

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE SIMMONS**

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

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African American Collaborative

Oral History Research Center at UNLV  
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## **PREFACE**

George Simmons story begins in Texas where he was born, raised and attended college at Texas Southern and University of Texas where he found his niche in drafting and architecture.

In 1963, George and his wife Eva moved to Las Vegas seeking job opportunities. It was an era when George could design the house, but was not allowed to buy it simply because he was black. He shares stories of his career path from designing for Sproul Homes to settling into a forty-seven-year position with Holmes and Naver engineering firm, which included work at the Test Site.

Through the years, George was active in the community, including the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity; black golfers association and with the many friends that he has known.

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December 13, 2013  
in Las Vegas, Nevada  
Conducted by Claytee D. White

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**This is Claytee White. It is December 13th, 2013, and I'm with George Simmons in his home in North Las Vegas.**

**How are you this morning?**

I am fine. How are you?

**Fantastic. George is spelled the conventional way.**

Yes, G-E-O-R-G-E.

**And would you spell Simmons for me?**

S-I-M-M-O-N-S.

**Okay, wonderful. I'd like for you to just start by having you relax and tell me a little about your early life, if you had sisters and brothers, what your parents did for a living; those kinds of things.**

I have one brother, who is younger, about three years younger. My parents: my mom was sort of a housekeeper. She worked for affluent white folk in the South and maintained their household, sort of managed their house; that's what she did. My dad, he did a lot of different things. I'm not sure. He didn't have any specialties or anything like that.

**And what is your younger brother's name?**

Codis. C-O-D-I-S.

**And where were you born, which town?**

I was born in Roxton, Texas.

**How big is that?**

Not very big and I'm not sure. I haven't been there in so long.

**What is it close to?**

It's close to Paris, Texas, which is where I basically went to school from the time, well, when I

was in fourth grade. I think I started school in Roxton, which was about the first grade, first and second. And then third grade I think I was in Midland; my parents moved to Midland. Then I went to live with my grandparents from the time I was in fourth grade until I was in the tenth grade. Then I moved back; after my grandmother died, I moved back with my parents in Midland and I graduated high school in Midland.

**Did you work as a young boy, as a young man in high school?**

Yes, I did. I had jobs. My mom wouldn't just let me sit around and do nothing. So yes, I did.

**What kinds of jobs?**

The one I remember most—I did little odd jobs, like working in restaurants and stuff like that.

The one I remember most and the one that was most consistent was I worked with this older gentleman. He had a little company, and he cleaned up offices. I worked that after school.

When I would get out of school, I would go and work there for two or three, four hours in the evenings to help him do that sort of thing. And every now and then we would have little bigger jobs, like cleaning floors at like Safeway (grocery store) and places like that. So I did that kind of stuff, just to put money in my pocket. Then on the weekends I might mow grass. Just little things.

**Great, great. I think Magic Johnson did some of the same things.**

One of the other things I'll tell you, working, my parents by that time—and this is my mom who had married a second time, my stepdad—they had a little grocery store and they had a little hamburger joint. That's what they called it. So I worked in those places, as well. They didn't pay me, actually, money to do that. I did that as a part of the family. But the other one was where I got basically my money.

**What do you think those kinds of jobs or working as a teenager, how does it help you in**

**later life?**

I guess it taught you a little bit of responsibility. In making a little money I learned how to manage it. Lots of families—their kids worked and they had to help support the family. My mom made me work, but she never took my money. I was always able to keep the money. So I did pretty much what I wanted to do with it. Apparently, I did okay because she didn't get involved with trying to tell me not to do this or that. So I guess I was doing all right in her eyesight.

**Tell me about college; why you decided to go to college? Who influenced you?**

That's very interesting. I didn't even think about college. I didn't have counselors and people like that. I was sort of like—in retrospect, I guess I just sort of lived in the present. I was graduating high school one day and my mom—I was almost graduating and my mom says, are you going to college? I said, I don't know. I hadn't thought about it.

So what had happened, I guess...when I was a junior in high school, there was this representative from Texas Southern that had come around to the schools and given us these kinds—they were placement tests, I guess. As a junior I took the test and I guess I had passed it. They gave me a little academic scholarship, paid tuition for a year, which tuition wasn't very much. But I got that.

And then I talked to I guess it was a shop teacher, as I remember, because I didn't know what to do. He sort of said, well, why don't you try drafting? You seem to be pretty good in terms of woodwork and stuff like that. Why don't you just give it a try? I said that's cool; I'll give it a shot. But that's how I ended up at Texas Southern and I went into that field in terms of drafting, architecture, that sort of stuff. I had no real plans and nobody really talked to me about it; it just happened.



**So which year were you born?**

I was born in 1937.

**So you were in high school in the late fifties?**

And I graduated in 1955.

**How did you get to Las Vegas?**

Well, after I graduated Texas Southern, I enrolled at University of Texas. This is 1959. They were just allowing undergraduates to attend. So I went there and I went there for about three years, I guess, and met Eva. Eventually, we got married. Her parents lived here. She graduated and we didn't have any prospects there in Texas. So decided to sort of move here because we came out and visited and they said they could get us jobs or whatever. And so we came here and that's how we started it.

**So Texas Southern was two-year?**

Four.

**A four-year school. And then you went to University of Texas for a master's?**

I went for another undergraduate degree in architecture, but I didn't graduate. That was a little different.

**Okay. So when you got to Las Vegas, what were your first impressions?**

That it looked just like west Texas, desert. It was hot. Midland is in West Texas. Paris is in east Texas. So they're two different kinds of climates. But Midland is desert and so is Las Vegas.

And it was sparsely populated at that time.

**Where did you live in the beginning?**

We first lived with my wife's sister for a few months until we found jobs and then we moved into an apartment.

**And where was the apartment, what part of the city?**

West Las Vegas. Sherman Gardens, I believe that was the name of the place.

**So tell me where Sherman Gardens is. I'm trying to get a good look at—**

J Street, pretty much just about the intersection of J Street and Owens. They called it Owens at that time. I think it's Vegas Drive now, but it was Owens at that time.

**Okay, J and Owens. I'm trying to picture J and Owens. I can picture H and Owens.**

**That's where Edmond's Town Center is, that area sort of.**

Yes, but that would be west, then.

**So west of that.**

J Street.

**So was that privately owned, Sherman Gardens?**

I assume so. I don't know who owned it.

**Private homes or apartment buildings?**

It was little apartments. They were apartment buildings, yes.

**Okay, good. So I know that Eva was in education. Tell me what your line of work was, your first job here.**

My first job I worked for two weeks, I think it was, down at the Bingo Palace sweeping floors.

Then I hooked up with this guy. He actually was an inspector for the school district, but he ran a design shop out of his house and he had an office in the back. So he hired me and I ran his office in the daytime. He would come up after work and we would work together at night. But basically I ran his office, his design shop.

**And what was the name of that business?**

It was John Sherman. I don't know what else he called it. It was architectural stuff.

**What kinds of things were you designing?**

Well, actually I don't know if you're aware of Golden West Shopping Center.

**Yes.**

We did that one. We did that. We did houses. We actually tried to design some hotels out on the Strip, just little stuff. Some of it materialized; some of it didn't. Little structures around town, jobs that he would get with different people.

**So who owned the Golden West Shopping Center?**

It was actually—all I knew was a group of white guys. I'm not sure who they were affiliated with. A lot of the things we did—I remember we were working on this project. I don't know if it was the same group of people, but I think they were tied in together. They were trying to design this hotel out on the Strip or close to the Strip. It was very interesting because we met them. But every time a decision had to be made, they had to call Cleveland. [Laughing]

**Okay.**

So my boss, he was getting a little nervous there for a while. He said, you think we're doing something wrong? I said, well, we haven't done anything wrong as far as I can see. So we did what they were asking us to do. But what we did do, which was interesting...this guy brought—one of the guys brought his family over to us one day and we met his family. It was his wife and a couple of kids. Later we found out that the wife wasn't his and neither were the kids. They were a put-together family for him. So we made assumptions as to who they were.

**Okay.**

Okay? Nobody ever told us. We just guessed and didn't say nothing.

**Okay. So what was your guess?**

Our guess was they were part of the Mafia or something like that. Some kind of criminal

something. We didn't know.

**So do you remember the place that you were designing for this person?**

No.

**What the name was going to be?**

No, I don't remember. It never materialized. It never got further than the design phase, with us anyway. They might have taken it somewhere else; I don't know.

**Before I get back to the jobs again, when you were doing all of this and you're a young married couple, what kind of entertainment? What did you do for entertainment, the two of you?**

Actually, I ended up gravitating toward golf because of my father-in-law. That was my pastime. And we went—I guess, like everybody, there were lots of things to do. By that time the Strip had opened up, the town had opened up. So you could go to places and dance and party and that kind of stuff. We did a little of that, not a lot, because that just wasn't something that we did an awful lot of. Basically just what was available in town.

**So you came out here in the late fifties, early sixties?**

No. 1963. It was after we married.

**Were you a member of the black golf association, black golf club?**

Yes, eventually. I joined it right around the mid-seventies. The first meeting I went to...they elected me the president. [Laughing]

**Who were some of the members at that time?**

Woodrow Wilson, I believe. There was Punch Hughes, Jonas Geran, Jim Roberts. Let me think. There was Donald Collins, Gene Feimster. Oh, gosh. I do have a picture of them that shows some of the early ones. Jimmy Bell, he was there and he's still alive. Who else do I remember

just offhand? I remember when I first joined—I'm trying to think of the musician. He was a member of a group. Oh, I'd have to get the picture to remind me who they were.

**One of the Treniers?**

No, it wasn't Treniers. But they were brothers.

**Nicholas?**

Huh-uh.

**Q.B. Bush?**

Q.B. was a part of it. I remember his name. Yes.

**Wonderful. And you were the president.**

For several years.

**Any memories of what you did as president or what the golf club was all about, above and beyond playing the game?**

Basically that was it. We just liked to play golf, basically. The golf club was a member of the Western States Golf Association. That was the parent organization, which was a series of clubs that were in California, Arizona, Nevada. I think at that time they had maybe 29 or 30 different local clubs and they each had an annual tournament every year. You would invite all the member clubs to that particular one. Ours was usually right around Thanksgiving, so it would be a two-day tournament for that. So we did that sort of thing.

**And did those tournaments raise money for any particular reason or cause?**

Not at that time. It later evolved into—I think they do now. I'm not a member anymore. In fact, I was a member up until a couple of years ago. I haven't played with them for quite some time. My understanding is that they gravitated towards helping young people, the young golfers. And I think the entire Western States Golf Association has gone in that direction. They were trying to

even at that time. I don't know if you remember. There's a guy named Bill Dickey, who was nationally known, and he carried a lot of that. And he was based in Arizona; he was from Phoenix. But I'm assuming he influenced the association a great deal, especially toward minorities in the field of golf, trying to get them into and through school, through golf, that sort of thing. But when we first started it wasn't as sophisticated as it is now. We were just trying to get little kids maybe to play with us, not necessarily in school.

**Good. Where did you play?**

Basically we sort of played at Muni [Municipal Golf Course] most of the time. At that time we also had the Craig Ranch Golf Course. We played a lot out there.

**What was that one?**

Craig Ranch Golf Course, which is now the Regional Park that the City of North Las Vegas bought and now they made a park out of it.

**Yes, okay. Interesting. Do you remember Jimmy Gay?**

Yes, I do remember Jimmy Gay. Jimmy Gay was a part of that; he was of the old guard. Yes, he was. I do. A lot of talking.

**[Laughing] Yes.**

Oh, yes, I do remember Jimmy.

**You were telling me about your jobs and you had told me about the design company. So after that what happened?**

Well, after a year or so I was there, I was let go. I don't know what his reasons were. But then I got another job. Then I went to work for Sproul Homes, which we did subdivisions. So I worked there until about probably 1965 or six, somewhere along in there.

**And you were designing?**

Yes, I was a designer for Sproul Homes. There was Charleston Heights. That's when the town was beginning to move. Charleston Heights, we did a lot of that. Winterwood, which was called Winterwood at the time. It's out just east, I guess, of Nellis. It's out where they call it Desert Rose Golf Course. They built those homes around there. So I designed most of the houses in that housing development there. And so we did that until things just sort of dried up. I left them, I think, right around 1966, in that area, probably '66, yes.

**Where is Charleston Heights located?**

Charleston Heights is up around West Charleston. It was Jones and west of Jones, right around in that area.

**Okay, good. Were all of those integrated neighborhoods?**

No, they were not integrated. In fact, I worked for Sproul Homes and they wouldn't sell me a house, until they built the homes that we lived in over on Veronica Street, which was on the Westside. Sproul Homes built a group of homes in there. We were allowed to buy there. They had planned to build some more, but they never did. But they did that. Then they built some homes across—oh, I've forgotten the name of the subdivision. But all those homes are still there. They built those, as well. But those were the places where we were allowed to buy. They just wouldn't sell me a house.

**Isn't that something? Veronica Street, I think this is probably where the Goynes, that area, that neighborhood.**

Yes, we lived right across the street from the Goyneses. And the Pughsleys lived right next to—let's see. Yes, the Pughsleys. Okay. And the Richardsons, the Goynes, the Taylors.

**And all of those were educators.**

Yes. They lived right on that street. That's right.

**Okay, wonderful. Oh, that's great. Thank you for that information.**

**I think I have seen an old ad, Sproul Homes ad in the newspaper where it said “white only.”**

I don't remember the “white only,” but that's what it was.

**Yes. This was a long time ago, probably a little before your time at that company. But I think the advertisement actually said that.**

**Tell me about the evolution of your working career.**

Well, I worked for Sproul until, like I said, early '66. Then the housing industry just dried up with Sproul, sort of, and they started laying off. I was one of the last ones to be laid off. But I went then—I worked for the county planning department. For one month. [Laughing] And that one month, it was just a chaotic thing. But it was like the entire office, the entire personnel there pretty much changed over in the one month that I was there. It was the most chaotic situation I think I'd ever been in.

**What was happening?**

I don't really know. I know that my boss, he was in that position and my understanding was that he was really there because he had so much on all of those politicians that they couldn't do much with him. In fact, while I was there I was working—when he found out what I could do or he could use me, I was drawing stuff for him for things that were going on in California, which had nothing to do with that job as far as I knew. So I decided I needed to get out of there.

Anyway, I had interviewed with Holmes and Narver, which is an engineering company. They called me in for an interview. Luckily, I didn't have to stay with the county longer than that month and I hired on with Holmes and Narver. They were a prime contractor for the Department of Energy.



So I've been with that contract for 47 years. Now, different companies have taken over that contract. Holmes and Narver kept it until 1990. And then it was bid out and Raytheon took it over and they lasted for, I think, five years. And then Bechtel Nevada took it over, or Bechtel. Then Bechtel kept it for about ten years. And then it's National Security Technologies now, which the mother company is Northrop Grumman, and they have the contract now.

**So tell me what that contract was all about.**

Okay. It's evolved into more now than it was then. At that time there were three basically prime contractors. Holmes and Narver was the engineering element of that and there was EG&G and REECo. And I worked for Holmes and Narver. We did basically engineering, building structures, apparatus, all kinds of stuff. We did that kind of thing.

**Were you at the Test Site most of the times during this?**

No. Actually I started downtown. I did spend a little bit of time [at the Test Site] because I had to have a security clearance. So I did go to the Test Site temporarily until I got my clearance. But for the most part I worked there, downtown, which we were located on South Highland. I think we all moved to the Test Site around 1973, somewhere along in there. We stayed there until we—well, actually, the whole engineering company did; we started a small segment within the company that had to deal with certain issues that we were mandated to do for the Department of Energy and I headed up that group. So we had a satellite office that was basically populated by engineers and staff. But I was sort of the head of that group.

We started out there on Spring Mountain and Polaris. That's where our office was located. Then we stayed there for a while. Then we moved it back to the Highland area. Then from there we moved the same office—it was the same office we moved over to Maryland Parkway and Flamingo, in a big office building there. By that time I think Raytheon came in and

got the contract and then we moved from there to Summerlin off of Town Center Drive. We had a big building up there. Then when Bechtel took it over, DOE decided to consolidate and moved us all down to the North Las Vegas property, which is on Losee Road. So they were getting rid of all the lease properties that they had in town and they consolidated just about everybody that was in town at that piece of property.

When we moved to the Test Site, I stayed out there for about ten years. I came back to town in around 1980, '81. So I had two offices; I had an office at the Test Site and an office downtown. And then as we got busier and busier with that new dynamic that we were dealing with, it became permanently downtown.

So we were doing master planning. We had a big project; we called it revitalization. But we were going to revitalize the entire Test Site. It was a three hundred and something million-dollar project that we were going to do. Well, we never got all that money, but we got a great deal of it. So they did that. So we were doing things like that.

**So when you say revitalize the Test Site, what does that mean to us, to people in the area?**

Renew.

**Renewing the building structures?**

Yes, yes. Upgrading, building new, removing, whatever it took to recapitalize the situation, because things get old, deteriorate and that has to happen. That's why we call it revitalization.

**So we know that there were aboveground testing in the fifties, underground testing in the sixties. Did that go on in the seventies when you were out there, as well?**

They were doing underground, not aboveground. They had stopped that. They were doing underground testing. Then the moratorium hit. I don't even remember. It was nineties, late eighties, along in there.

**When we made that test ban agreement?**

Yes.

**Yes.**

Then we stopped doing the underground testing and so forth.

**[Pause in recording]**

**When there was a test underground, what did it feel like?**

I didn't feel anything.

**You didn't feel anything?**

I never did.

**Wow. I mean I was in Los Angeles when there were earthquakes and you could feel the swaying of the buildings and all. You didn't feel anything?**

Every now and then. You'd see the lights moving, yes. But others were more sensitive; they could feel things.

**Okay. [Laughing] Okay.**

People around in surrounding areas, they would claim damage was done. But a lot of it was fraud.

**You think so?**

Oh, I know so. They would put in claims—because they would announce when there was a shot and folk would put in claims and not realizing that the shot never happened.

**[Laughing] Okay, that's not funny. But there is a question. When you were working for— [Sproul Homes]—you were designing a lot of homes: how you saw them changing in Las Vegas. Then I want to know how your work changed when you went from home designing to designing buildings at the Test Site. What kinds of things did you have to learn?**

Okay. Well, originally my background was architecture; that's just space design. But in working with Holmes and Narver, that was an engineering company. My supervisor spoke to me one day and he said, George, if you ever want to move up, you need to get architecture out of your title. [Laughing] This is an engineering company.

So what I did was I enrolled in International Correspondence School [ICS] for structural engineering technology. It took me five years, but in five years I got my diploma. I was doing structural design, not just the space, but the enclosure, beams and columns and that kind of thing. So I learned, well, that gave me the tools to do that kind of design. So I became a structural designer. So I was basically an architectural engineer, basically is what I considered myself because I did the whole thing. I did all of that, yes.

**How can you learn to do that through a correspondence course? Now, this was before computers, right?**

Uh-huh.

**How did you learn that? How could you learn about beams about doing—**

Well, when I was at University of Texas, I had taken a lot of the mathematics that involved, statics, strength of materials etc. So when I enrolled at ICS, the material wasn't foreign to me; it was more advanced and more specific. But it was kind of fun because I was really into it. So I was able to read the books and get the information and take the tests. Actually, I don't remember ever making anything less than an A on anything I took. So it was kind of interesting.

**It was just meant to—that was your field.**

Well, I enjoyed it. It was a lot of fun. And then to apply it, it was really interesting. One of the interesting parts about it was because I enrolled and nobody knew it but me at my company. One day my supervisor...I was doing things and he said, where did you learn how to do that?

And I told him what I was doing. He told me, he said, well, the company will pay for that. I said, really? Oh, I didn't know. So he did some paperwork. I had to finish the courses, but when I finished they gave me my money back. But that was how that sort of took place. But my interest was to learn and I had no idea that they would pay for it. Nobody had ever paid for anything before. [Laughing]

**So I want to talk about the home designs that you were doing for—Sproul?**

Sproul, uh-huh.

**How did it change over time? Tell me about Las Vegas homes and how they were designed at the time.**

They were basically just typical homes, three-, four-bedroom homes with the normal spaces that you would have. Their intent was to build them so that you could build them at a reasonable price that people could buy. The interesting part that I remember most was that one of the endeavors that the company was doing, they were going to do similar housing that they'd always done, but they were going to try to do it at cheaper prices. What they found was even though they were basically the same houses, people didn't buy them. All they did basically was change the price. They put the higher prices on them and then they sold them. People thought they were being taken by a cheaper price, okay?

**Oh, my god.**

Very interesting, the dynamics of how people's minds work, but that's what happened.

**So what about air-conditioning? Were you putting in air-conditioning units at that time?**

Yes, we were. Oh, this was the desert. Yes, at that time.

**Sometimes when people move to places with this much space as the desert, were they surprised that the houses were so close even at that time? Was that ever a concern?**

Some houses were. But in terms of the housing developments, they would buy a piece of property and their profits depended on how many they could get on that piece of property. So there were city codes that said they could only be so close together, you had to have so much yard in the back, so much on the front and so much on the sides. That was dictated by the codes that we were under. But then the next step was to put as many houses on that piece of property as you possibly could. That was the profit motive there.

**When you were actually at the Test Site, going back and forth, did you go back and forth every day for that ten-year period when you were at the Test Site?**

I did.

**Now, some men did not. Some men stayed there. Any men in your area, in your division ever stay there?**

Oh, there were lots of people that stayed there. In those days, the government, they did things for the employees so that they could keep the morale up and so they could entice people to come and go 65 miles from civilization to work. So they had lots of things and they subsidized. They subsidized the food. They subsidized housing. They had places you could stay. They didn't advertise that everybody move out there or anything. But there were places that you could stay for as little as a dollar a night. The food there was the tops. I think we got a per diem. At that time it was like five dollars a day. To ride the bus was a dollar each way. So that was two dollars of the five. Then the other three you could use for lunch. Well, if you ate more than three dollars' worth in food, you couldn't move. They subsidized it to the point where it wasn't expensive at all and it was really, really good food. So they did that.

But yes, there were people who did stay out there for lots of different reasons. I remember talking to a few of the guys; they figured that was the way they kept their marriage

together. [Laughing]

**Explain that.**

They'd go home on the weekends; that's as much as they could take.

**[Laughing] I understand, okay.**

Both sides, I'm thinking. And then some people—I knew of several people, they stayed out there so that they could get their finances in order. They could live out there very cheaply and put a little money together. Then I remember one guy, he was avoiding paying child support over in California. But they caught him anyway. And when they did, they took him off the site. He had to go back.

**Could families live out there?**

No.

**Just the workers.**

Just the workers, yes. You had to have a clearance to be there. Your family didn't fall in that category.

**I want to know about the political life, anything you remember about early politics in Las Vegas. Do you remember anything about Getting Out the Vote campaigns or people in church, politicians coming to church, talking about their campaigns?**

I don't. Now, my wife [Eva] was more involved. But at that time the big issue was bussing. Being that she was ultimately in the school district—she wasn't allowed at the very first, but she got in—but that was the biggest issue that was going on. That was where all the meetings were taking place around town to resolve those issues. She did most of that because she enjoyed doing it. So I stayed with the kids. [Laughing]

**How many children did you have?**

Two children.

**Did you join any organizations at all? I know that your wife is a Delta. Are you a Kappa or an Omega?**

I'm an Alpha Phi Alpha.

**What are some of the activities? And was there a chapter at the time?**

We started a graduate chapter here. There were—oh, god, and the people involved...there was Bob Bailey; Del Guy, Judge Guy. Let's see. Oh, names escape me at the moment. I'm thinking. Reverend Bennett. Billy came later. He came later, but he's an Alpha, as well. Let's see. There was Jim Shipp, James Shipp. He was a principal at one of the schools around town. Who else? There were several others that were prominent at the time. The names will come to me.

**Okay, great. What are some of the activities or causes that you were engaged in over the years? It doesn't have to be just the earliest causes that you got involved in. So did you have the Black and White Ball? Is that the Alphas?**

No. We started out very small. I can't remember some of the activities that we did. I just can't remember all the things that we did.

**So are you still active?**

No, I'm not. I haven't been active for, oh, quite some time. We didn't agree on a lot of things, on how to conduct things, okay? So I just got sort of tired of it, that sort of thing.

Dr. [James] McMillan was a part of that, as well. I remember him.

**He was probably a part of the golf.**

He was a part of the golf, yes. He was quite active in a lot of the political stuff that went around town.

**Right. NAACP, lots of things.**



Right, right. He was here before I got here. They were all involved in desegregating the Strip and all of that. I think it was desegregated, I think, a year or two before we got here, as I recall.

**That's correct. Did you consider or ever think about the fact that there were various people in the community that were considered as community leaders, black leaders? Did you see that?**

Yes. Yes.

**Was it evident?**

It was evident. Woodrow Wilson was one of those. He was quite a person. I associated with him. Well, actually I got involved in the Westside Federal Credit Union. He started it, he and Trudie Rainey. I became a board member and was a board member for quite a while.

**So did you know Mabel Hoggard?**

Yes, I did know Mrs. Hoggard. She was the one that was pretty much instrumental in getting me on that board.

**Oh, isn't that great?**

For whatever her reasons were, I don't know, but she did.

**So tell me the influence, the significance of that credit union to the black community?**

Well, it was a place that people of color could go and pretty much get a loan when they couldn't get it from the banks, basically. They sort of really took a lot of pride in it. So basically that was what it was.

**So I have seen the building that people say was the old credit union. It was kind of behind or it's off of Jackson Street, sort of.**

Uh-huh.

**So is there any possibility of that building ever—no.**

I haven't been there since we closed it. I knew it when they closed it. Then we moved down on Highland, as I recall; moved it there. Then when the credit union merged with another credit union from San Diego, I believe. Then they took it and they moved it over to some shopping centers. And I haven't been affiliated with it since then.

**So it's still active; it's just under...**

It was merged with another credit union because we were having some difficulties. So the solution was to merge with another credit union and they did that. Then once they did that, they kept the name for a while. But I stopped keeping up with it.

**Okay. So if I wanted information, old paperwork about that credit union that could be made available to the public, old papers that we could house at UNLV, where would I find that paperwork?**

I doubt if you would. I don't see that you would find it, basically, because the people that were most intimately involved was, of course, Woodrow and he died and Trudie died, as well. Then everything was taken over by the credit union that came in and I don't know why they would have kept—well, I don't know what they did with it. But they were based in San Diego.

**Tell me about Trudie Rainey. I'm not sure I've ever heard her name.**

Really? Trudie Rainey, her day job was working for REECo. She was in personnel. Trudie was from Arkansas, I believe.

**Fordyce?**

Could have been. Could have been. Jimmy [Gay] brought everybody from Fordyce.

[Laughing]

**Yes. That's right.**

Woody was from the South somewhere, too, but I don't know where.

**Me either. I would have to look at his oral history again.**

Yes, I don't remember where. But yes, Woody [Woodrow Wilson] was an activist, as well. He was a part of the assembly, I believe.

**Exactly.**

It might have been near the beginning.

**I think he was the first black assembly person.**

Could have been. Woody, yes, he was there. But other than that, I don't know where you would find any records.

But Trudie was a person who worked for REECo. Yes. In the evenings and on weekends or off times or whatever times she needed, she worked at the credit union. That was her second job, I guess you call it, yes.

**Okay. We've talked about politics. Did you know Joe Neal?**

Yes, I know Joe Neal. He worked for REECo, too.

**That's right. Yes. I think he was probably the second one.**

Joe was a thorn in their side for a long time. [Laughing]

**Yes. I think first black in the state senate.**

In the senate, right. Right. Yes, that's Joe.

**When I drive through the Westside now, I see lots and lots of vacant lots. We just had the controversy about F Street. Lots of buildings going up around the Westside; that old Westside, like the Nevada Partners, the FBI Building, lots of money sort of going into the area around there. What do you see as the future of that Westside community?**

I don't know. I'm just speculating. It just seems to me that they will probably sort of expand the Fremont Street Experience, so to speak, in that area when they can get that property. That's just

my thoughts.

**So you think downtown will—**

Yes. If they can make it profitable, yes, I think they will. At one time that was the only place people of color could live and the moment that was no more, they started to move out. So people are everywhere now. Yes, I think that will occur.

**But the one time of the week...if you drive over there Sunday morning, when you drive over there, you can't find parking hardly because all the churches are in session. What about that? What about that spiritual life? What would happen with all that activity?**

I don't know. I would assume that those people will find a way to continue. They would find a way to sort of coexist is what I think.

**So any additional memories that you would like to share? When you think about the housing, when you think about the Test Site, any other things that you'd like to share?**

Well, I don't know.

**That you can talk about.**

That I can talk about? [Laughing]

**Yes.**

Nothing like that. My personal experiences, is that what you're talking about?

**Could be personal, but things to talk about history of blacks in Las Vegas.**

Oh. And how tough it was for us to get a job.

**Any of that, yes. With a college education, you started at the Bingo Palace.**

Yes, I was working in somebody else's place basically for a couple of weeks. At that time I mean I was just trying to make some money. It didn't matter. But that was sort of true even in Texas. It didn't matter. I can remember there trying to get jobs in the field that I was in was

impossible, okay?

Actually, when I was at Texas Southern and I went into the field of drafting and architectural drafting, my instructor at that time, his name was John Chase, he was the first black registered architect in the state of Texas. I had an opportunity to work in his office. That's where I learned a lot of what I knew. Actually when I went there, I didn't even know what a T-square was or a scale or hardly what a pencil was. It was kind of difficult for me because I was competing against kids who had come from larger cities, like Houston and Austin, and they had had all this stuff in high school; I never did. So I spent most of my freshman and sophomore year trying to catch up and trying to catch up in a way that nobody knew that I was ignorant.

**Okay, yes.**

If you know what I mean.

**Yes. I am with technology right now.**

Oh, okay. But I was able to work in his office. So when I graduated—actually, a buddy of mine who was from Austin, we wanted to be architects, basically. So we went to see the president of Texas Southern and asked him why couldn't we have a school of architecture. That's when he told us that you are a year or so too late. If we had come to him a couple of years prior to that, all he had to do was ask for it and they would have given it to the school because that would be a way to keep blacks from going to the white schools. But by that time they had integrated—I should say desegregated because it wasn't integrated; it was desegregated—the University of Texas. So our best chance was then to try to enroll at the University of Texas, which we did. But I can remember with that kind of experience that I had working in an architect's office and all.

I remember another buddy of mine who was in the school of architecture and he was

ahead of me. They had an unemployment office on the campus and they were looking for people to come in this architect's office and work. We looked at the qualifications and we said we can do that easy. Well, we went. It was in the evening and we went there. We walked into this room. It was a big room and the room was full, all white folk. So we went in and sat right down in front. Well, the guy that was doing the interviewing or giving out the applications, he wasn't in the room at the time. But he came back in and he looked around the room and he says, oh, I see we've got quite a few more people in here than when I left. And he walked over to me and my friend and he said: you and you, get out. He wouldn't even let us fill out an application. So we had to leave.

One of the other things that I ended up doing because I was desperate more money—I didn't have money—I found that it was either you were over educated or not educated enough. So I saw this sign, this little advertisement that they were looking for I believe it was a janitor at a company called Tracor. I found out later they did government contracts. They were looking for a janitor just part-time. So what I did...I took the sign off the board so nobody else would apply. [Laughing] And I applied and I got the job, working 20 hours a week.

And the interesting part about it was one day one of the employees, a white gentleman, a young guy, though, he came up to me and he says—and I don't know how he found out—he said, I heard you can draw. I said yes. He said, well, wouldn't you rather be drawing up there with us than sweeping the floor? I said, yes, but nobody will hire me. He said, well, let me go up and talk to my boss.

So he went up and talked to his supervisor, who was a female, white female. And they interviewed me and I was switched from a janitor to a draftsman, just like that. It was still part-time, but it was something that I really enjoyed doing.

So that was one of those things that in retrospect—always I've told people it was really, really hard for me to become prejudice to a whole segment of the population because every time I saw somebody that I didn't like, there was always somebody that didn't act like that.

**Yes, yes.**

So I learned how to deal with people on an individual basis as opposed to on a general level, which I think most people do; they categorize you. But those were some of the interesting things there.

Then when I got here, even when I went to interview for the job with Sproul Homes, I went and the guy that interviewed me was one of the guys in the engineering department. Oh, he was giving me all kinds of questions and he wanted to see me work and I had to do samples. One of the owners of that particular segment of the company, he came by and he looked over my shoulder and he says, if he can letter like that, hire him. And they hired me.

Of course, everywhere I went I was the only minority. Even when I worked for Holmes and Narver, I was the only one in the engineering department. That was an issue, as well, because the people downtown—it was really interesting—they sent me out to interview with the head of the engineering department at the Test Site. A couple of the guys that I had worked with at Sproul whom they looked to me for advice in terms of how to design and whatever, they had gone to Holmes and Narver before me because they were still laying off and they had gotten jobs as designers, which was pretty high up. When I went, the same guy that hired them told me the best he could do for me was give me a junior draftsman position, which was like I knew nothing. But the key was he wasn't the one—he thought they had sent me out there for him to hire or to interview, but I wasn't. They hired me downtown. It was a different breed of cat downtown for whatever reason. So that was kind of an experience. But every time I somehow had to fight for

what it was.

During that time, though, I might have to add, the company—the government was asking them—they were trying to get them to hire more minorities. So they came to me and asked me; they wanted to give me an advanced position. This was during the time when I had enrolled in ICS. Now remember, this is an engineering company, okay? They wanted to give me this job as a designer, senior designer, as a structural designer. I refused it. And my reason was that I'm not ready yet. Because my thinking was they were trying to fill some kind of a quota; and the moment that was done, if I didn't know what I was doing, all they had to do is come and ask me a couple of questions and they'd say, see what I mean? So I refused it. But I said I'm working on it.

Well, when I did get my diploma and all that and I felt like I was comfortable enough that I knew what I was doing, I asked for the promotion and they said no. In fact, one of the managers said that I didn't—well, actually, to make a long story short, I had to write a little paragraph that said I was fully qualified for the job, dah, dah, dah, and I had to sign it to get the job. Even though there were others in the company who were white that had done the same thing I had, they didn't have to do that—but I did. But I was fairly confident that I could do the job, so I didn't have a problem with that. But it was just the difference that they showed.

But I excelled, I think. I can remember one of the times my immediate supervisor who was Chinese, he came and he said, George, I went in and asked for a raise for you and they gave it to me so quick, I asked for more and they gave me that, too. But I was, I guess, different than what they expected. I didn't just sit around and wait. I was trying to learn as much as I could so I could be prepared if anything did happen to break, if you know what I mean. The same thing I tell the kids now; they always have to have a goal to work for. My goal was basically the present



and to be available and ready if something happens. And I wasn't expecting nothing, hoping, but not expecting. But that sort of thing. That just happened a lot, a lot.

**Your stories remind me—when I read about Paul Williams, the architect who designed the La Concha lobby and some other things here—**

Right.

**—Berkley Square, he had to learn to draw upside down because his white clients, he couldn't sit beside them, so he had to learn to draw upside down.**

So they could see. Oh, yes.

**Amazing. But that field that you decided to go into was really a different kind of field.**

Oh, it was. It was.

**For blacks to want to get into at the time.**

Big time. It really, really was. It was really interesting. In retrospect, there were a lot of good people, though, a lot of good people. I found that out. But there were also those that...they had problems. [Laughing]

**The way you look at it is a very enlightened way to look at it.**

Really?

**Yes, it is. Because sometimes we just blanket things. We just say they're all this way. So it's refreshing to think about it again.**

One of those things, I'll laugh about it and I'll tell folks, sometimes when I'm talking to them, I don't tell them a lot, but you know how when people can say things to you and you know it's meant to be derogatory and you don't have a comeback? And so you walk away and then you're still fuming for months. So what I ended up doing was I sat and I would think of anything that people could talk to me about or tell me that would upset me and I would put little cute

comebacks that wasn't offensive but got my point across so that when those things occurred I had something to say. And I didn't have to worry about it after that. [Laughing]

**I love it. I love it. I hate ten minutes later saying, oh, I should have said that.**

I should have said, right. That's what I mean. We do that to ourselves. You know what I mean? You don't want to be rude because the first thing you want to do is fight, but that's not appropriate. So you just shut up. But then it worries you. It wears on you. And I'm thinking that's stress. So that was my solution for that, that one. There were several others, but that was part of it.

**That's wonderful. That is amazing. So did you get to know Art Williams?**

I think I met him.

**He was one of those first black attorneys for EG&G.**

Yes, I met him and I know who he was, but I never socialized with him.

**Well, I really appreciate this so much. I appreciate those stories that you just told me, but all of that Las Vegas history to help us fill in the gaps. That is wonderful.**

Well, I hope so. I hope it helps because that's just things that happened to me as I remember them. And you know how that memory is.

**Yes.**

We tend to sort of—I don't know; we modify it as we get older.

**Yes, and memory changes. But because we have the memories of so many people, we get a good look.**

You weed out the good stuff.

**Exactly. So I really appreciate this.**

Oh, you're welcome. **[End of recorded interview]**

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