

AN ORAL HISTORY OF WOMEN LEADERS OF MEMPHIS  
INTERVIEW WITH GLEN AWSUMB

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ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE  
MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY



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INTERVIEW WITH GWEN AWSUMB

APRIL 3, 1978

BY

MS. ELEANOR MCKAY AND CLINTON BAGLEY

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PLACE Memphis, TN

3 April 1978

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Gwen R. Rowsum

(Interviewee)

Claron M. Miller, Clinton Bagley  
(For the Mississippi Valley Archives  
of the John Willard Brister Library  
of Memphis State University)



THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE OF MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. THIS PROJECT IS "WOMEN LEADERS OF MEMPHIS." THE PLACE IS MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE. THE DATE IS APRIL 3, 1978, AND THE INTERVIEW IS WITH MRS. GWEN AWSUMB. THE INTERVIEW IS BY MS. ELEANOR MCKAY AND CLINTON BAGLEY, AND IS TRANSCRIBED BY MRS. BETTY WILLIAMS.

MS. MCKAY: Mrs. Awsumb, would you like to give us a short autobiographical sketch?

MRS. AWSUMB: I'd be delighted to. I have lived in Memphis a major part of my life. I came here when I was fifteen years old. I was born in Marshall, Michigan. My father was a lawyer in a small town in Michigan and served in the legislature in Michigan and maybe that's where I got my early interest in politics. He attempted to and was successful in obtaining a seat in the state legislature as a Democrat in a totally Republican state. Many years later I attempted the same thing in the Democratic stronghold as a Republican. I was not successful as he was in that race.

I lived in Chicago in the early part of my life and then for a short while--five years--in North Florida and came here in the depth of the Depression. My father went into the real estate business in 1930. I attended St. Mary's Episcopal School for two years and graduated and at that time I was unable to go to college that year because there was no money. Then after a year I went to Southwestern. I graduated from Southwestern in 1937 with a B.S. in chemistry. I had intended while



I was in Southwestern to become a doctor. Maybe I have always had a yen to do things that women weren't supposed to do, because in high school my greatest heroine was Amelia Earhart. I kept up a correspondence with Amelia Earhart about what I could do to become a woman flyer. But that passed and the doctor bit passed and I graduated from Southwestern in '37 and there were very few jobs around at that time and I went to Sewanee, Tennessee and taught school in a mountain school for a year. Then I got married.

I married Wells Awsumb, a Memphis-born architect, and went up to the University of Illinois to finish his architectural course. I met him at Southwestern and my first child was born up there and he graduated in '40 and we returned to Memphis where we have lived for 26 years except for short periods during the war when he was away and I went with him. Up until the time of, I would say 1950, I was totally absorbed in my family and raising three children. I have two boys and a girl. In 1950 we moved into our first owned home and think this sort of makes you feel much more of a part of a community when you buy your first home. You feel down in your neighborhood and then you look around and say, "How can I make this better?"

This was a house in mid-town and there were several opportunities that happened to come along about that time that got me interested in doing more and more about my community. For instance, up until that time there was not permanent registration for voting and we had a drive for permanent registration. Well, some people asked me to work on it



and I can recall taking my small child in a stroller going around in the neighborhood asking them to register to vote. I was appalled at that time how many people were completely apathetic about the whole thing. They really didn't care a thing about voting. Of course, you have to remember that we were coming out of a period of political dictatorship of Mr. Crump for so many years that people really didn't know how to exercise their voting privilege. It had always been pretty easy to let Mr. Crump run things.

But anyway, that was of the first things I got interested in. Then in 1952 I particularly became interested in another level in that I had two teenage boys, or bordering on teenage, and I had a father in World War I and a husband in World War II and the Korean War was going on and I backed the candidate that I thought would do the country the most good for president and that was General Eisenhower. I got involved in that campaign and established not only a political foothold in the community by my activities there, but established a lifelong lasting friendship politically at that time. After that campaign was over those of us who had participated in it felt that there was sufficient interest in this formerly all Democratic stronghold to perhaps build the basis of a second party in which we firmly believed.

So we set about that little task. It took 18 years to finally elect a governor. If anybody would have told me it would have taken 18 years, I probably wouldn't have started in the first place. But we did elect our first Republican senator in 1966, then in 1970 our first governor.





We felt we had accomplished a great deal not because of the party per se--the partisan part of it--but because there was no longer any cut and dried no-choice primaries for people to participate in. Memphis was growing up politically. This is good. It makes everybody put forth their best foot and their best candidates to have a really two-party system.

At the same time as 1966 was taking place, there was a turmoil as far as our city was concerned in the structure of its local government. I got involved in that type of movement, and served on the Program for Progress Committee which was charged with drafting some charter changes to the existing charter. That was a twenty-five member committee and was elected by the people and was not appointed by powers that be.

It was a citizens movement of several thousand people and they elected twenty-five people to serve on this committee. I was the only woman on there and of course as the only woman I ended up as being secretary. There's no big deal about my being secretary--it was just that I was a woman. That experience was very interesting and we did come up with some sound changes. It was successful and was presented to the voters. They bought it.

Because of its potential I became interested in trying to serve on the Council that we had provided for these charter changes. In fact, three people from the charter committee served on the council in 1968. So in the fall of 1967 I ran for the City Council from a district. At that time I didn't feel that I was sufficiently known city-wide although I had worked in all kinds of different committees, different enterprises



in the community. But I felt the district race would be the one more appropriate.

There had never been a woman elected to public office in the city at that time. This was a difficult image or sex barrier to overcome at that time. In my particular race there were seven districts. The district in which I live was a familiar one--about half of it and the other half of it was unfamiliar in that I was not well-known and did not know many people in that half of it. I depended upon my acquaintances in the half where I live and then I worked door to door to acquaint myself with those people.

There were sixteen people in my race. The other fifteen were men. We had a run-off, and I hit the run-off with a state legislator who was already serving in the state legislature. He also happened to be a Republican which didn't help matters too much at that point as far as how we had to sort of split both as far as Republicans were concerned. I did manage to get elected and as such was the only woman that was elected in the thirteen.

We took office January 1, 1968, and I served four years as District Representative (District Councilman). During that time I was elected Chairman of the Council which I felt was a high honor because it was something that was afforded me by my peers. It has not been done to everybody automatically. It particularly was not done at that time just automatically. It was fought over and by that time of 1971, I ran at



large because I had had a lot of exposure during the time I was Chairman of the Council particularly in view of the fact that we were televised every week. They no longer do that, but at that time WKNO televised them and we got a lot of exposure.

So I ran that and was very proud of the fact that I carried every precinct in town both white and black. That pleased me because I have always tried to feel that I was not representing just one group of people or one background or one viewpoint. I like to consider myself a moderate and a middle of the roader. So the city is my field and that pleased me that everybody in the city felt that way.

I served in that capacity for three and a half years and during that time became involved as a Councilman in the development of a plan to spend community development dollars, which was a federal program coming down from Washington in which local office holders would have the final responsibility in finding out how to spend the money.

I served on the Mayor's Advisory Committee as a Councilman of four Councilmen. And in so doing became intensely interested in it and the Mayor asked me to resign from the Council and accept a place in the administration in order to direct the program. This I did in April of 1975 and have been doing it every since.

One of the reasons I did it was not only my interest in it but it became a little frustrating for the Council to try to feel that they had accomplished anything. Legislatively, it was very difficult to see what you had accomplished. The challenge to be an executive, whether I



could do it or not, was rather intriguing to me and also for seven and a half years I had prevented my husband from being eligible for any city work--he was an architect. This is fine while he could get private work while things were going great or school work, but the disintegration of the school system away from neighborhood schools sort of blew the school jobs and then certainly the private work began to dry up in the recession we were having in '73 and '74. I just felt I had stood in his way long enough so I felt I was not going to run for the Council again for that reason. So I was delighted when the Mayor suggested me to do this.

I was trying to figure out what I was going to do when I didn't run for Council anymore. I couldn't very well picture myself sitting home knitting all day and I am sure I would have gotten into something. But this has been very challenging and I have enjoyed an attempt to be an executive and I have been pleased that I was able to do what we started out with three people on the staff to spend thirty million dollars.

I now have a staff of 178 people and we are entering our next three-year program with the possibility of spending some forty-five million dollars. We will be busy at work in some eighteen neighborhoods of this city plus special programs that deal with special economic problems with the downtown and so forth.

Do you want me to go into the community development now?

MS. MCKAY: Yes.

MRS. AWSUMB: Community Development is a program that absorbed many former categorical programs that the Federal government





had had such as Urban Renewal, Code Enforcement Program, Model Cities-- other such programs that had been going on for some time and in some instances they were successful and in others they were not. But the one thing that is different about Community Development is that there is the insistence that the guide lines for eligibility are rather flexible and made in Washington. The decision of where to spend the money and how to spend the money and what problems you are going to attack are up to the local officials and not directed by Washington. This was not the case in Urban Renewal. It also is different from Urban Renewal in that it is more like an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Urban Renewal waited until the slum and blight was so bad that all you could do was to get a bulldozer and start over. Community Development says go into a neighborhood that is showing signs of deterioration while there is still time to turn it around and redo the housing and rehab the housing and fix the streets and build the sidewalks, put in new lighting and make it once again an attractive environment in which people want to live, want to stay and may want to return to.

So with this in mind we have approached the neighborhoods in the city. In order to make a selection in 1975 we did a what we call "a needs assessment". We analysed 12,000 block segments--that's how many block segments there are in the city of Memphis. We analysed those 12,000 block segments as to their deficiency: What were the curbs, gutters, streets, sidewalks, lighting, housing, everything about that neighborhood was mapped out and noted. At the end of the analysis we mapped it on a reg-



ular map. As you might imagine when you have a couple of deficiencies they sort of peck together in clusters--one bad thing sort of brought on another bad thing. So we ended up with what we called the "135 potential priority areas." That indicated that there were 135 census tracts that had needs from just a little to really in need of urban renewal. But when we looked at those 135 areas and the mayor appointed a thirty member advisory committee of citizens to study the city and decide on recommendations for the expenditure of that money.

The first thing that the committee that we call APAC--Action Program Advisory Committee--set was they wanted to spend it wherever people lived and they set 80% for residential as the first criteria. They also looked at the density of the neighborhood, and the estimated cost of what it would take to fix up that neighborhood, thinking to spend the money so that for every dollar spent to affect the most people. We shied away from sparsely populated neighborhoods that cost a great deal and looked more closely at densely populated neighborhoods that didn't cost too much to fix them up. There was other criteria that we looked at, the last being geographic distribution. We did select nine areas for that initial thirty million dollars plus several special programs.

When we followed the public hearing requirements to the legislation the final public hearing was held in front of the City Council and politics got into the act. The Council added a tenth area to our list which rather crippled us as to our contingency line for the next three



years because we have 10% of that thirty million was owner contingency line and when they put that tenth area in there it pretty well too up all that contingency.

MS. MCKAY:           What was the area?

MRS. AWSUMB:        The area was New Chicago which we had not selected in the first place because it is really an urban renewal area. It also had a great many environmental problems which we felt we could not probably get a clearance.

We have to do an environment review on everyone of the areas in which we spend money--federal money. The EPA had some "no-no's" as far as where you spend money. New Chicago had every "no-no" in the book except flight patterns. They did not have airplanes that made noise running over them, but it did have some planes, it had railroads, expressways--it had everything in the book.

When the federal government built the expressway and paid 90% of it and then they said it was an environmental hazzard and you shouldn't fix up the neighborhood because the expressway is there, which is as consistent as the federal government usually is. But anyway we did have to do an environmental study. We hired a group at Memphis State to do the study that cost \$40,000 dollars and took a year to do it which delayed that area from going ahead. Quite frankly I expected them to turn it down, but they didn't. It was cleared.

We have begun work up there now even though we are just now conclud-



ding that three year period. We do have the plan ready for New Chicago and we are in there inspecting houses but the actual contract for the streets and so forth won't be let until fall. Of the other nine areas we took four initially and hired professional planners worked with the neighborhood in order for them to provide us with resident planning committees. We didn't ask them any specific people to be on the committee, we asked them to do that themselves.

We had varying levels of success with that--citizens participation. But the guide lines on the first three years were rather loose--they just said you should involve citizens--how we did it was sort of up to you. That changed this last legislation and I'll get into that later, but on that initial legislation it said to involve citizens so that they would know what is going on in their own neighborhood. We did establish these citizen groups in each of the nine neighborhoods and we found that the fact that they had had nothing to do with being selected in the first place there was no method of technique that we could involve anyone in the initial selection process because we did not know which neighborhood would be selected at that point. So went to them after the fact--you are selected so now we are going to spend this money in your neighborhood.

We had varying reactions from an area down near the Kansas Street Urban Renewal Area which ended in disaster because during that period the money for the Kansas Street Project was cut off in mid-stream.





And the people never did get what they were supposed to get. So many people thought the houses were going to be bought and they are still sitting in them and they didn't do anything to them for three or four years expecting them to be purchased and then they weren't and they really suffered in the Kansas Street area. I was not surprised when we selected an area down there in order to try to finish some of that work--that was the reason we went in that direction. But when we tried to deal with the people down there all they could do was remember their past experience and not trust us. They absolutely were very suspicious. They didn't believe a thing that we said we were going to do and it took several years to convince them we were serious and we did have the money in hand and we didn't have to apply for it--it was right there. That was one reaction.

Another reaction from another group was the only all-white area that we chose. We actually chose the all-white area because of while I was on the Council a number of programs would be presented to us for decisions. People complained, "You always give all the money to black neighborhoods; don't you know there are some poor white people?" So we decided we would try to balance it so we selected a white neighborhood.

That was a mistake because they were insulted--highly insulted. They would have no part of the federal program and would not allow their houses to be selected and threatened the inspectors. There are expressions around for what these people really were and they were. We just had a problem. We managed to do some renovations in the area, but we decid-



ed then the next time we had a selection process regardless of what the guidelines said we were going into only areas that wanted us. Other experiences on those nine areas for instance was an integrated area in which we were working was Barton Heights area in Southwest Memphis. It was far and above our best area as far as citizen participation, cooperation and enthusiasm. I've never seen such people--black and white together--they were just tickled to death that we had come in spending that money and they have worked with us tremendously well. And we have been very pleased with their response.

We are now at the point of not being finished in any of those nine areas. We are almost through in the Douglas area and that was the first place we started. We spent more money in the Douglas area and that's why we selected them first because we knew it would take longer there and there's more work to be done. All of the street improvement and lighting and all that sort of physical improvements will be under contract of the last five areas the first of July, New Chicago by the first of October, and I would suspect by the end of the summer of 1979 we will see the completion of the nine areas.

New Chicago will probably take about six or eight months longer than that. The government does not recall this money every three years or every year as far as that goes. They do give us a year's allocation out of our three-year entitlement and they tell us we must spend the first year's money in its entirety before we spot things in the second year's money. We are now almost at the end of the three year period and we have



not quite finished second-year money. We have not spent any third-year money at all. Which makes it a little difficult because you have to struggle inside of your budget and we learned a lot this go around.

In our first year's budget we had entirely too much allocated for certain purposes which we could not accomplish that first year, but the planning takes so long so we have now gone into another three-year program which will start the first of July. Our budget process is entirely different this time because of the experience we've had in this last three-year period.

We will begin the establishment of the planning process for seven additional areas which were selected out of the potential 45 million dollar entitlement grant that was given to us in July 1, 1978. We will have fifteen and a half million dollars this first year to spend in the planning process in our special program and for certain other purposes. One of the things that you have to do this this particular year was to buy almost two million dollars of urban renewal land. All the urban renewal projects have now been closed out and the land turned back to the city. All the unsold land had to be picked up by the city and paid for. And that side of legislation comes out of Community Development funds off the top of our program.

Now we have the responsibility of selling that land and as we do sell it we stand to sell it the way it is priced. We stand to sell it for four to five million instead of the two million that we had to pay to buy it. When we do sell it, it will go back into our program. That will hopefully benefit us by several million dollars, but it will take



time.. Its not something that's going to happen overnight. That is not of the reasons I have particularly anxious to see the Beale Street renovation take place because it is surrounded by urban renewal land that is just sitting there. If there is the possibility of launching an entertainment and restaurant center along Beale Street or what we call the Blue Light area and have a tourist attraction that is economic success we will foster interest in the land that surrounds it for auxiliary purposes-- support its purposes of one sort or another. If it is to our interest to do this plus the fact that the overall economy of the downtown area is such that whatever we can do to provide a catalyst to turn the downtown area around is what I have been interested in.

I was on a downtown committee when I served on the Council and I am completely sold and enthusiastic about the development of Volunteer Park on Mud Island. I think it is an absolutely fascinating concept of the tourist attraction that is not the glitter and neon signs of a Six Flags over Georgia or anything like that, but it is a seemingly educational project that would intrigue young and old alike as far as the river [is concerned]. We have never capitalized on our river as we should. We are so used to our river we don't realize its potential. This will do that and I believe that we will have people coming to visit us to see that particular project once it gets going and once the word gets around and we have some good advertising. It is just bound to attract a lot of tourists.





Then the next order of business is where are you going to put the tourists when they get here and we have not hotel to put them in. Although we have a fine convention facility, we don't have a convention hotel. We have a magnificent hotel of a vintage that is very nostalgic and that is the Peabody Hotel and it has been closed for three or four years. This hotel now stands a very excellent chance of being opened through the enterprise of the Belz family and their associate owners of the hotel that they picked up on the foreclosure market to actually keep it from being torn down and they have held on for three or four year to see whether they could find the means to restore it. This has been done in other cities to great success--Parker House in Boston was about to go under and it is even older hotel. It has been restored magnificently. and is very successful.

But now certainly all indications are that the plan has been worked out for the Peabody and it is going to be successful and Community Development has contributed one million dollars for a loan guarantee. The Economic Development Administration has offered to guarantee a loan of 90% of ten million dollar loan so that means they are guaranteeing nine million, but they required of that nine million that three million of that should be sub-guaranteed--guarantee a guarantee. So the Belz family is putting up two million of that and we are putting up the last million. We really were the million that made it go together. The Belz family is putting up three million on the front end in cash equity. Their necks are way out there in taking quite a risk. But I



think it is going to be successful and that it is going to be the spark that turns things around.

The second thing that is going to assist is the restoration of Beale Street through a two million dollar loan from Community Development to a developer to restore the building to enantable condition and to work out marketing and leasing rights with him. This is just for a block and a half of the entire area down there, but it is a very strategic and significant section of the street. By so doing it that way, the larger portion of Beale Street from Second and Third in which the buildings are in better structural condition and more apt to come back on their own volition through private enterprise, I believe, they won't need any assistance once this first part is done. Then the whole thing will come together. So that is the reason for that.

One of the things that has pleased me the most about Community Development which I overlooked in speaking of the methods by which we rehabilitate neighborhoods was we can do the streets and we can do new parks and we can do lighting and all kinds of these things, but our housing program is the most complicated and the most difficult part of our program. It takes longer. It is not easy to convince somebody to invest or reinvest once they have paid off their house, reinvest and take on additional notes particularly when they don't have a whole lot of income to begin with and even though our interest is very low--a 3% loan.

In some instances if the income of the resident is quite low or low



enough they may be eligible for \$4,000 grant. But this day and age \$4,000 doesn't go very far in rehabilitating a living unit. Quite often they have to borrow over and beyond the \$4,000 at 3%. So the financial working with these people, in getting them convinced that this is the best thing to do is a problem and then--I would probably say one of the greatest drawbacks in this whole city is the art of construction rehabilitation.

We don't have contractors--and this is not just in Memphis it is all over--we just don't have people that are skilled enough to go back into older houses and do a really good job of rehabilitating an existing structure.

They can build new houses but to go back where the techniques were different in the days in which it was built and then they are used to using the new construction. It is difficult for them to do it. It has been a problem. We have also tried to stay with minority and small contractors and we have an approved list of contractors many of whom are minority. We require certain standards for them to be on our list.

We have dropped several who did work that was unsatisfactory; we insist on high quality work. It has not always happened, but where it has not happened we have gone back and redone it in order to provide quality work for these people. But in certain instances we are not able to rehabilitate the house. In such instances we can acquire it from the owner, pay him the market price and then through the Uniform Relocation Act we can get additional relocation money and then you have certain other available monies to assist him to often times build a new house back on his own lot where we bought the house and tore it down in the first place. Add an ingredient in the Douglas area we have four



mobile homes that we put on empty lots up there and we temporally relocate people in these mobile homes while their house is being built or while a very large rehab job is going on. We have had people sitting in their mobile homes and watching us across the street as their new house is being built.

We have built eleven or twelve new houses in the Douglas--very attractive small houses that people have been very pleased with. To show you that I don't think this ever would have occurred I can't imagine such a thing several years ago, but I went out to Douglas the other day and so help me someone had bought a lot and is building a new house in Douglas of their own and it is not our money it is private money. This has to say something for an older neighborhood for a person to come back to this neighborhood--of course Douglas is an old established neighborhood.

People have been there for generation and this is someone who has lived there and has returned to the city and is building a house in Douglas which pleases me a great deal. I feel that this is indicative that you can begin to turn an older neighborhood around.

Of course, the necessity for establishing solid neighborhoods in the inner city in stability is ever increasing with the spiraling costs of new housing plus the flight from the city that has left a delapidated inner core that causes your tax base to decrease, has really caused problems across the country. Memphis is more fortunate even though people get upset because we are missing some federal funds.





I say hooray because we are not called a "distressed city", but that we have had good annexation policies and laws in which we have reached out and taken the good tax-based suburban land and included it in our city while we saw a broader career and worked on these inner city neighborhoods to restabilize them to have a balanced tax base across the city.

I feel this is the best way to go and I would rather be in that situation than ringed around with incorporated towns such as St. Louis and Atlanta have become. I feel we have a better opportunity for good solid growth in Memphis than Atlanta and St. Louis. Atlanta has passed its peak. We've had people talk about Memphis ought to be like Atlanta until it is like running a red flag up in front of me because we have watched Atlanta go through the process. They are over the hump and going downhill and Memphis is still running up that hill at this point and I feel can take advantage of some of the mistakes made by Atlanta.

I feel that our future is very definitely around the corner. We'll see Memphis maybe not in a rapid growth like Houston has had or like Atlanta had ten years ago but I think it will be a more solid growth. We have attacked some of our problems in a much more reasonable way.. We had a lot to overcome in the tragic events that took place in our city ten years ago. I was on the Council when Dr. King was killed and the sanitation strike took place, and this had an impact that actually at the time people were not aware of how serious this impact was as to our growth, our economy, our relationships within our city with one another.



It's had repercussions all down the ten years. We are just now coming out of that and that's why I am saying we are just coming out of that and we have made a lot of progress. We will be able to look at the future with a good deal of confidence. I believe that in five years you will be able to see the turn around in the downtown area and then in another ten a solid base of growth.

One of the things that makes me say that--I mentioned the tax base which provides our only resource for provision of services in the city. If the rest of our income is negligible compared to the major source of property tax it has been slowly closing in on us in that expense has gone up so we haven't been able to keep up with it. We are now in the process of a reassessment and that has not been done for many years. I think the inequities when they are straightened out and the present property reassessed will provide us an adequate tax base with which to provide services for the future.

Memphis has a very low low tax base tax rate compared to other cities. You would not think this if you listened to the average taxpayer complain about his taxes, but he really does not know what's it like in other cities. He also is very spoiled; we are the only major city who trots to your backyard and picks up your garbage and trots back to the front and puts it on a truck. This is a very costly process and I would anticipate that in three to five years we will no longer do that. We simply cannot afford that kind of luxury anymore. I do think we are in good shape and that we do have a good future.



You asked me to speak about historic preservation. It is an eligible expense under Community Development which I have been very interested in. One of the first things that came up when I served on the Council in 1968 was the potential destruction of a railroad station down on Lauderdale which we discovered at 10 o'clock on a Tuesday morning when we were in executive session was about to take place. We called the Memphis Housing Authority and asked them to send somebody down there to explain what we could do about this. They came down and said this was a part of the Court Street project that this station was needed to be taken down and that was the plan and that was all there was to it.

We asked if they would please hold the razing of this station until at such time that we could look into it and see if there was anything that we could do about it as a courtesy for a week or two, and by the afternoon session at 2:30 the bulldozers had taken this station down. That was the kind of response we got when we were concerned about preservation. Personally, I never thought the station was really all that important as far as saving was concerned. People who knew more about it than I considered it a significant period piece--whatever period it was. It might not have been architecturally attractive per se, but it was significant of a particular period. So that was a loss. If it had not been for the hard work of a very few ladies who attempted to preserve some of the older homes down on Adams we wouldn't have anything left probably in Memphis.

But these ladies without any help from the government--there was one gift of \$50,000 that they got from the city before the City Council came



along. But those properties along Adams in the near downtown section which is called Victorian Village is a result of their hard work by a very few people. Memphis owes a great deal of debt to those few people who put that together without much help from anybody else.

There has been a significant increase in interest in historical preservation in the last several years. I attribute it greatly to the awareness that people have during 1976 when we celebrated our bicentennial. I think this took place all over the country. People are inclined to go along and not pay much attention to what they have got until it begins to disappear. When you are forced to look at what you have in celebration of 200 years of history then you begin to appreciate it a little more.

I happen to have the privilege to be the chairman of the Bicentennial Commission for Memphis in 1976 and I found that there was quite an increase in interest in historical preservation. It has held over and the momentum has continued and we were able for the first time to establish through ordinance a Landmarks Commission for the City of Memphis which was done by the City Council and established a seven member committee whose charge it is to analyze Memphis and its historical perspective and survey it first and designate significant structures and districts that have architectural and historical significance. This has been in operation now for about two years and they have assisted other people in receiving national recognition as a landmark that is included in the National Register, in which we have about fifteen or twenty in Memphis that are on the National Register now.

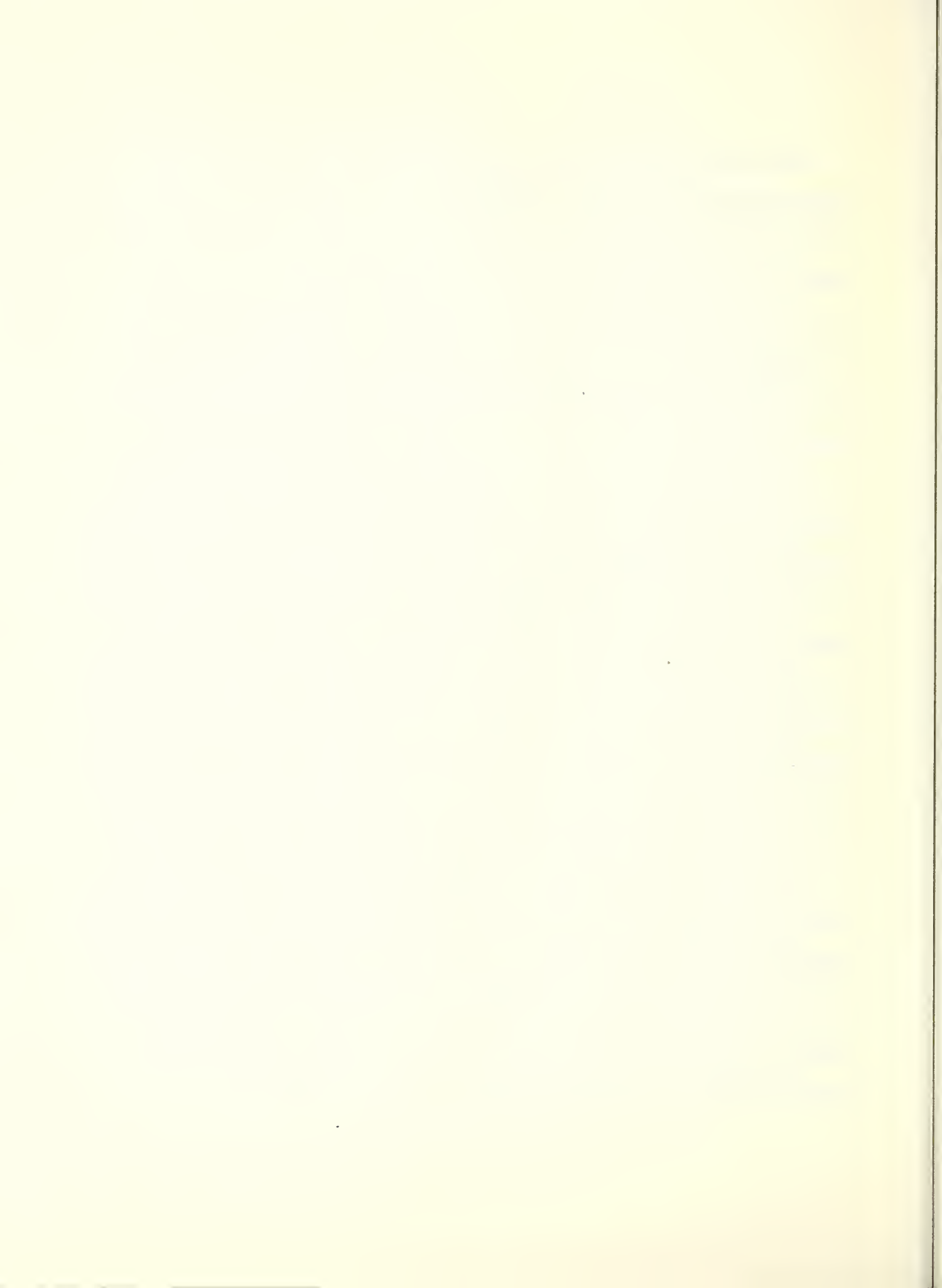




One of the districts that is on the National Register is the Beale Street Historic area, which is one reason I am so interested in restoring it before it is completely crumbles away in dust and ashes. There are still some good historical buildings left, but not nearly as many as we would like to have. Unfortunately they are scattered. This makes it difficult to concentrate on and do anything about. Isolated historical buildings are difficult to protect not only from the elements but from vandalism and from just general abuse.

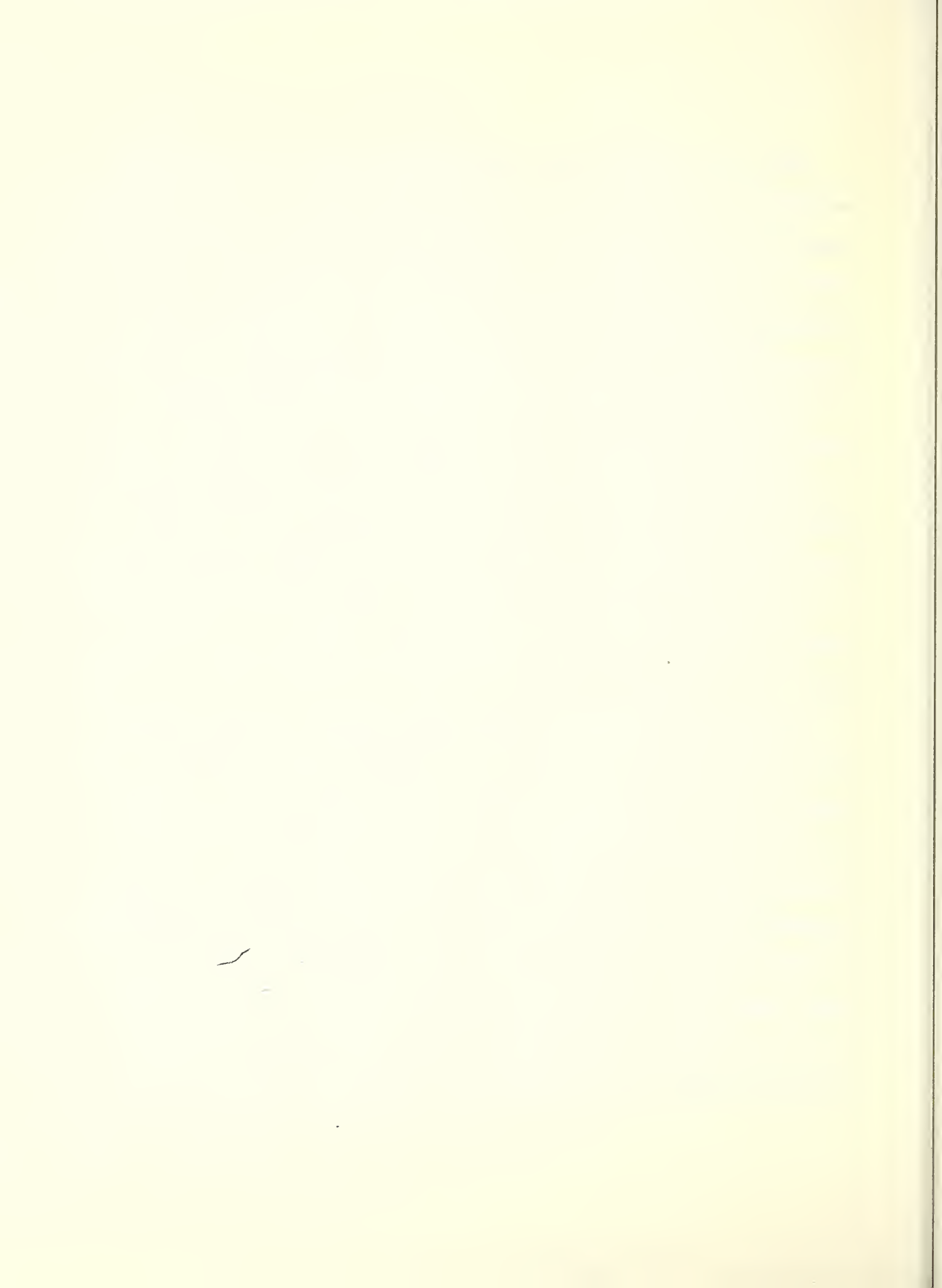
For instance, the Randolph House which was a significant house and was owned by the Urban League, and after they moved out of it and took their offices to other quarters and still owned the old Randolph House they decided to tear it down and to build a building there or sell the land whatever they wanted for. It was on the National Register. Of course, just being on the National Register doesn't prevent you from tearing it down--you can tear it down if you want to. But we felt it was a significant building we would have liked to have kept it. We did not have the money to buy it--they would have loved to have sold it. But they had an inflated idea of what it cost. It was completely unprotectable situation as far as its surrounding area.

One thing about it was it was directly across the street from the Phelan House which is the oldest house in the city and occupied by Mr. Phelan, remaining brother of two brothers who owned it. I have been quite concerned as to what would happen to the Phelan House upon the death of Mr. Phelan. Whatever does happen to it I hope--I trust it is going to be preserved in some way that he has made some kind of arrangement for this.



This is not knowledge that is available to anybody so nobody really knows what Mr. Phelan has done about it. It's in need of repair too, but it is the most significant building, I guess, that we have in the city at least a house in the city. There is an area north of the downtown area called the Greenlaw area in which we have just selected as a Community Development neighborhood. We will be working in there not only from the viewpoint of making it a better neighborhood but spending some money and restoring some landmarks which exist in there. Interestingly enough this was a neighborhood which used to be a summer colony for the people who lived in Memphis. They had a cottage out there and would go and spend the summer out there to get away from the heat of the city. This is just before the turn of the century and some of those summer cottages are still out there and one that belonged to Mayor Love who was Mayor of the city around the turn of the century.

We are spending some money through several means in this area, and we have a program which we call the pre-apprenticeship training program in which we take twenty-five disadvantaged unemployed young people and under the direction of the building trades council of the Union AFL-CIO they are teaching them on the job training in brick laying, carpentry, painting, and plastering--various building trades, and we are providing the materials. The Comprehensive Employment Training Act has provided the funds to pay these young people. Coupled with the dollars of the two federal agencies we have some houses up there that belong to a Catholic sister (a convent) and they own three or four of these houses that they bought for little or



nothing and we are providing the means to rehabilitate them through the training of the young people.

The results of this [are] that the union after this year of training pledges to take them into apprenticeship and this of course is a career path for a young person. If you know anything about what the trades make by the hour, this is not a summer program of raking leaves and that kind of thing. It is a real career path program. I had a little difficulty getting it past--very conservative Council because they did not really think--they thought it was a very high expenditure per person [project]. It is, but I also had problems from the three black Councilmen. Because they objected to the Union being involved and because they should have done this years ago, they were now making up for their past discriminatory practices as far as Blacks were concerned. And to heck with them and that was their attitude. They didn't want to pay the Union to do what they should have done in the first place. I say, "Fiddle to that!" Here is an opportunity to direct twenty-five people and also an opportunity to make the Union put up or shut up as far as black people in their apprenticeship programs are concerned.

So what if they didn't do it in the past--that's too bad, but let's don't hold that against them--let's make this program work and they'll do it again. We finally got that past and it is working, but it is more than working it is "rehabing" houses which people need to live in. It is preserving, in this instance, houses which have a historical part of our city and would[perhaps] be otherwise lost. So I think it is sort of a triple



or quadruple impact that this particular program is having.

I believe that the historical preservation movement that has begun to go forward here in Memphis will continue. I think people are going to think twice before they actually take down an older building. Number one it costs so much to build a new building and some very interesting adapted uses have come out of this surge all over the country.

The development of the downtown warehouses, office buildings being converted to living space is a very interesting one. There are lots of different ways to do it and also one of the elements is that you have got to have living units in your downtown area if you are indeed going to turn your downtown around. You cannot have a downtown that survives on a 8 to 5 traffic. You have got to have people past six o'clock in the downtown area. You have got to have them there on Saturday and Sunday. We are beginning to provide that.

Community Development offers a downtown supplemental loan. So many packages of housing conversion of existing empty buildings could have been brought about except for an extra ingredient on the financing. It just couldn't borrow quite enough to make it feasible. So we have offered a program which has been taken up a couple of times now and that is. If you have conventional financing for 80% of your project that you can convert an existing empty building into housing and you've got 80% of that financing from a conventional source in hand we will give you--that person--20 percent at three percent interest rates not to exceed the total amount for any one project of \$200,000.

So this has been done several of these and there are several more

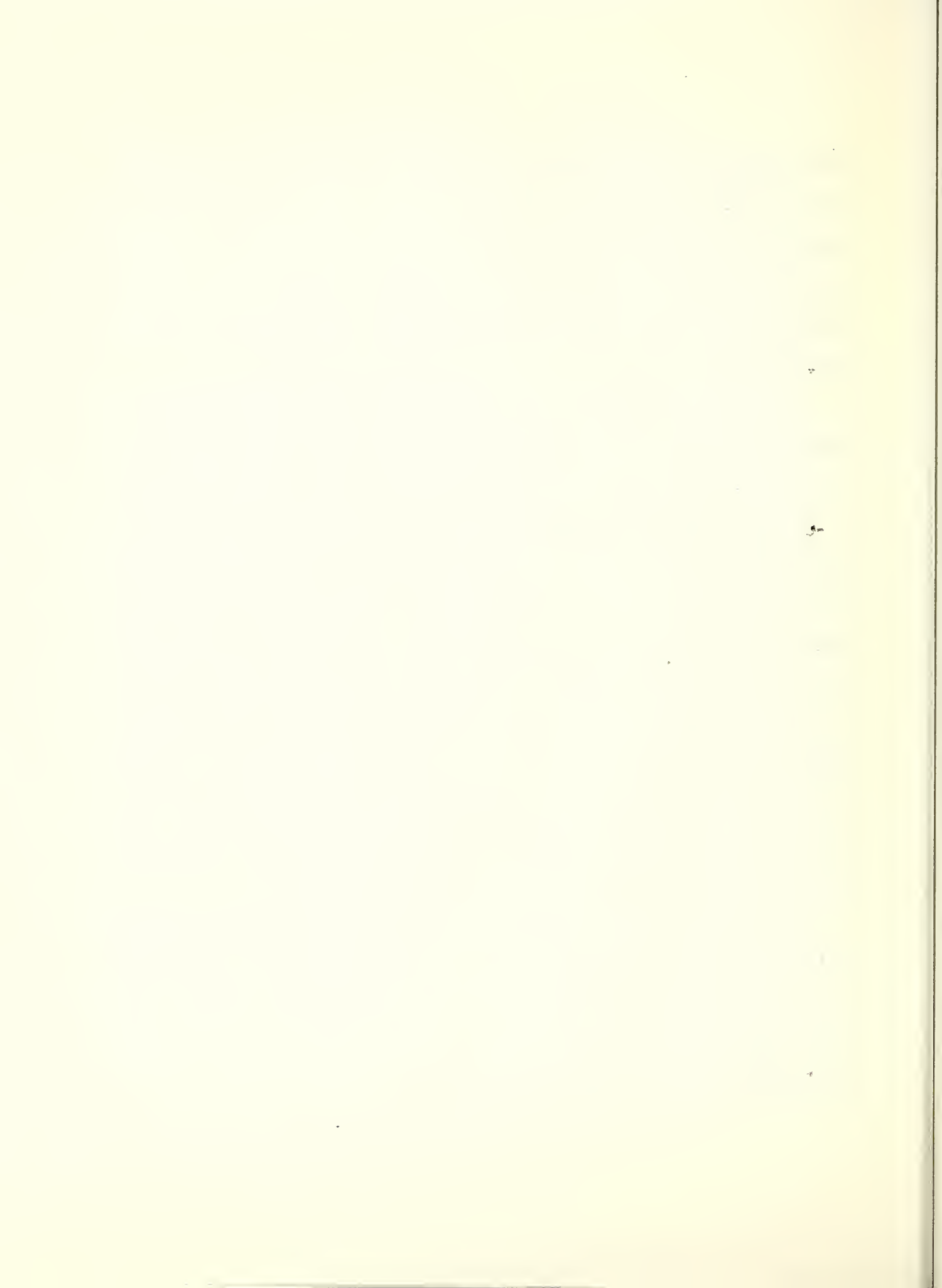




on the drawing board. I believe we will make a contribution to the possibility of accomplishing the provision of housing. These are all--well, not all--but most of these are in older--what you call really older buildings--and certainly what you call the "Cotton Row" area [which] is an historic district that contains buildings that were some of the first that were in Memphis.

I expect that we will see some of the other older buildings being converted into houses and combinations of housing and office space and living-working type arrangements. That will encourage retail units of one sort or another. I don't think that anyone expects--no one ever did expect--that downtown to turn around to be what I knew it in the 1930's and 1940's when you would take a day and go to town and you would take to the department stores from one end to the other and you would have lunch at the Peabody or maybe you would take in a picture show in the afternoon and sort of have a day downtown. That doesn't happen here; it doesn't happen in Chicago; and it doesn't happen in any of the big cities anymore. But here in Memphis we have a tremendous investment in the Government Plaza, a tremendous investment in the financial institutions and we have a large working force that comes to this area of our city every day.

We have a convention facility and we have potential tourist attraction. We will have convention hotels--ability to house these people who will come in to conventions and they always have a few extra dollars to spend. For every dollar a tourist or visitor spends it turns around four or five times in our city when they put out a dollar.



This provides for a very healthy economy. You cannot say--"I don't want my tax dollar to go into the downtown area--it's dead voer and gone--forget it." You cannot forget it==it's too big an investment and it has got to be protected and it is as important to the guy living out next to Ridgeway as it is to the guy living in mid-town. You additionally have a mid-town medical center which is a tremendous investment and it is probably our largest economical contributor that we have in Memphis, second to the Millington Naval Air Base, I would say probably, but certainly within the city limits and maybe Memphis State would come up with the Medical Center. The Medical Center and the hospitals and so forth is a great contributor to our economy and we must protect it in every way.

That is one reason that a return to the mid-town area for living has been attractive to professional people--people who are interested in the medical area. Downtown served as their base of entertainment, and the cultural activities in this twon have continued to be concentrated in the downtown area and the mid-town area. And they will continue to be I think for some time to come. So it provides us with a good base for confidence in the future that we can provide housing in the downtown area, we can provide eating establishments not only for the people who work down here, but for the people who live nearby and retail shopping--not of the vintage of earlier years--but certainly as adequate as any shopping mall in the suburban area.

MS. MCKAY: You must be pretty tired by now. It's a wonderful story. Do you have any specific questions?

MR. BAGLEY: How is the city nominating properties to the National Register? Who does this?



MRS. AWSUMB: Anyone who, well, you know there is a tax advantage now for having your property on the National Register. You can restore that property and receive a five-year depreciation on the front end which is very attractive, and of course that is the whole purpose of it. But anyone whose property fits the criteria can apply to have thier property judged for inclusion on the National Register. Our Landmarks Commission for whom I have a staff person employed, Ann Bennett, handles the application for the inclusion in the National Register. It goes through the state. The state Tennessee Historical Commission loos at it and then they can in tandem apply to the National Register. We have just provided the service for people who want to nominate their property.

MR. BAGLEY: How much money has the city received of property owners that are on the National Register received from the federal government?

MS. AWSUMB: You mean in this tax kind of thing?

MR. BAGLEY: No ma'am. Are there any organizations that have received any money from the state for the National Register?

MRS. AWSUMB: I can't really answer that question. There are some grants that the state has given out and the National Historic Trust has contributed to us for an intern for the summer--last summer--in the form of paying a graduate student to come and help in our historic survey that we are doing for the city. But as far as a direct grant I do not know of any particular direct grant. Now, we got \$629,000 dollars from HUD to help purchase the Beale Street property from MIA when we turned it over to the Beale Street Historic Foundation. But that was not from the National Register--that was from HUD. I don't know how they do that. I am not



sufficiently acquainted. Ann might, but I don't.

MS. MCKAY:           You mentioned that you were haveing trouble finding contractors who are familiar with the older techniques and so can go in and rehab a house. Have you thought about setting up a re-training program?

MRS. AWSUMB:       Well, we haven't--no. But we have talked to the Building Trades Council about this problem. It is not as I say, it is not something that is localized--the rehabilitation of older hones all over the country. It is a real art and there are just not many people. I know I mentioned to my husband as an architect to find a good concrete man or a good brick layer or a man who understands how to put up crab orchard stone. The artesans prior are not trained in those kinds of crafts today as they once were. It's the fast sheet rock type of operation in the new construction. It's difficult to find--plus the fact that in our homes area usually in the enighborhoods in which we are working the houses were not all that very fine to begin with and they have been allowed to deteriorate and have not had proper maintenance. A lot of them were built before we had building codes that made them conform to certain building practices therefore there are some things there. For instance, foundations that are, we would not allow today--to fix those and renovate them gets pretty expensive.

MR. BAGLEY:       Just today I have been assisting someone around who is a preservationist with the National Park Service and never been in Memphis. This morning we toured five places--absolutely entranced





with what she saw.

MS. MCKAY: Really! Where did you take her?

MR. BAGLEY: Well, we have been to Victorian Village and she's working in Denver presently with the National Park Service and also in Boston.

MRS. AWSUMB: Is this Katherine. . .?

MR. BAGLEY: She says she is trying to duplicate things like the Mallory-Neely House and see it all in one place. And the carpet on the floor--she was beside herself when she saw it. This is what I am working for to find some sort of model and we've been out to the Rayner House, the Lowenstein House and she was also fascinated with the Lowenstein House.

MRS. AWSUMB: I understand the Rayner House is receiving a grant from the state.

MS. MCKAY: They got it last week.

MRS. AWSUMB: Yes. So that's great.

MR. BAGLEY: What does future development offer to the public for rehabilitation for other houses? Do you offer any guidelines? Do you have a preservation plan?

MRS. AWSUMB: No, we do not. We are not talking about historic preservation at first. In the neighborhoods which we have selected as designated neighborhoods and we go up to a person and inspect their house and they have to bring their house up to code--minimum housing code--City of Memphis.

That's the way we produce our program. We inspect their house and



we find deficiencies. A lot of time they can do it themselves without any financial assistance. Then we offer them financial assistance if they need it, but we encourage them to go beyond the minimum housing code and there are certain types of things that are eligible in that rehabilitation loan.

They do not stick strictly to the minimum housing code. They can add a room or they can enclose a porch or they can put in a new furnace or they can do a number of things that are included in our eligible list. And we try to get them to do as much as they will.

As far as historic property is concerned, we do not have a historic plan for or a preservation plan for the way to bring it up to restorability. Right now we are granting some money to Memphis Heritage, a non-profit group concerned with preservation structures and preserving Memphis's heritage.

They have purchased a house in the Greenlaw area and it is in need of rehabilitation and we are giving them a grant for materials. They are going to use some of our pre-apprenticeship people under the direction of the Union to take advantage of the money for the materials which we are at length giving them. Then they have an architect who is tuned to this type of thing.

We have an architect on our Landmarks Commission who is particularly skilled in preservation type architecture. This is sort of a specialty of some architects.

But as far as having guidelines for the preservation of a building we do not other than the landmarks designation [which] provides that a per-



son may not change--once it is designated in the district or a building is designated as a Memphis landmark,[it] may not be changed on its facade without a certificate of appropriateness which must be granted by the Landmarks Commission. That means they would review whatever change that they propose to do and they would either grant or deny the Certificate of Appropriateness. Inside they can do anything they want to, they don't care, but outside they want to maintain the historic flavor. Does that answer your question?

MR. BAGLEY: It seems like you need more staff members if you've got one person covering the whole city preservation.

MRS. AWSUMB: Well, HUD is not allowing us to spend money on preservation right like we anticipated. There's been a change in emphasis on community development. I deplore it, but I do the best I can. It is like so often happens when the bureaucrats get a hold to write the guidelines. They write the guidelines in the legislation like they would like to have it. There's a cult in Washington in my opinion at this point in time--I guess they have always been there. I have just gotten more acquainted with them since I have been doing this. There is what you would call the young Liberal--he can't really get elected to anything but he can make his mark as a guideline writer. And you better believe they feel very important and they are, because I have dealt with them on other levels, in education as well as Community Development.

Things have been steered away from legislative intent and that the



original of letting the local officials make all the decisions has eroded considerably in this second go-around of legislation. The emphasis of getting a neighborhood before it becomes too bad to really make an impact in as far as rehabilitation has eroded.

The emphasis is more narrow. We are going back to the categorical programs in urban renewal practices rather than prevention. I think this is too bad because I think you can make the money go further in going into neighborhoods that are just beginning to sell. It costs a tremendous amount to acquire property and to relocate people. It really costs!

Now, you can do a lot with leverage like we are doing out in the mid-town section. I neglected to mention the mid-town demonstration projects. That is a large segment which we are not asking for a total comprehensive treatment as we do our other neighborhoods, but we are working with the bank providing a leveraging program where we guarantee the loan or writedown the interest or one of the two. Owners borrowed the money in the conventional way at the conventional rate--no more, no less--than somebody out in East Memphis would borrow for home improvement loan, but for years was denied in an older neighborhood because of the high risk for a bank. We are providing the--we are sort of removing that risk for the banks by providing that underwriting.

I think it certainly has been proven in the Central Gardens area that you can make a very attractive area out of older houses. That is what the Cooper-Young area is a similar situation. Central Gardens area will further





protect that investment, and provide attractive inner-city neighborhoods for our younger people to grow up in.

MS. MCKAY:                   What do you think can happen to make HUD get back to the preventive medicine approach?

MRS. AWSUMB:               Well, I wouldn't want to be partisan, but it was put together under Republican approach and this present administration has added this flavor of turn-around back to what you would call the Johnson "Great Society" medicine that we had.

Of course, I have decided that it was Nixon who called the funds down in the Kansas Street area which caused undue suffering to those people down there and this wasn't the only thing that he did that caused suffering, but it was a really bad thing that happened at that point. I feel that the concept of community development is a very solid one.

I like the idea of being able to determine how to approach your local problems. The same things don't happen in Detroit that happen in Memphis as far as neighborhoods are concerned except in the most general terms. To allow us to figure out where to place these monies where they will do the most good is fine. One of the reasons it has changed is that in the first year or two of the program it was abused by some cities. They built tennis courts out in their better areas. They did things that were not eligible because they thought they could get away with it. When they were monitored and this was found to be happening--it was like when you were a little girl and you had to stay after school because somebody threw a spitball and they wouldn't say who it was and everybody had to stay after school. So that's what happened was that everybody got these stricter



guidelines because there were some abuses.

MR. BAGLEY:                This apprenticeship program you were talking about.  
                              You are sponsoring this program?

MRS. AWSUMB:                This is a demonstration program that HUD. . . .  
                              We thought it up (my staff did) and I thought  
it was a great idea. These kinds of things happen because other funds be-  
come suddenly available for only certain purposes. The CETA funds be-  
came available to work with building trades in some way. So one of my  
staff members who had experience in writing grant applications came up  
with this combination idea. It has not been tried in other places and when  
we described it to our area office people in HUD they knew it was eligible  
for this.

When you have something like this you have to state you are going to do  
so and so and so. If there are any objections and they find it is ineli-  
gible they will so state, but they do not pick and choose among our pro-  
grams. We get to see how we want to spend our money so long as it is  
an eligible activity. But we do keep them informed upon what we are doing.  
So they wrote back voluntarily and said this is a very intriguing idea and  
please keep us posted on how it works--we'd like to recommend it in other  
areas if it succeeds.

MR. BAGLEY:                Who will staff this program? Will the teachers be  
                              from this area?

MRS. AWSUMB:                No, the Building Trades Council--Union people



are doing the class room supervisory part of the program to teach these people the basics of the classroom part. There's one Union person to every three young people on the job. Not only teaching them on the job, but working along with them so they are contributing as well as the three young people. I have one staff person who coordinates this. Then we contracted with this Catholic group called Code North to supervise the purchase of the materials and the work on their houses that these people are going to do.

MS. MCKAY: Is it complicated to coordinate?

MRS. AWSUMB: Very complicated to coordinate and very difficult for the city to understand (city administration) and they are supersensitive at this point on contracts. They would not allow us to negotiate a contract with Code North to operate this program because of problems they had on negotiated contracts. They said, "No, you'll have to do all these purchases through the city purchasing department."

I said, "You've just got to be crazy. We can't buy a piece of lumber or a yard of brick every time we need to do something on a house because that takes time."

We finally got it worked out. We had to put out a call for a bid for this contract and we had to write the stats in such a way that Code North had to be a non-profit organization. That was called for in the regulations, and there were certain other things that were called for in our ability to use CD funds in eligibility requirements. We had to write all this so that



this person bidding could only be Code North to qualify. So we had to go through that process. In fact, people often say to me, 'I would think you would nearly go crazy dealing with the federal government and all their guidelines.' I do with the federal government and all their guidelines any day to City Hall and their guidelines and their bureaucracy. It is absolutely incredible what you have to do!

MS. MCKAY: Do you think you will try and run for an elective office again? Use this experience to better yourself with Councilmen?

MRS. AWSUMB: Well, I tell you, the only thing that I have ever wanted to do other than what I have done so far, I would like to be City Mayor. I feel that time has passed where I would run for City Mayor and I did not do it at the time that it would have been the most appropriate and probably could have been elected at that time. My personal situation as far as my husband and his business had a lot to do with that decision. I feel that now probably--too near retirement--I just really won't go back into that. It's been talked about this year to run for County Mayor, but I absolutely have no interest in county politics. I've never been involved in county politics. I simply would not be interested in that at all.

I would not mind being City Mayor, but I can't imagine that I would run against Wyeth Chandler who had given me the opportunity to do this program and certainly I do not anticipate his not running next year for it. So probably not. I would not run for Council again.



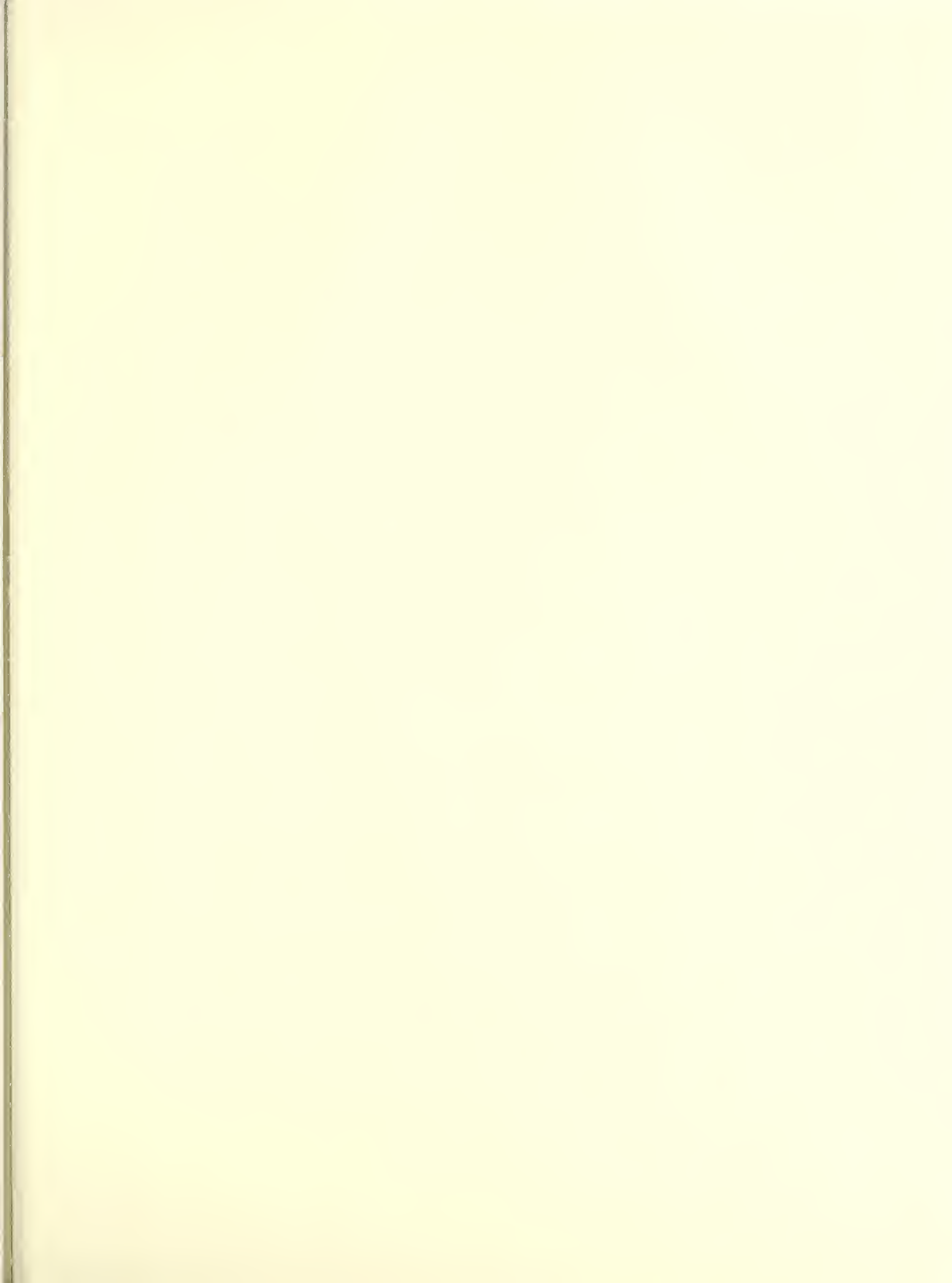


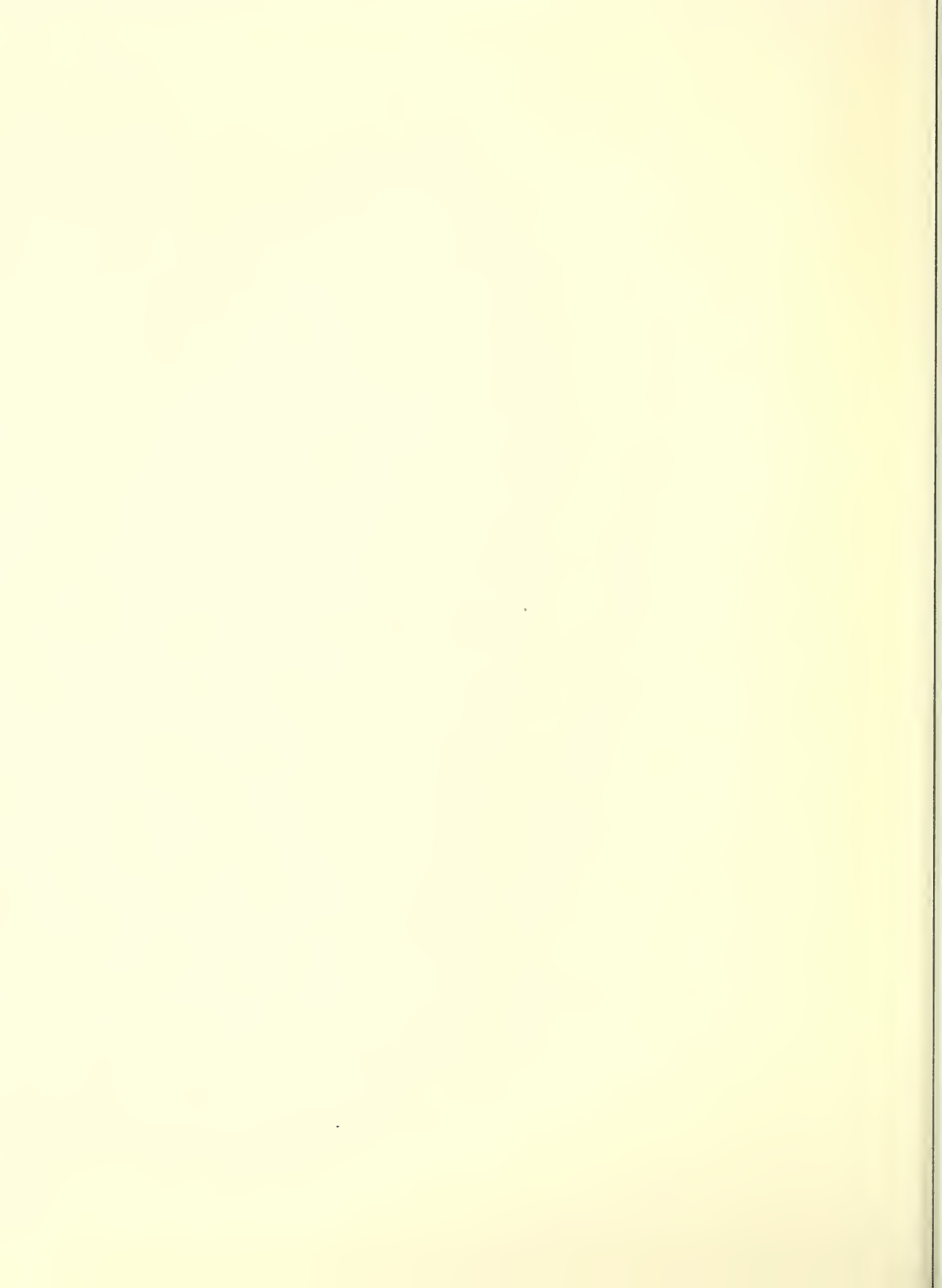
MS. MCKAY:                   There's the state legislature?

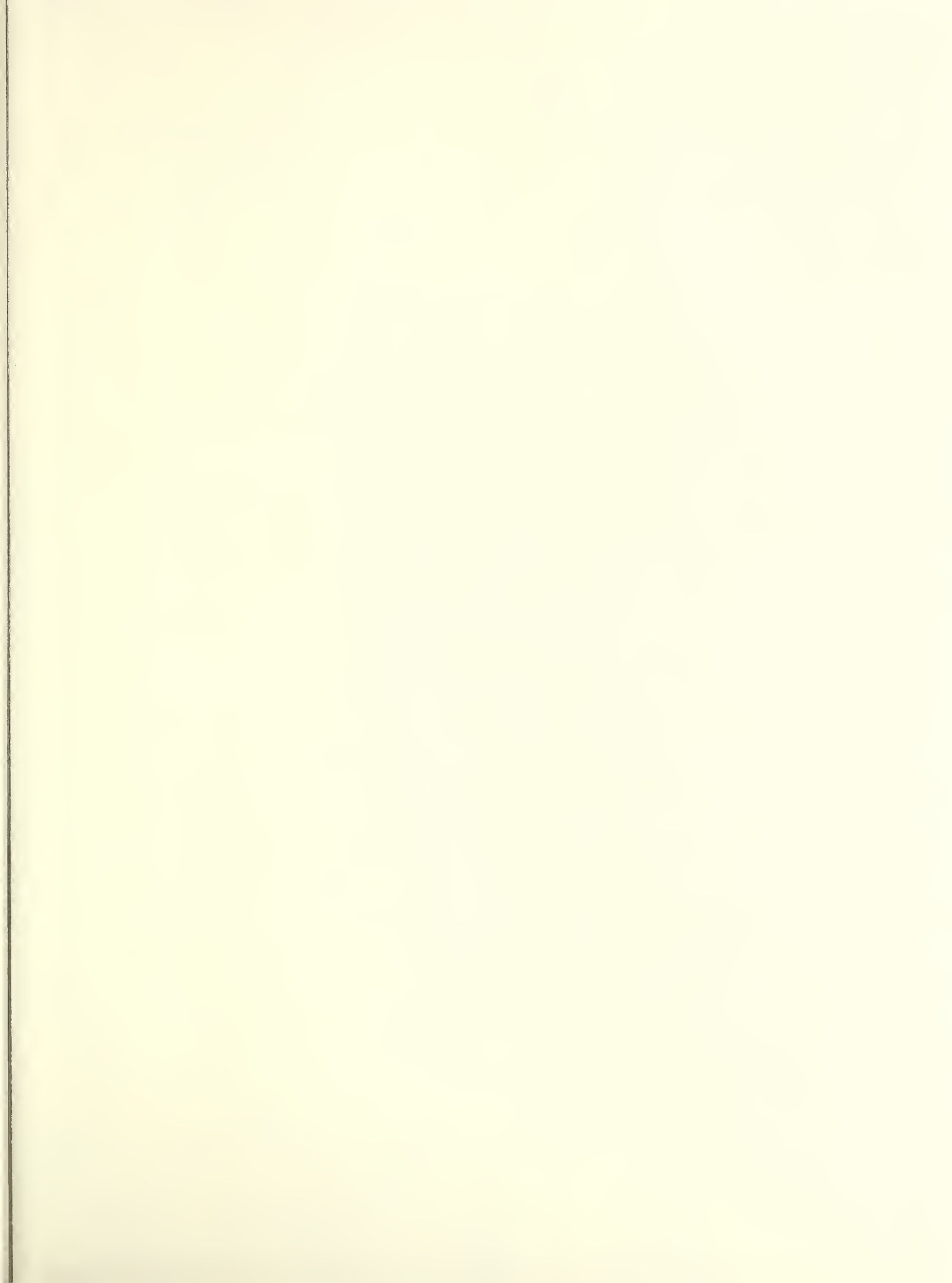
MRS. AWSUMB:               Well, the state legislature like anything else outside of the city takes you away. I have always tried to do what I've done in the community in conjunction with my family life, and I pretty well put them at the top of the list. That's why it was so great to serve on the Council or the County Court, because you don't have to leave town. I would never run for Congress. I did run for the state legislature in '56. The Lord knows what He is doing and when He hands you a defeat like that because at that time my children were smaller and I don't know if my marriage could have stood that ten or twelve weeks all week up in Nashville. At that stage in my life I'm glad that didn't happen. I'm glad I don't have to know that answer at this point.

MS. MCKAY:                   Thank you very much. We really appreciate this.











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