

Abraham Woods: —of the Great Depression, was born in 1928. And of course, I can only come up to the point of my remembrance being in elementary school. And of course, do have some vague remembrances of kindergarten and some other little situations, but then high school and on beyond.

Stacey Scales: Do you remember your grandparents?

Abraham Woods: Yes, I remember my paternal grandmother, and I remember my maternal grandfather. But the others, I do not remember. In fact, my maternal grandfather had some Cherokee Indian in him, and I guess some Indian blood runs in the family. At least we've taken some pride in that, and certainly tried to account for the fact of our involvement and the struggle to some extent. And of course, the fact that we were a descendant from Indian, from African Chiefs kings, and whatnot.

Stacey Scales: Did your grandparents or parents ever speak of some of the segregation during their day?

Abraham Woods: Yes. And of course they were people who had become conditioned to seek to try to stay in that place. And they counted us you in that manner. Certainly, my paternal grandmother, she would not have dared to said anything White folk out of the way, which was not to their liking. She certainly gave us the impression that we had to seek to please them at all times.

Abraham Woods: I used to pick cotton with her on occasion. It was quite an interesting thing to meet then the long rows of cotton, the long cotton sacks and the sacks that you never fill up. And it was amazing to me. So I got an idea of the laborious activity that is,, and sun up to sun down. Of course I didn't have to stay out there, and then getting little money because it was amazing how little money they got.

Stacey Scales: How much did they get? What did you get?

Abraham Woods: Well, a penny was something in that day. You got a nickle you were doing good, you see, for a child. But in that, keeping with that, my mother used to wash for some White people. She used to wash an on and a huge load of clothes, and I remember very vividly picking the clothes up. She'd wash them, she would iron them and then she'd send them back, and we get 50 cents, you see. And of course, we always look forward to it because she was going to buy a Virginia bread to share the Virginia bread with us.

Abraham Woods: And of course hearing White men refer to my father as "boy," as I began to get older, and to say things to him, disrespectful, you know, and he accepted it. And sometimes I was very embarrassed. This is your father, you look up to him, and here is man talking to him like "Boy" and this and this sort of stuff. And my father accepted that, you see and that sort of thing.

Stacey Scales: What did he do?

Abraham Woods: What did I do?

Stacey Scales: What was your father's job?

Abraham Woods: Well my father worked at a pipe shop. He was an iron worker. He worked at McWane Pipe shop for long years there. But some of this Black rage eventually came out in him. He got tired of being harassed by some of the Whites on the job, so he picked up a shovel and went to war with one. He even took the wheelbarrow and threw it at him. And from that they forward, they said he was crazy. "Don't mess with that crazy, that nigger." (laughs)

Abraham Woods: You see, we always look back at that today and laugh, but it sort of gave me a sort sense of satisfaction that he was striking back at the system of racism and discrimination and that sort of thing. And of course he survived. A whole lot of Blacks would not have survived. They've been fired, they've been messed up all kind of way, they might have been might thrown them in jail and this sort of thing. But all the policemen were White, and in fact, everybody was amounted to anything coming up in the White world.

Abraham Woods: In fact, when I got to high school, I had an eyeopener. I went to Parker High School, they were teaching a Black history course there. The book was offered by Carter G. Woodson, and I never forget the name of the book was Negro Makers of History. And that book was an eye opener to me because I did not know that Negroes, people of color, had made such outstanding contributions, and had accomplished many significant achievements. And it was just an eye opener to me. It gave me a greater sense of pride and self-esteem really, because—

Stacey Scales: Who was your teacher?

Abraham Woods: Dr. Hale, he was a teacher. Dr. Hale was a teacher and his son comes over. His son teaches at the University of [indistinct 00:07:27]. And I've had the opportunity to go over and visit, speak to Martin Luther King Jr. celebration. But I'll never forget Dr. Hale and that course. And of course, after I got to Morehouse too, Dr. Benjamin Mays would speak to us in Chapel. We'd rather go to Chapel and hear Mays speak than eat. I'll never forget Mays and chapel presentation on occasion as he talked about the racism and the discrimination and whatnot, Jim Crow. Mays would say he had a sort of a brogue, "I would not be a Jim Crow Negro," because some of us were going to the theaters in Atlanta, and you had to go up in the gallery and that was the highest point.

Abraham Woods: He said, "I would not take the wings of a bird and go there up in the gallery. I would not go around to the side of a restaurant to a hole in the wall to get a sandwich. I would not be a Jim Crow Negro." Which meant that we should have enough pride to stay out of those places, you see. And of course, he helped to mold my thinking. King was there. I saw him all off the distance. Didn't know that he was going to amount to what he did at that time. I did not finish Morehouse. I became ill, went into the ministry later, and finished my education going to Daniel Payne College, Baptist College, Miles College, University of Alabama. But I became involved after I got back home from Morehouse, I became involved with one of the community

leaders who was seeking to get people registered to vote.

Abraham Woods: Mr. Patterson, I'll never forget him. His voice seemed to be one of the long voices in the community doing that. And he was working with the NAACP at that time. I always admired Mr. Patterson for that. And sometime later, I had an opportunity to work with the NAACP and trying to get out to vote. Well, not get out to vote, but to get people registered to vote, you see. Mrs. Bernice Johnson was a Christian who worked. Mr. Patterson Was the NAACP voter registration chairperson for the nation at that time, and his headquarters was in the masonic temple.

Abraham Woods: So my getting started with the civil rights organization and then the fact that I had long before an opportunity to try to do something to get back at the system, because it was a humiliating system that took advantage of Black people and in all kinds of ways, you see. The kind of schools that we went to, dilapidated and you saw the schools that the White children went to, and they had the best of everything. You see, if you wasn't strong, you would start accepting that as what you were worthy of, you see.

Stacey Scales: Where did you live in Birmingham?

Abraham Woods: I grew up in part of town called East Thomas, and went to the East Thomas Elementary School and my people were poor. They were on welfare. Time, my father was not working, I remember being on welfare. And I also remember what turned out to be a very painful kind of experience for me. Father wasn't working and the salaries you made when you did work when you had a lot of children was not enough to go around. And we got way behind in our house notes, and we were set outdoors. In fact, I never will forget that traumatic experience of the White chair coming and they were the cruel men, and just set all of our furniture and all of our stuff out on the side of the road.

Stacey Scales: Did your community ever get together?

Abraham Woods: Well, the neighbors sought to be very helpful, but at the time, I guess the experience was so traumatic and I was so upset until the thing that stayed with me the most was the pain and humiliation at that time. I guess I'm just going to get you guess, now. I guess I was somewhere around 12 years old at that time. 12 years old at that time.

Stacey Scales: So at what age did you recognize that Jim Crow existed for the system?

Abraham Woods: Oh, I don't know how old I was when I recognized that, it's just sort of a thing —you couldn't fail to see that when you were old enough to look around and see what was going on in the community. Even in kindergarten, I recognize that because you came to believe that it was a White world and that White people were supposed to dominate being this, that and the other. In the kindergarten, I remember this experience, they told us that Santa Claus was coming to visit us, and you know how little children were all excited. And I never will forget this, Methodist church on 11th Coast [indistinct 00:14:17] in the kindergarten, and we'd been talking about it for a long time to our mothers, "Santa Claus coming." We were all excited to see Santa.

Abraham Woods: And so we were in the church during the time, and the teacher opened the door to let Santa Claus in, and it was a Black man dressed up in the Santa Claus suit. And it almost frightened us to death instead of meeting Santa Claus, you should have seen the children screaming and hollering in the classroom. (laughing) We'd never seen the Black Santa. And he was real dark too. We never seen the Black Santa Claus. Said "This is impossible. This is not Santa Claus." So it was a traumatic experience. You're just screaming out and yelling. (laughing)

Abraham Woods: So it just goes to show you how much that we had accepted the superiority of White folk and that White folk ought to be doing this and that we had no part and no place, you see. That was the Jim Crow society thing. You stayed in your place and things you did not do.

Stacey Scales: So what did your family do on occasions like Christmas? Could you explain the gathering?

Abraham Woods: Well, they cooked a whole lot to eat, and they got us —they did the best they could with the toys. Sometime it was very skimpy. I'll never forget, I asked for a cowboy suit and they got me a cowboy suit. And it was a cowboy suit, and it was all sort of fuzzy on the front leg, and wasn't on suit in the back. The back was out. I was real disappointed some of the other fellas whose families were much better off, they had all the full cowboy suits, and I looked all right in front, but when I turned around —And not only that, but a big boy when we all wanted BB's, air rifles and that sort of thing. So, the fellows whose families were a little more economically ahead, they got automatic rifles, the pump. My family got me a single shot, you see. So, shoot one time, you had to put another in it.

Abraham Woods: So I got to be a pretty expert marksman. See, because if I missed it the first time, I didn't have a time or chance to load it up again to get them, you see. But those were the days when the black eyed peas and butter beans were too expensive to buy for some Black families.

Stacey Scales: Did they ever go to outings? Your family?

Abraham Woods: Yeah, picnics.

Stacey Scales: Where would they go?

Abraham Woods: On occasion. There used to be a place called Artesian Well somewhere. I'll never forget where we'd go for picnic, but the thing that caught my attention were the police there. I'll never forget those motorcycle scout policemen. With the big boots, and they were there to keep order. I think it was sponsored maybe by where he worked at or something, this sort of thing. And they would provide barbecue watermelons and stuff like that for the workers. And of course the schools and the churches too. This always struck me, the churches. You couldn't go to the White churches, you see, and this sort of thing.

Abraham Woods: And so as you grew, you began to really be impacted upon by the inconsistencies in the society. Some people continue to accept them, I guess. But as you became more conscious and aware, you

became a little more sicker of the situation. I remember you used to pass Kiddyland Park, beautiful park where White children be out there playing, and you want to go so bad, and you just, you couldn't go. And of course the sweet cars and buses when you road them, you had to sit behind the Colored sign. And if you were sitting down behind the Colored sign, the White side got crowded, they make you get up, and you had to stand up, and the White folks would sit down, you see. It became such an accepted thing, and Negroes, they'd tell you to get up, "You got to get up now," just accepting this whole thing.

Abraham Woods: And the water fountains, the Colored water fountain was always skimpier, than the White ones usually have many instances at one that sat on the floor. Black somewhere, had just a little side thing, and all of that. And White toilets, and all of that.

Stacey Scales: Did people think that was different? Was different?

Abraham Woods: That the water was different? There always was a curiosity. And on occasion, when you could slip and drink a few swallows of White water, nobody was looking, you'd be very careful nobody was there, you'd want to taste the difference you see. And it seemed like to me, that the White water was colder than the Black water, and cleaner. That seemed to be a difference. Maybe part of it was psychological.

Abraham Woods: Now, I know that the restrooms, the Whites had better restrooms, because on occasion if you ever got a chance to peep in one, sneak in one, if you were cleaning, you'd see they had better restrooms than Blacks. Everything is better than Blacks, you see.

Abraham Woods: And then policemen were tough on Black people. They beat you up at any instant. You better not bat your eyes, or they would beat you up, you see. Then they shoot you and nothing was done about, you see, and this sot of thing.

Stacey Scales: So, you were born here?

Abraham Woods: Yeah I was born here. I was born here.

Stacey Scales: What was your earliest jobs?

Abraham Woods: The earliest job, one of the earliest jobs I had was, well jobs at my house, I was a slop boy. We had some hogs. I had to go up on in the White folk community, what we call College Hill at that time, Birmingham Southern Colleges. Part of it later became Dynamite Hill, and soon in morning, I'd fill up my slop buckets out of their garbage can, come back and feed the hogs, you see.

Abraham Woods: I used to be a paper boy. That was one of the early jobs I had. Throwing papers. And another early job I had was cleaning at the White people house. I'll never forget being down, somebody would make you scrub the bathroom floor and I'd work for all day, get 60 cents a day. You see, Black folk live in the houses now on College Hill, on the same hill where Birmingham Southern College Hill. [indistinct 00:23:39] it was up there.

Stacey Scales: Could you tell me more about that?

Abraham Woods: That is adjacent to College Hill and White people lived up there in that community. And a Black family moved up there and of course, do you remember the name of the family? I don't remember the name of the family. I know whether it was Mark or what but I'm sure somebody might be able to tell you the name of the family. And White people resisted and resented Blacks moving into their communities. And so they started setting dynamite off in the yards, that sort of thing.

Abraham Woods: And the Klan and whatnot ride through and this sort thing. And I remember vividly the men, as more Blacks moved in, men would have to watch the houses. And on one occasion, I understand a fella in a car, White fella, some White folk came by, and they went to throw a stick of dynamite in the yard and these fellas cracked down on him with the Winchesters, and shot him. And they grabbed him, and put him in the car and they shot up the car and they sped off.

Stacey Scales: They grabbed —who grabbed who? I didn't—

Abraham Woods: The other people in the car grabbed the fella who was fixing to throw the dynamite and who got shot. And from that day to this day, we never heard anything about somebody getting shot up there, or a man got killed or nothing, you see. If he died, then they kept it secret. The seriousness of his wounds, they kept it secret. Never did come out that here's a man who was shot on Dynamite Hill, fixing to throw some dynamite, you see. They were just quiet.

Abraham Woods: But White folk resisted very violently to the movement of Blacks into their community. And of course, in later years they resisted by moving out. Thus, the White Flight, when they finally couldn't do anything about it, they started moving out. But they were very strict segregation laws about what communities you could stay in. And also Blacks and Whites being together in the same meeting, and this sort of thing, you see. And so it very racist society.

Stacey Scales: The neighborhood you stayed in, was it all Black?

Abraham Woods: Yes, it was all Black, certainly so. It was all Black. On the outskirts of it, the White folks lived and they lived upon the hill. We lived at the bottom of the hill. They lived up on the hill, and some of the poor people lived on Outskirts.

Stacey Scales: So where did your family do their shopping?

Abraham Woods: Well, they shopped downtown at Pizitz, Newberry's, Loveman's. And they went to the grocery store, never forget, my father having an account at a grocery store called Holcomb Grocery Store. And again, he got behind in his bill, and we was standing, all the children standing there and my father, he told him, "I'm not going to let you add right as you know, can't get nothing." My father standing there pleading with this White man, "Please lend us some groceries, we'll pay you," and so on.

Abraham Woods: I'll never forget, never forget. That's very humiliating and very embarrassing, this sort thing. And I thank the White man that finally relented and said, "I'm going to let you have so and so, but you're not putting [indistinct 00:28:00]."

Stacey Scales: So you had a lot of brothers and sisters?

Abraham Woods: I'm the oldest of 11 children who lived. The twins had passed, my mother did, but I was the oldest of 11 children. So I had to sort of look after the other children. Some of the younger children learn how to cook, keep the house, because when my mother was down with another baby and this other thing, I had to sort of help out, you see. This sort of thing, you see. Yes indeed. So it was a struggle.

Abraham Woods: But in spite of that, life went on with us, and even under the oppression and the exploitation, we learned how to have some joy and some happiness, and that sort of thing. I'll never forget how creative my grandmother was when it came to providing something to eat. I came in one day having been playing hungry, and there wasn't seem not to be anything at the house to eat. Looked in the stove warmer, we call it being and old line stuff, some old cornbread. And I didn't want the cornbread, so I told my grandma was hungry.

Abraham Woods: So she said, "All right, I'll fix something." So she came in and she got that cornbread. So I told her, I said, "I don't want no corn bread." She said, "Shut up, boy." So she went and she got a skillet, black skillet and started crumbling it up and, got some onions and started cutting some onions up. And I don't know what else she did too because my mouth was stuck out. And she put it on the fire, I don't know what all she put in it. She was stirring something. And that why she called me in and said, "Come in." Gave me some in a plate. Said, "Eat that." Said, "Grandma, I didn't want this old corn bread. She, "Eat it, boy." I taste it. Man, it was good. I said, "Give me some more, grandma." She put it on my plate. I said, "Grandma, what this stuff is?" She said, "Boy, that's some cush." Cush. She had made it out of the old cold cornbread.

Abraham Woods: So Blacks learned how to be very creative. I remember the time when we had nothing, but my father had —they'd gotten a box of pig ears. Man, we had pig ears for breakfast. Took pig ears to school for lunch. Pig ears for supper. Pig ears, pig ears. I ate so many pig ears. Didn't want to see another pig ear. But we worked on that hog. Remind me of hog killing time. We'd all be happy when hog killing time would come. That was a happy time for us.

Stacey Scales: How would you kill the hog?

Abraham Woods: Well the men would get the hog. Before they killed the hog, they made a smaller pin and put a floor in it and put him in that pen, and kept him in that pen for a while where he couldn't exercise too much. He just start just getting fat, fat. And then they would take him, and they would kill him by taking the back part of the ax. And one of the men hit inside the head with the backside the ax, and then the other one had a knife. And when he would fall, the other one get him and cut his throat, and he would bleed out there. And then they had hot water boiling at the time. They had a barrel slanted, and had hot water in the barrel

and they'd drag him over and throw them up in the barrel in hot water, you see.

Abraham Woods: And then they would scrape all the hair off of him. And then they had a little thing erected where they could take him and hang him up. And they'd hang him up, but he'd hang up with his head down, his feet threaded. Then they would cut him open, you see.

Stacey Scales: Did they divide the meat up?

Abraham Woods: Oh yeah. Well what they do, they would give people fresh meat. A liver, tenderloin, and other kind of stuff. But the hams, they had a smokehouse. And the shoulders and things like that, they would usually hang that up in the smokehouse. And the white meat, side meat, they'd cut that up and they had a box where they put that in and put salt over it, salt it down, you see. That way they saved the meat and you had meat. You had bacon you could eat all through the year, and go to smokehouse and get you some ham and shoulders, and whatnot.

Abraham Woods: But they divided meat around. If this fellow was killing the hog, he would certainly share some of the meat with other neighbors. When they killed one, they would share, you see. And they would give us—they would also get the grease and make skins and cracklings. Crackling bread and pig skin. And also, they would give us a hog bladder. Balloons were high, then. They'd beat all the urine out of it, and then get a little stem or something to blow in it and they'd blow it up for you real big and that'd dry.

Abraham Woods: And we thought we had something, very big blue hog bladder, and this sort of thing. So we had some joy in the midst of all of the oppression and exploitation, you see. We played together, played games, and we enjoyed ourselves in spite of what the racism was, you see. But when you came in contact with Whites, one thing I noticed that you might grow up, you might play with the Whites while you're small. And then when they get larger, older, they take a different kind of attitude towards it.

Abraham Woods: So often, I never forget that I used to play with some White boys, and then later on they got larger, they sicced dogs on me and some of the other Negroes. We were going in that community, and they turned their dogs loose on us, that sort of thing. You learn to sort of fight back, you see. This kind of stuff, you see. But you had to be careful. You didn't go too far over the line because you knew what they did to smart Negroes, you see. They did something.

Stacey Scales: Did you have the same values as the parents and grandparents? Or did they change?

Abraham Woods: My values changed, and frankly, they had learned how to survive. Frankly, to tell you the truth, my perception now of people that we might call Uncle Toms, took the name [indistinct 00:36:40] during that day, may somewhat different than it had been at some other time. I'll tell you somewhat different because, I learned that it was a survival technique on the part our people, you see. If they had acted in other ways, then they might have been lynched. They may not have been around, you see. But I look upon it as a sort of a survival technique. You see? Because some went seem to have gone to the extreme. Because we had one lady to write a book behind the Ebony Mask. And I think it was very correct



that the Negroes might be smiling, but that's just a surface smile. Deep down in their hearts, that's really not the way they felt.

Abraham Woods: But they said to White people what they thought they wanted to hear, and they acted and these kind of ways because they wanted to please them, you see, and this sort of thing. But the lady said in the book, "We wore a mask." Our people did wear mask, you see? But so, I think it was technique of survival, which they use. And of course, those of us who've been so-called agitators and whatnot, I guess we wouldn't have been here to assume that role if some of our people had not gone along with the system. You see, they could have rebel and this sort of thing. And had that say and had that day and then go, you see.

Abraham Woods: So I can appreciate the survival technique and understand that, because some of our people went beyond that. So it was a delight when I got a chance to get back at the racism and the oppression and the exploitation, and that sort of thing. It was something grow up in you that you want to do something to try to deal with the system. And so, I guess that's one of the reasons that I became a hardened member of the Civil Rights struggle. It was an opportunity to try to dismantle so racist society and change things, you see. And then make the statement that we are somebody, you see. We're just not going to take it anymore, you see, and this sort of thing.

Stacey Scales: Did a lot of ministers speak against that before the Civil Rights era?

Abraham Woods: No, not to my knowledge.

Stacey Scales: Do you know of any women's groups that were involved the, I guess, early Civil Rights movement?

Abraham Woods: I really cannot think of any offhand, and not to say that there were not any. Just catching me right at spur the moment, and the vagueness of my memory, I would not say. But offhand I just can't remember any woman's group offhand that was involved.

Stacey Scales: Women's group in the church or anything?

Abraham Woods: Against racism?

Stacey Scales: Yes. Or provide for the people.

Abraham Woods: No, I just didn't see the women working like that. I didn't see the women working like that. Most of men didn't work like that, now. And of course that women had not really pushed to—we see women, course, Black women have always been dominant in many instances, but they start to protect their children, you see, and that sort of thing, from the oppression and Jim Crowism. I don't remember them fighting it too much.

Stacey Scales: Do you remember the first time you voted?

Abraham Woods: Yes, I do remember the first time I voted. I had to pay some poll taxes because poll taxes was cumulative. They made it like that to put Black folk at an economic disadvantage. And when you got to the point where you had this burning desire to try to become registered, and course you had a lot to go up against, but during the Civil Rights struggle, certainly being concerned about getting others to vote, you took the plan yourself, you see. And we had to teach people how to vote.

Abraham Woods: It was a long questionnaire for the whole lot of things on it explaining this, that, and the other. Situation was a little more relaxed at the time, but you had to ask a lot of questions and it was still difficult. And you had to pay your poll tax. And of course, it was —the first time you vote, it's a feeling that at last you are exercising something very precious, so far as American citizenship is concerned, you see. You didn't have too much to vote for, but the lesser the evils you see because White folk ran the thing. But just the idea, and that gave you a greater sense of pride and self-esteem, you see, when you were able to vote.

Stacey Scales: Did your parents vote?

Abraham Woods: Frankly, to tell you the truth, I don't ever remember my father voting. My mother voted. In later years after the poll tax and all of that was ruled out, yes, but way up the road he became registered.

Stacey Scales: Would you compare Birmingham in the forties and fifties to Birmingham now?

Abraham Woods: Well it's a new city in comparison to what it used to be. In fact, to tell you the truth, Black people felt like I did. We didn't feel like we were citizens, part of the city here. I mean, this was not our city. This was their city, and you came to city hall, you didn't have a good feeling. You either down there for some official or something there might not be in your best interest and that sort of thing. But with all White police partnered with racist leaders, certainly like Bull Connor. All Black folk do at City Hall was be janitors and maids, and that sort of stuff. All policemen, White. All firemen, White. People working there, White. People everywhere, White. All through the city, people who run the school system was White. You had some Black teachers in Black school, but White people ran everything. White clerks, everything.

Abraham Woods: It's a totally new city in comparison with a Black mayor, in the same city hall where a man like Bull Connor used to be, who was the personification of everything that's evil and oppressive about racism. Bull Connor was a personification of that. The man who turned dogs loose on the Black children, and did all he could to hold back the tide, you see. And certainly worked with the Klansmen, you see, and thier evil and diabolical activities. Now with a Black mayor, a predominantly Black city council, a Black police chief, a Black fire chief, a Black man head of the park and recreation situation, a Black man head of the street and sanitation department, a Black man who is the chief city attorney, and Black people serving as head of various boards throughout the city. A Black superintendent of education.