to let the contract for that. I had an opportunity to travel throughout the country and to go over to Toronto, Canada, and from Toronto to where they manufacture people movers. We went to Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and Florida, Dallas-Fort Worth, New Orleans. We looked at all of the new, innovative things that would put us into the next century, as far as the airport is concerned. It was exciting, and it was very rewarding.

The parking facilities at the airport are not exactly like I would have wanted them to be. The spiral up-ramp, I think, could have been made differently and would have been safer in every way. The design of the spiral is a little too tight. I would have liked to have seen that expanded and made safer. That spiral was the engineer's suggestion. I think it was the use of space that was the determining factor, but we had plenty of space. Some people have bumped their cars and damaged their vehicles.

I've got some very fine letters from the construction companies, one or two of them, thanking me for the input and suggestions and help that I was able to give, as far as the construction of the airport was concerned. There have been *some* problems. The only other thing that I would have liked to see them do is put in an extended carrier for the pedestrians out farther in the wings. I would like to have seen an addition all the way through the terminal. I think that it could have been an oversight. It's a wonderful airport; I'm proud of it. I'm proud to have had an opportunity to have been vice-chairman of the airport commission.

I think the overall job, as far as the airport is concerned, is a tremendous credit to the county. We acquired properties around the airport, and we have adequate properties now if it's necessary to expand.

I was also very happy to be a part of the growth out at Laughlin, Nevada. We had to approve the buying and selling of land there for the installation of the plants and also for the upper turnoff shortcut to different hotel facilities. I was the commissioner who was asked to make the presentation. We cut the ribbon when we completed the cutoff road going in from the top down into the casino area. I made the remarks and the presentation and also had an opportunity to present the ribbon-cutting scissors to Mr. Laughlin.

I resigned from the county commission after three years and eight months. I was elected in 1980, and in 1984 I resigned.

[Woodrow Wilson resigned from the Clark County Commission on July 19, 1984, following accusations that he had improperly used his influence as a commissioner. According to an article in that day's edition of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, Mr. Wilson and former state senator Gene Echols were alleged to have accepted a bribe from an FBI undercover agent in return for unspecified services. Commenting on Mr. Wilson's resignation, county commissioner Paul May told the reporter, "I enjoyed working with him in the brief time we were associated. He contributed a lot to the minority causes in the state of Nevada."--Ed.]

Chapter Six

EPILOGUE

I WAS ELECTED to the Nevada legislature in 1966, and was the very first black ever to serve in the legislature. That was a major breakthrough, because at that time the county wasn't cut up into sections, and you had to run at large. Being a minority in this community, the odds were tremendously stacked against me being elected. No one really believed that I would be elected because of those factors: the relatively small number of blacks in the community, and the at-large voting. In other words, the total area had to vote for nine assemblymen who had to be elected, and I think at that time we had forty-three running for the legislature. My election gave courage to the black community that they could have one of their own in the legislature. I was a Republican, and only a few blacks were Republicans; therefore, I had to be elected by the majority community, and that in itself was an important factor. It gave me the impetus and certainly the support, after I got to the legislature, that I would be

able to communicate with the majority of all the legislators. And I think basically that was one of the reasons why I was successful in getting many of my points over.

In my political career I valued my white supporters. I mean, as far as I'm concerned, all my life--even though I was born and reared in the South in a totally segregated situation--my relationship to people in general has been good. People have been people. I look at persons as individuals, not on the basis of black, white or whatever. That has been my philosophy, and that has been my thinking all of my life. In this great country of ours, even though we went through a period of slavery and emancipation and all the various things that have been tried to eliminate discrimination right down the line, people, both black and white, have made *tremendous* contributions. Had it not been for those persons of the white community and white race, we would never have come as far as we've come. I could not have gotten anything accomplished at the legislature unless I had been able to communicate with the white legislators, because they controlled the committees; they were in the majority on the floor to vote; and anybody that thinks that they alone can get these things accomplished, is not being realistic.

My open-housing bill was the most important piece of legislation I was involved with, because when you start talking about housing and living near whites.... Some of the fear that actually came out in the deliberations and discussions on the open-housing bill was that a lot of the white legislators thought that this bill would make it a crime unless you opened your house to roomers and boarders and things of this nature, which was totally unrealistic. And living next door to someone that they really weren't sure about, and.... In a totally segregated community, there are some fears, and I can understand that. What I tried to do was communicate on an individual basis with the key legislators--those who

were the chairmen of the committees, and those that had influence on decision making and this type of thing--and let them know how *important* it was. Nevada made tremendous contributions during the Civil War; the silver and gold from this state helped to finance the armies of the North. And so Nevada had played a major role in the emancipation of black people, so....

I was able to really communicate, I think, on an individual basis at the legislature. I just don't know of anyone else that made that impact on attitudes, as far as black and white is concerned, in the legislative process. As for the future of black leadership in the state, I've been impressed mostly by Mr. Wendell Williams. I think that Wendell is a highly intelligent young man. He is a member of the state assembly, but I don't know what committees he's serving on. He also is a teacher in the Clark County School District, and I've been very much impressed with his approach to the problems confronting people at the legislature. I believe that the kind of person-to-person approach that I used is the approach that he's taken. He hasn't gone on the floor and tried to dominate or criticize people from an individual standpoint, but has done his homework and actually probably talked to his constituents and his fellow legislators on an individual basis.

Another black leader from Las Vegas is Joe Neal, who is in the state senate. But I see Mr. Williams as a more influential leader than Mr. Neal, a more positive force in bringing about the changes that need to be brought about to make the race situation more cohesive. Mr. Neal's style is forthright, direct, and this type of thing, but I don't think that some of his other methods accomplished the things that could have been accomplished in the legislature. And he has lost his status, especially in having been removed from his chairmanship of the minority party (Democrats) in the senate.

That had more to do with his approach and internal politics than.... His personal style hurt him. It's always hurt him.

Another young black man in the assembly is Mr. Morse Arberry, Jr. I don't hear too much about him, and it doesn't stand out in my mind that he has accomplished that much during his tenure. However, I see several people in the West Las Vegas area that are doing some things, and I hope that they will be able to rise and move the community, because we are in dire straits at this time. We have a young man that was appointed by the governor as drug czar, Ramadan. He has impressed me. He is a black Muslim. And we have one or two attorneys in the community.

There are not many out in the area of civil rights involved in moving the community and really having the enthusiasm that we had at one time. Some years ago we had a core of people that were out there beating the brush, trying to move the community in a positive direction. That momentum has been lost. We just don't have that kind of cohesiveness. We had a cadre of people that were sincere, that were united in a positive approach to the racial problem. They were trying to move the position of blacks in Nevada ahead. Lubertha Johnson is one; Dave Hoggard; Dr. McMillan; Dr. West. There were ministers. Years ago it was Bishop Cox; we had Marion Bennett.... We had others --Sarah Knight; there were so many that I can't bring them all to mind right now, but those were some of the people that were actually out there. They had no ulterior motives; they had a positive approach to the problem and were trying to improve the plight of black people.

The goals were clear for our generation of black leadership. We wanted desegregation of the Strip, open housing.... All those things were straightforward. What is lacking today are well defined goals and an agenda--that's what is lacking --and working directly in a positive manner towards those

things. I tell you, we had what you would call...it wasn't declared, but we had a cabinet that met at regular intervals on major problems that were confronted in the community back in the fifties and sixties, and even into the seventies. We met at the Hoggards'; we met at Lubertha Johnson's Millwarden ranch. We met at various homes, and sometimes we really got involved in the push and the strategy that we were going to use; we'd be there all night! We would decide on which problem we wanted to address and *how* we were going to address it, and no one moved out front trying to take the glory.... It was a cohesive, constructive approach to dealing with the situation.

As segregation decreased, the pressure came off, and most of the people today think that all of the advancements...all of the things that have been accomplished are taken for granted. *That's* what has changed. They think that no one made a sacrifice; no one gave anything. And even the economic situation at that time was much more perilous and diminished than it is today. We didn't make that kind of money, *but* in the black community it wasn't anything to call a meeting, and if we needed five hundred dollars or a thousand dollars, people would give fifty or a hundred dollars. Even if they couldn't afford it, they would do that to contribute. That's the kind of things that were happening. That's the kind of thing that was done in those days.

In a way our success made it more difficult for the current generation to deal as individuals and as a cohesive group. They are splintered: "I want to be a leader; I want to...." Then, it was *we* who were going to lead. *We* would set the policy. No one went out ahead of.... If you were chairman, you were chairman, and no one tried to knock you off of the throne, you see. What has gone on since then--division in leadership...divisiveness. Individuals want to be

the show, top of the ladder, rather than coming together, uniting, selecting a leader or person to head the group and work within a unit to make a job successful. Those are the kinds of things that we lack today. We don't even have cohesiveness politically, and we have three people up there at the legislature--one senator and two assemblymen--who are not together. They're not working together as a unit. We don't have town meetings; we don't have...even with the NAACP, we don't have the cohesiveness that we had and the leadership that we had at one time.

When I was in the legislature, I came back to this community and reported to the people what was going on, and asked them, "What do you want? What area do you want us to attack or proceed in trying to develop?" And the people would tell me. I would write letters; I had an open phone then. I wrote hundreds of letters to individuals that I thought would give me some ideas on what was going on in the community and what they would like for me to approach. And we don't have that anymore. We don't have it.

If I could, I would like to call a meeting of the leadership from every segment of this community, whether it's politics, religion, social or fraternal organizations, or whatever. I would like to see this done to come up with some strategies to deal with the social problems--economics, drugs, education--that's confronting the community. If we could do that and prioritize these areas that I've mentioned and work on them, I am sure that you would see the kinds of things that we used to have in this community when it was in its development stage and moving in a positive direction.

Whites are aware of the lack of cohesiveness among black leaders. That can be a negative factor in getting anything or actually attacking the major problems, because when you have one person going to the power structure saying, "Well, we want to deal with the drugs," and another one

saying, "We want to deal with poverty," and another one saying.... Well, what it does is it doesn't give any direction to the white leadership, the white politicians--the governor, the mayor, the county commissioners, the city councilmen. It doesn't give them a *direct, cohesive, constructive* approach to the problems that exist in the community.

We also have some problems with the NAACP, and it's in the leadership. I'm unhappy with the present approach that the leadership, the board.... I really can't put my finger on the problem. I've been a life member for twenty years, and I'll always be a member of the NAACP, but I haven't been able to deal with the present structure. [laughs] I haven't been as active recently, and I blame myself as well as others; I blame myself more than anyone. The NAACP has not been growing in membership, and that has an impact on finances. It's not as strong as it was. From time to time we've had tremendous branches here...that period when Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Hoggard were active.

I would never advocate that all blacks belong to any one party, but I do believe that blacks could make a tremendous impact on the Republican party if more would join the party and work. Not just sign up as a Republican--that doesn't mean anything. You have to get involved, whether it's Republican or Democrat. You get what you put into it, and that's just plain and simple.

When things were much different from what they are now--it wasn't as open as now--I made tremendous inroads. I belonged to everything in the Republican party. I represented the Republican party at the national convention; I was a delegate to the national convention. I was honored by an award as an outstanding Republican in southern Nevada. And I've been on every kind of committee and board and everything else that you could possibly.... And I received uninhibited support from people throughout the Republican

party--not only in Clark County, but throughout the state. Senator Paul Laxalt (Governor Laxalt; Lieutenant Governor Laxalt) gave me *all-out* support when I ran for the legislature. When I would run for anything, I have gotten that kind of support. And it was not just splintered support; it was a cohesive, tight support. You get what you put in to a situation. I worked hard in the Republican party, and the rewards were great.

I feel that the Westside Federal Credit Union that I founded will grow. It was my ambition after we got started to become a commercial bank, but I don't think that will be possible in the near future. I just don't think that we could break through the political quagmire and restrictions. The existing banks have cut up territories, and I think they would oppose it. They would put the Westside Federal Credit Union in their name, and we would no longer be a Westside credit union.

I think this: unless we had some input, a person or two to direct the bank's attitude towards this community, make them aware of our needs and concerns and serve on the loan committee and the board of directors.... I doubt that the Westside community would be adequately served if the credit union became a branch of a commercial bank without putting some safeguards in place. We have been very instrumental in assisting people in owning properties on the Westside. We also have helped several of the businesses, and we have helped to build churches. A major service is providing funds for youngsters that want to go to school. We have been able to assist families with tuitions and things like that.

Actually, the attitude of banks toward the Westside Credit Union is the same as it is towards any credit union. They feel that we should be taxed and that we have an un-

fair advantage, and this type of thing. The battle is on right now, and it has come about because of the dilemma that the savings and loans got into throughout the United States, particularly in Texas and California. The savings and loan crisis of 1988-1989 has a direct impact on credit unions, period. Federal regulators are tightening up certain areas, and we're getting new directives and new orders and the changing policies and stuff like that. It will take more time, and it will increase the costs of loans. It's tightened up the operation, and we are definitely being more closely scrutinized.

I do not intend to continue indefinitely as treasurer and manager of the Westside Federal Credit Union. Once I get things so I feel that we have leveled off, and we find someone that will come in here and will take care of the little credit union, I feel that I'll bow out. You see, I'll be seventy-five my next birthday. I can't go on forever, but I'll always be here, as long as I am needed. When I can, I certainly would like to retire, though.

When I came to Las Vegas, I was on my way to California to continue my education. I stopped here to say hello to family and friends. I stopped, and was employed, and my journey to California ended here in Las Vegas. I do not regret it, because all my life--and I think I inherited it probably from my mother--I've been a people's person. The opportunities in California were probably as great as they were here, *but* what I found here was a need for the things that I thought I would be able to do. And it was to awaken the people to their opportunity--that they had an opportunity here. It was a struggle; they had tremendous obstacles, but we could overcome them. It was a challenge to come here and fight your way and push your way through the quagmire

of segregation, discrimination, denial, prejudice, and *all* of the facets that made it tough for minority people to survive. So we hammered at these things, one by one, as we could come along, every opportunity I had. The employment at Basic Magnesium, the presidency of the NAACP, educating the people, letting them know that it was...they could make it better by working together towards eliminating this. Also, you had another angle: to educate the majority community that you were a human being and that you were being denied your basic rights guaranteed under the Constitution.

Most of my life I've tried to do something for others, to improve the plight of people. And I worked hard at it. I don't know how much I accomplished, or this type of thing.... I just don't think that in the way that we did it that I could have accomplished very much more in California had I gone on, or even if I had gone on and gotten my degree in chemistry. I can look back day after day at the opportunity that we had, knowing that we did help people individually and collectively. I will always be a leader of this community, because the people made me so. The people still come to me daily for advice, for help, and they will always come to me.

Las Vegas is an unusual city. There's no other city in the world like it, but Las Vegas is all about money. Unless blacks pool their resources and do something in the area of financing their homes, we're going to be in trouble. I am somewhat pessimistic about the future, but it's left up to us. Now, if blacks just step back where we were and realize the method of success and the way of doing things.... For instance, every racial group that has accomplished anything, they've accomplished it by uniting, developing and working together. I remember when the Hispanics were splintered, they put their thing together, and now they're on an upward spiral. They've done better recently than the black

community, *definitely* so. But everything isn't lost. We have all the tools to do what we want, *if* we put it together and decide that we are going to work cohesively in doing it. It can be done.

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