

NELSON MALDEN –HOTEL BEN MOORE MONTGOMERY, AL

December 31, 2018, 11am

I'm here with Mr. Nelson Malden and we are in Montgomery, Alabama, and we are going to talk about the Ben Moore hotel and the Green Book. So it is December 31st of 2018 and it's about 11am. Mr. Malden, please state your name and what it is you do.

My name is Nelson Malden. I was a barber for about 60 years. I retired about two years ago and I went to Alabama State for college. And I haven't been doing too many...anything else. I started cutting hair in 1948. My father had a barbershop in Pensacola Florida and I came to Montgomery in 1952 to attend Alabama State College, which was the closest black college to Pensacola [Florida] at that time. I also had a job working at a barber shop which was one block from the campus. So by me not having any money when I finished high school and being able to work in the barber shop one block [away] I think was my basis of survival at that particular time. Other than that, I've been here ever since. I got married in 1960. No children. That's about the size of my life.

When you started barber school did you think it was going to something that you were going to do for the rest of your life?

My father was a barber in Pensacola. He was born in 1896 was a World War I veteran and I was raised up basically in the barber shop. So no one needed to teach me to cut hair, it's just by you being in the barbershop every day you picked up all the skills you need to know at that time. And so that's how I got started. He was a barber and he had seven boys and I was the youngest of the seven and all the three youngest ones cut hair and the other four, they never did fool around in the barber shop.

Tell me about when your life intersected with the Hotel Ben Moore.

Well in 1952 when we came to Montgomery, I had another brother, and he had been here since 1948. He was cutting hair here in the College Hill barber shop...

In the what?

We all got started here in the College Hill Barbershop, which was one block from the Alabama State campus. In 1958 we decided we'd go into business for ourselves. So we moved from here in 1958 to the Ben Moore Hotel, which was a grocery store originally, but the lady that owned the building at the time, my brother asked her if she would give some consideration and let us put a barbershop in there so she put two beauticians and made three sections...two beauty shops and one barbershop. And so in '58 that was the leading hotel and the only black lodging facility in Montgomery at that time. It was built in the early '50s, by Mr. Benjamin Moore.

So you were in this beauty shop/barbershop space at the bottom...

On the first floor.

But was it the Ben Moore Hotel at that time?

It was the Ben Moore Hotel at that time. Originally it was a grocery store but business went out of business so the lady, she made three businesses out of it. And the Ben Moore [had] a restaurant on the first floor, the hotel in the middle and he had a nightclub on the top floor. Like I said earlier it was the only licensed facility in Montgomery at that time for black lodging.

So was her business, she was renting space there?

She was renting space. Her husband died in the '50s. And of course, he was also a member of Rev. King's Church, Dexter [Avenue Baptist Church]...and Rev. King that was the only time he ever showed him...he had tears when he buried one of his members when he eulogized Mr. Moore.

So was the barber area separate from the beauty shop area?

The beauty shop go on one side and another beauty shop on the other side and the barber shop was in the middle, originally. So by being [in] one building with the space at one time and when she put the two beauticians and then she made three businesses out of it.

What was her name?

Ms. Maggie Moore [assumed spelling]. Her husband is deceased.

So you started with your brother?

We started, my brother, well actually my father...I was raised up in the barbershop in Pensacola, Florida and I was the youngest of the seven boys and the youngest of the three brothers who cut hair. And so we decided to...when we finished high school, one of my other brothers who finished high school in 1948, he moved to Montgomery and he was cutting hair in the College Hill Barbershop and then when I finished high school in 1952, I came in and got in the same shop where my brother worked. We had three chairs in there. So we'd...Mr. Brown which was the owner of the barber shop at the time, which was College Hill...so in 1958 my brother decided that we'd go into business for ourselves. And so he knew Mrs. Moore and he asked Mrs. Moore...he saw this vacant building and this grocery store going out of business and she asked would she consider putting a barbershop in and she did.

Wow. And so how long had you been doing barber work?

My father basically turned me loose in my, I was raised up in the barbershop in Pensacola, but in 1948 he didn't supervise me anymore, so basically he turned me loose, so I didn't have to be supervised around 1948, which I was probably about 14, 15 years old at that time.

So you had been doing it almost a decade on your own.

On my own.

So right off the bat...Hotel Ben Moore opened around '56?

No, must have been around '51 or '52.

Oh, it was earlier, ok. So the Hotel Ben Moore had already been around, but who was coming in? What kind of clientele were you getting? Did you bring your own clients or were they part of the hotel?

Well when we moved, you see the barbershop where we started in in Montgomery was one block from the Alabama State campus, so we had developed a large clientele with the faculty members and the students at Alabama State College and so by moving two blocks from our original site some of our customers followed us to the new location, which we did not necessarily have to build a business because we was able to take some of our customers from the College Hill Barbershop in 1958 and we moved into our own business and a lot of them followed us. So at the Ben Moore Hotel you had any and everybody who lived there. B.B. King, Ruth Brown, Little Richard.

So tell me about the people you worked on who were celebrities.

Well Little Richard [laughing] was one of our favorites. He stayed in the hotel, he had a show here in Montgomery for about three days and so he spent a lot of time in the barbershop and at that time we had a shoeshine stand at the barbershop and Little Richard was back at the shoeshine stand and he had a big old powderpuff, he's just powder his face and my brother's chair was right close to the shoeshine and we had about five or six customers in the shop at the time and Little Richard said, "Ooooweee, y'all some pretty men." My brother said, I wish he wouldn't talk like that in here.

So did Little Richard have the processed hair at that time?

Yeah, he basically lived in the hotel. We didn't have to do anything...

He lived in the Ben Moore hotel?

He lived in the Ben Moore hotel at the time. He stayed about three or four days because he had a layover so he spent, you know in and out of the barbershop which you know it was closest thing for his to socialize with so many people so then we had...

Ok wait let's go back for a second to Little Richard's hair, so was it pressed or...?

He had a process...

Chemically, so he had a relaxer.

Yeah, he had a relaxer in his hair, it was chemically...he had it straightened out. He put a lot of, for some reason he liked a lot of powder, the powder he put on his face didn't hardly go with his complexion but he liked it a little lighter complexion, the more powder he put on there.

So were you his main...

Like I said, he was just in town only for three or four days so we didn't get a chance to be one of his main barbers, but he was one that I remembered the most because of what he said, "Y'all some pretty men."

So go ahead, I interrupted you.

[8:30]

But anyway, that was one of the...there was Bayard Rustin, he went walking down at the March on Washington with A. Phillip Randolph, he lived in the hotel. And then of course Benjamin Mays, when he came through Montgomery at the time he preached Vernon Johns which was one of the pastor's at Dexter [Baptist Church] before the Reverend came. And we had B.B. King, stayed in the hotel, Ruth Brown, any and everybody and Joe Louis came to town one time, he passed through Montgomery. He stayed in the Ben Moore Hotel.

Did you do his hair?

No, we didn't do Joe Louis' hair. I did Benjamin Mays, the President of Morehouse, you know...they spend a lot of time, just to kill the time, you know. Everything was in that little area, that restaurant, right on the corner, that restaurant was the same building as the barbershop. And then the hotel [was on] the second floor and then the night club was on the top floor.

So what about...CORE was there, right? SNCC...into the '60s? And King. Did you ever see Dr. King?

Well he was one of my customers. I started cutting his hair in 1954, when he first came to Montgomery. I was also a student at Alabama State College at that time, so I had a 10 o'clock class that morning and I saw a young man drive up in his blue Pontiac, he got out and I looked at his head, like any barber would do, I thought *heck, I can knock him out in 15 minutes*. It'd take me about five minutes to walk to the counter, so he came in the barbershop. I asked what was his name, he said, "Martin Luther King." I said, "Where are you from?" [He said] "Atlanta, Georgia" I said, "What are you doing in town?" He said, "I'm here to preach my sermon at Dexter. I said, "Oh, it's nice to meet you." So after I finished cutting his hair I gave him the mirror to see if he liked his haircut, he told me, "pretty good." So you tell a barber "pretty good," that was an insult, but he came back two weeks later, I was busy and another barber was vacant but he waited on me, so I remember that sarcastic statement he made and I said, "That must have been a *pretty good* haircut." He said, "You alright."

So he wasn't "Dr. King"...

He was still in school at the Boston Theological Seminary when I first started cutting his hair in 1954 and he also took the church for a little money because he had to go back and forth to Boston and finish his dissertation but I had no idea at that time that I would be cutting one of the most historical figures of the twentieth century. It didn't even cross my mind. At the time, my ego was so big because I thought I was hot stuff and he came in, you know, an ordinary little preacher, and I was cutting most of the...the barbershop I was working in had a really high reputation and it had a lot of professional people so I was cutting most of the leading preachers' hair in town at that time...Reverend Lambert, Reverend Powell, so he was just an ordinary little preacher, with no claim to fame or anything, a new church, his first church...

So you did King's hair twice?

No, I did it off and on for six years. See he came in 1954 and he left in 1960, but he came back to the barbershop many times after he left and moved back to Atlanta in 1960.

And so during that time his popularity rose.

Yeah, his popularity starting rising in 1956, when he gave his acceptance speech at being the first President of the Montgomery Improvement Association, that was the organization that led the boycott. And the night when he gave his acceptance speech most people in Montgomery had never heard of King, just the people at Dexter, which was his church, they knew about Reverend King but all the church members...he wasn't getting a whole lot of public speaking at the time and it was such a short time frame from the time he came to Montgomery until he got famous so he came to Montgomery in '54 and about six to eight months later, that's when the [Montgomery] Boycott started. And so when he gave his acceptance speech and he had been voted to being the first President of the Montgomery Improvement Association that Holt Street Church and all the churches will the Reverends in it had a delegation all throughout the city with different churches similar to the Holt Street Baptist Church that night, and when he finished his acceptance speech, wasn't no lady in the audience that said, "Oh, Lord has just sent us a savior." And that was the beginning of his popularity, in 1955, when the Boycott started.

And so how did it change when he would walk in the barbershop as "Dr. King" as this leader?

No, what happened when he first came to Montgomery, he was just a little preacher at a church and had lost a lot of his members, at Dexter Church, so he was just an ordinary little preacher but when he gave his acceptance speech...was his first claim to fame was that night, but then as his fame went up in the '60s when the Movement started, he left in 1960 and moved back to Atlanta but he came back to town many times. So then after the Civil Rights Bill passed in 1964 and the Voting Rights Bill in '65, but a lot of his fame came after he left Montgomery, basically. You know the Nobel Peace Prize came around '63 or somewhere in that neighborhood, and then the Voting Rights Bill and the Civil Rights Bill but when he came in the barbershop after the Boycott a lot of people gave him recognition, you know the Press where following him everywhere he went and the Press where right on his trail.

Because he strategized the 1956 Bus Boycott in Montgomery. What I read is that the groups would gather there, at the Ben Moore. Were any of those discussions happening in the barbershop?

Oh yes.

So what did you hear?

Oh, yeah one day he was in the barbershop...one of the more memorable conversations I've heard in the barbershop after cutting his hair was that a sociology professor from Hampton Institute came in, I had met him before, and he came in the barbershop and he had a niece in South Alabama, he was an old man, he was trying to find out...he had no relatives and he was not married and he was trying to give his niece some understanding about his estate, so that was my analysis, so I got kind of familiar with him and so when Reverend King got to be famous and he came in one day and I

wanted to be kind of intelligent and I want to introduce Reverend King because Reverend King got his undergraduate degree in sociology from Morehouse and so this man who was from the sociology department at the Hampton Institute which was one of the leading black colleges so I introduced them. I said, "Reverend King, this is Mr. Hayes," or whatever his name was, the sociology professor. He said, "Good to meet you." And so they started a little discussion, so we had about three or four customers on the seat, three in the chair and it wasn't no big thing, you know the sociology [professor] said to Reverend King, I think...some way the conversation came up that the morality was one of the strongest forces in the human family. And the sociologist looked up and said, "I think it's economics." Whew, when he said that the barbershop, people stopped cutting and everything got quiet. And so they started explaining. The sociologist professor said, "When the European white man came to this land our biggest problem is that he built some leading universities to educate himself. Then when he got control of the resources, the oranges in Florida, the sugarcane in Louisiana, the oil in Texas, the grapes in California, the tobacco in Virginia, and the cotton in Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi, there would be a Wall Street to control the capital and you get West Point to defend it." He said, "I think that is the United States of America." Reverend King said, "Have a good day, Sir." [laughing] That was one of the most memorable conversations we had.

[16:26]

One day he was in there, and he spent quite a bit of time because two of his children were born on Jackson Street, his two oldest children. And so one day he was in there, he was doing a little writing in the barbershop and sometime doing some reading because when his children would get on his nerves he would come down and spend some time in the shop. So one day he was in there and two old men were sitting beside him. He'd always would take a seat in the back of the barbershop when he was just going to kill time and keep from interfering with the customers in the front. So one of the old men started coughing and another man said, "What are you taking for your cold?" He said I'm taking aspirin and orange juice. The other man said, "The best thing to take for you cold is to take you a rag and put you some ice cream salt and some turpentine on it and put it on your chest. I guarantee your cold will be gone the next morning. And there were two students in the front of the barbershop, one had gotten a ticket for doing 40 miles an hour in a 30-mile zone. The other student said, "Man you got to learn...", the one who got the ticket, he was from Chicago and the other boy who was talking to him was from Selma. He told the boy from Chicago, "You got to learn how to talk to white folks down here." If you had said, "Yes sir, and no sir" with some emphasis, you probably wouldn't have gotten that ticket. So the two students left. The two old men left and other barber went to lunch and finished my last customer and he left, and there was just the two of us in the shop. So Reverend King got up and "You know what, Barber?" He never would call me by my name, Nelson, he always called me "Barber." "You know what, Barber?" I said, "What's that Rev?" I been going to the barbershop every day and I [inaudible] learned... I said, "What's that?" He said, "Barbershop medicine will get you in the cemetery and barbershop law will get you in prison." [laughing]

Wow, was it primarily black clientele?

Right, right.

Were there ever any white clients that came in?

We had a quite a few civil rights activists come into the, you know, they lived in the Ben Moore hotel. Students from San Francisco State University, we cut some of their hair and some of the black activists you know, you had Clifford Durr the man who helped organize the March. A white attorney, but it was rare, in general, the larger population was black clientele.

Would you say most of the conversations were political?

Well, politics and sex, things like that. What men talk about in the barbershop. But most are political and then Civil Rights stuff, you know, like what's going on in Montgomery. You know after the Civil Rights bill in Birmingham, then we got a Voting Rights bill out of Selma, then we had a Supreme Court decision out of Montgomery. Of course...most of the civil rights activists lived within a five-block radius of that barbershop. Jo Ann Robinson, Mary Fair Burks, Reverend...Mrs. Browder, the case that went to court was Browder versus Gayle. Gayle wasso all the people active in the Movement basically lived within that vicinity of the barbershop at that time.

So what do you remember about the Boycott? (Montgomery Bus Boycott)

Well, the first day of the Boycott started, we was wondering are the black people going to stay off the bus. So there was a man who used to catch the bus every morning across from the barbershop, he waited at the Whitley Hotel and he was standing on the corner, he always caught that 7:15/8 bus, and so that particular morning the Bus Boycott started in '55, so one of our customers said, "Here come the bus!" And all the customers in the shop ran to the window and the man standing across the street. He had been catching that bus every morning, so when the bus passed and the man didn't get on the bus, everybody in the barbershop started hollering. You'd thought Joe Louis had knocked out Max Schmeling. That man was still standing there. He did not get on that bus. That was the very first day of the boycott. Then one of the people said, "It's going to work." We were wondering if the blacks were going to stay off the bus and that was the very first incident that I recalled about him not getting on that bus.

Did you normally take...how did you get to work?

Well I lived about two blocks from the barbershop and Alabama State campus was about one block from the barbershop so everything was in that vicinity.

So you never took the bus anyway.

Well I took the bus, before I got a car. I'd go into town. You know there are so many stories about the bus, but people get mixed up, you see there were no white seats and black seats on the bus. You had a black water fountain and a white water fountain, that was clear cut. You know, blacks drink out of black water fountains, but on the bus, the bus driver had discretionary power. He could shift. So for example, if a lot of white people got on the bus, he could move them back, then vice-versa, if a lot of black people got on the bus, he could move them forward. But on a particular bus line that caused the problem, the one bus line [phone rings]

[21:18]

See basically you have one bus line driver that caused the problem. You had a large black population on the east side of Montgomery and you had a large population on the west side of Montgomery

and in between you had a small white population. There were no malls at that time. All this shopping and doctors, lawyers, State Cap...everything was in the center of Montgomery. And so the problem usually started in the middle in the afternoon [inaudible]. There was a large white section in Montgomery called Cloverdale where ruling class lived with all the bankers and the lawyers [lived] and they'd acquired a large number of domestic help, the lawn men, the maids, you know the servants to take care of those people and so the bus that Ms. Parks was arrested on was South Jackson/Cleveland Avenue and when it comes by the barbershop it'd be South Jackson, when it leave that side of town is going back to the other side and it's called Cleveland Avenue and when the bus get in the middle of town in the afternoon, that's where the problem started. When those sanitation workers started getting off of work and when the white women started getting off from the State Capitol jobs downtown and both the South...and both the Cleveland Avenue bus going to the west side of Montgomery and bus driver who was assigned to that bus was named Blake and I guess he was assigned because he knew how to keep discipline and order on that bus for the blacks and the whites. So the ordinance had passed, if a black person has to give up their seat that must be an available seat...if you get...when the bus is loaded up at the terminal if everybody's in their proper racial seat and if a white person has to give up that seat to a black person there must be an available seat far up front, if a black person has to give up that seat to a white person, there must be an available seat in the back. If there's no available seats than the white person has got to stand and so the day Ms. Rosa Parks was arrested all the seats were filled so the two white women and the one white man got on the bus. So the bus driver actually told the black man to get up and he got up and gave the two white woman a seat. And Ms. Parks being a recording secretary for the N.A.A.C.P. at that time, she knew the ordinance so the bus driver asked to get up and so she refused. And the rest of it is history.

[23:34]

There had been several arrests before Ms. Parks, but they could not use in the case for a federal court suit, so they used Mrs. Browder. And Mrs. Browder was not arrested before Ms. Parks.

And there was also Irene Morgan, right?

What's that?

Irene Morgan.

Yeah, and Susan McDonald, Rita Browder, and another lady and Claudette Colvin was a 15-year old black girl who was pregnant and that's the case the attorneys really wanted to use because she jumped on the bus driver. She jumped on the police when they attempted to arrest her so she would have had a very good case but it was about her being pregnant and 15-years old. So when they went to court they used Ms. Browder. So the three judge courts in Montgomery ruled in the blacks favor, then the state of Alabama appealed it to the second and then in Atlanta they appealed it to the United States Supreme Court. The United States Supreme Court sent it back to the 11th Circuit and [deemed] bus [segregation] unconstitutional.

It's amazing for you to have seen this, to have lived through all of this, really. So the years that you were at the Ben Moore up until, what year?

Well, '58.

Until '58. Okay, so why did you leave the Ben Moore?

Well we stayed at the Ben Moore, and then my brother, he passed in the '90s and then I retired in 2015-16. I let a young man, you know, that worked for me at the barbershop.

How old were you when you retired?

Oh, I was 83. I've been retired about two years, so I'm about 85 now.

You look like you're in your 60s. [laughing] What have you been doing?

You got to get your eyeglasses [laughing] are you wearing contacts...

I'm wearing contacts! You have the energy and the spirit of a young man.

People are like, "Why are you so healthy looking?" I say, "Because my wife doesn't let me stay out too late at night." [laughing]

Yes, the women help, for sure. So I'm sorry I derailed you. So when you stopped...your brother passed.

The three of us started in the barbershop in 1958. One of my brother's passed in '85 and one passed in '95. We were the three youngest...I was the youngest of seven boys, so I'm the only one left.

Wow.

Yes. So when you left, where did you go?

I came home, just retired. I stayed in Montgomery, you see I'm from Pensacola originally but when I finished high school I moved to Montgomery and so then I got married in 1960, so I'm just here.

You said you retired in 2015.

Yes, about two years ago.

So where were you working?

The Malden Brothers Barbershop in the Ben Moore Hotel.

So it's still there.

Yes, the barbershop is still there. A young fella came and worked with me about in 2013-14. He was such a nice fella, so I let him have the barbershop. He was able to keep practically all the customers that I left. I figured it was about time for me to retire. I was ready, kind of burnt out, psychologically and otherwise.

So when you and your brother started it, did you rent from...

We rented from Mrs. Moore.

And did you ever take it over on your own?

No, we never. We was offered to buy the building, but my brother...we decided, what could we do with the building? During the time the 1964 Civil Rights Bill passed, the hotel business just went under because the Ben Moore could not compete with the Holiday Inns and the Marriotts. So basically it was built for black people during that time frame but when integration came that was one of the reasons [black businesses] had to go out of business because of the facilities, the locations, you know the Holiday Inn and all the high end hotels were more accommodating, more luxury for the people.

It was a double-edged sword.

It was a double edged...and two of the main things, two of the businesses that did more to help Civil Rights for black people during that time, they were the first two that had to go out of business as the result of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill. Regal Cafe was one of the buildings...see Reverend King had problems when he got to be famous because when he had tourists and other people coming in from different parts of the world, if he had, say 18-20 people, that was too many people for his house and two few people to open up the church...and sometimes he didn't want them so Mr. Deggett [assumed spelling] the man who owned the Regal Cafe had a conference room that would accommodate about 35 people. So he saw Reverend King, probably by Reverend King patronizing him, he told Reverend King, "you can use my conference room when you have that number of people, and when you have over 35, you can open the church." So that was the problem and so he let him use that. So when the 1964 Civil Rights Bill passed, for the food accommodations, the restaurants and all, Mr. Deggett could not compete with that and nor could the Ben Moore Hotel. See the Ben Moore Hotel really did a big favor for the Student Demonstration of 1960.

Well in the Regal Cafe, they let Reverend King use the 35-seat capacity for tourists then, people from different universities who were coming to visit him because of his world-renowned fame at that time. But when integration came...most of the black businesses were afraid for their business to be used for civil rights because they could be punished by the licensing...the city, the state license are all controlled by white people and if any of them get out of line, they could always find a technicality to revoke their license. So one day...to give you an example, we had a fire inspector that came into the barbershop, he was smoking a cigarette. We had two black ladies, he just walked over to them and he didn't speak to me or anything, he just came in and looked at the shop to inspect the barbershop, so I told Mr. Clifford Durr, the white attorney that got Rosa Parks out of jail, we had got to be friends, we did a lot of socializing, so I said, "Mr. Durr this white man come in the shop and" I said, "had two black ladies and he was just smoking a cigarette and walked over and didn't ask me, didn't introduce himself that he was the fire inspector. And so Mr. Durr said, "Don't you mess with that man." I said, "What you mean, mess with him?" He said, that man can close you up. I said, "What?" He said, "You have a back door to your barbershop?" I said, "No sir." He said, "Women and men?" I said, "Yes." He said, "How many restrooms?" He named different examples that the man could use. So the next time he came in I bowed to him because I didn't know the inspector/fire chief had that much power.

So that was one of the things, most of the black businesses were afraid because their license could be revoked. And some of them [would say] *I'll be glad when Martin Luther King leave because he's going to*

stir up all this mess and he's going to be gone. But Mr. Diggett who was the owned the...Café and Mr. Goldsmith at that time who was renting the hotel after Mr. Moore had died, Mr. Goldsmith rented the hotel and so one time, when the students...John Lewis and all that...James Forman they met in front of the barbershop when the student demonstration happened in 1960 because they were going to march in front of the Montgomery Court House for integration. But see 15 students from San Francisco State University came to Montgomery to join the Alabama State Students for that particular demonstration, and first they lived in the First Baptist Church black, the strategy of the students from San Francisco...all of them were going to stay together. If they were going to sleep in cars, all 15 would sleep in cars, if they stayed in church, all of them stayed in that one church, they were not going to separate. That was their strategy. And so the First Baptist Church, one of the students had a whiskey bottle and brought it in the church and one of the black members found out about it and she said, "No, we can't have drinking in the Lord's house." So they came back to the barbershop, located in the Ben Moore and it just so happened Mr. Goldsmith was in the shop at the time and we had met the student before and he said, "We've got a problem." And so Mr. Goldsmith, by being in the shop at the time saw what they was talking about. So my brother said, "Mr. Goldsmith, can we give them a cut rate and let four stay in the room for a discount? Mr. Goldsmith said, "Okay." But Mr. Goldsmith let the 15 students stay in there, they sign in and they let them stay for free. And the city asked Mr. Goldsmith to put them out because if they had went in there without a search warrant and arrested those students, the city could have had a legal problem. Because Mr. Goldsmith owned the hotel and put them out, the city didn't want to be bothered with that legal part of it, but he refused. And so after the demonstration kind of settled down, the city came back to Mr. Goldsmith and said, "I want to see your license for your...tax receipt. But the nightclub at that time did not enforce it...in other words if you had dancing in your facility you must pay five cents to the city on the dollar what you took in for the dancing. But there was no enforcement of that because some other nightclub owners at the time, but the city did not enforce it. So Mr. Goldsmith, he had no receipts to show, because he had had dancing in the hotel up on the roof garden and he had no receipts so the taxes...they put him...basically closed him up.

[33:45]

And the Regal Café which was the other black facility....

Is that R-i-g-g-e-r?

Regal Cafe? R-e-g-a-l

Regal ok.

All these things happened within a five block radius of the barbershop. The two ladies who started the movement from 1945-46 [inaudible] Mary Fair Burks about three blocks from the barbershop.

What was her name?

Mary Fair Burks

I think it was Burks. Mary Fair Burks, Jo Anne Robinson lived on the Alabama State campus and Rita Browder lived a block and a half from the barbershop. Reverend French one of the historians, his church was about three blocks from the barbershop. B. D. Lambert which was the pep rally

speaker for Reverend King, he lived about a block and a half from the barbershop. Reverend Say, Reverend Ha...all lived within that radius. Vernon Johns lived a half a block from the barbershop in the same house that Reverend King moved into in 1954. So as a result of that type of environment I was in at that time, I was able to cut most of those guys' hair in the conversation, that's what I got, a little information that I could share about the civil rights movement.

You got more information than most. I did a project on hair salons and beauty shop culture throughout the United States and the conversations that happen in salons are so unique because people are vulnerable but also relaxed.

They're more relaxed in conversation than they would be in any other type of environment. The social order made it possible for them to discuss things that would not discuss in the church.

Exactly. So how many people were employed at the barbershop?

Just the three brothers. We started the three brothers we moved from College Hill Barbershop in 1958 and we moved up there.

Were women ever your customers?

Yeah, about 25% of our women was customers. Ms. Abernathy, Reverend Abernathy's wife was one of my customers, Mary Williams was in the house with Ms. King's house got bombed.

So why didn't they go to the beauty salon?

Well there were certain things the beauty salon would not do at that time. Eyebrow arch was something relatively new and came into the beauty business in later years...Eyebrow arch with a razor. Most eyebrow arch during that time, they would do it with a razor and most of the beauticians were not accustomed to using razors. A lot of eyebrow arch...some of them would pluck you know but then wax and a lot of other things came in since that time for black females and they didn't have to go to the barbershop. But some would go for neck shapes, you know shape the neck up and get their eyebrows arched and you know mudpacks...

So would they get their hair done...

No they didn't get their hair...

They got their eyebrows done with you?

Yes.

And did they get their hair done with you?

No. We'd just cut their hair. Some of the barbershops, depending on how the customer and how they wanted their hair cut and liked how the barber did it. I'd cut one lady's hair and somebody would see it and say "whew" and then another lady would say "Who did your hair?" But mostly, the beauty...the old beauty shop when they had the straightening comb and the hot plate you know the women would go to a beauty shop on a Saturday night because they were going to church on Sunday, they'd take that grease and put it in there and take a hot comb and pull it through then style

it after that. And then later on the process came out, you know the relaxer and that did a lot of damage to the hair, that was thing at the time but it was a lot of chemicals, and did a lot of damage to black women's hair, especially. Because see once you put the straightening comb, back in the '30s and the '40s, by Monday morning your hair would be like it was on Friday, but when you put the relaxer in there black women can jump in the swimming pool and do anything and their hair would be straight. But they paid a price for it also.

Did you do all kinds of...

Hairstyling came in but we kept...old fashioned, we just kept the same old cutting. We didn't go back to the different schools to learn how to do different things. We stuck with the shave and that type of thing.

What percentage of men were getting processed, like Little Richard?

Very few at that time. Most of our customers were professional people. We'd have a few musicians and stuff like that and they'd get a process, a relaxer. But most of them are professional people. They didn't necessarily need that type of style at that time.

What did you do to Dr. King's hair?

Just cut his hair. A very short haircut, very easy to cut. It was called a "bonton"??? you know just the same length all over, a little bit closer on the sides. Hot razor...you see the hot razor line the barbers who couldn't really cut, they could almost mess up the hair but they'd put a real fancy hot razor line and go around there and make the haircut short.

Did you ever give him [King] shaves?

No, I'd just shaped his mustache. He came out of the barbershop, he gave his 90th anniversary sermon in 1967 in December, he came by the barbershop and I touched his neck up and then about four months later he went to Memphis in 1968 and that's when he was killed. He got his hair cut about every two weeks basically, but then when he was going for different occasions. See when he left in 1960...but then he came back many times after that and he came back and never lived in the hotel, he always lived with one of his fraternity brothers, him and his wife, named Richmond Smiler [???], so the afternoon that he was killed in Memphis, the telephone rang and Richmond was in the chair... "Is Richmond there?" He said, "Yes. He's sitting in his chair." They said tell him Mr. King was killed. And he fell out the chair, they were able to grab him to keep him from falling on the floor. That was his fraternity brother and that's where he lived when he came back.

[39:54]

You know he was killed at the Lorraine and that was a Green Book site. Let's just talk briefly about that, the Green Book.

You mean by the different sites?

Well the Green Book was a travel guide that was published for black people during the Jim Crow era, from 1937 to 1967. It was published by a man named Victor Green and it was put out annually, for the most part, they took a break during the war, but Hotel Ben Moore was listed in the Green Book.

Yes.

And like I said, the Lorraine Motel.

There were barbershops and hair salons were listed but yours wasn't. But had you known about the Green Book?

No, I didn't know...that's...no I really didn't know. We was listed in the World Monument Fund. It was nine sites, I think in Alabama and so the Ben Moore Hotel and by the barbershop being in the Ben Moore Hotel they listed it. I know it's supposed to come out sometime.

Well you know since the Ben Moore was in it, a lot of clients probably came down to you anyway because you were in the same building.

Same building, right.

Did you ever know Mr. Ben Moore?

Well he died around...I've got his obituary out there...in the archives. I met him, he was a member of the Dexter Church, see I joined the church also. I joined Dexter and so Mr. Moore, he was a member. He was kind of recluse, he never socialized too much. I met him, you know, but not real familiar with what he was about. He had a farm that he sold the land to a Jew named Marinaw [assumed spelling] and that what he took, the proceeds from selling this farmland and built the Ben Moore hotel. Because...back then he figured I guess that black people needed some accommodations.

So in terms of the other staff members of the hotel. Do you remember anything about the hotel? Did you ever go up and see the rooms?

Oh yeah.

Can you talk about what it looked like?

Oh yeah, they had probably, I think somewhere in the neighborhood of 20 rooms, and they had about 15, about 10 with ones with the bath, they cost a little bit more than the public bath, about ten rooms had a public bath with a shower, so the private baths in these rooms cost a little bit more. I think about \$15 for the [one] with the bath and probably about \$10 with the common bath. Any and everybody that socialized in the hotel and then the nightclub, was the leading nightclub in Montgomery. It was what they called the "Roof Garden." Then the big grocery on the corner, they sold alcohol in the restaurant, and they sold alcohol in the nightclub. Then in the middle was the hotel and Claude...was the lead musician. He played up there many times at the Roof Garden. Then Mr. Nesbitt, the man that brought Reverend King to Montgomery, his brother was the desk clerk. Robert Nesbitt was the one that brought Reverend King and went to Atlanta to all of the book fairs and insurance company, which he was on the Pilgrim Life and Health Insurance Company a while they were getting audited. The man that asked Reverend King, "How's your church?" And by

coincidence, he said he was looking for a pastor, he sent his young boys home for the weekend, “Why don’t you give them a call?” And that was the first introduction that Reverend King and Mr. Nesbitt had.

At the hotel, like I said, you could buy food, you could buy whiskey, and dance...Saturday night, Sunday night, you could hardly get into. They had one elevator...the fire statement...but it’s good that it never caught on fire. They were on top of ...and people be dancing and drinking. It was nice, it was real popular place at that time.

What was the neighborhood like at that time?

The neighborhood was very...it was one of the leading black neighborhoods in Montgomery. It stayed that way until the 1964 Civil Rights Bill. See when we first moved in ’58 we had about four doctors on South Jackson Street. And then you had the first black man who designed the Mint commission who lived on Jackson Street, Mr. Hathaway. He was the first black to commission Booker T. Washington [in audible]. Then Vernon Johns was one of the leading black preachers in 1926...one of the leading black preachers in the United States. Then you had Deacon Woods [assumed spelling], which was a dentist. You had Father Dubose which was an Episcopal Minister, he lived on the street. You had doctor Ben Dyke [assumed spelling] which was a chemist at Alabama State College, Jo Ann Robinson, the lady who started the movement. Mary Fair Burks, lived right off Jackson Street. So you had everybody. It was called Centennial Hill. It was the black bourgeoisie. Dexter Street Baptist Church, Maggie Street Baptist Church, any and everybody you know. But then when integration came, the professional people with income they basically moved to the so-called integrated sections and so then the neighborhood went down to rental property and so forth. And that’s the way it is now.

[45:40]

What is it like now?

It’s gone down, the rental property, you know. Drugs and...I guess the influence that the professional people had on the low-income people at the time made a better race, but when all of the professional people left, it left isolated uneducated people. The mixture just did something...that’s the price we paid. You see like black colleges, we had no idea that integration was gonna damage black colleges like they did. See we thought that we could have some of ours...white boy said recently “Well you asked for integration.” So you’re talking about going to the University of Alabama and all but we had no idea that we would lose all...And when Reverend King preached a sermon one time and said, “Be careful what you ask for, you might get it.” So we got integration but we’re paying the price, then and now. You see for basic integration we asked for public accommodations for crowds and other things but it ended up where we are now.

My stepfather, he grew up in the South in Tennessee during Jim Crow and he said, “Integration was the worst thing that happened to us.”

Yeah, because we had no idea the price that we would have to pay, see we wanted accommodations and education but see what happened, when Truman integrated the military, boom in on day, everything. But then they gave the South, especially, more time, a ten-year period for them to regroup their thinking so then we end up going to white schools and so forth and then the white

teachers had a big impact on the culture. So that's the price we paid, I don't see how now we're going to be able to pull out of it with the number of blacks incarcerated and into drugs, and poor white people catching hell too with drugs and suicide, all that stuff. Like he said, "Be careful what you ask for, you might get it."

[47:30]

I think it's the Civil Rights crisis of our time, mass incarceration. I wonder sometimes what King would have, I don't think he could have anticipated that we would have a black president and then have nearly 1/3 of black men in jail, at the same time.

Yeah, what I think what happened was that, you know the black President...how did Trump get to be President, basically, I guess Obama was President for eight years and every conservative Republican ran one of those seats and once those seats were filled in Washington, that's the power base and our Congress will not do anything about...so that's the price we paid. But I think Reverend King and Booker T. Washington had something similar. In 1895 when Booker T. Washington made that speech in Atlanta, he was saying we're uneducated. See the first thing they did on the ship that left and came from Africa, we had no education. In Mississippi...Census said the state of Mississippi in 1990 spent \$2.31 per black child and \$31 per white child. So what can we do? I mean we've got to face the reality, I wish we could. But that's the road that we got on but we've got uneducated people. And he told the people one day you meet somebody to buy your second-hand goods, and the real estate market what it is now, the black people I had friends who bought at the white neighborhood developments they'd go pay the bills, originally what the white man paid, I got a friend, who's a professional, the white man paid \$400,000 for a house and he'd had that house for 20 years, my black friend bought that same house, he paid \$400,000...and the white man, he stayed free, he took the \$400,000 and built another one...so that was part of the race, you see you might be getting a little off the subject when you're talking about race and property but it's pretty....

I think it's all related though. There were all of these provisions that we fought for, there were things that were given to us, like the GI Bill but we (black people) never benefitted from that. There were huge white welfare entitlement programs that the government came to the aid of people who were struggling who were white, we see this with the opioid situation now versus how we treated[black] people with crack addiction. So it's more of the same and so I just wonder when you in the barbershop, the conversations that were going on...was their ever any foresight, or question if we push for this integration that there could be this backlash?

Oh yeah. Like I was saying, we had some pretty enlightened people by the results of the Alabama State campus college, but we were saying that...see we made a comparison, one of the conversations in the barbershop was when Reverend King speech in the 1900s and Booker T. Washington's in 1895, and they both said the same thing. The thing that really made them famous was that one day black children and white children would be holding hand in hand and they built a big monument in Washington for him. But Booker T. Washington made the speech in 1895, the President of the United States invited him to the White House and they named every school, including the one Reverend King finished in the one for Booker T. Washington but at the same time he had no authority and no power to name schools, so the recognition came and gave them the rewards for that type of consideration and passed it at that particular time. But then now, we couldn't have done anything different at the time. Somebody said something, when we had been able to talk one time if we had followed the map, all the black folks would have been dead. See when Malcolm [X] spoke, Reverend Malcolm came to Tuskegee Institute to speak at the Philosophy Program and when he

finished his speech he had a four-hour...and this is not even in the history books, this is a fact. He had a four-hour layover from the Montgomery, Alabama airport. To kill time he went to Selma to visit Reverend King. Because see when he finished his speech at Tuskegee he came back to Dannelly Field...and he told Reverend King, I think you're putting your people on the wrong road. And they said Reverend King agreed with him but he said, "I cannot change my plan, not in the middle of battle." And he was right. The March [on Washington] was about to take place. But Reverend King, see when the Court put him under an injunction...now the March that day, that was the smartest move he made because if he'd have broke that Federal injunction, not the March, he could have broke the whole thing but he was intelligent enough to know that the Court order would stand. They told him, "Lay your March now." But thousands of people, Catholic Sisters, white sin...[inaudible] Wyatt, they thought it was a racial thing they put to stop the March period. But when they did, they had to get to 101, we concluded later on that 101 Airborne had to come to Montgomery and just in case the Federal National Guards couldn't handle the Klan in Lowndes County.

[52:36]

So one of my customers, he taught math at [AL ???] University and he was in his classroom and he saw this military plane come in and all these civilians were getting off. He was totally confused. But they flew him in, 101 Airborne....that had been closed because they didn't want people to know that they was here just in case it was leaving when the marchers came through, came from Selma. See what happened... Farmers [James], that court order, the most powerful black man in America now is Clarence Thomas, most powerful man...more powerful than Obama was, that one vote on that court. When Farmers blocked that court order in Little Rock, Eisenhower had invited him to the White House. He said, "Mr. Farmers, I sympathize with the problem that you've got in Little Rock, but court order will have to stand. He shook his hand. He went back and the next day sent the 101 Airborne. And so then Clarence Thomas is the most powerful man in that White House. And the court, the Federal Court and the Republican Party they let the man tear this country up...there's nothing new with communication...hacking, our system just might be antiquated enough not to protect us with what's going on with Trump, but still we said, "Mueller, Mueller, Mueller, but the man, the Attorney General...he can appoint that and the information from Mueller had to be turned over to the Attorney General [exasperated]...Ray Charles can see that from the cemetery! He can see that, so.

When Dr. Ready [???] told Reverend King, Dr. Reading was the second President from the Shinberg [Schomburg?] Institute of New York, he came to Alabama to further his research. He basically laid the foundation for the African Museum now. He came to Montgomery for the research of black history and black culture and he told Reverend King...and Dr. Benjamin Mays called the President of Alabama State to let this young boy use the library facility to finish his dissertation. That was Dr....he called and he said let this young ex-student of mine use your library facility because the public library facility, if Reverend King needed a reference to put the finishing touch on the dissertation. And it just so happened that Dr. Ready [???] office was on the second floor of the graduate school library and that's where they met. And so Reverend King got frustrated, he told Reverend King, "...when a human being comes into the world, he comes into an environment or structure and those experiences will be with him for the rest of his life." He said, "If you're born in China, you're going to speak Chinese." He said, "The sound of your mother and father's voice is going to go through your ears and fine tune your vocal chords." I wonder sometimes...when he made that statement, I wondered why somebody like my dad...boom, boom, boom, boom.

[laughing] Because that was the first sound that I heard. So that's what he told him, he said no matter what happens, the structure will be...now morality's a force but economics is another force. He said, "It two men were starving to death and they haven't eaten in several days, one man get a piece of bread, what is he going to do first? He's going to eat. And the moral force come in second. We can't escape...some are born as genius and some are born a moron." He told Reverend King we take too much blame for our failure and we take too much credit for our success." We haven't had the capacity to measure our intellect at this time. What makes some people a genius and what makes some people moron. He said, "You can make a law that another brain cannot unlock." That is what we're still struggling for structure within a race, but it's just not in the blueprint for us, from my observation.

[56:30]

I just don't think that there's any real...the forces that are against us, are always going to be there. Until that lifts I don't see...

Yeah. I think that's the problem, we want to see it...I looked on the commercials and just kills me when I see this black man and this white woman with this...natural commercial, see things are happening, it's like biological evolution, you want to see it but you can't see it, in a lifetime. We can't see a white man move to Alaska thousands and thousands of years ago and turn white...we want to see change but I don't think, socially, the evolution might be slow. This evolution process, we want to see it but we can't see the change that we really want to see. But then when you see interracial couples now having children, see the white man said if we had one drop of blood, you can identify a person by race by blood, you black. See like my great-granddaddy had three women, he had a black family, he had a white family, and he had an Indian family. Any my mother was one of the offspring, her daddy was a Mulatto, and her granddaddy was a white man. Then on my daddy's side, a white man owned him from North Carolina they moved to Monroe Alabama in the 1800s. My dad was in World War I, he was born in 1896. And that white man, when we moved from North Carolina to Monroe, the white man was a builder and he came there to build a big aristocratic church and I wondered why my granddaddy on my daddy's side had such a well-built house during that time. Then my Mulatto granddaddy, he had an Indian wife, then he had a white wife and a black slave.

Yeab, I found out that my great-great-grandfather was a white man. The story is that he was a Senator of South Carolina and he married one of his slaves right after Reconstruction, but they left the South right after they got married. I don't know where they married, but that's the story. But I think, again, what's so incredible to me is to see the response to...it's heartbreaking to me to see the lack of response to mass incarceration, and to not understand how critical it is to understanding what our history was and the realization that it is still happening, right in front of eyes, whether it's Democrat or Republican, it's the same.

The system is ...

...it's just stacked...

...it's stacked against us.

Yeab, yeab.

See what happened, capitalism is such a vicious thing, you know like their showing the...now with a black man and white woman. See the balance sheet the only thing that Dr. Ready [??] was trying to explain, the balance sheet don't amount to much in corporate America. Dr. Ready [??] in his class he said, "Why did we have 24,000 black churches in the United States in the 1890 Census? Why did we have 24,000 black churches!? The black preachers...he couldn't read and write. He worked for AT&T digging ditches when they had telephone lines. He couldn't read. When Daniel P. Moynihan came out with that statement and then white ministers started coming to the barbershop. So this white minister came in the barbershop and he was a Catholic priest, he came in the barbershop and Reverend...they had a feud and the barbershop cloth around him and he had a cross that shined like diamonds that showed that he was a minister, but he couldn't read and write! And when I took that cloth off that white man jumped up and said, "Oh Lord a man of the cloth!" What do you think Daniel P. Moynihan [did]? He said, "I'll be glad when they get that man straightened out." See education was key. Education. And that's the reason...we can't blame ourselves too much for our handicap now. Boy running from the police and we don't even know the relationship of the police to the State, you know we don't know the relationship. Poor white women are dying by suicide, drugs, they're invisible. You can't even see them...they're not even on the television. From M.I.T. they said the number, they did the research and said the number of white women dying with no recognition, we can see the black boys in prison, but what can we do? Capitalism is vicious, now it's world-wide, it's nothing but a balance sheet. Dr. Redding [??] said if Hollywood would put Jesus Christ in the bed with a prostitute they're going to make money. Put Jesus Christ in bed with a prostitute, they're going to make money off of it.

And Reverend King when they first see...how many we're talking about the Jews and incarceration...but he said how many threw them over a boat, black slaves...vomiting and diarrhea, they could not auction them off the block so they threw them overboard, because they couldn't make no money. "Throw them over here, we can't take no sick..." See when that first [slave] ship left and brought us here our whole culture disappeared. We had no culture. Can you imagine if they take you right now and send you to a land that you can't speak the language, you can't eat the food and what would happen to you, psychologically? Uneducated, like schools here in Alabama are pathetic...but what can we do about it?

Tax...Trump lowered the tax on the high income people. Hell, man you're making...sexually molesting women, his retirement is supposed to be \$120,000,000 [laughing]. It isn't funny but how we as a people, we get upset because we've got to look at the picture what caused the structure of these things that came about.

I think it's the dismissal of the history, at least, as a first step. The idea that we don't really look at how we got here and it's right in front of us, and it's still happening right in front of us and there's still this dismissal. And I think it comes down to just black people never been treated as equal human beings.

That's right.

This subhuman treatment...the idea of black pain, or tragedy is just in a different category than of white pain and tragedy. So until we really, the policies...it's not the Ku Klux Klan that's the problem, the government policies have been strategic in getting us to this place.

Yeah, I think that, there's another story that when the white lady and the black lady got together in 1944, how their relationship started, I do now know, Mrs. Burks, the lady I mentioned earlier

befriended this white lady and the white lady was a charter member of the Women League of Voters which was a white organization that poor white people had some representation in government, she tried to get Mrs. Burks to become a member, but in order to become a member you had to submit an application and then that had to be voted on by the existing members and they voted her down. She went off from that and structured her own organization and named the organization of the Women's Political Council and the Women's Political Council made Reverend King. And this white woman said black people and white people had something in common. They said, "We don't have a race problem. We've got a class problem." Class...at each other's throat. Boom.

And that was going to be King's next...

Yeah, and Dr. Ready [??] said every, for Democracy to work for any American Citizen, you're going to need a course of elementary Civics, elementary Civics. I tried to tell people [who say]...*Oh, they're going to get Trump!* But it's structured, see the Executive Branch of the government has never really been tested... And then they say, *Mueller is going to bring us salvation!* And I told them they've appointed a "yes man" to be the Attorney General, so what is...you see Trump never really tested his hand in power, he ain't showed no taxes. But we're wondering...everybody now is wondering how we're going to come out what we're in now.

[01:05:31]

My neighbor from New York, now he's and his auntie live in that house and he's about to go crazy because he wanting them to get Trump. But anyway, it's just another thing...human beings is just what we are. Our education will be the key, how to understand, like the man said, education is like a map, if you've got a good map with a territory, you can navigate. They said one of my good friends talk about education, Alabama basketball team was going to play Tennessee State thirty years ago for a basketball tournament, that was before integration. They said they were going to leave Montgomery, Alabama and drive to Nashville, Tennessee because they were going to play first thing that morning but they didn't want to have to sleep on the bus so they would leave at the right time for them arrive into Nashville. So the night they got ready to leave Montgomery the bus driver had a stomach virus and they had to get another person to drive the bus, but this man [was] the best driver but he couldn't read and so the coach knew the man couldn't read but he was a good bus driver so they got him on the bus and the basketball team and they got to Birmingham and all the players and the coach went to sleep. That man was still driving, a few miles out of Birmingham the bus stopped. The bus driver got off "Oh Lord! I done messed up! So the coach jumped because they thought he hit something and the coach said, "What's the matter? What's the matter?" He said, "I've done got you up here in Detroit!" "Detroit?!" So the coach looked at him and said, "Why do you know that?" He looked at the sign and the sign said, "Detour." [laughing] See education was the key.

...Don't care what they do but under systems put together it's another...you don't find any Queen Elizabeth's children coming to America, 'cause the white man left because they came for better living conditions but they did have the sense enough to build some of the top universities in the New England area and I feel so bad about some of the children. My white friend that collected during the Movement what Reverend King and Jim Pepper [assumed spelling] the photographer, gave all of this stuff to the archives and then the information they got from Bob's Smith [assumed spelling] they wanted to do for Harvard University's School of Journalism...where they got that information. Now that they've got it, ain't nothing that they're going do with it.

What do you think should be done with it?

Well, the point is they had the foresight, now it's history now. You can see something with your brain and you can bypass it but you've got to be able to see as an individual, collectively, you know that's one thing, but individually we've got to be able to navigate the territory. Like one man said, "I'd rather be able to teach my child how to survive than for him to be a dead militant." See, we've got to face reality, like the churches, our churches let them down, too. See we ain't got no more educated people, you know. Like King, see like one thing with Reverend King, that systematic... Boston Theological Seminary.

I got mad with Yale University a few months ago with Judge Myron Thomas he finished Yale and I was his barber. Jimmy Carter appointed him, the first black judge from Montgomery and so he was invited to go back to Yale and he invited me along with his guests and so we got to Yale and I was completely out of char...you know I was completely out ranked, you know and so when they had 1300 people for the dinner. So at the dinner Judge Myron Thomas introduced his other guests and his family members and he said my barber is here from Montgomery and he said he was also Martin Luther King's barber and said, he knows a lot of stories. So after dinner was over they had a reception with the faculty and Judge Myron Thomas...so after the reception we was all in the room having a party, drinking and so one of the faculty members came up and said, "Will you tell us one of the stories about King?" Whew, well you know, me a barber, a and him a university faculty member, so I couldn't...my mind just went blank. But I did remember an interview in the barbershop and I thought that I knew what happened at Yale so when I got up, I said, "Reverend King was in the barbershop one day and one of the Alabama State College Students asked him for an interview and he gave an interview for her class project and in the interview she asked Reverend King why did you come to Montgomery for your first church? And Reverend King said, "I always wanted to...John was one of my heroes in the ministry." And I thought of him to follow in my footsteps. She said, "Why did you go to Boston Theological Seminary for your Ph.D.? He said, I really wanted...I really applied for Yale." "But why you didn't go to Yale?" Reverend King said, "You're going to have to ask Yale that question." [She said,] "But you're a Nobel Peace Prize Winner?" [King said,] "But when I applied, I didn't have the Nobel Peace Prize." But that was a bad statement.

That was a perfect statement.

Yeah, but anyway it's a case where I could see on a human level, on a human level, I can see why we are what we are. You know, I used to get very frustrated coming back from Sam's just a while ago, a black man in front of me had two University of Alabama flags. Boy that just upset me knowing how they did black people at the University of Alabama. But man the spirit...to see them black boys on TV and we just can't compete with that kind of notoriety. The man gets the best players out of the best schools. See that's like what happened in the North with W.E.B. DuBois. See the North had the best schools, we had two students, two of my customers when they were babies, I cut their hair, they're daddy...and so M.I.T. sent for this girl, Kate B...

What's her last name?

B-i-c-k-e-l-s-t-a-f-f I think, something like that. M.I.T. sent for her and in the Atlanta airport something happened and she got...the sent a limousine for the girl, they sent it for her. She majored in electrical engineering. I had another boy, his mother was a speech writer for some of the Senators.

She was a black lady in Washington...his name was Lamar...and the mother, I can't think of her name. But she was a speech writer, when she came to Montgomery, she took over the Social Security system and her son...Harvard sent for him...he had a M.D...at the same time, and he would come back home while he was at school, I said, "Aaron [assumed spelling], you finished? By the time you finish college I'm going to be an old man and I want to be one of your first patients. He said, "Yes sir, Mr. Malden, I'm going to take care of you." So a few years later he invited me to a party. The company jet flew back into Montgomery, the McKensie [assumed spelling] Corporation. I said, "What happened?" He said, Mr. Malden, before I finished, McKensie made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

[01:14:00]

Then the girl, Kate Bickelstaff [assumed spelling], she was in school at M.I.T. And a Russian, a classmate...and her mother died, I went to the wake and she introduced me to her Russian husband [laughing]. You see they get the best brains, then and now, like W.E.B. DuBois, for example. They got the network...they get the best football players in University of Alabama. So when you get the best what else can you do? We're getting off the topic of Civil Rights [laughing].

It's fascinating. You have incredible stories. [look at notes] I don't know if I mentioned to you on the phone, I'm a curator for an exhibit at SITES with the Smithsonian. It's the traveling exhibition arm of the Smithsonian and we would love to have or borrow any three-dimensional objects. Do you have anything from the barbershop that we would be able to travel?

I told Mr. Preston, I gave him the program of the 90th anniversary. And I had a shaving mug out there, it's all beat up. I have to think...some scissors somewhere that I used at that time.

That would be wonderful. I'll be in touch.

I would just give it to you, the shaving mug, the lather machine, you know what you make lather with? I could see if I could get...I left some things over at the shop. There are some clippers over there.

That would be amazing. Yes. I'll be in touch about that.

Are there any stories that you want to tell that you haven't shared?

Like I've said, I like to give credit to the ladies [Mary Fair Burks and Jo Ann Robinson] who started the Movement...how Reverend King was nominated the man who nominated him to become the President [of the MIA - Montgomery Improvement Association] and how he gave up his opportunity to become President. See the two black ladies and one of the black men they felt at that time they needed an organization and they felt it would be better if a black mayor would be a better leader than one of them, but it was their idea. It was Mary Fair Burks and Jo Ann Robinson and she saw the friction between these two black men in Montgomery. E.D. Nixon was over at the N.A.A.C.P. Miss Rosa Parks was his recording secretary. A. Phillip Randolph taught him and they're the ones, A. Phillip Randolph the one that organized the March on Washington [where] the "I Have a Dream" speech...So Mr. Nixon had a grade A education, I was cutting his son's...see that Walt Disney movie...he's the one that played...that was Nixon's son for the Walt Disney movie. And

then Mr. Lewis had a master's degree in physical education from Tennessee State University and they did not get along with each other. Mr. Lewis lived half a block from the barbershop...

Are you talking about John Lewis?

No. Rufus Lewis, I'll show you a picture of him in a minute. So Rufus Lewis he had a thing, he'd come around and teach the people how to fill out the application to vote and he had a letter to test...it had ten questions that they give you and if you fail five you have to take it over again. So Mr. Lewis took me down to take the test and that's how I got a chance to vote back in the 50s. And they did not get along, Mr. Nixon and Mr. Lewis did not get along they had two different ideologies, they were worlds apart. So when Reverend King came they got Mrs. Robinson and Mrs. Burks got those old two black men together and said we would like you to be President of this organization, there's a lot of other things went into it but this was the basics of what I'm trying to get over to you, for this organization, and they agreed. But when it was brought to a vote and the people in the meeting vote for either one of you to be the first President, but Mr. Lewis was a member of Reverend King's church and a member of Reverend King's fraternity, he knew if it came to a legitimate vote the N.A.A.C.P. at that time had more members than any other organization in Montgomery. But he knew, Mr. Lewis, the night of the day of the election, Mr. Lewis, he told me the story himself. He gave me his picture with Jimmy Carter, I've got it in the hall. He gave me the picture and he knew that the N.A.A.C.P. [with all their members] he got more people to go around to go to that meeting and put Reverend King's name in the nomination instead of his and all were in favor and that's how Reverend King got to be the first president [of the MIA - Montgomery Improvement Association] I'll show it to you when I take this off. And that was a fact. And then Mr. Lewis got sick and I was looking around here one day, something told me, it just got in my mind and I don't know how it got in my mind and I went to see Mr. Lewis. He was dying, he died five days later, I've got a picture of him...I walked in his house and when I walked in, he *knew* what I had come for, for him to verify what he had told me. And before I opened my mouth, he told me to get the Bible. That really got to me, "Get the Bible." He knew I was going to ask him if the story he told me was true, so he told me to get the Bible he was going to put his hand to swear on it and that was a fact. And I'll show you the picture he gave me before you leave. [laughing] That blew my mind...he wasn't going to tell a lie...

He was going to swear...

...he was going to swear honest to God's truth how you read the election and then in the history books I tried to explain it, but it's gotten mixed up. Me and another guy...I was telling him that's what was a part of the history that never did come out because how he rigged it. He knew exactly how many people, basically the N.A.A.C.P. were going to bring so in order to get this man elected when he said...see he put the man's name as a nomination. *I'm putting Martin Luther King*, but he knew Reverend King and he remembered Reverend King's fraternity and Reverend King's church. I'll show you the picture. I've got both of the pictures out there. I'll show them to you. See now that not something your going to see in the history books

No, no.

01:21:05

Well you know they're so many stories about all that other stuff but... Reverend Abernathy, Reverend King... had a hard way to go with that other part of the story you know. When Abernathy first came to Montgomery. Reverend Abernathy was the youngest, about the same age group when they started being running buddies, you know.

Are you talking about Abernathy?

Mmm hmmm... you had reverend Powell... every person in there was highly educated. Reverend King was still in school, Boston Theological... hell I cut Benjamin Mays hair one time and I felt my brains improved. [smile] I asked Mays "How did you do at the University of Chicago?" He said, "I did pretty good." He said, "I was Magnum Cum Laude." [laughing] He came and did his last sermon at the First Baptist Church and in his last sermon he said the American white man is not going to give up his advantage point the only way they give it up is to cease to be profitable and we darn sure can't take it from them." That was Benjamin Mays' last sermon he preached at the First Baptist Church. And what got Vernon Johns fired, Mr. Nesbitt called me, I lived two blocks from Mr. Nesbitt, he called me one Sunday and said, "Nelson, you going to church?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Can I get a ride?" He said, "I put my car in the shop and it won't be ready until Monday." I said, "Sure, I'll pick you up." I was the usher in the church and Mr. Nesbitt was an official member, he was on the board, search committee, you know to bring preachers in, he brought Vernon Johns like he brought Reverend King. So I said, "Sure." And I had cut Vernon Johns hair several times and we'd broke up two or three fights in the barbershop from Vernon Johns, you know he had a hot temper, and one day he came in the barbershop selling watermelons and one of the customers said, "How much a watermelon?" He said, "a dollar." The man said, "I can buy watermelons like that at [somewhere else] for fifty cents." Well Johns said, "Sometimes it's best to keep your Goddamned mouth closed." He said, [inaudible]... they started to fight and we broke them up. So we go to church and the white man in the church was from Switzerland. It was very rare to see a white man in church at that time, but it was people that read about Vernon Johns about his sermon he published in 1926, it was one of the ten best sermons, I guess the white people that was in that category with sermons and all this stuff if they coming through Montgomery they going to come and see who is this black man? So they would come to the church. And so that particular Sunday the little white man was in church and he was right in front of me, I was behind him. Johns starts, he said, "The American white man can go anywhere in the world at one time, cash a check when he's paid, he needs no identification except his white face." But he said, "I can foresee that one day they're going to take a battalion of tanks for him to go to the outhouse...." You know what an outhouse is?

[Nodding yes]

So after the sermon was over Deacon ??? and Deacon Randall called for an emergency meeting, the emergency meeting would take place in the basement. Mr. Nesbitt said "I didn't know anything about this meeting. I can get a ride from some other member." I said, "I don't have anything to do, I can wait." And so I went down and stood up at the front door of Dexter Church and the meeting took place in the back. And Deacon Randall said, "You really embarrassed us today," he told Vernon Johns. He said, "What did I do?" He said, "You saw that white man in the church, why are you talking about 'it's going to take a battalion of tanks to go to the outhouse?'" Johns said, "I wasn't trying to hurt the white man, or embarrass him, I was just trying to help him. Unless the white man changes his ways, I can foresee that one day." And I start thinking in my head, here we are in 2016 and we get a man named Trump. He said, that "I can foresee that unless the white man changes he's going to have problems through world policy and we're not going to be looking at America right.

And so then Johns gets mad and he starts changing colors he said, “Well damnit, I’ll tell you what I’m going to do, the next time I see a damn white man I’m going to say what I really wanted to say.” And they were scared because he would use profanity in church and I was standing there and I’d already broke up two fights in the barbershop. So he said, “Next time I see a white man, I’m going to say what I really wanted to say. He said, I can foresee if the American white man doesn’t change his ways, it’s going to take a battalion of tanks to go the S-H-I-T-H-O-U-S-E.” And that was his last sermon. [laughing] Oh boy, he was something. But he...that was back in 1950s...and his wife was a musician the school at Alabama State. And then we get a man named Trump.

END [1:26:56]