

Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
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Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
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Interviewee: Dr. Emmett Bassett and Mrs. Priscilla Bassett
Interview Date: July 21, 2011
Location: The Bassetts' home in Grahamsville, New York
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 2:10:53

Priscilla Bassett: ... comb my hair? Does it look alright?

Emmett Bassett: I think it looks alright.

PB: Alright.

John Bishop: I think it's good, so let's just be quiet for about fifteen seconds and get some room tone. [Pause] Okay.

Joe Mosnier: Today is Thursday, July 21, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am with project videographer John Bishop. We're in Grahamsville, New York, at the home of Dr. Emmett and Mrs. Priscilla Bassett to do an oral history interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress.

Dr. and Mrs. Bassett, it's such a pleasure to be here with you. Thank you for the welcome and thank you for agreeing to sit down with us. It's really great to see you.

PB: Thank you.

EB: Thank you.

JM: Let me, um, let me start with this question. Mrs. Bassett, I was curious, in having done some research in preparation of the interview, to – I was interested in the question of how you came to be interested in the civil rights question and progressive politics and causes generally as a young, maybe even adolescent, young woman coming up, yeah.

PB: Well, I went to, uh, an elementary school in Plainfield, New Jersey, uh, which was, as we look back now, during the Progressive Era, uh, Howard Rugg or Harold Rugg textbooks, and, uh, just a generally New Deal, enlightened environment. However, I did come from a Republican family, um, and I left the, the, uh, public school and went to a private school for the last two years of high school. And at that time, um, during – well, it was 19 – um, what was it? Well, 1944, I guess, that Franklin Delano Roosevelt died. And one of my classmates came in to school and said, “My father danced on the dining room table last night.” So, that was [laughs] the conflicting atmospheres that I had in my educational experience.

And I did become interested in political issues. I remember going to visit our state senator, or no, our federal senator, um, Clifford Case, who was – now, he would be anathema to the [laughs] Republican leadership. But, uh, at any rate, I did have a certain amount of interest. But I was basically a suburban girl whose mother had very limited appreciation of African American people or culture, my father a little less so, uh, less extreme than my mother, who was a Southerner by birth, or by raising. She was raised in the North, but her mother was a Southerner and conveyed ideas to her.

Um, so when I went to college, um, my second year, there was no money. It was at the end of World War II, and my father, uh, really didn't have a job. So, I had to go to work, and I went to work at *Life* magazine. How I managed that I really – there's nobody left [laughs] to explain to me how that happened. But I had a job as – I would have been a sophomore in college had I been there – um, I was an office girl, and I filled the water jugs and sharpened pencils and ran errands and carried coffee and, you know, stuff like that.

And I met a very articulate and convincing union, uh, member, and that opened my eyes to quite a few things. So, when I returned the next year to Smith, um, it was a period of a lot of activity, and I became involved with the Progressive Party. And that –

JB: Can we pause for a second?

JM: Let's pause for just a second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: We're back after a short break. You were saying about – you became interested and began involved with the Progressive Party.

PB: Yes. And, of course, one of their major concerns was the state of affairs and relationships and the legal systems in the South. And I also was a history major and, of course, because I was a history major [5:00], I pursued, uh, a certain amount of, uh, study – there wasn't, really there wasn't any separate black history or African American history or anything in those days. Um, but I managed to find my way to learning.

And I remember – I remember I had this wonderful book. I forgot that. It was called *The Democratic Spirit*, and it was a collection of all kinds of writers. And, um, I have a copy now. I

managed to find one again. And in it was a poem of Countee Cullen. And that really stuck with me all my life.

JM: Yeah. Um, Dr. Bassett, you, um, grew up near the Virginia-North Carolina border.

EB: Yes, it's about twenty miles, sixteen miles, I think.

JM: Yeah, Henry County.

EB: Yeah.

JM: And, um, I think you lost your father when you were a teenager.

EB: I was – he died in 1935, so I would have been about fourteen years old when he died.

JM: Yeah. Yeah. Um, but even by that time, it seems that your, um, what would become your lifelong path of commitment to the cause of racial equality and progressive change was – you'd even been active by that point, as I think I know, say, in the effort around the Scottsboro trial.

EB: Yes.

JM: Yeah. Can you describe kind of the nature of life in your family and on your farm, and how you got drawn towards that participation?

EB: Well, I can remember before my father died in my first year in high school, he had told me – I had some half brothers, two half brothers, and they were ten, twelve years older than I was. And they had – my mother had tried very hard to send them to college. And the older son she had sent to Hampton Institute, because she had heard that was a great school. But my brother 'O,' Obediah I guess his name was, he didn't do well there at all. In fact, she took five hundred dollars out of her thousand-dollar insurance that she had insured herself for when her

first husband died. She wanted to leave something for those seven kids she had. And that's what she had done, and she had done that with the Metropolitan Life.

Now, I sat around the house, and I listened to what everybody said. We had no TV and, at that time, probably no radio. That came later. So, I listened to what my mother said that it was good to take half of her money and send him to college. But he did very poorly at Hampton, and, uh, so, the next year she sent him to St. Paul, and that was in Lawrenceville, Virginia. And the reason why she sent him there – he could, uh, take some easier course and if nothing else, he could study to be a carpenter.

And a few years later, my other half-brother, Matthew, he went to St. Paul. I think he finished high school there and did reasonably well. But he came home and he told me that he thought I should go to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. And I asked him why did he think I should go there. He said, "You're a very smart person, and your aunt in Cleveland thinks you should come there and go to school."

And I had two sisters in Cleveland, and they also told me that they would be willing to get me in high school there. I was dubious of that, because the schools, the elementary school I had gone to, I had probably two teachers out of the seven or eight years I was there that finished a year. They usually dropped out, went other places, and left us without a teacher except somebody who substituted.

PB: But, Emmett, remember – I kind of remember that you [10:00] got involved with doing civil rights work with the Scottsboro case.

EB: Yeah, well.

PB: Well, how did that fit in?

EB: Well, I was just talking about a little bit in Henry County when – before my father died. That’s what I’m telling you about now. And, uh, my father had told me already that he thought I was the only one that could run the farm out of the whole family. He says, “You’re probably the only that can do it. Now, I had grown up working with my mother in the garden, working with my father in his garden, and I used to hear them arguing about, “Who’s going take Emmett?” [Laughs]

I had another brother two – about a year and a half older than me. He didn’t like farming at all. He liked no parts of it and didn’t want any parts of it. And I had a younger brother, who usually stayed home with my – his name was Milton. And he was a very good student in school, too.

So, it – I think before my father died, he brought his cousin up. Her name was Ida Dodson, and she had gone to school at Chestnut Knob, which is a little bit south of us, towards Ridgeway, Chestnut Knob. And at Chestnut Knob, they had some teacher – I’m trying to think of his name, but – I think it was Holmes or something like that. He came there as principal from Pennsylvania, and he was the teacher my father had gone to, and this teacher, Ida Dodson, had gone to him, too.

So, she felt I was a very smart student and she transferred me from fifth grade, I believe, to seventh grade. And it became a very hostile school [laughs] for me, because I had boys fourteen and fifteen and sixteen, and some up as much as seventeen or eighteen, and they didn’t like me being in their class, and they were very hostile. But [claps hands] I guess that’s the only place I felt like I had to take a gun to school to protect myself.

JM: Was it your father’s example that – or your mother, too – that inspired your willingness to, you know, step forward to contribute in civil rights cases and causes?

EB: Yeah, my mother thought it was a good idea, that we shouldn't just accept things coming from people. And we ran into a lot of problems right there at home, because there was white families that had [13:10] – see, when they got the Fieldale Cotton Mill Company and they got the Bassett Furniture Company, you had white people moving from Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and maybe Tennessee, a few from Tennessee.

And the Bassetts, the white Bassetts, and, uh, my grandfather was given to the Bassetts' father when he married a daughter – he married a daughter of the Staples, who – no, Turners! I got the wrong name: Turner. That was who my grandfather was raised by, and he was a Turner. But he stayed with the Bassetts. They didn't put him out in a little house of his own, like he lived in at the Turners'. They put him in with their two boys – or maybe three, I'm not sure, but it was two at least – and he slept with them. And he didn't go to the schools that they went to. He didn't go to any school at all –

JM: Right.

EB: Because at that time there were no schools for blacks.

JM: Exactly.

EB: But these two brothers, so I understand – I got this from them and from my father – they used to come home and teach him math and teach him whatever history that they had learned about in school. So, my grandfather picked that up [15:00] and according to what some of those families told me, the Bassetts, that he knew more math, more history than his two sons did. So, they made him the boss of the one sawmill or what – maybe it was two. I'm not sure. But these sawmills sawed lumber, and they shipped it to Grand Rapids, Michigan.

JM: Oh.

EB: They shipped logs there for a while, and later on they started shipping the timbers there that they sawed. Now, William Henry was in charge of all of that, and he was in charge of a lot of white people. Now, it turns out, and this had leaked all the way through to me as a kid, that, that, uh, that the Bassetts were going to get six million dollars from the Continental Bank of Chicago to build a furniture factory.

JM: Right.

EB: But he had to get the approval of the State of Virginia.

JM: Okay.

EB: Now, the State of Virginia, say, in 1900 or about then, wanted no blacks bossing anybody, not even blacks. So, they got rid of William Henry. So, he was – he could become a preacher, and I assume he did. He married a lot of people there in Virginia. I've looked at all of that. He married – [laughs] had somebody to marry almost every week when he was a preacher. So, he had to give up his job.

Well, my father – I don't know how this worked out, but he worked for another family named "Till" Lester, who ran the furniture company. He was told essentially about the same thing, because they were getting ready to build a furniture store that could, would, uh, would, uh, manufacture windows and all of those things, so he had to build a factory, kind of, too. So, he got his factory, but he said my father had to give up his job, too. So, those things have impacted me [laughs] all my life.

JM: Yes, indeed.

EB: Because I used to listen to them talk.

JM: Yeah.

EB: And sometimes they knew what – didn't realize I knew what they were talking about, but I did.

JM: Right.

EB: And I remembered all the names they associated with. But I never heard the, the, the Lesters say anything about that until I came back from the University of Massachusetts. Now, that must have been twenty years later that I had gone up there and got a Master's Degree. And, uh, he, uh – and I came home. And I had a sister, who had worked in the hospitals during the war years, and she had gone around to see sick patients and sometimes she saw whites that she knew and she stopped to see them.

And she found out that one of these women knew my father. And she says, "Well, I'd like for your brother, one of John's sons, I'd like to talk with me." Now, I came home, I guess it was Christmas or something, and she says, "Will you go by to see this woman?" I says, "Now, who *is* she?" She says, "She's a cousin of Pop's." Now, I never knew that Pop was a cousin to Till Lester's wife. I never knew that. My father, usually when he had a conversation like that, he got out of my hearing distance.

JM: [Laughs] Right.

EB: [Laughs] So, so, so, so I talked with my sister. I said, "You know, this woman is still alive. My father has been dead for a long time. What did she do for him when he was alive? And why should I go and talk with her?" I just couldn't go.

And you say about the Scottsboro [20:00], well, I guess I was a freshman in high school when I began to read and hear a lot about the Scottsboro. And, to me, they were about my age, and there were white people around us. And we used to build one of the biggest ponds to go swimming. We used to take the horses, the drag pan, and make a dam across this little stream

that ran down from the Morris's place, and we used to make a huge pond there. So, everybody that lived in that neighborhood, white and black, came by and saw that lovely pond, wanted to go swimming there.

Now, we didn't use swimming suits [laughs]. And the women came in. They would go up the stream, jump in and swim. So, there [laughs] was this man. I assume he was my mother's first cousin. He was a Morris. And [laughs] he came by with two – his daughter and another cousin, who was one of his sisters' child, um, girls, I should say. I guess they were twelve, fourteen, about the same age as us, and they wanted to go swimming and they brought their father.

We didn't understand why she had brought him or why they had brought him, but I guess they brought him to teach him a lesson, that they could go swimming with us and there was nothing wrong with it. They knew — we knew they knew that we were cousins, my mother and her father. My mother and her father were first cousins. And I guess we weren't supposed to know that, but we did and we told them as much. And my mother was also first cousin to his wife. So, I said, "Mom, he must have married a cousin." She said, "Yes, he did."

And I knew my mother's first marriage was with someone that was related to her. Whether he was a first cousin or second cousin, I'm not sure, but he was a cousin. So, I asked my mother at that stage, "Why would you marry a cousin? Why didn't you ask him was he your cousin?" She says, "He didn't know, and I didn't know, so we made a mistake." So, we used to tell them about there could be nothing between us and them, because we're first cousins, we're second cousins.

JM: Right.

EB: And that's the reason we got some kind of people a little bit crazy in this family already. So, I told them all about that. So, this man came along with the two girls, and they brought him. They said, "Well, you can go talk with him." So, he came and he talked with me. And he talked for a long time. So, I told him, "Yes, they could go up there, jump in the water, they could swim, and we're not going to try to grab them and try to hug them! They are our cousins!" So, eventually he says, "Well, go ahead."

And the daughters had told him before then that he should go home. If he couldn't stand to look at them swim with us, "Go home, and you won't have to look at us." But he just went out in the woods a short distance, and I could just see him out there [laughing] trimming on a stick. I don't know what else he was doing. But at the end, he came back to pick up his daughters and he thanked me for letting them swim. And I don't remember much after that, because I think that next year my father might have died, and I think my fulltime work was taking care of the farm.

JM: Yeah, sure, sure.

EB: And milking the cows and doing things like that.

JM: Yeah.

EB: And going to high school when I could.

JM: Right, right, yeah. Mrs. Bassett – we'll come back, and this will be one of those interviews where we shift back and forth. [Laughter] But Mrs. Bassett, can you – um, Dr. Bassett, you mentioned your getting the Master's up at the University of Massachusetts, and I think it's in that context that the two of you met up in Massachusetts. And I wonder, Mrs. Bassett, if you would recall the circumstances and how you two came to know each other.

PB: Well, um, this was after World War II, and, um, I went to a women's college, [25:00] Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. And there was a road that ran from Northampton to Amherst, and along that road there was what was called a roadhouse in those days. And this roadhouse became rather notorious because they refused to serve blacks. So, some of the Smith women went over to join a picket line. And whether this is apocryphal or [laughter] whether that is really the first time we met, um, that's what I remember.

And, um, then there was a lawsuit, because some people were arrested. I was not arrested. I seem to have a knack for not getting arrested sometimes. [Laughs] And, um, so I was a witness at the trial that, you know, when the people – you were not arrested either.

EB: No, I was not.

PB: No. So – but, anyway, we got to see one another again after that and we had friends in Amherst where we were welcome to go for dinner and so forth.

JM: So, your knowledge of that, of that protest would have come from through the Progressive Party community, student group, or how would you have known about that to go and get involved?

PB: It could have been, yes.

JM: Yeah. It would have been –

PB: Because I know our lawyer – the lawyer that, uh, and he was very careful not to groom me for this, uh, when I had to be a witness. He said, "I'm not," you know, "you just remember yourself just what happened and tell it, because I'm not putting any words in your mouth." And, of course, I had never done it before and I went to see the president of the college and told him that I was going to be a witness. And he said, "That's fine. That's what you should

be doing.” So, uh, perhaps it was through the – I know the lawyer was part of the Progressive Party.

JM: Yeah. And I wanted to ask, too, at Smith in those years, there would have been – what – just maybe a half dozen African American students on campus?

PB: Oh –

JM: If that?

PB: A half dozen would be a lot.

JM: Yeah. Four, three, four?

PB: Yeah. There were four years of college and in my class – I was in two classes, you know. I was there and I – there were certainly never more than two or three.

JM: Yeah.

EB: Yeah.

PB: So.

JM: Would that have been your first occasion to become directly and personally acquainted with African Americans, or had you –?

PB: Oh, in my school –

JM: Yeah.

PB: I do remember that the atmosphere was very supportive of the black students. Um –

JM: You mean at Smith or –?

PB: No, at the public school.

JM: In Plainfield?

PB: In Plainfield, New Jersey.

JM: Okay, yeah, alright.

PB: Uh, there – Plainfield, uh, we lived in a part of Plainfield that was all white, but there was a small enclave of black families who were mainly, uh, working domestics in the households. Uh, and they were in the classes with us. And there was, you know, to my – well, what – five, sixth grade self, I didn't see that the teachers did any, treated them any differently. And in the eighth grade, we had a Cantata and we sang, um, "Ballad for Americans." And the – Paul Robeson's part was played by one of the black students, and, of course, he was the star. And Paul Robeson did come to Plainfield, and he performed at the public library – no, no, at the public high school. And that was a really very impressive experience.

JM: And you attended?

PB: And I attended.

JM: Yeah.

PB: Yeah.

JM: With students or with your family?

PB: It's possible my brother went along.

JM: Yeah.

PB: But not my parents.

JM: You earlier mentioned your mother had some –

PB: Yeah.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Let me ask this, too, and, um, as you, after the two of you had met and began to, uh, become interested in one another, how did you – I mean, it's obviously a very challenging context for an interracial couple in that era. How did you think about those issues and find your way forward in a context that could be even, not just unfriendly, but even hostile sometimes?

PB: How about that, Em?

EB: What? Well, uh, I don't remember anybody up at the University of, uh, [30:00] of Massachusetts being hostile about seeing us together – over at the University. Now, I have a suspicion that [laughs] over at her dormitory – I guess I only went by there a couple of times. I don't remember going more than that. I never went to that party that the woman said she danced with me.

PB: Yeah, I – [Laughter]

EB: I don't remember that. [Laughter]

PB: Well, there was a housemother.

JM: Oh, yes.

PB: But she took it in stride. Um, she had had really a big uproar the year before because a student had become pregnant, and, uh, that was, uh, monumental, uh, for the housemother [laughter] and for the student, who supposedly didn't know what had happened. But [laughs], at any rate, you know, this was not a very enlightened period. Um, but I – you know, we just felt that it was our right and privilege if we cared for each other to proceed.

EB: Yeah.

PB: Uh, I guess we knew that, you know, we might encounter some hostility and – and, uh, personal hostility, I don't remember that at Smith.

EB: No.

JM: Yeah. Dr. Bassett, let me take you back to, uh, to your move to, uh, Tuskegee [Institute], to enter college. And you would have a range of, it sounds like, of very, very interesting experiences while a student there and then, of course, would go on into military service.

EB: Yeah.

JM: But before we get the Second World War, I'd be interested if you would kind of share some recollections of your experiences at Tuskegee.

EB: Well, at Tuskegee, I was in or went there as a work-study, into a work-study program. I was going to work, I think, it was, may have been twenty-four hours a week, or it may have been a little longer than that. And I think at some time I gave that up and made it a little shorter because I didn't want to be there for five years. I wanted to try to graduate in four years, so I was trying to take a full load.

But that was very difficult, because I had to get up at four o'clock in the morning, go milk the cows, and I think I had thirteen cows to milk, and they were all Guernsey cows. He put me over there and he used to come around and take a look at me milking these – we were milking by hand at that time. And he says, "Where did you learn to milk a cow?" I said, "We had cows at home, and I milked two or three cows all the time there. So, that's where I learned to milk cows, so I'm milking here."

He used to go around after me to see whether any milk was being left in the cow's bag. I said, "No, I make sure that everything is done properly. We did it at home, and I'm not doing anything new here. I wash her off, the teats, and make sure they're clean," or there was a washman. I think he did it before I – I didn't have to do that. So, I milked these thirteen cows, and that was about – uh, I guess there were three other people that milked the Holsteins, which took a little longer and they gave a little more milk.

JM: And just to kind of situate this for the interview, this was part of the school's program.

EB: This was part of the school, and I think they paid us something like fifteen to twenty cents an hour, someplace in there, that's what it was. We didn't get much money for that, and so I had to do some extra jobs on weekends, like cleaning up the lots where the cows were fed during the winter months, especially, and I used to do that.

And, um, and sometimes there were people who had other little jobs that they would give to me, like a barbecue or something. I used to stay up all night helping them in barbecue, hog meat, because Tuskegee was going to have a big, uh, feast. And one day a year, they invited the whole community around, and they just cooked a lot of hog meat on the, uh – they went out in the woods and they dug a trench and they put some bars over it [35:00] and some stones around. We stayed there all night, and I'd get paid for all night, too, because he would sleep some and I would sleep some.

And this man had this song that he used to sing to me, that he did all of this for white people, too. He wanted me to know that. He said, "They certainly have been good to me." [Laughs] I said, "How *good*? You stay up all night, cooking their meat. Is that *good*?" You get a little tired sometimes. [Laughter] So, he just laughed and went on. But he did show me – he made up all of the salt and pepper and everything, and he put that in some kind of fat, and he'd go over the meat every once in awhile with that and put it on the meat. So, I did learn all of those things.

JM: Yeah.

EB: So, I did that for the first two years, and it was tough. I think I got As in math and As in a few other things. But there were some courses – I think biochemistry, I think I got an A in that, and the man came to me and he pleaded with me that he could give me a job there that

would be much easier and I could major in biochemistry. But I kept thinking about the farm back home.

JM: Um.

EB: I don't know. I says, "My father is expecting me to run the –" by that time he was dead, and my family still depends on me to run the farm. I had been able to bring in another black person from a white farm. And he worked for this man – I think he got seventy-five cents a day. We told him we could pay him two dollars a day, because we traded, sold stuff every weekend in town at the, on the street, and we made some money, enough to pay him two dollars an hour [Dr. Bassett intended two dollars a day] whenever he helped us. So, we had him. So, he just gave up his job with this white family and he came to work with us. And he almost looked at us as if we were his children, me and my younger brother. We were it! And, uh, the other brothers were into their building business or plumbing business and so forth.

JM: Um-hmm. How did – excuse me.

JB: Joe, could we stop for a sec?

JM: We'll pause for a minute.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

PB: ...next job.

JM: Okay, we're back after a short break.

PB: NYA – that was it, wasn't it, the National Youth Administration?

EB: Youth Administration.

PB: That money, yeah, okay.

EB: Of the Roosevelt Administration.

JM: Yeah.

EB: Gave me –

PB: Okay, hold it.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: I think we're good. We're back.

JB: We're good.

JM: Uh, yeah, we're back on. Thank you.

EB: Yeah, I can go over when he gets set.

JB: We're set.

JM: Okay.

EB: Yeah, they gave me a scholarship, and that is – I think it was supposed to be twenty-five dollars a month. That was twice what I was making working. And I only worked at Dr. [George Washington] Carver's place for about twelve hours a week, usually about two hours every other day or something like that, and maybe a little more on Saturday and Sunday, showing visitors around.

JM: Uh-huh.

EB: Yeah, so, that was very easy. Now, just how I got there I've never been able to find out. But I used to have a man at the Labor Department –

PB: Oh, yeah.

EB: And he was a writer – now, what was his name?

PB: Ralph Ellison.

EB: Ralph Ellison.

JM: Oh, yeah, we've heard of him. [Laughter]

EB: Yeah. He told me that he was going to take care of me. I told him I was working more hours than I was being paid for, because if I worked extra time over at the farm, they didn't want to pay me for it. So, [laughs] when I got this job, I didn't have to worry about that anymore and I had more time to study. And I got to meet Dr. Carver and I worked with his – a post-doc that was one of his assistants.

JM: Yeah. Let me ask how did – we'll come to Dr. Carver in just a moment, but how did you come to meet Ralph Ellison?

EB: Well, he was at Tuskegee for some reason and he was working in that department. And I used to go by there. But I didn't realize until later that he had written the book.

PB: Much later.

EB: Much later.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

EB: I put it together – that's who I was [40:00] talking to.

JM: Interesting.

EB: But I never knew him.

PB: No.

JM: And how about Dr. Carver? What was the experience like of being – did he – was he someone that you could have a fairly close personal academic context relationship with, or was he someone who had such stature that there was a distance between him and his students?

EB: I don't think he ever had that distance between me and one other fellow that worked there. Two of us got those scholarships. And we used to – when we'd first get to work, he wanted to see us for about a half-hour, just sit and talk. And [laughs] I remember I was just

beginning to grow a little beard, and he used to take his hands and, oh, feel across there, “You’re just like –”

JM: He’d touch your face?

EB: Yeah.

JM: Yeah.

EB: “You’re just like a little spring chicken! You’re just growing up!” And so, I, you know, asked my supervisor, you know, “Why does he do that?” And he told me – now, this I got from him; I haven’t seen it written down – that he was, well, should I say castrated as a young baby because they wanted him to be a wagon driver. Now, uh, so, uh, he felt that was the reason he had never grown a beard himself. He had a few whiskers around here, but I don’t think he even shaved. And he said it was because he was castrated as a young kid. So, it’s very sad.

JM: It certainly is.

EB: But what can you do about it?

JM: Yeah.

EB: And I think at that stage he was about seventy years old. I think he died at seventy-one or two. And I think I had just gone home, and I had a picture. I was going to stop by there the next time I went down to Tuskegee and get it autographed. But before I got back to that, he was dead.

JM: Yeah. How did you make the, um, how did you make the determination – as you were completing your college years, how did you navigate the choice between the responsibility of perhaps going back to take over the farm or going off for graduate school? Of course, the war would intervene, but also –

EB: Yeah, the war did intervene.

JM: How did you make that, how did you make that choice to – ?

EB: Well, it was kind of made for me with the Army and all of that, because I had already signed up. I think I had gotten a couple of letters from them, that, you know, there are things that you can volunteer for and you won't be drafted. And that was the Tuskegee Army Air Force that they were establishing then. And I was, I think, eighteen when they started after me, and I wrote my mother a long letter that she would have to, uh, approve of me going into this.

And there was another option I had, was to go to Fort Valley [College, now Fort Valley State University, in Georgia] after I finished college. And if I did volunteer there to become an Army officer, they could – I could go there for I think it may have been six months, or it was ninety days. I don't remember what it was, but I could take that. That was another option. And another option was to go someplace in Texas and become a warrant officer, but there was training for that. I could volunteer for that.

So, I wrote my mother and told her those were the options I had, and would she approve of that? She wrote me back a long letter, approving. She says, "I think you know what you want to do and I think you know more about it than I do. But I want to tell you this: that nobody in our family who ever volunteered for the Army came home. They all got killed." Now, I had to stop and think about that because she put down some names.

There was an Uncle Willie. I said, "Mom, I never heard of an Uncle Willie, so he must have been your brother or cousin." "No, he was *my* uncle, my great-uncle. He went to the Alamo out in [45:00] Texas, and he was killed there." I said, "But Uncle Willie – I'm talking about somebody [laughs] who looked like me." She said, "No, he looked more white than he did

black. And he went out there and he was killed there. But he's still your uncle." And then she went –

PB: Do you remember what his last name was?

EB: Obediah.

PB: No.

EB: Who, Willie?

PB: Willie.

EB: Travis. He was killed at the Alamo. You can read that in history books, but they never say that he was black. I don't know that he was either, because there was one of these grandmothers back there was supposedly white. I'm not sure about that, but – and, uh –

PB: Different fathers, maybe.

EB: Different fathers, yeah.

JM: Yeah. So, were you – in the end, um, what was your decision about whether or not to join the segregated Armed Forces as a volunteer?

EB: Well, I never wanted to go to prison.

JM: Yeah.

EB: And that's what – I had had a couple of people who had gone that route, going to prison. And I says, "Gee, you know –"

JM: This was after you were drafted?

EB: No, before I was drafted.

PB: Conscientious objectors went to prison.

EB: Yeah, went to prison.

JM: Oh, I see.

EB: The only ones I knew went to prison, and I didn't want to go to prison. So, I went to my draft board in Martinsville and – you know they had the Martinsville Seven there in Martinsville. I was away at that time. I was probably at the University of Massachusetts. Anyway –

PB: No, you're getting your time mixed up here, because the draft was before you went to Massachusetts –

EB: Yeah.

PB: Before you went in the Army.

EB: Yeah.

PB: But you'll get to that later –

EB: Yeah, okay.

PB: The Martinsville Seven.

EB: Well, I'm not going to get into that. The only thing I'm saying is that one of members of the Draft Board was Whittle [Kennon C. Whittle, judge in the Martinsville Seven case] –

JM: Ohhh.

EB: And Whittle was –

PB: The judge.

JM: Ohhh.

EB: Was on the Draft Board.

PB: Oh, the Draft Board.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

EB: And there was a couple of people that lived around that was running a dairy farm. So, I was telling them that, you know, I've already kind of, you know, talked with a man that his son is going away to the Army, and I could buy his ten cows and I could go into a dairy business myself. And, uh, he and I guess the whole group there says, "Well, you know, we're having such a poor turnout of blacks who are failing the physical, and so, uh, you're in good shape, so we want to draft you."

I said [laughs], "You want to draft *me* because somebody else failed?" I said, "You have more to do with that *I* do. You know, they work for you. Some of these people that got a draft – got a deferment work for you." Two members, Bradshaw and the other one, I knew, and I told them so. I said, "I don't have anybody that works for you. I've never worked for anybody that my grandfathers or my father worked for." So, I just told them that. They just looked at each other. They never answered me. [Laughs]

JM: After, um, after this experience with the Draft Board, ultimately you would go, I think, into the Quartermaster Corps.

EB: Yeah, I went to the Quartermaster Corps. And in there I ran in – I don't know – I guess at Camp Lee I went to a special outfit at Camp Lee after I finished my – whatever course that they taught you there. There was two courses, one being a soldier and the other one, uh, about the Quartermaster Corps. I took both of those and I made very high grades in all of that.

And, uh, they send me, when I finish, to Company E, which was essentially the company that most of the people there were controlled by, let me see, uh, Colonel Snowden, who was black. He was the highest-ranking black officer [50:00] at Camp Lee. So, I went to work for him. And I was called up several times – I don't know why – that they had a new job for me.

And I – once I went to a meeting, I guess there was a thousand people there. They were all white.

PB: I remember this story. [Laughs]

EB: And I walked up to the front and took a seat. And there was a young woman there, I guess from Petersburg [Virginia]. She walked over and says would I go and sit in the back seat. So, I just sat there. I says, “If you don’t want me here, why don’t you just tell me to go outside? You’re putting me in the *back*?”

And she looked at me [laughs], and I walked on outside. And ten minutes later, a young officer, who probably was white – he *was* white and older than me – came out and got me. But they never told me what they, why I was called up there. It was all white, nothing. I saw no blacks, nothing.

JB: Can we pause?

JM: Let’s pause for just a second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we’re back.

JM: Okay, we’re back on. Um, any memories in particular – I’m sure many do – but are there memories that you would like to share concerning your military service and kind of the – I’m thinking of the – I’m thinking of the, um, you know, experience of – as was so commonly reported by black servicemen who served in the Second World War, there was this profound irony of fighting, quote, “on behalf of freedom,” in you know, across the Atlantic Ocean and then you come back to return to life in a sharply segregated society.

EB: Yeah.

JM: I'm just wondering if there are, if the experience of fighting in a segregated Armed Forces altered, adjusted, shifted your perspectives about race relations in the United States, or were they –?

EB: Well, I just stayed at Camp Lee, and I stayed in Company E.

JM: Yeah.

EB: And most of the people there were professors. Some of them were college presidents. Some of them were – all kinds of professional people. That's mostly who I was around. And I used to go in to work there and I guess I found out more about this company when I met a fellow who was rooming with me at the time named Robert Ming, M-I-N-G.

JM: The attorney?

EB: Yeah, he was an attorney and he was, uh, I think argued a case before the Supreme Court.

JM: Yeah.

EB: And he went to A.P. Hill [Training Ground]. We had to go up there every, I think maybe about every six months I would have to go, and sometimes we would go there together, Ming. And, at the last time, there was a big stir in France about some soldiers getting extreme punishment for this or that or the other. And they gave Robert Ming a captain, or maybe they gave him a colonel or something, and he was shipped to Europe to help rectify some of this mistreatment that blacks were complaining about there in France.

So, uh, he asked me, he says, "You never come down." Everybody there wants to be known, and they want to be known by the officers. There was a captain, there was a first lieutenant, a second lieutenant, and maybe, I think, somebody else there that I knew. But I never

went down to talk with any of them. The only thing that I did was just report for my work, and do it, and go home, go back to my room. [Laughs]

JM: Yeah.

EB: So, they seemed to have liked that. But he told me, Ming did, that everybody is around trying to build themselves up. So, there was a second, a first, a second lieutenant there. He didn't like me at all. And I never had much to say to him, and he didn't have much to say to me. So, one day I ended up at A.P. Hill with him in charge, and he told me when I got back to the Company, he was going to [55:00] have me – I was a sergeant then – he was going to make me a private again.

I says, "*What?* For what?" He said, "You are not doing all the things I'm telling you to do." I said, "Well, I tell you, and I haven't broken any rules, as far as I know." So, he went back and told the colonel that, and the colonel just – I was told – just laughed and says, "You must have provoked him some way [laughing] if he said anything to you, because he never said anything to me."

JM: Um, after the war, what was the, um – what drove your decision to apply to the University of Massachusetts? How did you reach that –?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: Okay, we're back.

EB: Well, as far as I could see – I came out of the Army. I got a job teaching agriculture in Henry County and I was liking that job reasonably well. You know, you've got a car. You've got about ninety dollars a month, and most people around were making sixty or seventy a month.

I got a little more money than they did, I worked twelve months in the year, and it was kind of interesting.

But after two years and there were more people coming home from the Army, and, uh, there was, uh – part of the county extended down towards Axton, Virginia. It's the road going to Danville. [Highway] 58 went right through Axton, Virginia. And [pause], and there were some big plantations down there, and there was a couple of bankers who were establishing, uh – they were establishing some kind of a program for blacks returning from the Army that they could study agriculture and go to school on their plantation, and I was supposed to be the teacher.

He said the superintendent had approved of that, but *I* had never approved of it. And the only thing I could see that this would work out for them – they were going to get seventy-five dollars a month, and these farms were going to get some of this government money to pay for this school that they were going to have on the plantation. So, I was supposed to be in charge of that.

So, I just told them one day that I could never be a person that's training somebody to be a sharecropper. And that's the only thing – after three years, this program was going to run out. And what were they going to do? And they would be on the farmer's land, in his house, with three or four kids probably, maybe two, maybe just one, maybe none, but anyway, they would be stuck on that plantation for the rest of their lives. I told them I just couldn't do that. I told two of them, two bankers, and they owned huge plantations, probably thousands of acres of land, lots of tobacco. And all the farmers I saw on there were black.

JM: Right, right, yeah.

PB: It's interesting. When we went with Julian Bond on the "In the Footsteps of the Civil Rights Movement" tour, we met a young white professor from a school – he was from a college in the South, wasn't he?

EB: Mississippi.

PB: From Mississippi. And he knew about that program! Emmett had never known anybody else who –

EB: I never knew anybody else who –

PB: Knew anything about that program.

JM: Interesting, interesting.

PB: But he was right! [Laughs]

JM: Yes, indeed. Yes, indeed. Yeah. Mrs. Bassett, let me ask you. Um, after you met and married in, in, uh, 1950, you both would move, of course, together to Columbus, Ohio, for – as you pursued your graduate work. And, uh, I'm interested in the experiences of, uh – you had in Columbus and you would continue your efforts in civil rights. But also, let me ask you, and maybe as you describe some of that time there, I wonder, too, if, um, any early stirrings of kind of considerations of women's status and issues played in your mind, if that had been touched up against your life at that point at all.

PB: Well, that really came out [1:00:00] in retrospect, I guess. Um, but we first went to New York and were there for a couple of years. And, uh, I had wanted to go to law school, but that didn't work out, because by then, I guess I'd been kind of sidetracked because of Emmett, but also there was no money for me to go to graduate school. So, I got a job with the New York Public Library as an intern, and it was a wonderful program. It was an excellent program. And –

but this was putting me into women's work: library, nursing, schoolteacher. Um, but I must say that it wasn't, uh, freighted with a lot of regret –

JM: No, no.

PB: Because – yeah, at that point.

JB: May I ask one question?

JM: Please, yeah.

JB: Back in Amherst, was Wally Nelson and Juanita Nelson – were Wally and Juanita Nelson in Amherst when you were there?

PB: Wally and Anita Nelson?

JB: Never mind then. They must have come later.

PB: Did you know them?

EB: I don't recognize his name. Wally? Wally?

PB: Nelson. Wally Nelson and Anita Nelson.

EB: No.

JB: They must have come later.

PB: Yeah.

JB: Yeah.

PB: Okay. So, uh, going – uh, the women's movement didn't, uh – I mean, it was very clear to me that there were these patterns that you were supposed to follow. And, uh, of course, I was already not following [laughs] one of the big ones. So, um, when we got to Columbus, um, I went to work in the library there and I found out through a neighbor that I could get a job at General Motors and make much, much more money. And so I did. And that was, of course, women's work also, although I was on the production line, um, that was all women in those

positions. The skilled tradesmen were men and predominantly, almost exclusively, white. But, um, there were, um, there were black women working on the production line.

But I'll just tell you a small story about that. When I first went, uh, to be interviewed for the job, to apply for the General Motors job, I sat next to some people in the waiting room. And a black woman, uh, when I asked her did she know anything about buses – I don't know how I got there, but anyway –

EB: I think I might have taken you, honey.

PB: Did we – we didn't have a car.

EB: Oh, yeah.

PB: Maybe you borrowed one.

EB: Maybe I did.

PB: But anyway, she said, "Well, I'll take you into town, and then you can get a bus up to the college, university." So, I did, and I got to be friends with her. Um, but before that happened, before we really became friends, um, I went back to work. And I went into the washroom, and there was this black woman. And she looked very much like the woman that I had been helped out by, uh, but she looked different because she had a wig on. And that always threw me when people [laughs], you know, would change wigs and stuff like that.

So, anyway, I thought, "Well, if I don't speak to her, she'll say, 'Oh, these white women, they're all the same and they,' you know. And if I do speak to her, she'll think that I think that all black women look the same!" [Laughter] I don't really – but I said, "Oh, the heck with that. I'm going to say, 'Hi.'" And I said, 'Hi,'" and, you know, we had a nice friendship after that.

But she was on probation for ninety days before she could get a job on the production line. And so, she worked in the washroom during that period. And she had worked in Curtiss-

Wright *factory* during World War II. She had real factory experience. I had worked a couple of months in a, uh, Sp – Sperry Gyroscope factory in Plainfield, grinding lenses, so I had no – you know, that wasn't anything much.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

PB: But she was experienced [1:05:00], and this was the way they played. Well, I became active in the union after that, because I said, "That's got to stop." Not that it stopped, but – you know.

JM: Yeah. And you would have – you would, um, soon effectively be in the role of the shop steward, as I understand it.

PB: Yes, I was. And that was very unusual. Years later, uh, the daughter of a friend of mine who is active in the UAW [United Auto Workers], said, "There weren't any women stewards," and I said, "Oh, yes, there were!" [Laughter] "And I was it!"

EB: Yeah! [Laughter]

PB: But that was in that plant. I don't know what went on everywhere else.

JM: It sounds as if, and you can tell me if this is correct or not, it sounds as if experiences like that would have confirmed your sense of –

PB: Justice – *in*justice. [Laughs]

JM: Rather than altered it tremendously, but rather sort of confirmed and deepened it maybe?

PB: They confirmed it and they also gave me the sense that I could do something about it. And that's really been the guiding light – that you don't just sit back and let it happen, even though I must say [laughs] I don't think we've gotten very far, but I still – I have hope.

JM: Right, right. And you were in Columbus in 1954.

PB: Yes, we were.

EB: Yeah.

JM: When the *Brown* decision came down.

PB: When what?

JM: When the *Brown* decision came down –

PB: *Brown* decision came down.

JM: In May, of course.

EB: Yeah.

JM: And then, of course, the late summer of '55 is the horrible experience with the Till murder.

PB: Yeah.

EB: Yeah.

JM: And I know, uh, Dr. Bassett, that you, um, moved out – you, uh, made an effort to, uh, raise money for Emmett Till's mother.

EB: Yeah. Yeah, we had a big meeting at one of the Baptist churches. I think we raised three thousand dollars. And there were some people who felt we shouldn't have sent it all to her, because she was – well, I don't know. They just felt that she was just going to not use it wisely is all I could see. But I didn't see anything wrong with giving it to her.

JM: Yeah.

EB: She had gone through enough.

JM: Yeah.

PB: And you also went out in the park and collected money there.

EB: Yeah.

PB: Yeah.

EB: We collected money down at the, at the state capitol. That's where those pictures were taken.

PB: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah, you're alluding to there was an article, coverage of your effort to raise that money in *The Crisis*, the NAACP publication.

PB: Yeah.

EB: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JM: Did your effort in a public context like that in Columbus in the mid '50s – did that cause you any problems inside your academic program?

EB: Ha! I guess so. I guess so, because, uh, you know, when I was getting ready to – I guess I was about ready to graduate, and, uh, I was, uh, uh, teaching. They decided that I hadn't had any teaching experience since I had been at Ohio State and they wanted to give me some, because they had just gotten a report that most students who do well on their qualifying exam have had some teaching experience, because you learn things and learn it well when you teach it. So, they decided I should teach a course.

So, I taught a course and, uh, after I finished teaching this course, uh, two of the students who took this course under me and another fellow – I think his name was Kenneth Fox, but it doesn't mean too much. I don't think he's still alive. I think he died. And he was a very talented and a very honest person. And I think he had gone to Uppsala [Sweden], because I went to Uppsala for a year, and I think he's the one that encouraged me to go there, too. So, I thought he was a very nice fellow.

But the thing that bothered me – since I had these two students and I was going to Chicago – I had gone there several times, and every place who wanted me sent me a ticket to fly up, kept me in the best hotel, the Palmer House or the [1:10:00] whatever, the Hilton House or whatever it was, at those places for two weeks to look for jobs [laughs] in Chicago. And they all said if they hired me, the whole top would go off of that building. That's what they said. The man at, uh, let me see, what was that? Uh, the name of the company, it was – do you remember?

PB: ReaLemon?

EB: No, no. [Laughs] ReaLemon offered me a job.

PB: Oh, no. No, they don't –

EB: That was, uh –

PB: Uh, oh.

JM: We'll make a note of it later, because I know it's –

EB: Yeah, I can pick that up. I have it written down in there. It's something like –

PB: Beatrice Foods!

EB: Beatrice Foods [Corp.], yeah. That's what the man told me, that he would give anything to hire me, but he had hired a Chinese technician and he almost lost his job off of that. Everything there was white. It was in the heart of the black community.

PB: These were all dairy – uh, food-related, dairy-related technology jobs.

EB: Yeah.

JM: Your Ph.D. made you the, as far as you are aware, the first African American, the first person of African descent, to take a Ph.D. in dairy science, perhaps, ever.

EB: Yeah.

JM: Yeah.

EB: Yeah. As far as I know, because at Tuskegee, the man had an M.S. He got it from Wisconsin, I think.

JM: Yeah.

EB: And most other places – and I did get a lot of letters from a lot of colleges, one college, I guess, maybe two, Florida and Georgia. They wanted us to come right away.

[Laughter]

JM: To come and teach?

EB: Yeah. [Laughter]

JM: Not knowing that you were African American?

EB: Yeah.

PB: No, no, these were African American schools.

JM: Oh, I see, okay, yes.

PB: But, of course, we couldn't, because of miscegenation laws.

JM: Yes.

EB: Yeah.

JM: Oh, so, you very consciously would not make – you would not have moved to the South in those years?

EB: No.

PB: Well, I don't think he –

JM: Yes.

PB: Would have had the job.

JM: Right.

PB: These were state universities.

JM: Right. They still had all of those laws.

EB: I think they were –

JM: Yeah.

PB: This was before the *Loving vs. Virginia* –

JM: *v. Virginia*, yeah.

PB: 1967.

JM: Yeah, yeah, of course.

PB: So, we had seventeen years of being illegal in some places. [Laughter]

JM: Sure, exactly.

PB: Not that we thought about it much, except in Virginia.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

PB: That was a difficulty.

JM: Yeah.

PB: Yeah.

JM: So, you, um, you took a job in New York?

EB: Yeah, I worked for Sheffield Farm. That was a big dairy –

PB: That was –

EB: Huh?

PB: No, this was after Columbus. You had gone to Sheffield Farm after Massachusetts.

EB: Oh, I can't – yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, that was after Massachusetts, yeah, I took a job there. And, uh –

JM: At Columbia University.

EB: At Columbia University. Yes, I went there, and they had some jobs in the Department of Microbiology. It was changing over, and they wanted people with a chemistry background. And I had thought about this when I was going to Ohio State. If I couldn't get a job in dairy technology, I could get one in organic chemistry. And I took all the organic chemistry courses, and they asked me would I like to take a course in advanced physical chemistry, and I could get a Ph.D. in chemistry. But I had made As in all these advanced courses and physics, but I just thought that in advanced, uh, physical chem I would need a little more math and I didn't want to go take another math course. I had had calculus, [laughs] but that was enough.

We had had very poor training in mathematics in high school, elementary school. We didn't have anything at all. We didn't have people who could teach you square roots. And I remember learning that from a book that one of the people that we were trading with, her son died, and she told me I could have all of his books. And I saw that white students in Virginia had physics. They had, uh, uh, math, different math, calculus, some calculus, in high school. But I didn't have any of that.

JM: Yeah. Let's pause [1:15:00] for just one sec here.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: We are back after a break for lunch. Thank you for a lovely lunch. It was, um, delightful. And, um, you have very kindly but firmly instructed me to say Priscilla and Emmett, so with your permission, I will do that as we move through the second half of our interview. Um, Priscilla, if you would, can you talk a little bit about some of the – we're going to turn back to Columbus for a bit and, um – there were a number of ramifications, I guess, that followed

from your sort of becoming identified as a forceful advocate in the union context and perhaps otherwise, yeah.

PB: Well, yes. I was a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which was founded by Jane Addams in World War I, and, um, it was a very congenial group of women. There were maybe some men, but not in Columbus, but in New York there were. But, um, that got Emmett into a little trouble, because, uh, when he was being considered for a position at Ohio State, which he – you hadn't applied for. They were just looking into it, right?

EB: Yeah, looking into it. And the department had agreed that they would give me this assistant professor job.

PB: Yeah.

EB: At Columbia – at Ohio State.

PB: So, uh, anyway, you were asked to visit with the FBI?

EB: Yeah, he said –

PB: Because of, uh, “your wife.”

EB: I mean, I'll tell you, and maybe this is wrong. Maybe I forgot. He told me that –

PB: This is the head of the department.

EB: Head of the department.

PB: Dr. [Ira] Gould, yeah.

EB: Dr. Gould. And he came to me and said that, uh, they weren't concerned about me, but they were concerned about some of your friends that had come to our house. And the only thing I knew was there was a woman who was a friend of Priscilla's, to some extent, I don't know how much, but she had been to our house. And I was down at, uh, Ohio State's, uh, the

University Hospital, and I met her with her husband, and she introduced me to her husband. He was a doctor there in some position at the Medical School.

PB: Well, I guess that was, um –

EB: I don't know.

PB: Meer.

EB: Yeah. I guess.

PB: I don't know.

EB: But, anyway, I couldn't tell him the names –

PB: We never did figure out who it was, so don't use that name, because I don't know that that would be true.

EB: I don't either.

PB: But, uh, anyway, she, um – I mean, I didn't really know what they were talking about.

EB: Well, I told him that [clears throat] I was not – I didn't feel good – I wouldn't go and talk with the FBI or CIA of whatever they were.

PB: [Laughs] FBI.

EB: I didn't know which it was, but I told him that I wouldn't want to talk with either one of them. So, uh, that was it. And he said, "Well, you know, the University has that as a policy now, that we have just been censored by the Association of University Professors." And I told him that I belonged to that organization and I wouldn't want to go and talk with any of that group. And he says, "Well, you can't get the job." I said, "I don't want that job [laughs] if that's what I have to do."

PB: Yeah. But on a personal level, we had trouble swimming with the kids.

EB: Yeah.

PB: Um, the swimming pools were closed, and so we used to go to this beautiful lake, called Lake Hope, which we really enjoyed going to. That was great.

EB: Yeah.

PB: So, when we went out to Columbus to a family reunion, not having known there was any family in Columbus, um, we went to Lake Hope with our granddaughter, and we had a fun time.

JM: Would there be other instances when you would sort of – the episode you just recounted I'm presuming it was sort of a Red Scare kind of –

PB: Yes, that's what it was.

JM: Yeah. Um, were there other instances, then, throughout the remainder of the '50s, early '60s, when the same kinds of pressures were brought to bear on you, just sort of out of the Cold War – I mean, Red Scare kind of context?

PB: Out of that? You mean racial only?

JM: No, sorry.

PB: Oh.

JM: Were there other instances where some of the [1:20:00], um – where you encountered more concerns about you that came sort of focused through the lens of the Red Scare rather than through a racial lens?

PB: Well, I also had a visit from the FBI.

JM: Oh.

PB: And I told them I was sorry. I was hanging clothes out in the, [laughs] in the yard where we lived. I said I really wasn't available for a talk, so that was the end of that. But, um, as far as jobs were concerned, it never was a problem for me.

EB: No.

PB: And, um – not in Columbus or in New York.

JM: Yeah. Dr. Bassett, when you came, um, to New York ultimately with the Columbia University position –

EB: Yeah.

JM: I'd love to have you just sketch in general terms some of your, uh, scholarly and academic work, because you would obviously have a long career as a professor and researcher. And, um, I know our interview is not going to be about the science and all of that work, but I'd love to have just a basic description of all that work.

EB: Yeah, well, at Columbia, now, they gave me a salary. I guess it came off a grant. And the only way that they could pay me is if we brought in enough money in grants to pay for my salary, and the man that I was working with, who was at that time, I think, assistant professor, and he had to pay a good portion of his salary, and the technician we had to pay for. And we had to pay – if they wanted to take a course that came out of our grants, too. So, we had to have grants.

So, the idea was – I think it was the first year I was there, or maybe it was the second. I don't remember precisely. We had made about five publications, big publications, on the biosynthesis of patulin. We were also looking at different amino acids and how the, uh – the two amino acids that were – had a benzene ring, we were wondering how they formed, so we looked into that and we did publish a little note about it. But the man that I worked with – I wanted to

publish the whole thing and probably do some more work. He says, “I don’t – I’ve spent all the money, so I can’t go back.”

But I found out later that some of the people at Rockefeller Institute were also working on this. And he said, “They’re going to read this. And if they – if you write this paper [laughs] like you’re going to write it,” he says, “it’ll never get published, because that is their field.” And they were just going to turn us down. I didn’t know all of that politics was into that type of work, so I just went along with him, “Okay, you just write in what you think is safe, and we’ll publish that.”

So, the – if you want to know what that was, you know, we had, um – no. No, what is it? Gosh, I forget about all these amino acids, and how many times do I know them? But the two that are aromatics is tyrosine and phenylalanine. Now, we wanted to find out were they synthesized like some more benzene rings were being synthesized by this fungus we were working with. And I found that tyrosine and phenylalanine probably came from the same, uh, oh, what you want to call that, uh, fungus – came from the same precursor, I guess I should call it.

JM: Yeah.

EB: Came from the same precursor. And these people had it down that you had phenylalanine that was formed in – uh, tyrosine was formed from phenylalanine. Well, I put some radioactive material in some of the synthesis that we were doing and I found out that more [1:25:00], uh, of the – that tyrosine had more of the radioactive carbons in it than phenylalanine, so it couldn’t be coming from phenylalanine. But he decided that we didn’t want to put that. We’d put it in as a kind of a temporary note, that we *noted* that.

And so, a few weeks later, I think it was two people who had gotten the – not the Nobel Prize. I don't know what they had, but anyway, they were – had gotten some, a lot of rewards for what they had done. Maybe they got the – some kind of a prize. But he said they would never approve of the – so we published it his way, and that got published. So, that year we published five different papers, and enough to get us a lot of grant money the next year.

JM: I see.

EB: So, that we worked against, but you weren't completely free to publish anything you wanted to publish. And, um, I think three or four months later, they republished their work. And they published it –

JM: Is that right?

EB: And said that they came from a common precursor, but they didn't come at the same sequence. Both of them came at different points in the development of the organism. So, we wanted to say that, too, but he wouldn't put it in.

JM: Interesting, very interesting.

EB: And he was putting most of the money into the research I was doing, because at that time I was just, uh –

PB: Maybe you were a post-doc at that time.

EB: Just a post-doc at that time.

JM: Yeah. Did those, uh – was that publishing question, uh – did that reflect – that was straightforward academic politics, not racial politics? Is that correct, or no? You don't know?

EB: I think it's academic.

JM: Okay.

EB: Yeah. I think it's that.

JM: These other folks you were working with at Columbia were white?

EB: Yeah. Yeah, they were white. And this group down at, um, at, um – um, I'm trying to think –

PB: Rockefeller, was it?

EB: Rockefeller Institute. They had much more money than we did, and they had a lot of post-docs and they had a lot of people who had worked there for a long time with those people at, uh, at, uh Rockefeller, so they kind of had a corner on that. And they would look at us as putting in, so what they would probably say to us, that, you know, "You haven't done enough research on this to make that statement." So, they went back and there were three different groups. I don't – can't recall what all three of them were. But they agreed that they both would say that they had redone the work and they published again of how it worked, and it was the same thing that *I* wanted to publish.

JM: Yes.

EB: I never got a chance.

JM: Exactly. Right. How did your, um, how did your, uh, lives as activists on the question of racial equality, how did those – how did that unfold after you settled in New York in the mid 1950s? Because the, uh – I mean, Little Rock is '57. Well, Montgomery is the year before that, Little Rock is '57, Greensboro kicks off this sort of major, wide-open, uh, demonstration phase of the movement. What was the pattern of your involvement across those years? Priscilla, do you want to describe that?

PB: Well, um, let's see. Our daughter, uh, was going to public school. This was just in our personal lives. And, um, she was in kindergarten, and the school – it was a very large class with two teachers. And we had the opportunity to send, uh, her to private school, to an Ethical

Culture school, the Fieldston School, which was in a rural part, [laughs] not so rural, but, you know, a less-urban section of New York City – Riverdale, New York, and a lot of – a nice campus and good teachers and so forth.

Um, [1:30:00] now, I was not in favor of leaving the public school system. But I also knew how Emmett felt, having gone to a one-room, segregated school where the teachers rarely finished the school year, and he had only one teacher that he really connected with in his whole life there. So, I would certainly defer.

And I was convinced of that when I met Mae Mallory, who was a, um, colleague of Robert Williams in North Carolina, right? Mae Mallory was a real activist.

EB: Yeah.

PB: And, uh, I happened to be sitting with her at lunch at a meeting on the New York City public school system, and I told her my dilemma. And she said, “No dilemma. You just send your child where that child will get the best education.” And she said, “You can keep on fighting for what you believe in. It doesn’t mean you won’t.” And so, that convinced me that I would defer [laughs] to Emmett. And so, we did, with our three kids.

But Emmett, um, I mean, we – I think you more than I actually got involved in that business with the integration of the middle schools in Washington Heights.

EB: Yeah. I forgot all about that.

PB: And there was, uh, there was also a Freedom School that we had, um, where the children went in a Methodist Church in Riverdale or Kingsbridge.

EB: Kingsbridge.

PB: Yeah. And then when there was a big Brownsville issue, Ocean Hill-Brownsville, uh, we tried to keep the local school open, uh, not with the – not with the regular teachers, but

the teachers who were willing, you know, to support community-based, uh, school boards.

Yeah. So that, you know, even though I was a mother in a private school, I was still involved.

EB: Yeah.

PB: And Emmett also. I mean, I think you were on the front page of the daily news for picketing somewhere.

EB: Yeah.

PB: I know we never had that [1:32:33] [laughs].

EB: They filled my car tank up with sugar.

PB: And, yes! They filled our car tank up with sugar, and we had to have that pumped out.

EB: Washed out. [Laughs]

PB: Uh, very angry people. This was in Washington Heights, uh, about these middle schools.

EB: We were trying – they had three junior high schools, and we were trying to get them to integrate and each one of them takes so many whites, so many blacks, get a kind of balance.

PB: And they were in a good geographic area where they were fairly close together.

EB: Yeah.

PB: Nobody would have to travel very long distances.

EB: Travel far. Some of the blacks would go here, some go here, and some would go in the home district, and white students would come into that, too. And we thought we had worked it out, but we came back and we found out that everybody who was supporting us had gotten fired or something.

PB: Oh, it was –

EB: The principals.

PB: Yeah, the principals.

JM: Is that right? They fired the principals?

PB: Yeah.

EB: Yeah.

PB: So, it was bad times.

EB: Yeah.

JM: So, this would have been what years, year or years?

EB: Well, when did Mitzi start to Fieldston, because they used to come and tell me,
“You don’t send your kids there?”

PB: Yes, we did get that.

EB: Yeah.

PB: Well, we were – were we living in, uh, Dyckman Houses then?

EB: We were living in – we were living in –

PB: I think we were living in – it would be in the early ’60s.

JM: Yeah, early ’60s.

EB: Early ’60s.

PB: Yeah, we were living in the co-op.

EB: The co-op at that time, yeah.

JM: Would your children ever come back into the New York City public schools, or no?

PB: No.

JM: No, okay.

PB: No, they went all the way through.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, I know, Dr. Bassett, that you had a very interesting engagement with the planning for the march in Washington.

EB: Yeah, but, uh, I guess I was kind of recruited by, uh, what's his name?

JM: Bayard Rustin?

EB: No.

PB: No, Bob, our neighbor. He was a neighbor and friend, Bob Lewis.

EB: Bob Lewis.

PB: But who recruited him?

EB: Well, I think that, uh, [1:35:00] he probably was recruited by, uh, Sid, uh –

PB: Sid?

EB: Oh, the one that supported Martin Luther King. He used to come up every week.

PB: You mean Stan Levison?

EB: Stan Levison!

PB: Stan Levison.

EB: Yeah, I keep thinking Sid.

PB: Okay, yes.

EB: Stan, Stan.

PB: Who had been in In Friendship, this was.

EB: In Friendship, yeah.

PB: In Friendship.

EB: Yeah. I was in that. And when I went into that, Bayard Rustin had left this group and had gone to Africa to try to stop the French bombing. I never saw him at a meeting.

PB: Testing.

EB: Testing. And when he came back to the country, we had a meeting at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. And that's when they, uh, up – we turned it back over to A. Philip Randolph, and he had all the people he had chosen to work with, I guess, the NAACP and so forth, all the churches. We turned all of that over to him.

PB: But you had recruited a lot of buses. I remember there was a threshold that he wanted before he would commit himself, right?

EB: Well, we figured we had enough for a hundred thousand people.

PB: Yeah.

EB: Yeah. And I think they felt that was –

PB: That was In Friendship. I mean, Emmett was a part of that.

EB: Yeah, just a part of that.

JM: And you went to Washington?

EB: Yeah.

PB: Yes, we did go.

EB: Yeah.

JM: Can you share your –?

PB: And we had been to the Prayer Pilgrimage also, and a lot of people don't remember that, but that was very moving.

JM: Can you describe the Prayer Pilgrimage?

PB: Yes, that was very moving.

JM: Can you describe that, that experience?

PB: Well, [laughs] we had the – our two children with us at that.

EB: Yeah.

PB: Did we drive down there?

EB: I think so, and I think Buzzy went – was that the one that –?

PB: No.

EB: No, not Buzzy.

PB: No, I don't think so. Um, you know, I get a little – it was by the Reflecting Pool, and Dr. King – it was the first time that I had ever heard him speak. And that was very moving, and that's what I remember. Um, and a friend –

EB: Now, that was when you went down from Columbus.

PB: No, no. This was – we were living in Brownsville.

EB: Brownsville.

PB: In Brooklyn. Yeah, when we came back we had a hard time finding an apartment in New York City. So, this was what? 1956? Right after the bus boycott, was this real debut, so to speak, on public – yeah.

JM: Was that the instance where the landlord changed your locks?

PB: Oh, that happened when we – before, just before we were married. It happened the week before we were married, I think. We had just moved in, um, not ourselves, but we had moved in some blankets and things.

EB: Yeah.

PB: I don't know what we thought we were going to sleep on.

EB: Well, we had – were going to bring some more things.

PB: Yeah, we had some other things that we were going to bring.

EB: But we just put enough in there to claim the apartment.

PB: Yeah. And when we went back, yeah, [laughs] sure enough –

EB: That door was locked.

PB: I went back, yeah.

EB: You went back. The door was locked. I went there. It was locked. The key didn't work. [Laughter]

PB: [Laughs] That was quite a shock.

EB: A shock. I went over and talked to the man, and he says, "Well, I want to give you your –" the barber! He says, "I want to give you your money back." I said, "But, no, that's not what we want. We want the apartment." And he said, "Well, I was told not to give it to you."

PB: Yeah, the key. We did have some housing things, but to finish up on, um, the education, both of us tried to blend our work lives with our activism. And I was, uh, I participated in the Council on Interracial Books for Children, which encouraged publishers to publish books by African American, or as we used the word "black" then – I still do – but African American, uh, authors and illustrators, and also popularized the books. And, um, that was, you know, a very good way to – because I was a children's librarian and –

JM: Well, that would be a theme through all your professional, uh, work in, um, as a librarian, that [crosstalk at 1:39:52] consistently.

PB: Yes, we were all developing curriculum, book collection, everything. Yes.

JM: Yeah, absolutely.

PB: I really was very key. [1:40:00]

JM: And I believe also related to the theme of your master's thesis when you got your MLS [Master's Degree in Library Science].

PB: Of what?

JM: Also related to your master's thesis theme when you got your MLS.

PB: Oh, yes, my master's. Yes, yes. Yeah, I was urged to publish it, but, um, at the time, I didn't think it was appropriate for me, as a white woman, to publish it, that, you know, I was having a certain advantage in getting that published – that “white skin privilege” [laughs] – and that I really didn't think that was appropriate. And so, I don't know that anybody has ever published anything.

But I did go back, and many of the books are out of print. And I'm sad about that, because the whole theme of that was, uh, the rejection of a child's first language when he or she goes into the – formal education has a very alienating effect.

JM: Absolutely. And let me say, just for the record, that your Queens College 1977 master's thesis title was “The Black Idiom: Libraries and Children's Books,” yeah.

PB: How'd you find *that* out?

JM: Well, in this instance, quite easily. You sent me the CV. [Laughter]

PB: Oh, I put it on there. Oh, okay! Oh, I think I was applying for a job, which I really didn't want, but they wanted me to apply for that, too, you know. Queens College really, um, they try to do right by me. [Laughs]

EB: Yeah.

JM: Are there other parts of your long pattern of engagement with progressive struggle that are related? Because, of course, the Vietnam War would become a focus of your activism in the late, later in the '60s, but staying, say, in the front half of the '60s, were there other things that stand out about the community of progressive activism in New York and your connections to that community?

PB: The early '60s?

JM: Or the mid '60s?

PB: I guess I reconnected with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. And how I ever saved it, I don't know, [laughs] but I gave a talk on, uh, war toys, I remember. So, that was certainly a part of, uh –

JM: Children's toys?

PB: It became very important to me.

JM: I'm sorry. You meant children's toys, war toys?

PB: Yes, war toys. Yeah, children's war toys.

JM: Yeah, right.

PB: Yeah. Um, what else was happening in the early '60s?

EB: Well, they didn't want us at – what is it? 33 Hillside?

PB: Oh, Fort George Avenue?

EB: Yeah. They didn't want us to give our meetings inside of the –

PB: Oh, that's right! That's one reason that I wanted to leave.

EB: Yeah.

PB: We were in a co-operative, Mitchell-Lama Co-operative. This was a state program that, um, subsidized – it wasn't low income, but it was –

EB: Middle.

PB: Middle-income families, apartments. And, uh, we moved in there, and it was a wonderful place. In advance to moving, we had meetings, and there was a co-operative board, and we designed the playground that we wanted to have, you know, using more modern equipment and so forth. And we were there and, uh, we did have some meetings of the Upper Manhattan Committee for Equal Rights.

EB: Yes.

PB: Right? And, uh, the board, of which I was a member, decided that it was just getting to be overwhelming, this whole, uh, situation with the, uh, uh, lack of change in the South, that they really wanted to take a step back. And it wasn't just the South – the North, too, because we were involved with the public schools –

EB: Yeah

PB: You and I. So, it wasn't just us, because there were several other people in the building who were active with the group.

EB: Yeah.

PB: But they decided by majority vote not to allow the meetings there anymore.

EB: Yeah.

PB: So, at that point, um, I heard about another apartment, and we moved. [Laughter]

JM: Yeah.

PB: We abandoned the struggle! [Laughs]

JM: That would have been about when that you made that move?

PB: That was '61 we moved into the co-op. It was, um –

EB: That would be about '64 or '65.

PB: Yeah, it was about '64, I think, before we went to Sweden. [1:45:00]

EB: Yeah.

JM: Yeah. Did you, in these years in New York, did you ever, um, have occasion to hear Malcolm X?

EB: Oh, I used to go to hear him all the time.

JM: Did you? Yeah?

EB: Yeah. I went with –

PB: Yeah, and I met him on the sidewalk once? [Laughs]

EB: I went –

PB: With, um, who was that?

EB: Philip.

PB: Who wrote *Poverty in America*?

EB: Yeah, he was on the board of –

PB: Well, anyway, it'll come to me. You know – Michael Harrington!

JM: Harrington, yeah.

PB: Harrington, yeah. I was talking with Michael Harrington and Malcolm X, and we got into a three-way conversation.

EB: Yeah.

JM: What do you remember about the occasions of going to hear Malcolm X speak?

EB: Did you – you never went.

PB: I didn't, no.

EB: I went three or four times. And I guess [laughs] after he had broke [nb: that is, from the Nation of Islam] and you saw the violence coming, heightening, I didn't go. I guess we went for a walk that morning he got shot.

JM: Ah.

PB: Yeah. We lived not far away.

EB: Yeah.

PB: But we weren't there. We never –

EB: We never went to them when they took on religious, like –

PB: Well, when – I don't remember your going.

EB: I went with, uh, what's Glenda's husband?

PB: Oh! Oh, okay.

EB: Yeah.

PB: Alright.

EB: You knew. You knew we went.

PB: Yes, that's right.

EB: I went to three or four of his speeches in Harlem. I don't know just where they were, but looked like some of them were in the Harlem, uh, Army building.

JM: The Armory?

EB: Yeah.

PB: In the Armory?

EB: Armory, yes.

JM: Yeah. Did you, um – obviously, you would take up activism or roles as activists in relation to the war, and I'm wondering, say, by – we were just alluding to Malcolm X's assassination in – what – February of '65, I guess. And, of course, by '68, the war has really heated up. Bobby Kennedy and Dr. King are killed that summer. And, um, I'm just wondering kind of how you were taking stock of the struggle, if you will, by the late '60s and from the perspective of where you were in your lives.

EB: Well, we – that's when I first went to Columbia, isn't it?

PB: No.

EB: I went to Columbia in –

JM: Were you out in Newark when the Newark Rebellion [July 12-17, 1967] happened?

PB: We were in Sweden.

JM: Ah, you were, that's right.

PB: Um, no, this is – this is – we –

EB: I only stayed at Ortho [Pharmaceuticals] two years.

PB: Yeah, but you went to New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry after the Newark riots, rebellion.

JM: After you came back from Sweden?

PB: Yeah.

JM: Yeah.

EB: Yeah.

PB: But –

JM: I'm interested in – I'm sorry.

PB: But I don't – you didn't go straight there, did you?

EB: No.

PB: No, you went to Ortho Pharmaceutical.

EB: Yeah, I was there for two years.

PB: Yeah, and they built him a lab, and, oh, boy – but he didn't want to stay there.

JM: Was Ortho a part of Johnson & Johnson?

PB: Yeah.

EB: Yeah, it's a part of Johnson & Johnson, and –

JM: I want to ask about Sweden, but please tell me about why – what factors led you not to want to stay at Johnson & Johnson?

EB: Uh, let me see. Well, I guess, let me see – Johnson & Johnson –

PB: Was it testing products, some of that?

EB: Yeah, I was testing.

PB: No, not you. When they tested in other, in poor communities in the world, they tested some of their products. I just vaguely remember this.

EB: I saw a lot of things that I didn't like. You know, they used to buy blood here, buy blood there, and some blood – you knew that they bought blood all over the place. But sometimes they didn't buy it with Johnson & Johnson's name. They bought it through another front group.

JM: Huh.

EB: And you had all of that going on there, and when you compared their salaries with some of the other places, we weren't paid very much. So, when I got the job in New Jersey, and they paid more than Ortho did, everybody was happy I'd left, because they got a big [1:50:00] salary. [Laughter]

PB: But they offered you free tuition for your –

EB: Daughter, yeah.

PB: And other – they gave him a big raise, and he said, “No, I told you I'm not coming back, and I – that's what I mean.” So, that was Emmett!

JM: Wow, yeah. I'd love to hear you, um –

JB: Could we stop for a second?

JM: Okay, let's pause for a minute here.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're on.

JM: Okay, we're back after a break. Um, just while we were off there for a minute, there's an interesting aspect of the recruitment at the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry, I guess, yeah, and their effort to reach out to you because –

EB: Yeah.

JM: As I understand, the College had – notwithstanding that it was in Newark –

PB: Yeah.

EB: Yeah.

JM: Which had recently experienced this tremendous upheaval –

PB: Um-hmm.

EB: Yeah.

JM: Had few African Americans on their entire faculty.

PB: That's right. Yeah.

EB: Yeah, they wanted you, and they wanted you to serve on the Admissions Department, all of these things that didn't help you very much with your research work. [Laughs] I guess that was one of the things that kind of eats at you. It used to be the doctors were on – the black doctors were on that. But they could easily get out. "I've got an emergency." "I have surgery today." And who are they going to call? Me! So, I was covering for probably ten – five or six different people. They never showed up. They called me.

JM: Yeah. I'd love to have you describe your year in Sweden.

EB: Oh, could you do a better job of that? [Laughs]

PB: Oh, well, for the family, it was really pretty exciting, I'd say.

EB: Yeah, I thought so, too.

PB: We went across the ocean in an ocean liner to Norway and then [clears throat] visited a friend from Rockefeller Institute and his wife, who had been Emmett's, uh, technician. And from there, in Trondheim, we went by, uh –

EB: Train.

PB: Train down to Uppsala, and we were – you know, everything just went so nicely.

EB: We had to wait a while to get an apartment.

PB: Huh?

EB: We had to wait a while –

PB: Yes, we had to wait, but that was alright. But the nice thing was, going down, we stopped off in Öre.

EB: Yeah.

PB: And, uh, we didn't read the schedule correctly and there was no place to spend the night, and the stationmaster took us into his house!

EB: Yeah.

PB: Imagine that! [Laughs] So, that was very nice.

EB: Yeah.

PB: Anyway, we found it quite a welcoming environment.

JM: And you worked with Dr. Arne –

EB: Tiselius.

JM: Tiselius?

EB: Yeah. I really didn't work with him. He didn't come [laughs] –

PB: [Laughs] There very often.

EB: To the lab that often.

PB: It was his lab.

EB: But I talked with him a lot. And he had had other professors from Columbia, Dr. Kabat, and they were great friends, so I guess I got all of those recommendations. And so, I got in very easy.

JM: Let's pause for just a sec here.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're on.

JM: Okay. Priscilla, I want to ask about, um – you had mentioned during the break that, um, that Dr. King's speech, um, at Riverside Church really sort of, you know, drew your attention to him in a kind of new, wider sense, I think, as the '60s were moving on. Can you share that?

PB: Well, he really blended all these issues. I mean, there were the racial issues, civil rights. There was the economic – uh, we did go to the People's – well, that was after his death, but we went to the Poor People's March, as well. And the war, and what was it Muhammad Ali said, "No nigger ever – no Vietnamese ever called me nigger."

And I think, uh, you know, that this was just – that war was, on so many levels, wrong. I mean, it was wrong for us to move in to take over for the French after Dien Bien Phu [Vietnam]. And it was wrong for the poverty draft. It was not – it was, [1:55:00] even though it was, uh, everybody draft, the other people who could get out of it did get out of it. And [clears throat], and the economic impact on this country, just as – the same as we're seeing right now. So, we have a poverty draft now, and we have this country shortchanging the needs of its own people.

So, Dr. King, I mean, listening to that speech this spring – I heard it again on the radio, which really made me happy. It was on our Albany station NPR. Um, it just, you know, really

was so deep. And so, he's been called a – what is it – an activist-philosopher, Dr. King. And most philosophers are not thought of as activist, but he certainly was. Some people would maybe not call him a philosopher, but I would.

And I also had great respect for Malcolm X. And, um, we just recently went to the memorial of the author of the new book about him.

JM: Manning Marable.

PB: Manning Marable, yes. He was – he's a family friend, not particularly close to us, but other members of the family.

And [clears throat] so, you know this – any – I know that in his speech, “Grassroots Speech,” you know, he ridiculed the March on Washington and so on. I could understand that. I could understand where he was coming from. It didn't make him my enemy for that. And, uh, I think he brought a lot of understanding, uh, to the – you know, the people who are really disenfranchised in this country.

So, the combination of these two great leaders, uh, we don't have that today. But what we really are missing is a mass movement that created them – rather than that we need leaders, we need a mass movement, and we're not having it.

JM: Yeah.

PB: [Laughing] Try as I may! I'm trying to get those seniors!

JM: Yes, you are. [Laughter]

EB: [Laughs] Trying to get those –

JM: So much so that I know – so much so, the both of you – that you have in recent years been honored yet again for your ongoing commitments and contributions in these ways.

Let me ask, too, about the long experience now, the lovely, long experience of sixty or – I don't know your anniversary date, but maybe sixty-one years of marriage.

EB: 1950.

PB: Sixty-one.

JM: Yeah.

PB: It'll be sixty – this is – it'll be sixty-one, right?

EB: Yeah.

PB: No.

EB: Yeah.

PB: It'll be the sixty-second anniversary.

EB: It was '50. That's fifty years to 2000, ten.

PB: So, it's sixty-two this fall.

EB: Yeah.

PB: Yeah.

JM: Which is just remarkable! I'm, uh – you have forged this partnership in a, as a, quote, "interracial" couple, since we have this concept of race that has defined our world –

PB: Yeah, right.

JM: – for so long. Um, you know, I would invite your reflections on that experience, too. I know, Priscilla, you had mentioned in the break that that was something that you wanted to touch on.

PB: Well, I did – uh, I do remember what, uh, Dr. [W.E.B.] Du Bois said, um, and it probably was after the *Loving* decision – *Loving v. Virginia* – that overturned all the miscegenation laws in the country. I think there were seventeen states that still had

miscegenation laws. And, um, he was a leader in the NAACP and he made the statement that the NAACP did not, um, did not support – it did not oppose interracial marriage and it did not support interracial marriage. It believed that individuals who fall in love should have the right to pursue their relationships.

And that's the way I felt about it. I mean we didn't, uh, fall in love and get married and have three children in order to, uh, create some new [laughs] racial grouping in this country. Some people talk about the elimination of race by, uh, consolidation. No, come on! We have to [2:00:00] respect culture, cultural differences, and so on. Our older daughter once told us that she thought the reason that we had such a long marriage, um, was because of our moral compass and that it – we came from very different backgrounds and so on, but somehow or other, we had the same goals. So, there you go.

EB: Yeah.

PB: [Laughs] How 'bout that?

EB: That sounds very reasonable, sure. Very good.

PB: Well, you might have come in for a little, uh, criticism of – but, of course, your family – as we have studied more about his family, there has been quite a lot of interracial relationship.

EB: Yeah.

PB: Um –

JM: Were any of those –?

PB: Including the Alamo!

JM: Yeah.

PB: [Laughs] I don't know quite – figure that one out, but –

EB: But I – he is listed as one of, well, Polly Letty’s children.

PB: [2:01:08] Yeah. Oh, okay, yeah.

EB: One of Polly Letty’s sons, but I don’t know much about Polly Letty, who was my great-great-grandmother’s mother. I don’t know where she came from, but I was told that she came from a very wealthy family of the Traverses around Richmond. So, I hate to put her into the Richmond map. [Laughter]

PB: Well.

JM: Dr. Bassett, I want to ask a final question of you. I’d be interested to hear about your service on the, on the Human Rights Commission in New York City.

EB: Well, I mean, we didn’t – we met about every month. I think it was every month, not too often. And what I would do is to check up and see – see, we had several neighborhood groups in our, uh, community, which were well organized, like RENA [Riverdale Edgecombe Neighborhood Association]. They had groups – housing group. And there was the group down in the end house going east – 421? Was that right? 421? Yeah, they had gotten in with some group. I don’t remember the name. They were trying to get something done about housing in the neighborhood. So, I used to look and see how those cases were proceeding. That was my main interest in going to these meetings.

Of course, we always had big dinners. I have, uh, cards where we used to meet at – what’s the big hotel?

PB: The Plaza.

EB: The Plaza, we used to meet there. So, I think the governor gave us a lot of money to run that organization, because I never paid for it.

PB: But, I mean, I think this vagueness is an indication of the [laughs] effectiveness.

[Phone rings]

JM: Let's pause for just a sec to get the phone.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: Um, Dr. Bassett, I think you wanted to kind of sum up your perspective on the, on the, uh, on the merits or impacts or lack thereof of the Human Rights Commission.

EB: [Sighs] Uh, [clears throat] I'm trying to, wonder – I'm thinking about where should I start on this, [laughter] the Human Rights Commission. Well, I mean, the one I'm working with now – you know, the county is broke. Jobs, they go to the people who have the inside, uh, information and knew somebody to refer them to the proper – to the job. Now, in New York City, uh, I guess it's the political clout that will get you a job sometimes, not always, but sometimes. So, those are the things that I see that can be very difficult to get ahead there.

Now, I never had those problems because I was never looking for a city job. And I was, uh, always able to get a job if I wanted a job. But, uh, I did go to these, uh, dairy technology, big places, [2:05:00] and there they were not willing to hire you, give you a job, although their plants were right in the middle of the black community. And not even a porter or a floor sweeper or *anybody* there was black. That was Beatrice Food Company. And they –

PB: 1950 – no, '55.

EB: '55 or '56.

PB: Yeah.

EB: And also, one of my professors had a brother that worked there. He thought I should have told them what color I was before I came. I said, "Well, they didn't ask, so why

should I volunteer?" They would see me when I came. And that's what I got. You know, he talked as if he could soften the way for you – his brother, since he had a brother that had a job. And they both had gone to Purdue [University], and his father was head of the Dairy Technology Department at Purdue College in Indiana. So, I don't know whether Jim – but when I left Ohio State, uh, they got rid of dairy technology, they got rid of food technology, and made it into some – what do they call it now?

PB: Food technology, isn't it?

EB: Food – no. Food –

PB: Sciences, Food Sciences.

EB: Food Sciences.

JM: Food Sciences, yeah.

EB: Food Sciences. They all were put into Food Sciences. So, they got rid of [Dr. Ira] Gould, who was head of dairy technology and [Professor Fred E.] Deatherage [Jr.]. That was biochemistry. It was also combined with Health Sciences. Yeah, the three things were combined.

JM: I know you've written or, um, elsewhere noted that, um, you were much motivated by, uh, Frederick Douglass's observation that, um, "without struggle, there is no progress." And you have paved long paths of a great deal of social justice struggle on many fronts, so I'm glad we've had this occasion to visit and document at least a little bit of that work in the little bit of time we could be together, because there's such a long record of service. So, it's a real honor and a privilege to be with you both. Thank you.

PB: We're honored to have participated in this discussion.

EB: Yeah.

PB: Makes me a little introspective. I have to look back and see where I didn't do what I should have done. [Laughs]

JM: I don't know about that. I'm not sure it's that way at all. Any final thoughts?

EB: Yeah, I remember when I first went to register to vote. That was just before I went into the Army.

JM: Yeah.

EB: [Clears throat] I went to a little filling station about two miles from home, and that's where they registered voters. So, I told him who I was, and he went – I thought he was going to give me an application to fill out. That was my assumption. But he just gave me an empty sheet of paper. He said, "Go ahead and register yourself there."

So, my father was dead by then, because he always voted. He probably would have told me what to do. But I talked with another man a week or so before I went up there, and he had told me – his name was Jim Mullins. He was a pretty well-off black there in the community and had run into a lot of problems. He ran the corn mill, and everybody went to that, black, white – oh, everybody went there to grind their corn and make corn meal.

And he told me, "Just think about an application that you're filling out, that you want to identify yourself to somebody, and put on there when you were born," and I think he might have told me to put on there my race. But somehow, that's one thing I left off. [Laughs] I don't know whether that just never came to me. I told them when I was born, who my mother was, who my father was, what, where they lived, where they were born – I told him *all* of those things.

So, he called me back, but he says, "You never put on there you're black." I says, "Did I need to put that there? You can see I am." [Laughs] And he says, "Just sign it there." He said, "You belong – you are –" I guess at that time they put Negro. I think so. That was – [2:10:00]

JM: '40s?

EB: I guess that must have been about '42 or '43. So, I did put Negro down there, I think.

JM: And they registered you?

EB: Yeah, they registered me. No problem. And that's – I guess a lot of people can hardly fill out an application. A lot of people who haven't been to college or finished high school at least wouldn't know how to do that.

JM: Yeah.

EB: But I did all of that – and where I went to school, all of that. [Laughs] He just looked at it and said, "This is fine, except you didn't put your race."

JM: Thank you both so very much. It's been a real privilege.

PB: Thank you.

EB: Thank you very much.

[Recording ends at 2:10:53]

END OF INTERVIEW