Russell and Gina Sugarmon, Tennessee State Senator, 1969

SS124.mp3

David Yellin- This is April 21st 1969 and we are at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Yellin, David Yellin, 4241 Park Ave. and our guests tonight are Mr. and Mrs. Sugarmon, Gina and Russell and Joan Beifuss and Carolyn and I are here for the main purpose of talking to Russell Sugarmon but Gene if you have anything to say don't hesitate. And we reserve the right to throw shoes at you. And we are going to try and take you back in time and see what we can talk about. I will just stop it now.

(Tape Break)
David Yellin- Correction please 22nd of April, I was corrected by Russell Sugarmon's watch. What we sometimes do, I don't know I feel maybe what we ought to do is to get into some of the things you might remember best and then go back and cover your own history but you were in the legislature last year and we have not yet touched on that very much about what happened in Nashville during the period of the strike February 12th until April 4th thereabouts.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah I wish I had known as that particular type of (Muffled) I could have refreshed myself on that legislation because there were two or three separate incidents which resulted in efforts to pass more laws to strengthen the hand of the police and I ain't recall, for example at one point they had a riot up in Nashville. I can't remember if that was the 1st session or the 2nd session. After which there was an effort to, and also Stokely Carmichael spoke at Vanderbilt in Fisk and then they had the riots. They were efforts to pass laws designed to authorize all kinds of things, an arrangement that allowed the state department of education to order the school presidents to expel students for rootifying riots and inciting riots.

David Yellin- I believe those were before.

Russell Sugarmon- Those were before.

David Yellin- But listen if there is something you had recourse to refresh your memory we can do that part again.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah there is. We all got somewhat (muffled).

David Yellin- Well perhaps then that is not a good place to start.

#Well I just think maybe if we could just sort of get if possible the general tone of the legislature during that period that all this was happening in Memphis.

David Yellin- Because on the record is what they did but…

#How were they feeling about the whole thing the Memphis legislatures.

Russell Sugarmon- Well it varied. I don't think there was really any real change in tone. I think as far as the legislatures from Shelby depended on a the basic point of view that the individual had. I think those who might have been aware of the fact

that they were living in a town of social ferment were shocked and concerned about doing something to respond to the causes.

David Yellin- This is the strike now?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah the strike. That brought about this confrontation between what turned out to be the black community and the administration and the others were just embarrassed it happened in Memphis. I don't think it really, the fact of the death shocked them.

#Well before we get tot that how is the breakdown numerically at the Shelby legislatures, how many were aware they were living in a time of social ferment would you say?

Russell Sugarmon- Very few.

#Can you name them?

David Yellin- You know what might be interesting Russell, it probably been asked this question but maybe I will put it in another way. Like Jackie Robinson you know he was the firs tone. Weren't you and MR. Willis the first one?

Russell Sugarmon- He was the first and I was the second to join. When he ran, and that was interesting, I was running and we went out to, we gotten back in town I think we had been to a NAACP legal conference and we got back into town at 11:00 or 10-:00 the night of the deadline.

#For filing?

Russell Sugarmon- For filing. And so some of the members of the club had prepare these petitions and we went out to, I believe it was Charles Black's house and we looked at the races, and we had always followed a theory of trying to get into a race in which there were a large number of relatively equally strong white opponents. At this time this was prior to districts this is the first time we had won. On the theory of two white votes for every black vote and if you got two white candidates of equal strength they split that vote on that theory it is going to be a racial vote as far as the black candidate is concerned. If you have one more than the two then you have got a mathematical chance and ads it turned out that night there were two races. There was on in the senate with several candidates and there was one I the house and so we flipped a coin to see who would run for which and I ran for the Senate and he ran for the House.

David Yellin- Well now who won?

Russell Sugarmon- He won in the house and I lost in the Senate.

David Yellin- Well no who won the flip did he call the….

#Did he call senate or house?

David Yellin- He won the toss and he had a selection.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

Carolyn Yellin- Whose coin was it?

Russell Sugarmon- I don't know I think we borrowed it from somebody.

David Yellin- It was a penny with Abe Lincoln.

Russell Sugarmon- As a matter of fact what happened in the Senate race was that the race in which probably that night there were 4 or 5 candidates, white candidates and one of them was a guy that was drooping out and he was so surprised he withdrew because he said he didn't want negros to think he was opposing them. We tried to show him the logic of the thing, if he won that was great and if I won that was great it wouldn't be any kind of bitterness. So we felt confident that our precinct leaders could interpret this because they had been through this type of logic before.

#This was Drew Canale?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah. We backed him the next time., we backed him prior to that and backed him several…

David Yellin- What is the date on this just..66?

Russell Sugarmon- 66 was the year I won.

David Yellin- So this was 64.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah and actually 63 the summer of 63 which is the 64 term. (muffled)

#Who were your opponents do you remember?

Russell Sugarmon- Well the only one I remember is Canale because he got out.

Carolyn Yellin- This is a side question I have always wanted to ask. Is Drew Canale related to Phil Canale?

Russell Sugarmon- I think they are distant relatives.

Carolyn Yellin- And John Ford Canale?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah I think he and John Ford or closer, I don't think they are brothers they could be. Sons of the same brother and sister and the other one is a cousin or something like that.

David Yellin- Now which of the two for the record is the attorney, the county attorney?

Russell Sugarmon- The attorney general, that is Phil Canale.

David Yellin- Phil Canale yeah, and Drew is now a senator?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

#Can we I think we are going to get confused here can we go back to the time that you first got into the Shelby Democratic Club or civil rights activity in Memphis would that be back around 58 or 59.

Russell Sugarmon- You mean in a formal way?

#Yeah.

Russell Sugarmon- That was when I came back from law school.

#Well let's start there and come on up I think that would be the easiest.

Russell Sugarmon- That was I guess 1956 that year and at that time I think we had 8 house members and possibly 2 Senators/

#From Shelby?

Russell Sugarmon- From Shelby. And this is the state legislation, they all ran at large which meant the top 8 in terms of votes cast were elected to the house and the top 2 in terms of those cast of 3 I have forgotten the exact number were elected tot the state senate.

#They ran at large throughout the entire county?

Russell Sugarmon- County wide.

David Yellin- That was safe wasn't it.

Russell Sugarmon- Well it was except that we had developed a technique, this has been going on for years, a technique called single shotting.

#Called what?

Russell Sugarmon- Single shot voting. Which is like (muffled) voting when you are talking about corporate law where if you have 8 candidates and it is an application of the mathematics of the election. If you have 8 candidates running and you have one candidate who for some reason, in our particular case it was race got 1/3 of the vote and they didn't vote for anybody else and the other 8 candidates divided them among themselves what was left his chance of coming in the top 8 it was mathematically greater just probability is the hope.

#Well now how was, this was already being done t the time you came back in?

Russell Sugarmon- This is single shotting, yeah it is a slightly different form.

David Yellin- Were there ever any negro candidates before you were in?

Russell Sugarmon- There had been candidates before but primarily for the purpose of trying to develop registration,. There really wasn't much of a chance.

#Now was there any kind of a formal organization in 1956?

Russell Sugarmon- There as an organization the Shelby County Democratic, there were two really the Lincoln League and the Shelby County Democratic Club, the Lincoln League was a republican organization that George Lee had. And the democratic club was an organization headed by at that point Dr. J. Walker the founder of universal in…

#What is his first name?

Russell Sugarmon- J.E.

David Yellin- Is he related to Walker?

Russell Sugarmon- That is his father.

#Had this kind of, had some kind of a formal negro organization function for instance in the Crump period?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah the Lincoln League functioned and there was this democratic group but I don't think that Dr. Walker was the head of it then. He was sort of a reformed president within the structure of the club, and the club didn't really have munch of a political structure it had a structure like a civic club, a president, a vice president and a secretary, and this sort of thing after 1956 was when they change the structure. But anyway in that election, sons of glory was running and…

David Yellin- Where are we now, in….

Russell Sugarmon- This is 56. Sons of Glory was running for re-election and I have forgotten who is opponent was. Jim (muffled) was his state wide manager. A Chancellor, chancellor Hoffman was running.

#Because he is involved in this.

Russell Sugarmon- He was running against the (Muffled) nomination.

David Yellin- For senate?

Russell Sugarmon- No for the position he holds for Chancellor.

David Yellin- Chancellor.

Russell Sugarmon- I think his election is significant though because he is the first judge to beat the candidate nominated by the bar here. Which was also machinery that developed during the Crump days.

David Yellin- I mean I think it is import for us to mention that Chancellor Hoffman was the one who issued the 1956 or no he issued one of the injunctions didn't he?

Carolyn Yellin- In 1966 against the strike…

David Yellin- No he was supposed to but he was away and another guy did.

Russell Sugarmon- I don't doubt that they might have intended to make an application against the strike I would doubt they could have gotten it.

David Yellin- But Chancellor Hoffman was involved in one of these injunctions, but…

#Let me come in here again. So the Lincoln League and Shelby Democratic club were functioning as what, civic clubs?

Russell Sugarmon- no they were functioning as political organizations except that the democratic club, I think that the difference….it is my opinion that the difference between the club before 1956, well before 1959 really and after 1959 was one of structure and philosophy. Before 1956 the leadership would have been Dr. J.E. Walker, James T. Walker who was a labor man.

David Yellin- Are they related?

Russell Sugarmon- No relation. And a lady that was a school teacher named Willa McWilliams who was later married to Jimmy Walker. I worked on their campaign sort of on the precinct level that year. Well Hoffman got negro and labor support against the bar nominee and beat the bar nominee and this was the first time a judge hadn't been picked by this machinery that Crump had put together one. And I think it really started the thing that led to the ball of fire dropping the bars against black lawyers because we have consistently urged negro organizations not to support the nominees of the bar primary nominees for the reason that the bar association was segregated.

#Well Russell by 56 had the whole Crump political machine pretty much fallen apart?

Russell Sugarmon- No.

#It was still strong?

Russell Sugarmon- We work with the counterpart. Which was harshing Jones and the sheriff was Hinds, Mel Hinds, they were all people who had been I would say a part of the county organization which was in the Crump Orbit. Paul Barrett on the quarterly court.

#Was George Lee still strong in 56?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah he had a pretty effective organization, this was relatively, I would say he was good for 5 to 7 thousand….

Carolyn Yellin- Excuse me a minute, Tom come, I would like for you too…(Tape Break).

#What about O.Z. Evers where does O.Z. Evers come into this whole thing.

Russell Sugarmon- I think probably politically, around 1959. Prior to that he was the plaintiff of the NAACP in a desegregation suit.

David Yellin- Yes Russell excuse me, yesterday senator Bogore mentioned last night that he was instrumental or helped him and (muffled) in 61 appoint a negro assistant attorney.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

David Yellin- Who was that?

Russell Sugarmon- Horton. That is a little interesting insight into that which I will get to I guess involving Robert Kennedy and the present U.S. Attorney (muffled).

David Yellin- Tom Robinson?

Russell Sugarmon- Anyway that election was the first one where a coalition of black voters and labor voters had succeeded locally and…

#This is 56?

Russell Sugarmon- 56. And I think the next year there was a local election, I don't think there was any…might have been a (muffled) I am not really sure. But in 59, oh Wildman, S.A. Wildman ran on that ticket. It was Wildman for the state legislative, he is a negro who is an attorney for the alcoholic control board.

David Yellin- Will?

Russell Sugarmon- S.A. Wilbun.

David Yellin- Oh Wilbun yeah.

Russell Sugarmon- And there were 4 people, Wilbun, Hoffman, Gore and I think a labor man was running against Clint Davis for Congress. We have never backed up Davis. Whoever was running we were backing them, but anyway Gore won and Hoffman won and Wilbun got 27,000 votes which I think was about 2,000 short of placing him among the 8 that went and this particular election disturbed people. There were some editorials written about single shotting and that session of the legislation changed the method of electing the house and the senate. They remained at large but I believe then they went to districts. This is on a state level not the city level.

David Yellin- Was that the province of the county to determine that or is that the state?

Russell Sugarmon- Well it was the province of the state, but because the custom (muffled) in the legislature if there was a unanimous delegation of a delegation was supported they just went along with it. Local affairs.

#Russell do you have the faintest idea what kind of a percentage of the negro vote you could count on in say 56? I mean what kind of strength..

David Yellin- Louder I can't hear you louder on the tape.

#I said how much…

Russell Sugarmon- It is rather difficult when you are talking about Wilbun's race. I think that he probably got over 90% or 95% of the votes cast on that race. Which is different from the question of whether he got 95% of the negro votes cast.

#Of the eligible voters.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah there was a fall off they started voting on the top races and one that had the most publicity and the ones that stirred the most interest. This is still true. That in the most recent election I guess Irvin's election. If he had got the votes that Gore, was it Gore who was up for election.

David Yellin- No.

Russell Sugarmon- No it was….I guess it was (muffled).

David Yellin- Yeah.

Russell Sugarmon- If he had gotten the same percentage of votes there would have been a lot closer race. Maybe 3 or 4 hundred votes different. But anyway he came close enough sop they changed the method of elections. And then the city elections came up in 59. And there, I think they had changed both the state legislation and the commission. I t went from at large to positions in the city. Commissioner, fire and police commissioner, public works, mayor, commissioner of public service and one other commissioner. So at that point we decided to run someone for one of those spots. So we got together, when I say we I mean the leade3rship of the democratic club and went to George Lee and Hooks. Hooks was sort of a republican ally, he wasn't a full fledged card carrying member of the Lincoln League but he drew their support a couple times and he worked with them. Hooks and Willis and I were in the same office so we were always talking politics. The three of us went to Lee and we told him what we wanted to do and asked him if he would join in the united effort you see and run a ticket. He agreed and then we went back to the club and they said it was known as a volunteer committee. I ran for public works, Hooks ran for juvenile court. And then Everest entered the race under the unity league ticket and…

David Yellin- Everest?

Russell Sugarmon- Everest, she asked about Everest.

#Now what was the unity league at that point?

Russell Sugarmon- The unity league was Everest and some other fellow who that was h is one shot I don't remember I think he left town shortly after that.

#Are you saying in otherwards the negro community was split between 3 political…

Russell Sugarmon- The unity league was born in that election.

David Yellin- Was that a protest against you people?

Russell Sugarmon- It split into two groups. Well no I think Everest saw politics as a good way to get his name advanced and by going against he grain he picked up support from groups who might not have been interested in seeing the volunteer ticket. I mean not necessarily black any other group that was interested in helping his campaign. Anyways that was a year were we had sort of a division, all kinds of groups that hadn't been interested in politics endorsed slates including the knights of Columbus and things like that.

David Yellin- Alright can I just stop a little bit here on a chronological detail. What made you run, did you toss a coin this time?

Russell Sugarmon- No, this is the same thing as what made me come back. I didn't like it here I grew up here and I don't know you experience certain things when you are growing up that don't give you the type of feeling you are supposed to have about your home and I didn't like it, and I didn't want to come back. Memphis has always been a very political town, even in high school every election the principal would make a speech about our parents going to vote and you would see teachers passing out literature, usually to people you didn't think much of.

#What high school did you go to?

Russell Sugarmon- Washington, and I went to law school because I was undecided what I was going to do. Almost well when I finished college.

David Yellin- You mean you went for the reason that you were interested in politics?

Russell Sugarmon- I was interested in being a lawyer because it gave you so many options in terms of becoming an activist.

#Where did you go to college?

Russell Sugarmon- Rutgers, I went one year to Moorehouse, I got put out.

#Put out of Moorehouse?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

#For what?

Russell Sugarmon- For drinking. Scotch. In the dorms.

(muffled)

Carolyn Yellin- You said you could erase this (muffled).

David Yellin- No as long as it is scotch I think it is fine.

Carolyn Yellin- (muffled)

#How old where you at that time at Moorehouse.

Russell Sugarmon- 16.

David Yellin- Oh really you went to college at 16?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah well I was 15 most of the first year I was 15 in May….

David Yellin- How come?

Russell Sugarmon- I went to school in the summer time one summer I think it was so I had enough credits by the 3rd year to finish.

David Yellin- So how come you did that?

Russell Sugarmon- I can't really remember. I played football and I think my parents were ready for me to get out of high school.

David Yellin- And they didn't want you to play football?

Russell Sugarmon- I don't think they were too sure bout what else I was playing.

David Yellin- And you were graduated from high school at 15?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

#And then they rushed you off to Moorehouse.

Russell Sugarmon- So (muffled) because I got put out my first year so it really took me 5 years to get out of college.

David Yellin- You mean none of your credits transferred over?

Russell Sugarmon- Well when I transferred they admitted me as a freshmen and they sad that I would have to spend the semester there before they would evaluate my grades.

David Yellin- This is at Rutgers?

Russell Sugarmon- Yes, they had, this was right after the war.

David Yellin- Oh and how did you like living in New Brunswick in the north.

Russell Sugarmon- I think I stayed in shock for about a year and a half. First time I had been out of the south, first time I had been away from home really.

David Yellin- Well what do you mean shocked?

Russell Sugarmon- Ion a integrated situation.

David Yellin- Yeah you were not only integrated but a southern boy up north.

Russell Sugarmon- And my room mate was 27, they had the influx of G.I.'s coming back from the war.

David Yellin- Right, was he white?

Russell Sugarmon- No he was negro too. I lived in a football dorm.

#Did you play football?

Russell Sugarmon- I played lightweight, I got 4 letters and three concussions.

David Yellin- Four letters….of course that is the old school of Paul Rosen.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah I think that is why I really chose it. I had been toying with the idea of not staying at Moorehouse so…but the disciplinary committee helped me to make up my mind.

David Yellin- And when you went to Rutgers did they know about it, it is an inconsequential question?

Russell Sugarmon- No I got my grades after. Well what we had done was to celebrate a successful year academically by getting drunk in the bell tower.

David Yellin- Getting high in the high. Wonderful.

Russell Sugarmon- They said we will give you your grades but we don't desire for you to (muffled) in the fall.

David Yellin- Of course it is a Baptist school isn't it?

Russell Sugarmon- It is I believe AME. Is Mays a Baptist minister?

David Yellin- Well Martin Luther King and everybody connected with him.

Russell Sugarmon- He went but I don't think the Baptist's have the structure to sustain this school. IO think it was a AME school.

David Yellin- Yes.

Russell Sugarmon- No he was there when I was there.

#Martin Luther King was?

David Yellin- Martin Luther King?

Russell Sugarmon- I didn't know him that well, I knew him but not that well.

Carolyn Yellin- Was he ahead of you?

Russell Sugarmon- I am not sure. He might have been a year ahead.

Carolyn Yellin- Was he known on campus or did you just realize later that he had been there?

Russell Sugarmon- No he was quiet. He wasn't at that point, oh are you leaving us? Ok.

#Do you want to shake my hand again.

David Yellin- We could always talk about politics.

Carolyn Yellin- I think we should explain that this is the youngest Yellin offspring going to bed.

#Hopefully.

Carolyn Yellin- Oh her way to bed good night dear.

David Yellin- Good night Sweetie.

#Well now what…

Carolyn Yellin- Well I just wanted to finish this one question since it did come up about Martin Luther King being there. You say he was quiet?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah.

Carolyn Yellin- Did you realize later when you began to read about him in the paper that he had been there?

Russell Sugarmon- No I didn't really realize it until after the Montgomery boycotts started and one of the fellows who had been at Moorehouse with me reminded me of the fact.

#What year would you have been at Moorehouse?

Russell Sugarmon- 45-46.

David Yellin- Were there any incidents at Rutgers that caused a shock or any that you can recall now?

Russell Sugarmon- No I think the shock was just he shock of trying to compete, because I don't really, I think the time I spent at Moorehouse helped, it was like a preparatory to going there.

David Yellin- You mean trying to compete in the field that you had enough proper preparation and you were aware of it?

Russell Sugarmon- Oh yeah.

David Yellin- Of course added to the fact that you were now at the ripe old age of 17.

Carolyn Yellin- (muffled).

David Yellin- At that age a 27 year old is an ancient.

Russell Sugarmon- It was interesting and frightening. And…

David Yellin- Of course as you look back at it now it was great for you wasn't it?

Russell Sugarmon- Yes I enjoyed it, it was a tremendous experience the whole time and I think two incidents characterize what happened there. as far as the change in the social climate. My first year there I played football and the athletic fields were 3 miles away from the dormitories and hey had a bus system that they would bus you out and came back. We practiced late one night and I guess some guys from the soccer team had been practicing late or one of the other teams. A couple of us, the football players got on the bus first and so we were sitting in the back and the lights were out so 3 or 4 of these guys got on the bus and they were talking about he fact that one of them had a blind date and they were kidding him and describing the shock he would have when he saw her and they were describing her as being cross-eyed and bow-legged and one of them said suppose she is a nigger? And they all laughed and all this, that kind of created a jangle and then my last year our team went down to Annapolis and we played Navy.

David Yellin- You were on the 150 pound team yes.

Russell Sugarmon- We played Navy and we beat them and I think that was the only time in those 4 years that any of the teams in that league beat Navy, I think they always had a tremendous light weight squad. 2 or 3 hundred people on the squad and they traveled maybe 6 teams and apparently all the mid shipmen except the football heavy weights were light weight size and they had to participate in athletics. They had a tremendous crop of athletes to pick from. But anyway we were feeling pretty happy and we stopped in Delaware in a diner on the way back in one of these train car type of places. I was one of the last 4 or 5 fellows to get off he bus to look at (muffled) and order. They had started performing serving taking orders and the whole counter lined up with juice salad or soup or whatever they ordered. I guess they probably had 30 or 04 meals served while they were going down the line. So the lady came to me and asked if I was negro. It never occurred about what she was driving at. She says well you have to eat in the kitchen. So I got up and walked out

and when I sat on the bus and when I sat down and turned around the whole team had walked out and the coach was yelling profanities back through the door. He was saying you can sue the damn school if you want to get paid for this bill and we left. I think in the first year I would have had to walk out and wait until they got through eating.

David Yellin- Yeah.

Russell Sugarmon- In that 4 year time it changed a good deal.

David Yellin- So this would be about 49?

Russell Sugarmon- 50.

David Yellin- 50.

Russell Sugarmon- This was 49 because I finished in 509.

#And where did you go to law school?

Russell Sugarmon- Harvard after that.

David Yellin- Well you are not, oh 150 what did you play?

Russell Sugarmon- Defensive half back.

David Yellin- Did they have two teams?

Russell Sugarmon- Oh yeah.

David Yellin- How come you went to Harvard?

Russell Sugarmon- I don't know I applied to Michigan, Harvard, Cornell and California Law school.

David Yellin- Berkeley?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah and I heard from Harvard first. So….

David Yellin- But you didn't want to come back to Memphis or did you?

Russell Sugarmon- I was undecided about what I was going to do when I went to college, I didn't like Memphis and I decided to come back because I didn't like it. I was not sure whether law was what I was going to be going into. The more I got exposed I had a tremendous sociology teacher, he turned out to be everything at Rutgers, a guy named Paul Massing.

David Yellin- Paul?

Russell Sugarmon- Massing. He was the secretary of the German Communist party, he got run out when Hitler took over. After he later recanted I guess you call it.

David Yellin- It depends….

Russell Sugarmon- He became a leading expert on communist apparatus and what not. His sister was married to (muffled). But he had a fantastic grasp of dynamics of society and I think really listening to him talk and his critiques of different things is what really made me go to law school.

#How do you spell his last name?

Russell Sugarmon- Massing, M-A-S-S-I-N-G.

Carolyn Yellin- Let me ask you during that period you were at Rutgers were you coming back to Memphis during the summer times?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah I didn't stay ever summer I came back a couple weeks.

Carolyn Yellin- And what would be your reaction, you said you had shock when you arrived at Rutgers.

=Oh it was the same I was suffocating when I left and I was suffocating when I came back.

Carolyn Yellin- Did it seem even worse when you came back?

Russell Sugarmon- I don't think it was long enough. I think it is possible to live here for a considerable period of time and never really experience anything that makes you, forces you to confront the type of environment you live in. You could stay here for 3 or 4 days or a week and never have occasion to get out of (muffled). All you see is black people unless you get a traffic ticket or something where you are exposed to the police. You know.

David Yellin- Were you able to talk with anyone about this at that time?

Russell Sugarmon- I talked with a history professor at Moorehouse before I left.

David Yellin- Somebody here I mean, was somebody else, was anybody else aware as you were?

Russell Sugarmon- Oh I think a lot of my generation were aware, I don't think many decided the thing they should do is come back. A lot of us went and decided that politics was a way. Out of the three years I was in Washington well Willis and Hook sand I all three were in school at the same time although they were ahead of me and we were all active politically. I think in the class is a state senator from Wisconsin and one from Kansas, the secretary of state of Michigan is now on the Michigan supreme court.

#At Rutgers?

Russell Sugarmon- No from my high school.

David Yellin- No from Booker T. Washington.

Russell Sugarmon- And one in Connecticut state office but we all came out of the same period.

David Yellin- And all from Memphis?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah. All from that high school.

David Yellin- Yes and the three of you?

Russell Sugarmon- The three of us came back.

David Yellin- Came back. Were you friends with Ben Hooks and A.W. Willis?

Russell Sugarmon- We grew up together.

David Yellin- Were you, I don't want you to tell tales of anybody, I think we are trying to get a picture here, were you a loner in this respect or were you able top..

Russell Sugarmon- You mean the three of us?

David Yellin- Yeah or where you able, you yourself now able to articulate your dismay, if that is the word and it hardly is, about Memphis and why you disliked it and so on.

Russell Sugarmon- Not really, I don't think I really started expressing a reaction to it until probably my second year at Rutgers. Up until then it was jut a ball. I was cynical and bitter but I kept it all in. I didn't have much to say to anybody I guess during that period. Then at Rutgers I took a lot of English course and I had a chance, one of the professors up there and got me a what was it? It was a fellowship to the new school…

David Yellin- The new school in New York?

Russell Sugarmon- No this was something in England.

David Yellin- In England?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah it was to work on my masters in English. I got accepted at Harvard so I went to law school. I wasn't sure whether I was going to write or what. So I just became a revolutionary.

Carolyn Yellin- Did you think of it in those terms then?

Russell Sugarmon- Oh yeah I used to be an advisor for AYD, American Youth for Democracy. I never joined the party but I used to advise the youth front at Rutgers and I went to a couple summer camps they had but it was always a little bit too

eager and then we would always write too much and it didn't quite come through. I never (muffled).

David Yellin- Where did these genes come from Russell?

Russell Sugarmon- What's that?

David Yellin- These genes of you being dissatisfied, wanting to change and graduating at 15.

#What is your father?

Russell Sugarmon- He is in real estate. I don't know, 2 or 3 incidents when I was growing up. I went to a cooperative school here and the principle was a German woman from Wisconsin.

David Yellin- In Memphis?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah, it later became a Lutheran Cooperative school and recently I think in the past 4 or 5 years they stopped. But then it was just a cooperative school she collected money from parents and she and teachers and we went there.

#Was this a black and white school?

Russell Sugarmon- No it was black. She was German but she was the only non-black in the whole thing. But she had a good library and she let us read a lot.

#Was it in a church or in her home or…

Russell Sugarmon- It was in the parsonage of the congregational church.

David Yellin- How come you went there who was it that made you go there, your mother, your father?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah my parents the public schools were pretty rough and not really. They were places that were empty where you were off he streets.

David Yellin- Tell us about your family, how come they were so sensitive to what at that time was…

Russell Sugarmon- I don't know I guess I am lucky that way. My father grew up in a place called Gunnison Mississippi. He had a Mississippi high school education.

David Yellin- Oh dear another guy from Mississippi. You (muffled).

Russell Sugarmon- Well my sister was born there and I was born a year after they came here.

David Yellin- Your father was from Mississippi.

Russell Sugarmon- My mother was born in a place called Decent.

David Yellin- Who?

Russell Sugarmon- Decent. It wasn't very that is what they called it.

(Laughs)

Russell Sugarmon- When they got married they borrowed somebody's horse and wagon and they got married and he took her home and he went back to work, I think they got together about a week later when he could afford somewhere decent to stay.

David Yellin- In Decent?

Russell Sugarmon- I think it was in Shelby after they got married. They later came up here but, they stayed at Mississippi.

David Yellin- Now did you have grandparents?

Russell Sugarmon- I don't know I never met them.

8You never met them.

Russell Sugarmon- I have seen a picture of my mother's father and some of her uncles. But beyond that no, I don't know anything about my father's parents. I know about his aunt, it was his mother's sister. She was married to the fellow that raised him. Who sort of….

David Yellin- Where did you get that aunt?

Russell Sugarmon- I am not really sure what it is. I have heard it so many different ways.

David Yellin- Is it.

Russell Sugarmon- I can remember we used o go back to this fellows farm and I guess he isn't really any relation to me no blood but he sort of stood emotionally in the place of a grandfather to the both of us. One summer we went down and spent a couple weeks on his farm.

#Who is this you and…

Russell Sugarmon- My sister.

#Your sister there were you and your sister where the two children in the family.

Russell Sugarmon- And this was I believe when Joe Lewis was champion and everybody was following boxing and they used to stage county matchers down there. And the sheriff was a referee and they would have strong negros up there boxing. The guy next door who was a blacksmith of all things took me up to see this boxing match and in the heat of the action the referee ordered the boxers to part

and hey wouldn't and he got mad and he hit one and the guy fell on the floor and he wouldn't get up. I kept wondering why he wouldn't get up he didn't hit him that hard you know. So it got real quiet and everybody left. He took me back and I was protesting, I said why didn't he guy get up and why didn't they continue the fight. Well finally he says because that is the sheriff. And you know it dawned on me.

David Yellin- He wasn't killed or anything.

Russell Sugarmon- No but the sheriff got mad and hit this guy and this guy, I figured he thought if he moved he would get killed because the sheriff had killed people, black people, so that broke up the boxing match. But I remember that and I had this thing about being a gentle man when I was in Grammar school and the street car used to run by our house and the car stop was right on the corner. They still lived there when it was a shotgun, they have largely improved it since then. And a lady dropped some money once and I went to pick it up for her and she stamped on the money and said don't touch my money nigger. And this sort of thing you grew up with,.

#What street did you live on?

Russell Sugarmon- On Walker, right across from Lemoyne and Walker (muffled). I had a new bike once, I sold some magazines and my parents added some money and I got a Schwinn bike which is what all the kids wanted and a Henderson bicycle. I got on my birthday, another kid and I were going to his house and we were taking turns riding and the police picked us up because niggers don't own bicycles, new bicycles.

#New ones yeah.

David Yellin- So what did they do?

Russell Sugarmon- Well they parked on what is now Lemoyne Gardens, then they called it Shinertown, it was a slum.

David Yellin- Shana?

Russell Sugarmon- Shiner, S-H-I-N-E-R. They threatened to take us to jail and they slapped us a couple of times. I kept insisting that it was my bicycle. It is not difficult..

#How old were you back then?

Russell Sugarmon- I must have been 12. I told my father and he cried and I wondered why he wouldn't call the, well they were the police. You couldn't do some thing. There was that sense of frustration.

David Yellin- Did they keep the bikes?

Russell Sugarmon- No they finally let us go. So but you accumulate enough of those things it is not difficult to try and figure out how you tear the whole structure down.

#This is probably an impossible question because it seems to me in that period a lot of people did get to the point where they wanted to tear the structure down and they got to the point where they could see their own personal way out of it.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah well I think so because that was my problem when I went to Rutgers and I went to law school. It wasn't too bad when I was at Rutgers because I was always in training for something., football wrestling track or something and I didn't date that much. I knew girls but when I got to law school all of the girls I knew when they found out I was coming back to Memphis it was well let's be friends but nothing more than friends.

#You mean from the time you started law school you had intended to come back?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah that is why I went, I think if I had no planned to come back I probably wouldn't have gone to law school because I had never really been impressed by being a lawyer. It is another way of making a living.

David Yellin- And you really wanted to be writer?

Russell Sugarmon- Well I liked it.

David Yellin- But you had no alternative you felt.

Russell Sugarmon- Well this was a more immediate field.

Carolyn Yellin- Well the choice between those two things truly was a choice between going for a….

Russell Sugarmon- The attachment and involvement.

Carolyn Yellin- Or going for local involvement or to change something that is very much more real.

David Yellin- Do you remember what made you make your mind up that you would come back to Memphis? Any particular thing? Or did you think you…

Russell Sugarmon- No this, in the course of the 4 years I was at Rutgers I had gotten exposed to kids who were involved who, were doing things not to the extent and the degree that this generation is. But they were active in things. I worked for Stevenson, I worked for 48, I guess that was Law School, I guess it was Truman.

#Truman yeah.

Russell Sugarmon- This sort of thing. Listening to mass and point out the flaws in the structure. This one and you know the communist party and everyone else he was a terrific social critic I think. And it looked like law, I was never interested in being a sociologist because you always had to start with the framework of an institution. I mean you just didn't come back and hang your sign, sociologist. There was no way of catching on in Memphis you know without also taking up all the

burdens of the particular agency your were working for. There were too many obvious ways (muffled).

David Yellin- Yeah.

Russell Sugarmon- So it looked like..

David Yellin- In a sense you are not an organization man in that sense?

Russell Sugarmon- I am an organization man I definitely am. But I am not an organization man beyond a certain price. I didn't…

David Yellin- Yeah I know this will not be published. I mean not that you are against any organization, your drive comes from what you think you can do.

Russell Sugarmon- Well I came and I thought it was possible to create an organization that had a similar philosophy I guess a set of goals. If you come by a city like Memphis in 1956 and when ever you are going to finish your formal education what organizations can you identify with that are going to let you develop the things that brought you back. You think by coming back you can't it automatically narrows the career is.

David Yellin- Preacher…if Russell Sugarmon….it occurs to me that if Russell Sugarmon came back today or this year or next year it would be a different Russell Sugarmon?

Russell Sugarmon- Well there might be some other alternatives in the law in terms of…

David Yellin- you came back probably in so many ways what is the apathetic period or non active period, or active period.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah I think it was a period during which there was still a hangover form the days of the real tight Crump construction.

#Sot hen with the, really seem to be hung up on the Shelby democratic club. Did you see in the Shelby democratic club a chance to sort of shape it to what you wanted?

Russell Sugarmon- I saw in politics, I mean I was not alone on that there were several people here who had the same type of a feeling that politics was one way of amassing a fund of power which could be used to produce some changes. I think I have always been concerned about who exercises that power.

David Yellin- And what have you discovered?

Russell Sugarmon- I still believe that.

David Yellin- Well who does exercise power?

Russell Sugarmon- Varying degrees and varying ways, a number of different organizations and groups. Most of them sort of kinship groups. And very few of them for any sort of goals beyond the immediate.

David Yellin- Well is the power didn't you say that you have discovered is it a financial, industrial…

#Are you talking about I Memphis?

David Yellin- Well is Memphis different form the rest of the country?

Russell Sugarmon- No only in the Greek I don't think in kind though.

David Yellin- Would it (muffled) for instance if the Crump had the power in the city? I mean I am really asking I am not…

Russell Sugarmon- Well I think he left an apparatus which took some time to run down and break up.

David Yellin- So the Crump apparatus still, might be what you call a hangover.

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah for a number of years. I thin the democratic club was just a, when I left Rutgers I was firmly convinced that the democratic party had more hope of being reformed more than the republican. Whether it was the problem was of a lesser magnitude even with the south which was then the democratic south. Which was the reaction there of winning party.

#Were you in contact with Willis and Hooks and, while you were in college?

Russell Sugarmon- Not very much, just in the summer when we were here.

#For instance did you know that Willis was going to come back here or did it seem like you were going to come back all by yourself.

Russell Sugarmon- I knew it before I finished law school, not while I was in college I would guess probably the end of my second year.

David Yellin- Yeah where did he go?

Russell Sugarmon- Hooks was already back when we came back.

#Yeah Hooks is older isn't he?

Russell Sugarmon- Yeah he had the, when I started practice, I guess he has probably ten more years of active practice that I have. So he has been here about 10 years.

#Willis went to Wisconsin didn't he?

Russell Sugarmon- I guess it wasn't 10 years? Even though we were in high school together how did that happen? I went 4 years to, 5 years to college and 3 years to

law school and 2 years in the army, and one year in graduate school. So how long a span is that?

David Yellin- That is 11 years.

Russell Sugarmon- 11 years so it could have happened that way.

#What was the year in graduate school?

Russell Sugarmon- Finance, I went to BU for a year while my wife was finishing.,

David Yellin- In…

Russell Sugarmon- It was Boston University.

David Yellin- Boston University.

Russell Sugarmon- My then wife. My then wife.

David Yellin- You smiled.

Russell Sugarmon- It was a polite smile.

David Yellin- Yeah and I saw the knife but I didn't….

Russell Sugarmon- That was what turned me around.

#(muffled).

Russell Sugarmon- I had just gotten out of the army and we got married. I got out of the army on the 21st and we got married on the 25th of May.

David Yellin- Where were you in the army?

Russell Sugarmon- In Japan. I met her the last, after Christmas my last year in law school. She was the first person I mentioned that didn't immediately act like I had Halitosis when I said that I was coming back to the south. It is kind of a curios feeling you really feel alone. You get with a group of kids and everyone is saying what they are going to do when they finish, I am going back to Memphis in sociology. It is embarrassing. And they are trying to figure out whether you are an uncle tom and you are going back because somebody is going to take care of you down there, but whatever the reason something is wrong.

David Yellin- Coming back to Memphis to live. I mean that is why you came up there to be liberated.

#Well…

Russell Sugarmon- I wondered what it was going to be like, I didn't know if I was going to be liberated or not. I was sure…

David Yellin- Excuse me how did you find Harvard as opposed to Rutgers, did you feel an initial…

Russell Sugarmon- No I think the 4 years at Rutgers did a lot and now I wasn't ordered by race at Harvard I was ordered by brains. I took the aptitude test and I made a….they give it allover the country and you are in a percentile group and I was in the 95th percentile in the top 5% or something like that and I felt pretty good and I got there and I stayed three years and I never met anybody who was lower than that. I got the impression that the school was doing me a favor you know trying to help out.

Carolyn Yellin- Dipping down into the bottom of the barrel.

Russell Sugarmon- Scraping the barrel to make room. I doubt if they had many applications from many kids who went through public school in the south you know, negro kids. I am sure that had something to do with them admitting me.

David Yellin- Well of course during that period they didn't do that much they did it jut a little.

Russell Sugarmon- I had that in my application, why do you want to go to law school, because I don't like Memphis Tennessee. I elaborated, they have this page or two you can use to explain why you think you want to be a lawyer.

David Yellin- But part of as you say your emphasis or your self conscious or whatever it was you were feeling was not race it was this you say brains.

Russell Sugarmon- I thin there is was a legitimate, no cultural bias involved…

David Yellin- But also at the same time Rutgers gave you a certain amount of confidence and social (muffled) you were also older.

Russell Sugarmon- I think Rutgers gave me more of a sense of either being at ease with myself.

David Yellin- Yeah.

Russell Sugarmon- And the rest comes after you are able, the shock of recognition I think to us the current term.

David Yellin- And I don't know I am sorry but this appeals to me.

#Feel free.

Russell Sugarmon- Jim Lawson had said this that very early he strove who he was he said it gave him great strength.

Russell Sugarmon- Yes it does.

David Yellin- I think I know what you mean but isn't there an extra dimension or an extra I don't know what I mean, carbuncle or an extra something about that a negro has to go through in order to find out what he is. There is always that….

Russell Sugarmon- Well think you go through those experiences very young like I related. That really detach you from the institutional forces that produce a person who identifies with the values but I think it takes something else for you to unwind. What you do is you withdraw and you stop believing and those things but I thin you need another shot, you need an additional joke to figure out I am somebody too I have some things going for me, I am something too I don't have to buy all this.

David Yellin- However your something is it evaluated against the negro community or the white community or both?

Russell Sugarmon- Both.

David Yellin- And that is what I mean is so difficult because there are two lives.

Russell Sugarmon- Oh yeah we have this argument, not argument but debate.

#Discussion.

Russell Sugarmon- I excuse her because she is a foreigner.

David Yellin- You got her, you know everybody reaches you know where they can find their own little spot, that is a dirty little trick.

Carolyn Yellin- It is a very difficult to understand at times and it definitely scars for every negro male figure.

Russell Sugarmon- Everybody has scars, just depends where they are.

David Yellin- Yeah well only through the scars too can you find out who you are. Here I am with my scars.

Carolyn Yellin- I believe it is definitely the first 10 years of your life that contribute. No matter what later on you become something that everybody says oh you are great it doesn't matter it is the first 10 years that scarred you and somehow you will always come back to that in your own little wee hour you will come back to this when you have little doubts at times.

#I am thinking white southerners have something of this.

Russell Sugarmon- Oh I am sure white southerners have some thing of this.

#Because to find themselves…

David Yellin- In a lot of ways it is more difficult.

#They must renounce so much and I think this thing of…

David Yellin- They don't have the built in objective that everybody can see.

#And there is a real renunciation of parents along with values and family I mean that means a great deal this is so much built into the structure of the white southerner. So I think…(Tape End)