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James Hunter Lane, 2008

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*Interviewer:* On behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom project, we would just like to thank you for coming in and taking time to share your story with us.

*James:* It's my pleasure.

*Interviewer:* Now for the record can you please state your name?

*James:* It's James – excuse me; I have a little frog in my throat and I'm trying to make myself heard. It's James Hunter Lane, Jr.

*Interviewer:* All right. And your birthdate?

*James:* July 6, 1929.

*real time: 00:25:21*

*Interviewer:* Okay. And where were you born and raised?

*James:* I was born and raised my whole life in Memphis.

*Interviewer:* Okay. And who were you raised by?

*James:* I'm sorry?

*Interviewer:* Who were you raised by?

*James:* I missed what you said.

*Interviewer:* Oh. Who were you raised by?

*James:* Oh, by my parents.

*Interviewer:* Okay. And their names and occupations?

*James:* I'm sorry.

*Interviewer:* Names and occupations.

*James:* Oh, their names were, well James Hunter Lane and my mother was Lucille Berrel-Lane. My father was a lawyer, mother was a housewife.

*Interviewer:* Okay. And did you have any brothers or sisters?

*James:* Yeah, I have three sisters.

*Interviewer:* All right, and what are their names and occupations?

*James:* Well, the first, the oldest is Mydel. She's always been – she's a widow. She's always been a housewife. My second sister is named Lucille. She lives in Simonton, Texas and she's a widow also. She's had a number of different jobs. And then my third sister lives in Memphis. Her name is Camille Gotten, and she has worked out at the nature center, Litherman Center, and various other places. But she's currently just being a housewife.

01:42

*Interviewer:* All right. Were there any other members within your household, extended family or anything?

*James:* Well my grandfather lived with us for quite a number of years. My father's father.

*Interviewer:* Okay. So what was daily like life – or what was daily life like?

*James:* Well, it was very privileged, comparatively speaking. We lived on a single-family home and not in a very pretentious neighborhood, but it was a nice place and nice neighborhood. It was a very comfortable, fun life, as I recall it. You know, no serious problems and catastrophes and nothing, nobody was seriously ill. You know, of course my grandfather died. But it was a good life.

*Interviewer:* Do you remember what the name of the neighborhood was?

*James:* Yeah. Well, it didn't have a name, but it was one across the street from Messick High School, which is no longer there as a high school, but it was right at the corner of Spotswood Avenue and Greer Street. Now that's where I was raised. We moved way out in the boondocks when I was a senior in high school, out to 6256 Poplar, which is Bill White House, which is still there. It was way out in the country then. It was, Poplar was a two-lane street, and Germantown had about 2,300 people in it.

03:24:13

I think my mother and dad, just to give you some idea about how the real estate market has changed, they paid like \$25,000.00 for that house, which is, gosh, it must've been at least 6,000 square

feet and seven acres of land which is right on Poplar \_\_\_\_\_, on Poplar. So it increased in value quite a bit before they sold it.

*Interviewer:* Do you have any significant childhood memories that have influenced your life?

*James:* Well, yeah, I guess a number of them. I was fortunate enough to go to boy's camp a couple of summers, and of course that was a real formative experience. And I played a lot of sports and then – when you say my early life, how far up do you want to go? The high school level?

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Sure.

*James:* Yeah. Well I was – I went to what they then called a normal training school, it's now called campus school, which is adjacent to the University of Memphis campus, and it was just like a public prep school. It was really a fine place. They had the teachers – it was set up to teach teachers, so the teachers they had teaching us were really top-flight, the best they had, 'cause they were hired to teach the teachers, student teachers. That was a great experience.

**05:04**

And of course I joined the Boy Scouts, and that was, again, I mean I was in a wonderful Scout troop and that certainly was an influence. Then I went to Central. There again, it was a top-flight school and I had a lot of good experiences there. My football team won the state championship. It was just an all around good life. I wouldn't have changed anything that I can think of.

*Interviewer:* So the prep school, was that your elementary school?

*James:* Excuse me?

*Interviewer:* Was the campus school your elementary school?

*James:* No, it was elementary through what we call middle school now, through the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

*Interviewer:* All right. And did you participate in any specific activities when you were younger, besides Boy Scouts?

*James:* Well, let's see. You know, the usual, you know, junior high, basketball and that type of thing. I was in the Latin Club. You know, it was mostly just we played a lot in the neighborhoods then, what we called "playing out." We had a lot next to our home, and

we did a lot of fun things like playing games there. As far as organized activities, they really didn't have that many of them in those days, I mean other than, like I say, Boy Scouts, things of that nature. But I did participate in everything that was available of that nature. Not much of an arts man.

[00:07:02] BEGIN CLIP 2

*Interviewer:* Did religion affect your life growing up?

*James:* Did what?

*Interviewer:* Religion.

*James:* Oh, I meant to mention that. Yeah, I'm a lifetime member of Idlewild Presbyterian Church and my father was very active in the church, very devout. So I went there every Sunday, and there again, that was a wonderful church, had a lot of good children's programs, and I participated in all of those at my parents' insistence, although I enjoyed them.

*Interviewer:* So what would you say your motivation to go to college was?

*James:* Well, I guess my dad had gone to college, my mother had gone to college, and all my friends were going to college, so I sort of just followed. I wanted to go, of course. And there again, it was a great – I went to Washington and that was a wonderful school. And after I went there I went to law school there as well. So I was there six years. And that was the reason I went, is just to get a higher education.

[00:08:19]

*Interviewer:* To just give a timeframe, what years were you an undergrad?

*James:* Well, are you talking about high school?

*Interviewer:* Oh no, just college.

*James:* Oh, college rep. College. I entered in 1947 and graduated from undergrad school in '51 and from law school in '53. But that was back in the days when you could have just two years of – well, you counted your senior year in academic school towards your first year in law school. So you could get a degree, undergraduate degree in four years and then two more years in law school, whereas today it's you've got to have four years of undergrad to get into law school. So that was – so that's how long I was there.

*Interviewer:* So how do you think segregation affected your education?

*James:* How what?

*Interviewer:* Segregation.

*James:* Well, it didn't affect it at all 'cause we were totally segregated. Every school I went to was; there were no African-American students in any of the schools that I went to. The whole system was segregated.

[00:09:37]

*Interviewer:* Do you have any memories of just daily life and when you first realized what segregation was?

*James:* Yeah, I was going to address that. It's amazing what separation there was. I mean not just at school, but just throughout society. The only – I had very little contact with Black people. We just didn't have any friends who were Black. We had a Black maid. That's about the extent of my contact with Black people. I did work one summer laying bricks and my fellow bricklayers were Black guys, and that's the first time I met any Black people on a one-on-one equal basis. I say equal, you know, I went home to a fine home, but we all make the same money though, \$37.00 bucks a week. Don't want to forget that. But that was when I was a senior in high school.

[00:10:45]

But you know, the whole Memphis society was just totally, other than in some of the large factories where there was some blue-collar workers that were Black – not many, but there were some – there was very little integration of any kind. I won't say Black people were invisible, they weren't, but they were just had very little intercourse with, you know, just wasn't – didn't happen. It might seem strange at this day and time, but that's the way it was.

And that applied to all levels of society too. My friends, who were all pretty privileged, had the same experience. I mean they – I won't say people were actively racist; they just didn't have any position on it. I mean, I'd say if anything they had a disdainful attitude towards Black people, but it wasn't – they didn't go out and chase Black people down and beat them up, that kind of thing. It wasn't that kind of racism. But they didn't do anything to help them either.

[00:12:06]

- Interviewer:* You said you had a household maid. Did your family have – do you remember if your family had a good relationship with her?
- James:* Oh, wonderful. I remember her lovingly. You know, she was – helped raise me. I think just to give you some idea, I think her salary was like \$3.00 a week, some shameful amount. But that was the going rate, you know.
- Interviewer:* All right. Well, do you – sorry. Do you have any memories of the reason you decided to go into law?
- James:* My father was a lawyer, the main reason. I guess that's basically why.
- Interviewer:* Was there any certain aspect of law that you wanted to pursue, or just basic?
- James:* Well, when I got out of law school I went in the Marine Corps for three years and I did a lot of law – I was a lawyer in the Marine Corps. And I did some criminal law in that respect, so when I got home I had no idea I was going to do what my dad let me do. As it turned out, he was an expert in bankruptcy, and I just despise that kind of law. I just didn't realize what I was getting into, so I sort of split off from him and had my own small separate office and did legal work other than bankruptcy work.
- [00:13:47]
- Interviewer:* All right. You said you were in the Marine Corps, and that was obviously integrated. But did you have any significant interactions?
- James:* Being in the Marine Corps?
- Interviewer:* Yes.
- James:* Well it was unlike any experience I'd ever had. The first time I had to have no control over my day-to-day living, my fate. By and large I enjoyed it. It was a good group of people and it was an elite organization and it was – I got to go overseas, got to go to Korea and Japan, so I enjoyed that aspect of it. But no, it was a shaping influence probably as much as anything that'd ever happened to me, 'cause they weren't too easy on us, and you had to measure up. So yeah, it was probably as much as anything that had ever happened to me, it had an influence.

[00:14:56] BEGIN CLIP 3

*Interviewer:* What influenced your decision to go in the Marine Corps?

*James:* I'm sorry?

*Interviewer:* What influenced your decision to go into the Marine Corps?

*James:* Well, I just had always, you know, bought their advertising, you know, "The few, the proud," that sort of thing. And a lot of my friends joined. It was right when the Korean War was going on, but fortunately for me, I didn't have to go in 'til after my law school was over, so the war was just over. Most of my friends went in in '51 and a lot of them were in some pretty heavy action. I went in just because I thought it was a superior force.

*Interviewer:* What did you do after the Marine Corps?

*James:* Beg pardon?

*Interviewer:* What did you do after the Marine Corps?

*James:* I went back to practice law just right after I got out.

*Interviewer:* Okay. You practiced law here in Memphis?

*James:* Yes. Mm hmm.

*Interviewer:* Okay. And what aspect did you say you practiced? I missed that.

*James:* Well, at first I had a real general practice. Now after about eight years I decided I was going to run for public office, which I did, and got elected for the city, what we then called the City Commission. So made up of a mayor and four commissioner, and I was one of the four commissioners.

[00:16:14]

*Interviewer:* What year was that?

*James:* I ran in 1963 and took office in '64 and served through '67. Then they changed the system of government to what we've got now, the Mayor Council system we've got, which is a great improvement actually. Although, you know, I was coming to work pretty well. There wasn't as much bickering as there is going on now.

But the commission system was basically faulty because the same people that passed the laws enforced the laws, and the same people that spent the money appropriated the money. Weren't any checks and balances involved, except that everyone sort of worked together because we knew that we were going to have to approve each others' budget, and so nobody was too resistant to doing that.

[00:17:17]

Interviewer:

Is that what inspired you to run for a public office? Or what inspired you to become active in the government?

James:

Well, I had become active in politics before that. I was campaign manager for a couple of candidates. In fact, one of them was a professor out here at Rose who ran for Congress, Gunny Ross Pritchett, who was in the, I think it's the National Relations Department. It was way back in the early '60s, and he ran against a guy who had been up there forever, and got badly beaten and left town. After that he was a bad loser. Then I'd done that same thing for another man. So I got interested in politics.

I just never thought I'd run myself, but they needed somebody to run against this incumbent who'd been up there for like 16 years and was one of the old Crump hangovers. And lo and behold, I beat him. And I beat him because I beat him because I got 40,000 African-American votes. That's the only reason I beat him. And before that time the Black voters were not organized well. Actually the Crump machine dealt with a number of preachers that turned out the vote. There was a lot of money changing hands and the Crump organization would, you know, hand out bucks for "campaign expenses." A lot of it went into the ministers' hands.

[00:19:05]

But at that time Mr. Crump controlled the votes, so many votes it wasn't really necessary to get a big Black vote. Then Russell Sugarmon and A.W. Willis and Jesse Turner and Maxine Smith, just to name a few, organized what they called themselves a County Democratic Club, which was really a high-powered, well-organized, totally honest outfit. And their system was to interview candidates before they endorsed them. Then at that point they expected funds in order to finance their campaign. Well that was understandable. That was reasonable. But they didn't take the money and then endorse – it wasn't a quid pro quo, you know, you didn't pay the money to get endorsed.

[00:20:04]

So I got their endorsement, and that was the first time I'd really met any Black people of my age and status, you might say. Russell had gone to Harvard. In fact, A.W. Willis had too. And Jesse Turner was a banker and Dr. Smith-Vasco was a dentist and Maxine was a, she taught at the University of Memphis after a lawsuit to get in. She taught French. And they were all very educated and very confident people. They were very good politicians.

*Interviewer:* Do you remember what the interview was like when you had to interview to become endorsed?

*James:* Well, of course they wanted to know my position on Black/White relations and wanted to know what I would do if I were elected in the next one, putting Black people into wanted positions and jobs and that type of thing. And they generally just wanted to know my philosophy. And of course, I certainly wasn't a flaming liberal at that time by any means. I mean, nobody was. And I say nobody; there were a lot of White people who were a lot more liberal than I was who had been active, but I was a lot more liberal in my position. It was just an old-time \_\_\_\_\_ politician.

[00:21:45 BEGIN CLIP 4

*Interviewer:* What was your stance on race relations in Memphis at that time? Like when you interviewed, what was your response?

*James:* Well, you know, by that time my eyes had been opened to some of the – I can't say the word, to the discrimination, some of the mistreatment. So, you know, my attitude was things have got to get better and I'll try to work towards that.

Even though the Black vote had been organized, and even before that election Sugarmon and Willis had been elected to the legislature. I think that was in the early '60s. So there had been some breakthrough, but very little actually. And there was still just a deep and passionate resistance to Blacks being elected to anything. So even though I say there was a liberal movement, and there was by that time, a lot of Whites, relatively a large number, had gotten involved in community relations, race relations, and so there was a lot more activity in that direction than there had been five years ago.

[00:23:19]

But I've forgotten your question now. What – you asked in the interview what did they want to know?

*Interviewer:* Mm hmm. What was your response when they asked you about race relations?

*James:* My response was they knew that I'd been working at better race relations in these organizations, and I guess my response was "I'll continue to do that and I will, if elected, I'll appoint people." Which I did. Not a lot, but at least it opened the door. And I tried to get Russell Sugarmon elected to the – appointed to the Light, Gas, and Water Board, but I just didn't have – there weren't – the votes weren't there. 'Cause people who had been active in civil rights were considered by many people as radical, not to be trusted people, and he was one of them, even though what he was doing was perfectly understandable and legitimate. He wasn't viewed that way.

[00:24:27]

Maxine in particular was – she was thought of as a she-devil, you know, by many not contemporaries. You can't imagine the depth of the animosity there. It was strong. It got worse during school, the desegregation.

*Interviewer:* You said that your eyes had been open to discrimination. Was there any specific incidents that had made you become more aware?

*James:* Well, just my association with people. As I say, growing up I had no association with Black people. But associating with people like Sugarmon and Willis and Turner, and I left out Jim Lawson. I had met him – didn't know him closely, but I had met him and knew of what he'd been doing. He started the lunch counter desegregation in Nashville and then continued to work at a church here in Memphis. He was really heavily involved in the garbage worker's strike.

[00:25:40]

I wasn't in government when that happened. I ran for mayor and was roundly beaten in 1967.

*Interviewer:* What motivated you to run for mayor?

*James:* Well, it was sort of a natural progression. I was the more liberal of the – I guess moderate probably is a better word than liberal – off the candidates who announced, until A.W. Willis decided to run. And so I had expected to get the Black vote, and I think I would

have. But when A.W. decided to run, well that pretty well killed my aspirations. I went ahead and ran anyhow.

Interestingly enough, we had a mayor named Bill Ingram that was kind of a populist and had a lot of Black. And he had been a city judge and he had been one of the first judges who really listened to the defense cases, and had gotten a wide following in that respect. He ran for mayor, and Henry Loeb, who had been mayor, ran and made – they were in the run-off. And Ingram, in the preliminaries, not the run-off, got more Black votes than Willis did, which was amazing at that time. That's because he established himself as a friend.

But that's why I ran for mayor. I just wanted to be mayor.  
(Laughs)

**27:28:14 BEGIN CLIP 5**

*Interviewer:* Okay. Besides becoming endorsed by the-

*James:* I'm sorry.

*Interviewer:* Besides being endorsed by the Shelby County Democratic Club, what other ways did candidates try to appeal themselves to the Black community?

*James:* Well, it's just like the Presidential candidates are doing now, you get with precinct and put out signs and you buy as much TV time as you can. You just present yourself to the public in any way possible. And at that time of course there was a lot of radio advertising, a lot of newspaper advertising at that time. A lot more so than there is now.

But the main thing was raising money, and you had to have money to – as the saying goes, "Money is the mother's milk of politics." You've got to have money to buy all the time. So it was an important part of it.

[00:28:31]

*Interviewer:* Did you continue in politics after you had ran for mayor?

*James:* Yes, I did. I ran for the school board in 1971 and I was elected. I became the president of the board the next year. No, actually it was in '73, which is the year the busing order went into effect, which was a lot of fun. It was – you talk about bitterness and division in the community, it was just, I'd say hatred wouldn't be

too strong a word. It was just very, very strong emotions about that, you can imagine.

And whether you were in high school or – you know, you weren't in the '70s, but anyhow, people, both Black and White, were pretty heavily opposed to busing because it meant picking up children from one neighborhood and transporting them sometimes eight or nine miles to other schools. The same things with Blacks. And it cut out a lot of after-school activities.

[00:29:42]

There's no questions that Blacks in the schools were inferior – inferior in the sense that they didn't get as much money and the teachers weren't as good sometimes. So it was justified. I don't mean that – well, whether it was or not, District Court of Tennessee said, "You do it and come up with a plan."

Well prior to that, the school board had not voluntarily desegregated but just a tiny bit. So there had to be a court order planned, and there was a lot of debate back and forth as to how extensive the plan would be. Maxine Smith; and Carl Johnson, who taught over here for a while; and George Brown, who was a judge later on; the Black members of the board, and I guess Francis Cole, who was a moderate member, and myself were for one plan, and the conservative members of the board, there were four of those, were for limiting it as much as possible. In fact, some of them voted against it altogether, although it was contempt of court. They just wanted to – every politician virtually in town, whether they had anything to do with schools or not, came out against busing. I mean it was just a very unpopular thing in the public mind. I mean people running for county court clerk or people that had absolutely no connection to city schools were.

[00:31:36]

And it got pretty nasty. I mean the anti-busing people were burning buses. Not with people on them, but I had a cross burned in my front yard. It wasn't a big cross, but I got the message. It was that kind of campaign.

*Interviewer:*

You said you had a cross burned in your front yard. Was there any other way that your personal life was affected by the decisions that you decided to go with?

*James:*

I had a lot of nasty phone calls. And my children went to public schools, so they got a lot of guff from people in the schools. They were, not so much at Central. My son went to Bellevue and he got

shaken down for lunch money and, you know, a lot of harassment. Fortunately he was a big, strong guy and didn't have to take a lot of it. But it was handed out, I'll say that.

And you know, I got a lot of criticism from my White friends about, they didn't seem to realize that we weren't voluntarily desegregating schools; we were doing it because the court ordered us to. So they overlooked that little fact. They were very much opposed to desegregating schools, as was 90% of the other people.

**33:19 BEGIN CLIP 6**

*Interviewer:* Can you just quickly explain the logistics of busing?

*James:* Excuse me?

*Interviewer:* Can you just quickly explain the logistics of busing?

*James:* Well, I forget the number of buses we had to hire, but it seems to me it was like 160 or something like that. The logistics were that schools, for example Ridgeway and Hamilton let's say, what they called paired. Ridgeway was all White, Hamilton was all Black, so in order to – this is just an example – in order to desegregate the two schools they loaded Ridgeway students on a bus and took them to Hamilton and Hamilton students on a bus and took them to Ridgeway. And that happened in many, many instances. It was the only way it could happen, 'cause Black schools were all generally in a certain neighborhood, large neighborhoods. White schools were in the same neighborhood – I mean different neighborhood. So it had to be done that way.

[00:34:34]

So as far as logistics, it just took a lot of buses. It was expensive. It took a lot of money, additional money out of the school in addition to what had been spent on school. And the city government, 'cause as I say, everybody was getting on the anti-busing bandwagon, they cut our – just like they're doing now, they cut our funding until the court told them to give it back. They cut our gasoline off for the buses, and the court told them to give that back too. There was massive resistance to the busing thing, even though it was ordered.

*Interviewer:* Do you think the schools would have ever integrated naturally if it wasn't court ordered?

*James:* No. I don't think so. Not the way that – not the way things were set up in the city. Not, because the public opinion was, as I say, both Black and White. To a large extent White, but it was amazing how many Black people were not in support of busing, even though theoretically it was to benefit the Black school.

Of course what happened was they lost about, it seems to me it was like out of 160,000 students, we lost – 45,000 White students dropped out of school and went to these private – we called them segregation academies. That's what they generally were started for.

[00:36:19]

*Interviewer:* Do you remember, or can you recall what influenced your decision to start working with race relations in Memphis and different groups that work on ending segregation and discrimination and things like that?

*James:* Well I think, just to get down to the basics, you know, I realized how unfair the segregation situation was all across the board. I mean buses, for example, that was obviously totally unsupportable by fairness and just decency. And there again, we had to have a lawsuit to desegregate the buses. But there was so many instances of Black/White water fountains-

Things were just unsupportable based on Christian faith as far as I was concerned. And that influenced me as much as anything. It was just the right thing to do, even though traditions of history had been otherwise. And it was so embedded that people had forgotten it as the right thing to do. They had just been so used to it being done that way that they didn't particularly want to change, thought it was the thing to do.

[00:37:41]

But I think most people who got involved in the civil rights movement likely felt that way about it. It certainly wasn't like a popular thing to do until, well, I'd say until now. But not nearly as strong a feelings as there were before.

*Interviewer:* I'd just like to go back a little. Do you remember the climate of the atmosphere right before the sanitation strike began?

*James:* Well, of course I was out of government by then, but I certainly remember the climate. There again, the sanitation workers were just, they were really abused. They didn't have any pension as I recall. They didn't have any pension plan. They didn't even have

raincoats, you know, when they were working. And they weren't allowed to organize. That was the main issue in the strike; they weren't allowed to have a union.

[00:39:02]

They finally – well, there was a state law that said municipal employees could not organize into unions. And the mayor, Loeb, was relying on the advice of his city attorney who said, "They can't legally organize." So he took the lead in opposing the organization. But he didn't reckon on the support the garbage workers were going to get. It became a citywide movement, very strong. Not just citywide, nationwide. People came in from all over the country, including Dr. King, to March and to demand the right to organize.

Fortunately we had a really strong city council at that time, made up of some of the top people in the city, Black and White. And they realized, there again, that the righteousness of the cause of the garbage workers, and were looking for a way to allow them to organize. What they finally came up with, instead of a union agreement, they called it a memorandum of understanding, which is virtually the same thing, but just the name wasn't as inflammatory. And so that's how it finally happened.

[00:40:44]

Then they had a big argument about whether they would take the dues out of their paychecks, but they call it a check-off. But that finally was resolved in their favor too.

40:56 BEGIN CLIP 7

So anyhow, that's as far as the climate. And again, it was very divisive.

Loeb was a very popular mayor. It's hard to say whether Loeb was a racist or not. He was Jewish, which doesn't necessarily mean he wasn't a racist, but he was a fairly simple man. Actually he was a big, good-looking guy; looked like a politician look. But he was real hardheaded and wasn't too flexible in and wasn't too intellectual gifted in my opinion. Mostly he was. And once he'd made up his mind about something it took a lot to change his mind, particularly when he was getting the advice of his legal advisor.

So anyhow, he had public opinion pretty well – a lot of public opinion. He certainly didn't have Black public opinion, but he had a lot of White public opinion that was in support of his opposition

to the organization of the workers. So that really, you know, caused a standoff. He was getting all these phone calls saying, "Stick to your guns," and meanwhile the city council was trying to work out something. But they finally – 'cause he was getting, 'cause you know after Dr. King was killed things really got nasty. It was, you know, we had riots and no telling how long it would've gone on. We had the National Guard here and had all kinds of confrontation. It was getting pretty rough.

[00:42:55]

*Interviewer:* You said you weren't in politics at the time. What were you doing?

*James:* I went back to practicing law.

*Interviewer:* Okay.

*James:* Until I ran for the school board. Now I was out of city government at the end of 1967, and I ran for the school board in 1971. So there was a short time there when I practiced law.

*Interviewer:* Were you still practicing general law at that time?

*James:* Well I went with a large firm, and I did a lot of the land use control work, like what's commonly called zoning work. I did a lot of that. The school board wasn't – technically it wasn't a full-time job, so I could practice law and be on the school board too. It turned out to be a pretty full-time job. *(Laughs)*

*Interviewer:* Okay. Did you participate in any of the sanitation strike marches or did you observe any of them?

*James:* I marched in one march. It was prior to Dr. King's march. But there was a group of churchmen in the march, and I did that. But it was a relatively minor march.

[00:44:09]

*Interviewer:* To backtrack, or I don't know if you can recall, was your church affected by segregation or desegregation at all?

*James:* Well, yes it was to a minor extent. We had some, a row of students one Sunday morning who came to church and wanted – you know, they said – the ushers, it turned out they were real racist and refused admittance, even though they said, "We're just here to worship."

And we had a minister there and he was just a \_\_\_\_\_, a wonderful, strong man named Paul \_\_\_\_\_ Jones, and he heard about it and he called a meeting of the session, which is a ruling body of the church, and just laid down the law. He said, "Listen, I heard what happened. If it happens again, I'm out of here. It's not going to happen. If anybody comes to this church and says they want to worship, we're going to assume that's what they're here for. They will be admitted." So that was the end of that at Idlewild.

So I still think there was a majority feeling against desegregation, but the leader made it clear there wouldn't be any so. And actually after that day there was – we have very few Black members now, maybe 1%. That's not 'cause they're not welcome; they just prefer to worship somewhere else.

[00:45:54] BEGIN CLIP 8

*Interviewer:* Do you remember what theater or restaurant or something of that nature, what was first desegregated here in Memphis?

*James:* I remember the theater 'cause I had something to do with it. I was, if I remember, the board of what we call the Front Street Theater. It's over on Madison. It was a really good professional theater. And I was there one night and Russell Sugamon and A.W. Willis were trying to get tickets to go in, they wouldn't sell them to them. So I threw my weight around and told the ticket seller, "I'm on the board. You will sell these gentlemen tickets." And they did. And I really caught hell about that from the board.

Their position was, "Well, if we let Blacks in here we're going to lose all our Mississippi customers." Not that we have that many anyhow. But I came close to getting kicked off the board. But it all passed and that was the last of that.

Usually that's what happened, the anticipation of problems are much stronger than actually the problems, you know. As far as restaurants are concerned I really can't tell you. The lunch counters were desegregated because of the sit-ins, but, you know, that was at things like drugstores.

[00:47:31]

I had another experience with a restaurant. It was at the 100 North Main building. I don't know whether you know where that is. It used to be one of these revolving restaurants on top of it. This was when I was in city government. I had a good friend who later became a federal judge Odell Horton. And I invited him to come

to lunch with me over there. I had an honorary lunch card. I hadn't shown at the club, but since I was in government they sent me a card. And they wouldn't let him in. He was, at that time he was a city – you know, was a federal prosecutor. So of course I wrote the \_\_\_\_\_ blast them out and sent my free card back. But that was the kind of attitude.

And here again, he was a Jewish guy and he said, "This is going to ruin my business if I admitted a Black man." Well, when Judge Horton became a judge, which is, you know, a federal judge is a considerable amount of power, and it's a highly respected job, I took Judge Horton back over to that restaurant. We didn't have any problem that time.

[00:47:55]

But I don't know, to answer your question which restaurant desegregated first.

*Interviewer:* Okay. What year was the Front Street Theater, what year did that incident occur?

*James:* That was before I was in office, as I recall. I'm not sure. No, I guess it wasn't, 'cause I didn't really know Sugarmon and Willis before that, before I ran for office. I'd never met them before. I went to the Shelby County Democratic Club to try and get their support. So it was during that period of say in the '60s.

*Interviewer:* Okay. Do you remember what thoughts were throughout the city or with any of your friends or anybody like that when the Civil Rights Bill of '64 passed?

*James:* What was your question?

*Interviewer:* Do you remember what thoughts were or how the city was affected when the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 was passed?

*James:* Well that had a lot to do with voting, and the vote was pretty open here. I mean, there wasn't any sizeable amount of resistance to Black people voting. It was pretty honest elections I think. But it did \_\_\_\_ to other parts because part of that was the war on poverty. That was a separate bill, but it was related – it was part of Johnson's massive legislation to make things better. And the War on Poverty program – excuse me, I've got this problem with my throat – the War on Poverty was a massive legislation that provided all kinds of programs for the poor. And we hung up on that thing. I was in city government at that time.

[00:50:54]

The mayor, who was a great champion of the poor, held the thing up in local application of it for like 11 months because he wouldn't agree to who was going to be the director of the thing. We, you know, several very confident people were recommended, but they weren't his people, so he wouldn't approve of them. And that was – I remember that about it.

But as far as any, you know, direct effect on the political situation, I think it had a lot more effect in rural areas, where they were still, you know, faking ballots and they had tests for being able to vote. You had to read a Chinese newspaper and that kind of thing in order to be able to - \_\_\_\_\_ ridiculous example that was supposed to have really happened in Alabama. They were determined that Black people weren't going to get equal vote.

52:02 BEGIN CLIP 9

But that changed all that. They had to send – you know, this was back in the days when they wouldn't let James Meredith into the University of Mississippi law school, and they had actually a shootout down there where they had the Federal Marshals and some of the people came down there to resist. There was a lot of teargas and a couple of people got killed actually. But this was the climate, part of the overall climate in the '60s, a vicious one.

*Interviewer:*

To fast-forward a little bit, after busing, after you were on the school board and the city schools became integrated by busing, was there any other instances that had occurred with discrimination or trying to further enforce integration or things like that?

*James:*

Well, by that time most of the time the public institutions had been segregated, the libraries, for example. The zoo; it used to be that Black people couldn't come to the zoo except on one day a week, you know. And the buses, public buses, all public facilities, like restaurants and the postal things had been – that had already been taken care of by the time school desegregation came up. Now I won't say it was done enthusiastically, but it had been done by law.

[00:53:42]

So you know, as far as was there continued resistance to segregation, I would say emotionally and mentally yes, it continued for a long time. And private country clubs, for example, I don't think the Memphis Country Club, which is sort of the crème de la crème, has yet admitted Black people. Most of the

other clubs have, but that was relatively recent, you know, within 10 years. There's no law that required them to do that, but they did it because they finally realized it was not fair.

But to answer your question directly, after the school desegregation there wasn't an awful lot of effort that was needed to desegregate other things 'cause it had already been done.

[00:54:51]

*Interviewer:* After running on the school board and things like that did you do anything else politically? Like did you continue to stay involved in politics?

*James:* Well, I was a friend of Mayor Harrington's 'cause he worked for the school board when I was on the school board. See, I was a friend of him then, and so he appointed me to the Memphis Housing Authority, where I served for six years. That was an appointed job. And that was – I enjoyed that job \_\_\_\_\_. We didn't accomplish as much as we should have, but we – you know, it was a fulfilling job. We were helping people who needed help, I'll say that. But we didn't do as thorough a job as we should have.

Apart from that \_\_\_\_\_ the Federal money was reduced and we didn't have the money to do it, 'cause all of – most of all the money for the Housing Authority came from the Federal government.

[00:56:06]

*Interviewer:* After everything had happened, like the sanitation strike and Dr. King's assassination and busing, did you see any changes in Memphis for the better?

*James:* Well, yes, there was now. We did the right things maybe for the wrong reasons, but Memphis had gotten a pretty bad national reputation because of Dr. King's assassination. In fact, national magazines were – one of them called us a "sleepy, backwater river town," which kind of shook up the chamber of commerce. So there were some voluntary efforts to try to bring about racial harmony and to do other things to upgrade the city, but the business community got a lot more involved than it ever had been before, because they realized what a national chain this had been, or national black eye all this had caused. So they were determined to try and change things for the better \_\_\_\_\_ in other way.

So yeah, I think all this had a good effect. Too bad it had to cause so much pain and suffering. And of course, Dr. King's death, which might have occurred anyhow, but it happened here. It took that to shake the city up a little bit.

[00:57:48]

And then we got some more moderate leadership too. Well, I take that back, Mayor Chandler was a boyhood friend of mine. He was a real racist when they questioned about his position. But he was smart enough, unlike Loeb, to see the way the wind was blowing, and he had a city council that he had served on, he knew all those people and he knew how to bend and sway with them. He was a practical guy is what I'm saying, so we didn't have an awful lot of race or unrest during his term.

Then after that there were several moderates who ran for mayor against Chandler. None of them got elected. So there was still a lot of conservatism, if you want to call it that, in the community. Enough to re-elect him. He was opposed by a judge named Odell – no, what was the name – Higgs, who was a good man. He ran against him twice, but – and they were close elections, but Chandler won every time.

[00:59:05 BEGIN CLIP 10]

*Interviewer:* What do you think of politics and race relations now? Not just in Memphis, but locally, like across the United States.

*James:* Well I'm not sure I'm qualified to answer that question. I think there's still prejudice. Always will be I think. I think we've come a long way. The fact that we've got a White woman and a Black man running for the Presidency in the Democratic primary says a lot. Frankly I never thought when I was in college I'd ever see that day. You know, that just seemed out of the question. So I think to that extent things have come along.

Then we've got an awful lot of very effective Black congressmen and I don't think we've got any senators. I don't think we have any. We've got a lot of women senators now, but when I was growing up there was only one. Can you think of any Black senators, U.S. senators? I can't think of one offhand.

[01:00:21]

*Interviewer:* Not off the top of my head.

*James:* Excuse me?

*Interviewer:* Not off the top of my head I can't.

*James:* I don't think there are any. A lot of Black mayors, Black congressmen, but I can't think of a U.S. senator. And I don't know how many of them – well, Obama was, of course.

*Interviewer:* I was going to say Obama, but now he's running for the Presidential election. I can't think of any off the top of my head.

*James:* Excuse me?

*Interviewer:* I can't think of any off the top of my head.

*James:* Yeah. I don't think so.

*Interviewer:* I'd like to go back, just back to the time of the sanitation strike and the march you said that you were involved in. And I believe you said it was church members?

*James:* Well, there were a lot of church leaders from all denominations. They wanted to show their support of the sanitation workers. They organized a march of their own that Dr. King wasn't involved in. It was just primarily church leaders and some church members. It wasn't a large \_\_\_\_\_, but it was significant I think. There were just relatively few church leaders in the city that became involved in the desegregation movement, particularly during the school. This is – the school comes later on. You can just count them on the fingers on your hand as how many church leaders were in favor of school desegregation.

[01:02:14]

A lot of them organized these private schools to take the White students who dropped out of public schools. I mean they aided and abetted segregation, but I don't think they looked at it that way. There just was a demand for schools other than public schools. But that's what it amounted to. I'll bet – gosh, I didn't make a head count at the time, but I'd bet there weren't more than 20 Ministers, \_\_\_\_\_ Black ministers in the city, and rabbis who were openly in support of desegregating the school, who came out for it. 'Cause their congregations were so strong, I guess.

*Interviewer:* So were there very many people from your congregation at this march?

*James:* I'm sorry?

*Interviewer:* Where there very many people from your congregation as the-

*James:* In the march?

*Interviewer:* In your march, yes.

*James:* No, one of our assistant ministers was. He was one of the leaders. There was a few members. I won't say a huge crowd, but maybe five or six, something like that.

[01:03:38]

*Interviewer:* So how did you hear about this, if it wasn't widely publicized?

*James:* It was widely publicized.

*Interviewer:* Oh, okay.

*James:* I mean it was well known that they were going to march. It started at the St. Mary's Episcopal Church here on Poplar, what now Poplar to Main Street. You know, they had a cross in front and that sort of thing. The spin was impressive, but it didn't have a lot of impact I wouldn't say.

*Interviewer:* Did you have any negative public reaction during the march? Did anyone do anything to you?

*James:* No, there was no people throwing rocks or anything like that. No, it was – I don't recall any. They never caused civil, you know, it had a religious aspect to it.

*Interviewer:* Did you have any close friends or did you witness any of the major marches in Memphis?

[01:04:42]

*James:* I have some close friends who marched, that is White friends. Well, I had some Black friends too. But as far as White people who laid it on the line and got out there and marched, more and more from out of town than were from Memphis actually. But there were a good many from Memphis. One of them was a councilor named Jerry Blanchett, who's one of the least-known heroes of the civil rights movement. He was a city councilor, and he was the only one that got out there and marched.

But there weren't a large number of local White people who did. I'd say, you know, I can't name numbers, but I'd say less than 2% of the whole march were Whites from anywhere.

A lot of labor leaders from all over the country were involved in that, because it was by and large a labor movement. It had racial aspects to it, but the whole major issue was whether or not the city garbage workers were even going to be allowed to form a union.

**[01:06:15 BEGIN CLIP 11]**

*Interviewer:* So what were the reasons that you didn't personally march?

*James:* I'm sorry?

*Interviewer:* What were your reasons for not marching?

*James:* Well, to be honest, cowardice was some of it. I was in a law firm, another factor that kind of discouraged that kind of thing. I could've said, "I'm going to do it anyhow," but I didn't. I was on the school board. No, I wasn't on the school board then, but I'd been in city government and I'd taken my share of flack when I advocated desegregating the swimming pools and all that kind of thing.

I guess I was just, I'd had enough at that point.

*Interviewer:* Did you ever go and listen to Dr. King speak while he was in Memphis?

*James:* Did I ever see him?

*Interviewer:* Yes.

*James:* No. Except from a distance.

*Interviewer:* Okay.

*James:* I never did meet him.

*Interviewer:* Did you ever go to any of his speeches?

*James:* No, I didn't. I'm sorry, I didn't, because they were inspirational, but of course I listened to them on the radio and on TV, but I didn't attend. Pretty hard to get a ticket.

[01:07:34]

*Interviewer:* Do you remember how you heard of his assassination?

*James:* Well, it didn't take long for the word to get around. No, I think it was on the radio, but I'm not sure. The word spread just immediately when it happened. Of course, nobody knew who did it. It took them a long time to catch James Earl Ray, as you know. So they had to finally got him in one – and no one has ever really determined what a lot of people think, that there was a conspiracy and he was just a triggerman.

I don't know if you're aware or not, they had a mock trial. He plead guilty, so there wasn't a trial. But they had a mock trial later on in which the defense attorney representing him in absentium, you know – I think I'm right about this – they actually had the trial and one of the federal prosecutors and a jury and all that, as to whether or not he had conspirators with him, and the jury found that he had. That doesn't make it true, but it does say that an impartial body thought it was.

And, you know, when you consider he's a petty thief, as James Earl Ray was, gets some money to escape to London somehow, somebody was backing him, was paying the bill. They never did catch him.

[01:09:35]

*Interviewer:* So do you have any other stories or memories that you'd like to share with us?

*James:* Let me just think about it. We've left out the main one – a couple of people who were very involved should be mentioned that I knew pretty well. One was a man named Edmund Orgill, who was a businessman and came from an old Memphis family. He was one of the first to get involved in anti-Crump activity. Keep in mind back in those days anti-Crump activity was – I won't say it was physically dangerous, but it was certainly, you know, Mr. Crump was all-powerful, and opposing him took a lot of moral courage.

[01:10:39]

And Mr. Orgill got later got involved in the civil rights movement, although he wasn't – I wouldn't call him point man. He was certainly sympathetic. Then he ran for mayor and got elected. But from a civil rights standpoint, this was in 1958 I think, he was sort of a disappointment. He didn't hire any Black people in city

government and he didn't step forward to doing any great things as far as significant things as far as favoring Black people.

And then there was a congressman we had here, only a one term, who ran from the same district Senator Cohen – I mean Congressman Cohen – ran from. He got elected. He was a guy named George Grider, who was a war hero, and he was a \_\_\_\_\_ Marine. And he got elected, and he was an extremely liberal guy for those days. He was a leader.

Then there was Lucius Birch, who probably was the most effective. He was a lawyer that five of the most – served as one of the top five most effective lawyers in town. He went to the court and got a permit for Dr. King to march. He took his case, and did a lot of other things too. I'd say he was preeminent in that field.

[01:12:27]

And there were a number of other businessmen who got into the anti-Crump movement, and then from that they got into the anti – not all of them, but they got into the anti-segregation movement. They were generally moderates. I could give you a whole list \_\_\_\_\_.

**01:12:52 BEGIN CLIP 12**

*Interviewer:* You mentioned quite a few times throughout the interview about the anti-Crump movement. Could you explain a little bit about the Crump machine?

*James:* Well, yes. I can't explain all about it, but I can tell you a lot about it. Excuse me. Well, Mr. Crump came here from Mississippi and he got into politics right away. This was back in the '20s, and he had a genius for organizing political organizations. He ran for mayor and was elected one time, and then he was actually impeached because he wouldn't enforce the prohibition laws. You know, they had passed that you couldn't sell whiskey, and he wouldn't enforce that law, so he got impeached.

[01:13:52]

But then he ran and got elected to Congress and he – meanwhile he was building this organization that was really grass roots, I mean he had people at every level, and he pretty well controlled elections for, you know, 30 years. If you wanted to get elected to Congress, U.S. Senate, governor, even though that was statewide, he had a lot of influence on it. You had to go to Mr. Crump and get his blessing.

Well, he was getting – they called him a benevolent desperate, but the operative word was desperate. I don't know how benevolent he was. He was benevolent to people who supported him, but he – my dad, for example, was an anti-Crump person. You know, he suffered from his, and he was considered for a judgeship, that type thing. And everybody who opposed Crump was in one way or another adversely affected. Labor leaders in particular. I mean they literally were running out of town.

[01:15:07]

So Mr. Crump continued – I think he died in 1956 or '58. Yeah, nothing 'til that time. He was still very powerful, and even after his death some of his people continued in office and his organization. Without him the organization was not nearly as strong, 'cause he was the supreme leader and he had peoples' loyalty. But he was just a remarkable man in the sense that he could organize so well that he could keep the peoples' – he was a very likeable guy. Everybody who was, you know, not offended by him or abused by him really loved him. I mean they got a big statue for him out in Overland Park entrance. You may have seen it.

And he did a lot of good things for the city, I'll say that. He kept taxes low. I say he did; his people did. And by and large he picked good people to serve on his – certainly judges, his judges were top-flight. And a lot of his – the mayors he selected were good people too. But some of them after he got in – but one of them in particular after he selected him kind of got cross, where he kind of got tired of being told what to do, so he got - \_\_\_\_\_ got a cross \_\_\_\_\_. But by and large people followed his orders or they paid the price.

[01:16:47]

But he was, you know, I won't say on balance based on philosophy. You know, no tyrant is a good thing. He was basically a tyrant, but as tyrants go he was a pretty good tyrant, if there is such a thing.

*Interviewer:*

So what would be one piece of advice that you would give people in our generation that you have learned throughout your life?

*James:*

I'd say get involved is the main thing. If you don't do it – count on somebody else to do it, it may not get done. And when I say get involved is all kind of levels you can – I mean you can start out by putting – getting involved with a candidate that you like, show up

at his headquarters and say, “I want to work,” and put out yard signs and do the scut work that’s entirely necessary for an election. It’s not particularly fun, but it’s exciting, though, to be in the headquarters where things are happening and somebody you like is, you know, gets elected. It just – excuse me. Do what?

Oh, okay. Of course, when you lose it’s kind of sad, but that’s just the chance you take. Are you running out of film?

[01:18:31]

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_.

James: Okay.

(Laughter)

Interviewer: Well we’d like to thank you very much for taking the time.

James: I enjoyed doing it. It’s good to have a little reminiscence every now and then. At my age I have a hard time remembering things sometimes, but I admit I sort of prepped my mind a little bit before this happened.

There’s a book, if you haven’t read it you really must do it, it’s called *At the River I Stand*. Have you read that book?

Interviewer: We saw the movie.

Interviewer: We saw the movie.

Interviewer: We saw the movie.

Interviewer: We saw the movie.

James: Oh, did they make a movie out of it?

Interviewer: Yeah, there’s a very nice documentary about it.

James: It’s a documentary?

Interviewer: Mm hmm.

Interviewer: Yes.

James: Yeah, I didn’t know they’d done that. It’s a marvelous book. Yeah. Good, I’m glad they did that. And there was another one

called, it was about the national civil rights movement, something about *Which Way the Winds Blow* or-

[01:19:29]

*Interviewer:* *Jericho Road?*

*James:* Have you heard of that one?

*Interviewer:* Uh uh.

*Interviewer:* Uh uh.

*James:* Well, there's another one, if you're interested, called *Memphis After Crump*, which is a small book that you might find interesting.

[End of Audio]