



Interview with Imogene Watkins Wilson

July 5, 1995

Transcript of an Interview about Life in the Jim Crow South
Memphis (Tenn.)

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Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University

Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life
in the Jim Crow South

Interview
with
IMOGENE WILSON
(DOB 4/15/24)

Memphis, Tennessee
July 5, 1995
Mausiki Stacey Scales,
Interviewer

Wilson: I-m-o-g-e-n-e W. Watkins Wilson, Imogene W. Wilson.

Scales: What are your earliest memories of Memphis?

Wilson: Well, let's see. Did you want to start with school?

Scales: Childhood. How far back do you remember, just growing up here in Memphis?

Wilson: Well, I grew up in North Memphis. My father was a physician and he had his office in North Memphis on Bellevue and Jackson. And he practiced all over Memphis. He was a graduate of Meharry back in 1911. And so he came to Memphis. He was originally from Baltimore, Maryland. My mother was originally from Tuskegee, Alabama and her family had moved here. Then he had come here early with the other graduates from Meharry and

settled here. Then they met eventually. She was a teacher.

Scales: What was your father's name?

Wilson: Dr. Thomas H. Watkins, Sr. And so he had settled here with a number of his classmates who had also set up practice here at that point. Quite a few of the doctors settled here after having come here from Nashville. So they were married in 1923. So he eventually moved to North Memphis and set up a practice. I was born a year later. I had a brother and sister.

So growing up was a very pleasant thing except for the fact that we lived on the north side and my parents had always done everything socially on the south side of town.

Scales: Why is that?

Wilson: That's where they had settled when they first came to Memphis. And moving out to North Memphis was quite a new experience because most of the people in North Memphis had migrated there from the rural areas. So you had a really different mix of people. And most of the people in South Memphis, I don't know, they came from all places. There wasn't any just particular place. But it happened that North Memphis was nearer to the rural areas at that point. Now, it's much more into the city and environs. So I went to grade school,

Klondike Elementary. It went as far as the sixth grade. And then I had to transfer to two other schools. One was Kearns Elementary. I was the valedictorian of my class at Kearns. When I was at Klondike, I was the spelling champion when I got to the sixth grade. And I continued to be the spelling champion for two years at Kearns. You know, the city has a contest. So I had a pleasant school life.

Scales: I was going to ask you a question about your father, excuse me?

Wilson: Okay.

Scales: Were there many black doctors here in the city?

Wilson: When he came, they had began to have many more. They had about -- oh, I don't know how many -- about ten of them, I think. Well, I guess that includes the dentists too. But when he came, there had been some but they increased as the years went by. And they formed the greater book of the black doctors until in the sixties when the more of the younger doctors began to come into town. And now, you just have a plethora of doctors. I couldn't even, I wouldn't even know if I saw them ... If I didn't know them when they were little boys, I wouldn't know them now. Because a lot of them come here from out of

town.

Scales: Did they deal with patients black and white?

Wilson: No, they just dealt with black patients. And they made calls on the patients. They made house calls. That was the way that it was done. Even the white physicians made house calls. There wasn't any such thing as ... People came to the offices too. But it was nothing to call a doctor at any hour of the night and he would pick up his bag and go. And went to the house to deliver the children. You could not go to the black hospital, the white hospitals. They didn't have any hospitals ... They finally had some hospitals somewhere in the thirties, but they were not the same quality of hospitals as you know today. And so for the most part, children were delivered at home. I was delivered at home. My brothers and sister were delivered at home. Everybody just about. It wasn't until after the War that ...

Scales: What war?

Wilson: World War II that, in the forties you know, that things began to change toward that. And it still was not until sometime in the seventies that black doctors were really accepted into the white hospitals to practice. However, I have

one daughter and she was born in a hospital that was for blacks.

Scales: Which hospital was that?

Wilson: That was East Hospital. That was the second year that it had been built. That was 1957. And it had only been built about two or three years. So she was one of the early patients there. It was a maternity hospital. But I guess they did most procedures, I mean most kinds of things were done there too. But she was born at ... that was one of the early hospitals that they had built. And it was still segregated. No whites. Whites practiced in there but only blacks were served there.

Scales: Did your father ever get a chance to work in the hospital here?

Wilson: No. He never did get to that point. There was another hospital that was built, Cottage Chapel Hospital. And Cottage Chapel Hospital, I don't know, it must have been built somewhere in the thirties. And it was built out in North Memphis. It was quite a thing. It was associated with the AME Church. That's how it got its name Cottage Chapel. And there were four brothers by the names of Martin and they had come here from some other place. But every one of them was a doctor. One was a pharmacist. One was a dentist. Two were medical men.

And the medical men, one of the medical Martins established it.

He was the first President of that hospital. And he established that hospital for some I frankly don't remember whether it still exists or not. I don't think it does.

I don't think they have anything like Cottage Chapel. It just shows you how far removed I am.

Scales: Did your father work there?

Wilson: He practiced there but he was quite an elderly person by the time it was built. And so he did not practice too much there. I'm sure he went there to visit patients to a point. But he practiced here for about sixty years. As I told you, he graduated from medical school in 1911. So he actually stopped practice was when I moved here and I had my family with me and moved my mother and father here with me. It was about, let's see, that was in 1963. So he stopped practicing around about that time because he'd gotten be quite up in years. And, of course, he lived until '71 and he was 96 when he died.

Scales: Considering that it was rare to have African American doctors way back then, did he ever share any stories about discrimination, challenges?

Wilson: Oh he did. He many of them. But it was the whole

gamut. It was the rule rather than the exception, you know. Everything was in a separate world. And black people, for the most part, operated as though they were in a separate entity. We had our own stores. We could go to the white store and buy but you for the most part, you had people who went into business for themselves on a smaller basis. They had their own parks and everything was separate. So you didn't think in terms of ... because it was a way of life. And, of course, he came from a large family and he, more or less, was a self made man. So he had put himself through college as well. He used to do work in the summer in New York City and make his money. Sometimes he worked for various people there who needed secretaries. He worked for a man who was a book publisher. And he worked whatever it took to get money to get back to school. This is what he did. And since he was from Baltimore, Maryland, he had not had quite the experience growing up the way that we had it here. Because Maryland being up east was a little more open, you know, and yet, they had their share of problems as black people. Because even up east it was very tight as far as segregation went. I think it's because he was busy doing things, whatever opportunities he found, he more or less went that route and did not have time to stop and worry about what he was deprived of. Because, in his view, if I can't get that this route, I'll go this route. And so, you know, while he was deprived of some of the things, I don't think he had the

deprivation in the way that some people had it. I don't know quite how to say that but when he came here, because he had a profession, there were things that he could do and be involved with that some of the people who were not educated couldn't. And he never had a problem associating with the white doctors or the white people; they respected him quite a lot. We never felt, what should I say? Subjugated. Because I guess we were more or less independent. So we didn't have to go through the business of being angry because the paycheck didn't come. Whatever he didn't get, he had to blame himself, you know? So we didn't grow up feeling anger in the fashion that we would feel it if somebody was always, you know, on our back. We lived in an area where it was all black.

Scales: That was in North Memphis.

Wilson: M-hm. But across, there was a through street kind of like a parkway would be, and that was called Jackson Avenue. That sort of divided the whites from the blacks. So across that street, all the whites lived all over there. So we weren't isolated from white people. And during the Depression, when all of the people would come around, homeless people we would call them today, but people who had lost jobs -- it was just a terrible time back there in that '29 year, whites would come to our door and knock on our door just as big for a handout. And

my mother would always ... They'd come. "Can I do something? I just want to make enough for a meal. If you don't have any work, can I have some food?" Mother might say, "I don't have any work for you to do, but I have some food." And so she would fix food and hand it to them through the door. In fact, more white people came to our door to get food than blacks. Well, I guess they didn't know they were in a black community sometimes.

You know, the communities were so close together. And then, I think they would see his sign being a doctor so I think this is what attracted them, perhaps, thinking they would get, you know, more. They didn't get more because we were just as bad off in a way, you know. Because when they couldn't pay your patients, then you had a short time too.

Scales: Did you ever begin to realize as a child that there were two societies?

Wilson: I knew it immediately. And my father and mother, they made us aware of it. They were children, white children, right to our backs, to our rear. And I can remember when we would go out to play, we did not have a sidewalk in front of our house at that point, but there was a sidewalk on the street behind us and we would always go back to that sidewalk to skate. If the white children were back there skating, they would soon clear the place because their parents had told them they couldn't play

with us. So when we would come home and tell my parents about it, then they would explain to us about what the situation really was. But my mother never was bitter about it. She just said, "They don't understand. You all go ahead and play. And if there's any problems come up, just come on home." And this is the way we did. And a little white girl would come ... I would be playing with my toys in the yard. We had a large field next to our home. She would come across the field and want to play with my doll. And, of course, I'm glad to have a friend. So I'd put my doll through the fence and she'd play with my doll and then she'd go on home. So one day, she came and she had a toy. And when I put my hand across there to play with hers, she wouldn't let me play with hers. And that was when I could see that she had been really brainwashed against -- I imagine they said ... I don't know whether they knew where she was or not, but she would come from a long distance. I guess a distance from as far as that corner to here, to come across the field. She would come across the field about that distance and up against our fence. You know how sometimes you have a hole in the fence. And that's where we would play from day to day. Yes, we would meet at the fence. But she would not let me play with her toys. So when I told my mother about it, she says, "Well, you don't need to go down there and carry your toys any more." And said, "You really don't need to go down to the fence any more." So I just stood there -- I'm like five or six, I

remember that -- because I could never understand why if I could let her play with mine she wouldn't let me play with hers. And we knew that, you know, there were children ... We were never ignorant of the fact but we just were not ... We were so self sufficient in a way, we had our own social life. So we really weren't dependent on them to do what we wanted to do.

Scales: Yeah, I heard, when you said that people would come and ask you, your family, for assistance during the Depression, but yet the children would be somewhat reluctant to play with you at times

Wilson: Now these people who would come, they were vagrants. They were people who, like I tell you, like the homeless people just going ... I have them coming even now. They'll come down the neighborhood. There's a shelter over here. It seems as though from time to time they fan out here and beg. And most of those are black that do this now. But in those days, when people didn't have jobs, it was a tough time. And people just didn't have any means of working. Mostly men. Once in awhile, you'd see a family that would be out there in the wagon or something and the man would come in wanting to know if we had some jobs for them to do. But these were white people down on their luck that were roaming the area and trying to find some work or food. And that's the kind. Now they weren't related to

these little children. These children were children who lived in various places. It's now an expressway but at that time, it was a street called Louis Street right behind my street and that was where all the white people lived. And they lived to the west of us. They lived to the south of us and they lived to the west of us. And Memphis has had that kind of pattern the whole time. Just like this neighborhood was all white.

Scales: What's this neighborhood called here?

Wilson: This is called the Glenview area. And this was all white until about 1960. And slowly people could get, families began to move out and move away, and blacks began to ... And once you have whites moving out, the rest of them fly, you know.

They just don't seem to be able to withstand the pain or the pattern. And the white flight. Actually these houses were better built than anything we could build and so, you know, we just were pleased to be able to find some houses that were in neat neighborhoods and what not. So this is how it became ... Of course, most of them moved out east and formed brand new neighborhoods. In those times, however, people weren't doing any much building because the economy, you know, was not that great.

Scales: So did most people rent their homes?

Wilson: Yes. You had a lot of homeowners and you had a lot of people in South Memphis owning homes and people in North Memphis who owned their homes. So black people have always owned property. But you didn't have all ... They didn't start building all the projects, all of the projects, until about ohhh, it was around the Roosevelt era, in the late thirties. They began to build the projects. Before that, the terminology that had been used was slums. The slum area. Now that implied ... Today, you hear the word more ghetto. You didn't hear that word. That word I don't think really came into existence in a big way until after World War II when you had more ghetto like in Europe. And I guess people coming back would refer to places as ghettos. And it meant the same thing. Slum was even worse than ghetto because ghetto implies a region. It implies a political district, or a district that has been inhabited by an ethnic group of some type. But a slum area is less than that because it implies everything is just run down. Everything is ramshackle. And when you have an area where you've got houses in the rear of a house and in the rear of a house, that's slum. And it can't get much worse. And at that point, back in the late twenties and the thirties, you had a lot of run down areas that they would have places in the rear of them -- little outhouses and little things. And black people had to live like that because most of them didn't have that much work. And half

the people were domestic workers. And they depended on white people for their livelihood. So, it was a boon when they started building projects. I think they went a little too far with it all over the country. But it was a good idea for awhile, you know, to give people decent housing. A lot of them did not know how to live because they'd never lived in a house with a toilet inside. Or a house where everybody had his own bedroom. A house where you had a kitchen and a dining room. That type of thing. And these, the first projects, were built by the government and they were built in North Memphis. As I said, North Memphis was a little bit less affluent than South Memphis for black people.

Scales: Did you all have your own businesses?

Wilson: Black businesses were flourishing more then than they have now. They had barber shops.

Scales: Do you remember any of those places?

Wilson: Well, you know, there wasn't anything really big. There was a barber shop down on Main Street. Oh, what was that called? It was quite a place because he did whites and blacks. It was a barber shop for blacks and whites. And this man ran it. I just can't remember the name, that man's name. It was

not too far from the hotels and so he would cater to a lot of the whites who would come in. And he had a lot of pullman porters who would come to town, who would come in and that wasn't too far from the railroad station. So everybody knew to come to that. It's been so long because it's been closed a long time. But that was one of the most well known barber shops. You might ask somebody who you talk with later about the barber shop that was down on Main Street near the Orpheum Theatre. I just can't remember the man's name. But he was there for years and years and years. And he catered to blacks and whites. And it only stopped when he died, I think. I think his daughter tried to carry it on but it didn't last long.

Scales: What other type of places were there? Could you just describe your neighborhood, how it was growing up? Or were there places you couldn't go? Or anything like that.

Wilson: Well, yes, you couldn't go to theatres, the movie theatres, unless you sat up in what we called the bird's roof. Oh, what did we call that thing? In other words, you sat up as far as possible. Whites could go in and sit on the first floor and they could sit in the balcony. But you had to sit in the Pigeon's Roost, I think that's what we called it. And you didn't go in the same entrance where they went. You would go up the fire escape. You went up the fire escape. They did it at

the Orpheum. They did it in the Warner Theatre. Every theatre in town. There was only two theatres that you could go to and go and sit where -- One was called the Ace Theatre, was in South Memphis, at Walker and Mississippi. And nothing but blacks were in the community, but they were always second and third run movies. They were never first run movies. But you could go there to the Ace Theatre and many, many people would go there. Then you had -- There was a theatre here in Orange Mound. Orange Mound is an area in town that is a very old community of black people. There was a theatre there but I just don't remember the name of that theatre. It's been long extinct. But only blacks could go there because that's all that lived in the neighborhood because the whites had all, you know, had everything. These other theatres were downtown on Main Street -- the Warner and the Orpheum and all the big places. And that was the part that I hated the most. In fact, I stopped going to them right after -- when I was in high school, that was the last time that I went down and sat up in that top. I vowed after I had done that this last time that I would never do that again because I had begun to understand how unfair it was. The other thing that was very foolish and traumatic thing was sitting in the back of the bus. It wasn't as bad here as it was in other places. But it was bad enough. You would get on and you were to fill up the back. Well, we always had a car so we didn't have to ride the buses much but when I started to school and

started to going across town to high school, I had to ride the bus.

Scales: How did you feel about having to go to the back then?

Wilson: I didn't feel it until I left home and was able to sit anywhere I wanted to. And then I got angry. But you took things for granted then. It was a way of life. When you've been drinking purple water and you figured that was all the water, and everybody else was drinking purple water, you just drank the purple water. Until you find out there's some green water that you can drink and then you want some of that green water. Oh, there's another thing. You'd go downtown and they had two fountains.

Scales: Where was this?

Wilson: At the department stores. Goldsmiths was the biggest department store. And you had Goldsmiths and you had, at that time, Lowens. All these were Jewish owned. We had at that time Goldsmiths, Breeze, and Lowensteins. And they were on Main Street. You had Gerbers. And they had two sets of fountains. My mother would never let us drink out of them because she resented having to drink out of -- There was no difference in the fountains except the white people didn't want to drink out

of the same fountain black people drank out of. And we used to ask them, you know, why. The same thing on the bus. You'd go to the bus and the white people would get in the seats in the front and the blacks sat in the back. And finally, that changed around somewhere in the sixties when the NAACP began to get active. The same thing is true of the libraries. You could not go to the main libraries.

Scales: Was there an all black library?

Wilson: There was an all black library, only one, on Vance Avenue. And there you had to wait for the books. You could not just go in there and get a book. If there was a book that was not ... if it was not in their file, you had to wait a few days or a week to get it. You couldn't go down to the main library and get it. You had to wait til they ordered it from the main library. It was an all black library. And it was more like a high school library. You know, it was limited. And they would not let you even go into the library. So the NAACP precipitated the change in the sixties where that was concerned. In fact, it was the fifties that they began to ... It was about the time Martin Luther King began to crusade in this area. And so they had a boycott. And what they did was to boycott the department stores to put pressure on them. And so, we were asked not to buy anything from the department stores and to just turn our

charge cards in or just don't use them. And they felt it. I mean, it was successful. When black people stopped buying at those stores, they felt it. They felt it with a vengeance.

Scales: Who were the local leaders here, I guess, before Martin Luther King?

Wilson: Well, you had many people who were involved with the NAACP. When you asked about the businesses, two of the biggest businesses were owned by Dr. Walker. It was owned by Dr. J.E. Walker. He had come here from Mississippi and opened an insurance company, established an insurance company which is the biggest ... Well, it's a large company now called Universal Life Insurance Company. And he also established a bank. But before he had established that bank, we had had two other banks here. Called the Sovereign Bank and I don't remember what the other one was. Then you had these other insurance companies that were established by blacks. The Union Protective. You know, they sponsored burial policies and things. Union Protective was established by one of the men was a Mr. Wheeler. And his son lives at the other end of this block, one of his sons. He had four sons and a daughter. And one son is now on city council. And he's also a minister of one of the biggest black churches here, one of Mr. Wheeler's sons. The other one was with the Union Protective Insurance Company and also became

big in the housing authority here. And I really don't know what he's doing now. I think he's still with MHA and he lives at the other end of this street. A third son, you've heard of Kirk Wheeler? The one who's the minister of the church on city council -- that's his son, one of his sons. Those were the people that were more or less in the forefront. You had some politicians. You had Lee. Oh, what's Lee's name? Oh, he used to call himself -- he was one of the first blacks in this area to get a title in the service of World War I and he kept that title all his life -- Lieutenant Lee. Lieutenant Lee was one of the ones that established another insurance company. That was the largest. Those were the biggest businesses that we had, black owned, and they employed a lot of black people. That was the Supreme Liberty Life which was a branch of the North Carolina Mutual. You had North Carolina Mutual, an arm of it. You had Supreme Liberty. And Lieutenant Lee was, I think he was with, I can't remember now -- I think it was Supreme Liberty. But basically that was his basic income, business. But he was quite a politician and he was with the Republican party. And the Republican party was the party of blacks in the south because we did not have a dual political set up. It was all Democrat. It was all Democrat. You had a person here named Ed Crump, E.H. Crump. That hospital was named for Crump. And Crump was more or less a boss who was the head of the Democratic. He had the power. He had power not only over black

people but white people.

Scales: When you say power, what do you mean?

Wilson: He could appoint and fire. He had authority to give out jobs to people and see that they had jobs or he could pull a job from under you. If a person wanted to teach, eventually they had to go across his desk and he had to decide whether or not that person would become a teacher. He had enormous power.

And he was a cotton man. A lot of money had been derived from cotton. And, of course, when you have money and can be involved in elections, then you -- He was the Newt Gingrich of the times, you know. He was quite the one to do the favors. The town has just gotten the reigns off of it. Because he had gotten so entrenched in the Democratic party, he called the shots across the state lines and what not. And, of course, the only time that his power diminished was when he lost the power to ... when the person that he favored for the elections lost to Estes Kefauver, who became a senator for Tennessee. So his power began to be deluded because then he could no longer call the shots.

Scales: How did he get all that power?

Wilson: Well, money.

Scales: He was a rich man.

Wilson: Well, I think he amassed real estate. It was really not as much money as really ... That's an interesting thing. He had money. But his personality was such that he controlled a lot. You ask a good question. When I was the youngest that I can recall, I kept hearing about Crump. And he really became so powerful politically, even today politics is one of those things where people get it by being bully. By bullying. They get it by getting people behind them, people who they do favors for. And so his came from a lot of business dealings, through having property. But you ask me a good question because I really can't answer that. That started long before I was on the scene. And by the time I was aware of him and the things that he did, you know, he was going off the scene. His power was. I think being big in the political scene put him in the position to do favors for people. It's like up in Congress. There's some people up there who are much more powerful than others. And they do it by persuasion. They do it by bribery. They do it by all kinds of things. Oh, I know where he first got his power. He was Mayor of Memphis. Uh-huh. And as Mayor, that was part of the politics that was involved. He got a lot of power through having ... I don't know which came first. I don't know which was the chicken and which was the egg. I don't know whether he

was so powerful that he became mayor or that he was mayor and became powerful. Now, maybe some of the other people who were on the scene before I would be better able to answer that.

Scales: What was his relationship with the African Americans?

Wilson: He was feared. He had people that he used so that he got along fine with them. W.C. Handy came to Memphis. He had an office down on Beale Street. And he wrote a lot of music. And he was from Florence, Alabama. Jazz was beginning to be very big here and Beale Street was a mecca for everything. Coming to Memphis and coming to Beale Street was like, in the early days, going to New York and going to Harlem. Anything that mattered, anything that was having anything to do with night life, fast life, everything was down on Beale Street. And it had begun in the early days when the Italians had been in Memphis. And the Italians had a lot of businesses down there. Breweries. Italians, in many ways, they bring a lot of old country things wherever they are. So they have a really tight knit community. So they owned a lot of night clubs and night spots and drinking places. And I think that spawned a lot of it, the things that were down and later became to be known, give Beale Street the flavor that it had. So you had a lot of ... I don't know what you know about a lot of these ... It's kind of like Rampart Street in New Orleans. It was that kind of life.

And Beale Street was a street that you didn't come to Memphis without seeing what Beale Street was all about. Anybody who wanted to shoot craps. I once wrote an article about Beale Street. Yeah, turn that off. [tape turned off] [End of Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

Wilson: ... had an office down on Beale Street and he was selected ... You know, he's the one that wrote Beale Street Blues, W.C. Handy. And he wrote the St. Louis Blues. And he wrote a lot of other kinds of blues. So he was the Duke Ellington of the time, you know. And so he was commissioned by Crump to write his campaign song. And he wrote this song, "Mr. Crump Don't Allow No Whiskey Playing In Here". Mr. Crump was also one of these fundamentalist Christians. He was a Puritan in a sense. I tell you Mr. Crump was a lot alike. What's this little fellow? Who was this little fellow who tried to run for President? This rich man.

Scales: Ross Perrot?

Wilson: He's just like Ross Perrot, that type of paternalism. He was a tall man with heavy white hair. Perrot is a little runt. But they share the philosophy. That's the kind of man; he knew everything about everything and what he said, this is

your morality. This is the way life ought to be. As I say, he didn't just espound that on black people, but he expected white people to follow through on that too. So, you know, for years we had what they called the Blue Laws. Nothing was open on Sunday but church. Nothing was open. You didn't play ball games on Sunday. You didn't do anything on Sunday but go to church. Of course, it wasn't Mr. Crump's thing but Mr. Crump made sure that nothing opened up either. So this song, "Mr. Crump Don't Allow No so-and-so Playing In Here". "We don't care what Mr. Crump don't allow; we're going to play our so-and-so anyhow. Mr. Crump don't allow" That's the way the song went. Oh, there was a whole lot of song. But anyhow, it won the election for Crump.

Scales: The song sounded like it was almost against him.

Wilson: It does but it was a play on the thing. I used to have it somewhere, I can't remember where that it now. He don't allow no ... The refrain was, "We don't care what Mr. Crump don't allow, we going to play it anyhow." But it was almost, it was dichotomy in a way, but that might not have been the song that won him the election. That might have been another one. But I do know that he did write a song that got Mr. Crump elected. That was the campaign song. And that was the beginning of around here having campaign songs when the people

wanted to run a race of some kind. And he didn't allow any black policemen at all. Didn't believe in black policemen, only white policemen. We didn't get black policemen for many years.

And then, when they did have black policemen, they weren't allowed to arrest white folks. The only people they could arrest was black folks. If they saw a white man over there shooting and witnessed it, they couldn't arrest him. They had to call white ones to arrest him. That was the mentality. It really wasn't until, let's see, somewhere in the fifties when they began to have black policemen. Then they just had a handful. Didn't have any black firemen. You had segregated schools and so you had black teachers. All black schools and all black teachers. All white schools and all white teachers. And, of course, ...

Scales: Excuse me, were your children's schools segregated? The schools you sent your children to?

Wilson: Oh yes. You went through white neighborhoods to get to the black school. You went through white neighborhoods. I mean, it wasn't any rhyme or reason. You would pass a big white high school to get to a black school. And we had neighborhood schools. We had neighborhood schools. But like I told you, in my neighborhood, the whites lived just across the main thoroughfare? Well, there was a school that I could get to in

five minutes. I couldn't go to that school. I had to go back over here somewhere to another school that was just for black children. And so it wasn't until in the seventies that they integrated schools. And that was when, you know, they had the national Supreme Court deemed it so. That is one of the reasons that Martin Luther King came to Memphis was because you only had black garbage men. And the garbage men were treated just like they were nothing. They weren't paid anything. If they had to stay off, they didn't get paid for that day. And they had to go in the back yard and face dogs, face anything. They would never know what they would face going in the back. And they were just treated very poorly. If it rained, it didn't matter. They had to still go out and pick up the garbage. And we had a mayor at that time who was very unsympathetic to things, you know, a white guy. His name was Lowe. And he refused to listen to the union. And it just began to be so terrible that the union decided it was just not going to take it any more. When they just asked for some simple things, you know, like give them some equipment, some raincoats and things to wear in the rain. That type of thing. His attitude was just, "They don't need it." He had been Commissioner of Sanitation. So then they had to call Martin Luther King in. And so that was when that changed. The NAACP had done so many things to help turn things around. They turned around the library. They instigated the desegregation bit and all that kind of thing. But it was when Martin Luther

King had to come and kind of work with that. Of course, you know, he was here when he died. We had a newspaper here. We had a black newspaper. We tried to have several newspapers here. But Memphis World was the first one that I can remember and yet, it was only ... It came out of Birmingham. And they had the Birmingham World. And so, it usually had the same news that was in the Birmingham World except they had a first page and a society page. So they had women writing on the society page on Memphis society and they had all the things that were happening in the black community -- not all of them but most of them, many of them.

Scales: Memphis World came out of Birmingham?

Wilson: M-hm. I forget who the man's name who was over down there. His name was Scott, that's what his name was. And he was the editor down in Birmingham. And so, what we would do would just send the stuff we had here and they would just make a new front page. That was it. So around in the fifties, knowing that we needed more than just a page, because Memphis has always been on the cutting edge of a lot of things and you had two colleges at that time here. You had Lemoyne College and you had a little college called Roger Williams College.

Scales: That was an African American institution?

Wilson: M-hm. It was small. And it was really to help train some of the ministers. We had a prominent minister here named Owens. He was very revered, very well thought of as a minister. He was educated and he was quite a speaker. So he was a Baptist and they named the college in his name. Changed from Roger Williams College to Owen College and they called it Owen Junior College. So between Lemoyne and Owen Junior College, you had a black institution, and of course, Lemoyne had been a high school before that. And a lot of the people sent their ... You only had two high schools in Memphis for a long time. And that was the one on the north side, and one on the south side.

Scales: What are the names of those?

Wilson: The one on the north side was called Manassas, M-a-n-a-s-s-a-s. Manassas High School. And all the people in North Memphis went to Manassas. And the one in South Memphis, first they had a school called Kortrecht, K-o-r-t-r-e-c-h-t. I don't know where the name came from. But obviously it was a white benefactor of some kind. K-o-r-t-r-e-c-h-t. So, then they established a new high school in South Memphis called Booker T. Washington, named after Booker T. Washington. And Kortrecht was no longer the high school. Booker T. Washington became the high school for the south side. So you had a north side and a south

side. For years, until the war, World War II, those were the only two high schools for blacks. The whites had about five or six high schools, you know. But all blacks in South Memphis went to Booker T., as we used to call it. And all the blacks went to Manassas on the North Side. I had an aunt who taught at Booker T. Washington and my mother sent me to Booker T. Washington. So that's how I happened to get on that bus every morning. To come to Booker T. Washington, you had to get a transfer, you know. So I got a transfer from my North Memphis elementary school to that. There's something I started to say by bringing up those high schools.

Scales: You were talking about the Williams School, Roger Williams College and how those came about.

Wilson: Okay.

Scales: Or Lemoyne High School and Owens Junior College.

Wilson: And that's where I got off at, back track to that. Lemoyne High School preceded Lemoyne College. And you had a lot of the Netherland whites from the east who were Congregationalists. And they came and many of them volunteered their services. And they began to make a real good college out of it. Lemoyne was the background for a lot of the prominent

people, black people, who are in big jobs today, came through Lemoyne College. Because it was quite a nice college. [phone rings; tape turned off] People who come from Tennessee State. Fisk was right up the line there in Nashville. And Fisk used to be -- oh, it was equal to Howard in its prestige. And to go to Fisk -- I would have liked to have gone to Fisk just as much as I wanted to go to Howard. But my father had gone to Howard. And he talked about it in such fond terms so that's how I happened to have that ambition to go there. So Lemoyne had spawned a lot of the people who ... well, we had an educated crowd. And so, it was foolish for us not to have a newspaper that better represents the community, the black community. And so the Chicago Defender sent representatives down here to see about establishing a paper down here. And they took the editor from the Memphis World and he was the first person to edit the paper. That was something like 1950. That was about 1950 or '52, 1951 or 1952. But he had been so entrenched in the ways of the Memphis World and the Birmingham World that he did not really do what they expected of him. Some of the ways that he had of doing things were quite alien to what the Defender publications had been used to doing. They had publications down in Kentucky and in Detroit and in different places. And they wanted to establish the same kind of publication in Memphis on a larger scale. The big papers around here were the Pittsburgh Courier that came out of Pittsburgh and it was a national paper

that had a very good readership. And the Chicago Defender and then there was the Afro American, a newspaper that came out of Baltimore. So they needed a paper here of the calibre of those papers. And so after Mr. Swingler, L.O. Swingler had been the editor for years, twenty-some years of the Memphis World, and so when they decided to do this, he was a ready made editor. And naturally, this was an opportunity for him to expand. But, as I say, after about six months when he wasn't really working out, they sent a person here to troubleshoot. Or more or less kind of give him some assistance. And eventually, that person became the editor of the paper. They sent him down here as general manager. So then he began to bring the paper up. Because he had been a foreign correspondent. His name was Alex Wilson. And of course, I was writing. I had already been involved in journalism and I was asked to write for the paper on the social level, society news. So, I married him. [chuckled] I have been trying my best to get this thing written but this is more or less

Scales: So you married the editor?

Wilson: I married the editor. And this is he. And, of course, that opened up a whole new chapter. And so I had gathered stuff. He was involved in a lot of civil rights cases. And of course, he was the editor. He brought the Tri-State

Defender a long ways. And by the time Little Rock, they were trying to get Little Rock integrated, he was dispatched to go and be in charge of the black journalists that were sent over there. So he took care of all the civil rights things that were in this area. He traveled all over Mississippi for the Emmett Till case and all that kind of thing. And, of course, by the time Little Rock came along, which was in 1957, he was beaten and from the blows that he suffered at that point, he eventually succumbed to that and after all of that was over, they promoted him to Chicago as editor of the Chicago Defender. But it proved to be a little much for him. It was a daily paper. And, of course, he died in 1960. But the newspaper was another business. When you asked me about business, it took me awhile to consider all the different things that we did to keep our community informed. There was insurance businesses. Of course, all kinds of hair businesses, you know, barber shops and beauty parlors. We had two drugs stores. We had a drug store. The South Memphis Drug Store, which was -- oh, what was that man's name? You had one located on Mississippi Boulevard, Mississippi and Walker. And you had one out on Florida Avenue; that was one of the Martin brothers. You know, I told you that one of them was a pharmacist, Dr. Martin had that out there. My father had an office together with one of the doctors, with one of the brothers who was a Martin, down on Beale Street. Oh, that was another thing. On Beale Street, you had all the major doctors,

black doctors, down there. The insurance company was down there; the bank was down there. Photographers were down there.

Oh, we had some good, excellent photographers. The best pictures that were ever made in Memphis were made by the Hooks Brothers. And Hooks Brothers, they're the parents and relatives of Ben Hooks who was just the Director of the NAACP. But you had the pictures that they took in their day are just as good today as far as even the quality of the paper and everything. They were very talented, artfully talented. And they could pose pictures so very well. And they took the major pictures of the day.

Scales: Were they the photographers for the newspapers?

Wilson: No, we had a fellow named Ernest Withers. That's another one that could tell you more stuff about Memphis. He's a contemporary of mine. He went to Manassas High School. While I was going to Booker Washington, he was going to Manassas.

Scales: ... interviewed him.

Wilson: Well, he's one of those who worked for the paper. He took this picture. Ernest Withers did. And he used to accompany him. Ernest Withers was one of the early policemen. And something happened. I don't know what happened. And he

didn't remain on the force. But with the training that he had gotten, it outfitted him well for getting around doing the work that he was doing. And he had an office down on Beale Street. And my husband used to have him, to go with him when he went on these dangerous missions out, you know, when Emmett Till was killed. Then they had a lot of lynchings down there in Mississippi. They had a lot of civil rights stuff down there. You had a man named Dr. T.R.M. Howard, very well known black physician, who established a clinic down in Bayou, Mississippi.

And he and his wife were quite active in the community civil rights wise, and of course, the whites could not stand that. And they did everything they could to run him out of town. And did run them out of town. The man had a thriving business. The climate of the area was, you know, if we don't want you to thrive and do well, we are going to run you out and we're going, you know, trump up things on you and make it hard for you. We had one of the biggest ball parks where all the black baseball players played ... was owned by one of the Martin brothers.

Scales: Where was that located?

Wilson: That was down on Crump and Lauderdale, which is now -- let me see -- It was on Lauderdale near what is now called Crump. Actually, the street was called Oury at that time. And of course, A. Philip Randolph was quite a union man and

organizer in the east. [static on the tape]

Scales: You were talking about where Lauderdale was.

Wilson: What is now called E.H. Crump, as I tell you -- this whole town has different things named after E.H. Crump, you know. So one of them is Crump Boulevard. That's one of the main thoroughfares of town. At one point, the name of that street was Oury. And what is now E.H. Crump is where the ball park was. That was not far from where Booker Washington is. And Booker Washington is on Lauderdale. So the stadium was right, it was a big ball park. And all of the baseball games were there. All the black players. It was just a popular place to go. I never went. I was younger and so I never saw any. By the time I was old enough to go and enjoy, I left Memphis. So I never did. But I passed it going to school sometimes when I was out in that area. Dr. Martin hosted the political ... They were trying to elect Dwight Eisenhower, I believe. Or was it before Dwight Eisenhower? The Republican party was the party, as I said, that blacks felt allegiance to. And so Lieutenant Lee and Dr. Martin, all of them, were black political figures here. Then you had another benevolent person, a very rich man, named Bob Church. Bob Church was about 9/10s white and 1/10th black. And he was quite powerful. He was quite wealthy. And in fact, at one point, his father had been the one to ...

Before my time we had a big yellow fever epidemic. And the town was bankrupt from dealing with it. And in order to do something, I don't know, to get enough money to foster something that had to be, or to float some bonds, he had to pull the town out of its poverty. And of course, that was quite a thing. Old Man Church had built a big park for black people down on Beale Street because black people could not go to the parks. All the parks were closed to black people. They couldn't go to the parks. They had a big confederate park on the river, on Front Street. You didn't even walk through there.

Scales: Why?

Wilson: You were black.

Scales: Would something happen to you if you walked through there?

Wilson: You were arrested. You'd be arrested.

Scales: You just wouldn't get caught down there.

Wilson: You wouldn't get caught going through there. If you were a maid and you were taking a little white child through there, you might could go through there. Then there was a park

... let me see where else. There was another park they had that you didn't go through. Oh yeah, Overton Park. That was named for one of the white benefactors, one of the white forefathers.

And you only went to the zoo one time a week. You went to the zoo one day a week.

Scales: Which day was that?

Wilson: Thursday. Went to the zoo one day a week, Thursday. That was usually the maid's day off in the white community. They gave Thursday off.

Scales: Was there a connection between that day and the zoo?

Wilson: That was it. That was the reason they chose that Thursday because that was usually the maid's day off in these white homes. So they figured that would be a good day for the blacks to go. I'm also told that if a holiday, like the Fourth of July, fell on that Thursday, then you went on Tuesday so that the white children could go on Thursday. And then, when you went to the zoo, you didn't ride the little ponies. They had little ponies and things that the little white children, they had for them to ride, you know. And concessions. But you went there, black children could not ... It was just pitiful to think about how deprived, you know. It was all calculated in

the South to keep the black person down. Because I think they didn't want to admit it but once you give a black person an education, he can do what you can do. And they didn't want that. So they made life just as deprived and miserable as possible to keep you back. They didn't have schools for a long time. That's one of the reasons that Lemoyne High School was there. Because a lot of the doctors and the professional people wanted their children to be educated. So after Lemoyne was started, they started a high school there and you had to pay to go to it. But then they established Booker T. Washington High School, or Kortrecht, and then people were able to go free. But the whole thing about this segregation thing, not desegregation but segregation, was to keep you separate. And to keep you from enjoying the benefits of life the way whites did. You just weren't supposed to do it because you were inferior. But, if in your family, they'd say, "Well, how do you know you're not as good as a white person?" you'd grow up thinking that. In my family, we were always told that we were good as anybody. I never have felt secondary to a white person. I felt equal to any of them and above many of them. And that's the way we were give that assurance, self esteem. A lot of black families gave that to their children. But, you know, when all a person ever sees is negative vibes coming back from a situation, he either fears that thing or feels subjugated. So you always have had people who felt that thing, especially if all their lives all

they ever did was serve white people. They felt like, you know, this is it. And a lot of times, you'd find them more loyal to the white people than other people because they were convinced that that wasn't ... Well, you got that right here in 1995. Where you have black people who will do anything that a white person thinks that they ought to. But it started back in those days.

Scales: Were there women's groups that organized against some of the

Wilson: There were women's groups who organized for the help of black women. You had the National Council of Negro Women. You had numerous clubs. My mother was one of the founders of a club that I'm in today that is, well, that club is about ... It was established in 1923. And all of these women were either wives of professional men or they were themselves professional.

They were either teachers or something like that. And they used to organize to read to cultural kinds of things. This is one of the ways that black women ... You had clubs that were organized among black women, black nurses. Women who were nurses. They had a nurses group. That was about the time that Jack and Jill Club of America -- have you ever heard of that? The National Jack and Jill Club organized for that very reason, because of all this lack of outlet for the black children of

middle class America who had the means to go places but were deprived of going places.

Scales: There was a Jack and Jill here?

Wilson: Oh yes. Jack and Jill has been here for years. I was a member of it when my daughter was born. And after a period of time, you out grow it when your children out grow it. And it's mostly for young parents, you know. Somewhere where you know the families. You know the parents. You have three or four friends who have children and you'd like for your children to play with those children. And so the club was a good outlet for that and people who thought alike about going places and doing things. So they would travel to where the conferences were, you know. If they had a conference in a given place, then that was your chance for you to meet people from all over the country like that. It's kind of an elite kind of thing but at the same time it was another way for black women to do, you know, get together and share a lot of common things.

Scales: What did the National Council of Negro Women do? What sort of things would they do in the local area?

Wilson: They sponsored cultural events. They sponsored lectures. They sponsored things that people wanted to do but

couldn't do in the white world. You know, concerts, fashion shows. They're still doing that. They're still doing it. Mary McCloud Bethune was one of the founders. And, you know, you're familiar with her?

Scales: Yes.

Wilson: She was one of the forerunners of women who tried to bring up the educational level, you know. And that was one of the ways that she had of getting women to get into lecture groups. And anything that's uplifting. Anything that promoted women. A lot of women were also second class citizens. A lot of women needed to go beyond just rearing a family. And in some cities, maybe it was the cooking of foods that brought women together. Some women sewing was the thing. So it depended on the ... Now since the early days, things have shifted where women are more into working. Women are more into going to school and being educated. So the emphasis of this National Council of Negro Women has escalated into a voter rights kind of thing. They do education among the groups on voter education. Civic kinds of things. Organize, showing them how to organize for political purposes. Sometimes it's a religious emphasis. It depends on what is necessary in the life of women in that community what their focus is on. And they raise funds many times to fund things. Focus on children. Sociological kinds of

things. But it depends. The National Council of Women is something to help women to come into the forefront and come into their own rather than be Mrs. So-and-so. Rather than just follow husbands. The time has changed where women now are more, you know, oriented into work life and careers. And you have so many women who are divorced and you have so many ... til they just need some other vehicle other than their children to focus.

Scales: Did the men respond well to that when the ladies of the town would decide to join those organizations?

Wilson: Most of the time. Most of the time those women were women who were already out there any way. You know. It wasn't a thing where, you know, "Ask my husband do you think I ought to joint that club" type of thing. They were already out there and they're meeting these women. So this was an interest. And the men themselves were involved in whatever, you know, whatever endeavor that they were in. A lot of the women were single women. You find a lot of single women are the ones who do things with the Girl Scouts and the Y. They're the ones anyway.

So they needed a group that would give them that vehicle through which they could operate. The women who were married, most of the men were probably involved, and many of them were professional, you know. Many of the women were teachers or their husbands were in their own worlds of business. So I don't

think that there has never been a conflict between, you know, whether a woman ... It wasn't so private. It wasn't any thing that a man wanted to join, you know. And it was just like you have women who are busy in their churches and in charge of things. So it was just a second kind of activity.

Scales: Did people ever address the visual icons of Jim Cross like the Aunt Jemima bottle? The images associated with, I guess, Mammies and things like that?

Wilson: We've always tackled that within the groups. And the sororities, I think, for the most part, were the _____ of ... You had to have a concerted effort to make an infoot road. And a lot of the club groups a lot of the time, this was discussed among ourselves. I know in the sororities, that's one of the things that sororities have long tried to address. Also the NAACP has always been active that way. So this is the way that they addressed it. They were not confrontational about it. Generally, there would be a discussion somewhere and somebody would decide they were going to take action. For instance, now my husband was the editor of the paper here. And unbeknownst to me, he and a group of his cohorts were behind a campaign to cause the white paper to start using titles. I write about it in here. I don't know whether it's in this article or not. Oh, here. I may have an extra article, this was published, that

addresses that. But this would be an example of how they tackled it. When he came to town, he tackled a lot of that. And as a newspaper, he had to keep in the background. Here it is. This is part of the thing where blacks here came together. The newspaper

Scales: What year was that?

Wilson: This was in the fifties, late fifties. What you were talking about was taking up a lot by the newspapers, the black newspapers. Typical of other local issues pursued by the Tri-State Defender was the censure of the Peabody Hotel for its discriminatory practices against black guests. Well, here you couldn't go to white hotels. And that's one of the reasons Martin Luther King was down at the Lorraine Hotel because he'd been staying at the white hotel and they shamed him and said, "You should be staying at a black hotel. You shouldn't be staying at a white hotel." But I think the people that killed him lured him down where they could find him. They didn't want to do what they were doing in the white hotel. I will always feel that they lured him down there. But the Peabody was one of those places you could not go into. So, in here it tells about a lot of the local issues. And we're talking about in the fifties, now. I don't know whether that's the period of time that

Scales: Yes.

Wilson: Explaining Peabody's policy as regarding blacks attending national meetings there, after several had been asked to leave sessions of the National Conference on Government. When they had these nationals, there was a lot of black people who had been from other parts of the country who were integrated already and when they came down here, then because the Peabody didn't want black people in there except as waiters and things, they wouldn't let them attend sessions. So the newspaper took up that. Had been asked to leave sessions of the National Conference on Government.

Scales: This says 1956.

Wilson: Yes, this happened in '56. Said we will not serve any Negroes any food and we will not house them. There are some scientific and professional groups who have less than two percent Negroes which we will accept. If the organization had just two percent Negroes, they'll accept them. We don't want to take issue -- It's just like Jackie Robinson would go and they would never let him stay with the team. He would always have to go find somewhere where he could room. Now, can you imagine having to do that? He's the only black one on the team and

everybody else can go in and enjoy but he'd have to go out. And he's humiliated that way. [End of Tape 1, Side B]

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

Wilson: ... manager at the Peabody told the Tri-State Defender, "We will not serve any Negroes any food and we will not house them. There are some scientific and professional groups who have less than two percent Negroes which we accept. We don't want to take care of political groups with mixed memberships at all. In addition, Negroes are expected to call at the porter's desk in the hotel, be escorted to the meetings, seated by themselves and leave the back way by the freight elevators." That happened in Memphis in 1956. The group left quietly. And see, they had approached this man about this because that was a discriminatory practice. "The group left quietly but that was not the end of the matter. After a professor who had brought his class to attend the forum," -- it started when this man brought his so he could sit in on sessions. And because of that, they couldn't. "So after the professor conferred with some influential persons, the class was finally admitted. Also teachers wishing to attend the South Side Chemical Conference held at the Peabody the following week were invited to attend sessions after arrangements were made by the publicity chairman of the Memphis Session of the American Chemical Society. Editor Wilson and the Tri-State," -- I wrote

this article in a two part thing during Black History Month back in the eighties. So I had to go back to the newspaper to make sure I had my facts straight. "Editor Wilson and the Tri-State Defender took up this cause presented by the Citizens Improvement Committee, a concerned group of black clergy, business and professional citizens who spearheaded a boycott against the ..." And this is what I was about to tell you about this. "When faced with all the different things that had happened, they said, you know, we need to boycott that paper." Because the paper had begun to do some things too.

Scales: The Commercial Appeal? What were they doing?

Wilson: I don't care how prominent you were, you were just Willie Brown. You weren't Reverend Willie Brown, you weren't Dr. Willie Brown. You weren't Professor Willie Brown. And then, if you referred to your wife, she was Suzie. She was not Mrs. Suzie, she was just Suzie. And anything they had about black people, they had behind it "Negro". They didn't just write about what happened. And the only thing they thought was worth printing in there was if you robbed a bank, if you killed somebody, if you were killed by somebody. The only thing they would do in the obituary, they wouldn't give you a title until you died. And they might put the "mister" in there when you died. [chuckles] And then, they wouldn't print news that was

really news about black people unless it was derogatory. So they were protesting the paper's policy of not using courtesy titles in addressing black citizens in their publication, as well as some other unacceptable practices. Reverend D. Warner Browning, who was pastor of Mt. Pisgah at that time, that's over in Orange Mound, a member of the Committee, published a lengthy well-worded article in the Tri-State Defender directed to the editor of the Commercial Appeal. Because they read everything the Tri-State Defender put in there.

Scales: It was a rivalry?

Wilson: They wanted to see what black folks were thinking. Now when my husband came and took over the paper, he had been working in the east with papers and he was not a black newspaperman; he was a newspaperman. You know what I'm saying?

He was a newspaperman period. And he was using the same practices because he had studied at the University of Missouri at Lincoln University. He had worked for all these newspapers and he was a foreign correspondent. And he knew what newspapering was all about. So when he would write things in there, it was not any more like what was in the World. The World was very prettied and watered down. They didn't want to offend the white folks. He did not offend the white folks. He just wrote was there. And a lot of times it would step on their

toes. And what was referred to even before this was something that the mayor had done that he didn't approve of. And he addressed the mayor in his editorial. Oh, the mayor, you know, Mayor Orville, he'd wanted people to think he was just a friend to the black man. Well, he was in his own way but he was also trying to cater to his wife constituency. And what he did was a slap in the face of black people for a particular thing he did.

So, whenever he would see something wrong in this city that white officials was doing, he'd write it in his editorial. And they were eager every week, they hung onto every word because they wanted to see what black people were thinking. So he helped to turn around a lot of things because for the first time you had somebody bold enough to say what they wanted to and weren't frightened of the powers that be. So finally, the Commissioner of Police invited him to come down. Said they wanted to talk with him. You had all these white policemen going around picking up black women and before they let them out of the car, they would rape them. Or have sex with them and tell them if they said anything about it what they would do to them. And so the women were too frightened to tell. And so much was happening. And a lot of times when they wanted to exert power over them, they'd get something on them and hold them over a barrel like that. And so black people weren't talking and telling things. And a lot of the white policemen were getting away with a lot of mess. So when people started

coming to his paper and telling him all of this and he confronted the Police Commissioner with it, he said, "If you give me proof, I'll see." He didn't believe it. And so he began to get proof and that's what [tape static] So, my point is that he was more of an activist kind of an editor. He would not back down and yet he was not a crusader in the sense that, you know, he stirred stuff up. He was merely mirroring what was going on.

Scales: So what did he write about? You said that he wrote about some of the things that people would bring to him.

Wilson: He would write about incidents that people had before kept in the quiet, kept in the dark. And people would come to him and tell him things on the Q.T. and he told them, always get the officer's name and the officer's number and all of that kind of thing. Some of the people that it would happen to, and other folks would say, well you can go to Mr. Wilson and he will see, and tell him about it. And so he began to amass information. He didn't print this stuff. He just got facts and details and took it and showed it to the Commissioner to convince him that what he was saying, there were real people behind it. It wasn't just hearsay. And things did start happening for better. Some of those men were fired. But it was not big front page news when they were fired. It was Internal Affairs kind of thing.

But it was the beginning of turning around some of the mess that had been swept under the carpet in the city. And it was because they feared his newspaper. They feared his putting it in the paper because that meant that black people were ... See, that was when Martin Luther King was just getting started. And they found that black people were now beginning to open up and do things. And so it was really the best thing that ever happened when they began to expose that stuff.

Scales: You said earlier that the Commissioner told him to come down. What happened then?

Wilson: To talk with him. He wanted to talk with him and find out. He showed a willingness to listen, the Commissioner did. That was Commissioner Armour and he was a Commissioner of fire and police. There were only three people. See, we didn't have a city council like we have today. We just had three men; they were the council. They were the judge and jury and everything else. You know, that's the way the white people had held things in tact because they didn't have so many people to have to make a decision. That's how Crump was strong.

Scales: What gave your husband that type of fearlessness?

Wilson: He was just a fearless man. He was six feet, almost

six feet five. And he was just a forceful person. He had had all these experiences in the Army. He'd been in the Marines. That was during World War II. And then he had gone back during the Korean War and served as foreign correspondent on the front line. And then he'd been a newspaperman for so long and had been worked for all these large newspapers. At that time, they weren't hiring black men in white newspapers, you know. But with his training, he was trained just like even a doctor who's trained in a black university gets the same kind of exposure as a white one in a white university. So he was a newspaperman period. So therefore, he was practicing his craft the way it should be practiced. He didn't limit himself to just thinking about black issues. He was thinking of the broader issues, you know. So that really was why they sent him down here to trouble shoot for this paper. And he eventually stayed on and became part of the community and was made editor, full editor of the paper. And, of course, the other man was fired and he went on to do something else. He got involved with political things. But this particular thing about, when you asked me about the Uncle Toms and the things, this was one of the ways they were addressing that. And this was one of the things that Reverend Browning who was pastor at Mt. Pisgah who was a member of this committee -- because see Alex got all these men who were insurance executives, some of whom who were in other businesses, and ministers, because they had influence, you know, in

churches, and so this man ... I don't know, Alex might have written this article but they let him put his name on it. Reverend [unclear] published a lengthy well worded article in the Tri-State directed to the editor of the Commercial Appeal. And what I was trying to get to was that the white people, after he began to talk with the Commissioners, they would not have a meeting of the Commissioners unless they got _____ of the Tri-State Defender because they knew that they were going to hear -- they were either going to talk to them through that paper or they were going to find out what black folks were thinking. And that was a turning point in the town. Because they found out that a lot of things they couldn't get away with like they had been. In which he categorically responded to the reasons given by the Commercial Appeal editor in defense of the paper's policies. The paper had no policies that were good really. They haven't done that much changing. They changed that because they almost lost the paper because again, black folks boycotted the paper. A lot of people haven't even renewed their subscription since then. Everybody used to get the Commercial Appeal. And all black people, they would religiously, just like they got the other paper. And when this happened, quietly, those men decided that they would buy up all the papers as fast as those carriers would come out, especially the ones that were going to the black neighborhoods, they would pay them off. All of these men were businessmen so they put money into a fund.

They paid them off, took the papers and threw them in the Mississippi River. And so they weren't getting out into the community.

Scales: So they would get all the papers that came to the neighborhood.

Wilson: That's right. And so no papers were coming to the black neighborhoods. They saw to it. They had a system. And he didn't tell me anything about it. I didn't know what he was doing. And one day I was at a beauty parlor and somebody brought it up. But that's what he was intending. They got the word out through beauty parlors. Everybody's got to go to the barber shop or the beauty parlor. So they would get the word out not to buy it. You'd kill your subscription and why. And the people cooperated. The publisher of the paper was over in Europe on vacation. And they were, "You better come back here because, you know, we're losing." They didn't realize how many black folks were buying it.

Scales: When did the boycott take place?

Wilson: It was during this period. It was quiet. Nobody knew who was behind it or anything. So he wrote, "Various groups have waited on the Commercial Appeal in attempts to have these

indignities corrected have met with arrogant and insulting rebuffs." They first tried to talk with them. "One group was told that Negroes did not deserve titles given to other people because they were not only immoral but amoral. That a very small percentage of Negroes living in Memphis were legally married. That if titles were given, that many white people of Mississippi would drop their paper. All these were excuses. It is saying in the first place that after 118 years, it has not done one thing to broaden the attitude and outlook of its clientele." This is quoted from this man's letter to the editor. "I want the titles that everyone else wants and enjoys because there's nothing in a democracy that is good for some of the people that is not good for everybody. The conclusion of the whole matter is that the Commercial Appeal has just about used up of its constitutional privileges and met few, if any, of its moral obligations of the peace and good will of the total community. And in the weeks that followed, mass riots were held in various churches." This actually happened here. "Further articles appeared from other persons and the Citizens Committee published a full page editorial entitled 'Why the people support the crusade against the Commercial Appeal' in the 8/24/57 issue of the Tri-State." They used the Tri-State Defender to do this. "An effective boycott which lasted over a period of weeks so effectively shut down circulation in the black neighborhoods -- it was 60% effective the first three days according to a

spokesman -- that the publisher cut short a European vacation and returned immediately to address the situation," it is said.

"The publication soon changed its policy." Now this man, Frank Algren, just died last week. He was in his nineties. "A letter from Frank Algren, the editor of the Commercial Appeal, confirmed his agreement to resolve the grievances of the Committee." This man died and I think they said he was 97. He died just last week. "The Citizens Committee voted to end the crusade against the Commercial Appeal effective September 21, 1957. The paper no longer designates" Now, since then, they no longer designate Negro following the mention of people of color. Every time it wrote something about black people, that's what they would always identify them. Especially if they had a murder or something, or a robbery. And if a white person robbed a bank, they just had his name in there. But they didn't designate so it made people assume that he was black too. "The paper now no longer designates Negro following the mention of people of color nor does it refer to women without the appropriate courtesy titles." They never would say Miss, Ms. or Mrs. Never. Anyway, these are just some of the things that when you ask that question, how did they address it? They did it through vehicles. They did it through groups, through the newspaper. Especially when they had somebody who was not afraid to publish the things and not afraid. The paper we had had before, The Memphis World, he was rather accommodating. And in

a way you can understand at the time that he was there, he didn't really have any support to do much different because the way life was. But the War had come along and it's just like when young black people decided to sit down at the lunch counter, the time had come. They had sufficient back bone and backing. Their fathers had just fought a war, World War II, and they had come back and they were, you know, "I'm not going to take it any more." And they had imbued their children with the strength of something. And the children did not know. It's just like you're asking the questions and you did not grow up in that era. The children couldn't understand. "Why do we have to sit on the back of the bus? Why is it we have to drink in that fountain? Why is it we can't go to the zoo?" And they were much better ... They were so far removed til to them this is ridiculous!

Scales: What did you tell your children when they wanted to go and they couldn't?

Wilson: Well, the same thing that I was told, I suppose. That I don't want you to get involved and be arrested. So what we did, we just didn't go to the zoo. I took my class of children one day to the zoo because I taught in an area of town that was walking distance from the zoo. And a lot of children had never been to the zoo for the same reason. Because to go to the zoo

and not be able to do some of the things there, and always be restricted, people just stopped taking their children. But I felt like they should be exposed. I taught the sixth grade at that point. And a lot things they just didn't know that they should have known to be twelve or thirteen years old. Eleven, twelve and thirteen. So I decided that I was going to take them on that one day to the zoo. And it was the first time most of them had ever been. And that was a pitiful commentary. But it was better to go and be exposed one day. And then when we got back, I told them about, you know, the system and why it was. Because some of them asked why is it we can't go but one day, you know. And I explained to them like I told you the way. When something is sanctioned by a city government, you can't buck it by yourself. So you have to find ways and means of dealing with it. This is what this newspaper did. It brought together all the forces that could do something about it. And at my house, my parents got around that back of the bus thing by having a car. And another way, I had relatives that lived in South Memphis. And sometimes when I got old enough and my father was out and we only had one car. So I needed a way to get there. So there was a bus that only went from Black Town to Black Town, black part of town to the other part of black town.

It went from downtown and it happened to go right back into the neighborhood. Now, once it crossed a certain street, nothing but white people were on the bus, but up until that, it wasn't

nothing but black people. And they filled the whole bus. The same thing is true of the bus that I took to Booker Washington. When it came downtown, nothing but black people got on the bus. So I would just ride those two buses. I rode the ones where there was nothing but black people were on it. I went away. Like I told you, I went away to Washington, D.C. and I enjoyed sitting ... I sat on the front of the bus for the first time. And it was the most traumatic thing that had ever happened to me. I sat on the front of the bus and everybody was sitting like nothing's wrong, you know. And I'm sitting here. "I'm actually sitting on the front of this bus!" Nobody could feel what I was feeling. I had never sat that far up on the bus. I didn't know what it felt like. And I vowed at that moment that I would never sit on the back of anybody's bus any more unless everybody was sitting back there. And so when I came back home on a visit -- I'd been gone two years, I came back home on a visit and I got on this bus that was going to the black neighborhood and crossing over to the white after that. All these blacks had come from North Memphis and had filled the bus all the way up to the top, all to the front. And finally, they got off at their various neighborhoods where the white people got on at another point. Because the bus was going to extend into the white area. And with all of us having been on there, they were standing. And they were just rocking back and forth. So finally, the bus ...

Scales: Who was standing?

Wilson: The whites. Because the blacks had taken all the seats. Finally, the blacks were getting off in Black Town, in the black area, and the seats became available, but I'm still sitting up there in one of them front seats, right in front of the door. The door that you get off in the back on the side was right behind the seat that I was sitting in. But I'd been up north, you know. I'd been up north and I don't sit in the back there any more. And so they kept looking at me. Now mind you, every seat in front of me was empty! Seats behind me were empty. Seats beside me were empty. But because I was sitting up there and the law was that you didn't sit behind a black person. That's the stupid law. And because I had been up north, I wasn't moving. They could have kicked me off that bus and I would never been in there. But the devil got in me and I said, now that is absolutely foolish. I am not going to move. I had about a block to go, one block I had to go. And I sat on that bus. I looked out the window. And all the whites were watching me. All they had to do was sit over here. And all these seats were empty. As tired as they looked, I'd have sat on back there. What difference does it make? But that wasn't what they'd been used to doing. And I only had one block to go and I just had determined I am not going to stand, I am not

going to move. I'm the only black left on the bus. I think there was one other black man. He was already sitting back there in the corner. Now, I went up. There's a street called Wicks. And the next street from Wicks is called Wellington. That was the longest block I have ever seen. That was the longest block! I'm looking out the window like I don't know what's going on. So finally, this white man who had a uniform on came and tapped me on the shoulder. And he was polite. And asked me would I move back. I smiled and I was polite too. "I'm getting off soon." I looked over. He got red as a beet. And the others, oh they were ...

Scales: You told him you were getting off?

Wilson: "Yes, I'm getting off soon. I'm getting off soon." And I looked on out the window like I didn't ... Well, you know, you ought to be satisfied with that. I'm getting off soon. What it was. And I was supposed to get off at the next stop. And I didn't see any reason to get up and stand and let him sit down. And I stand until I get there. That was a long block. It was almost as long as this block. It's a long block from here to that next street down there. It was just about as long as that. But it seemed even longer. It seemed like we were going through the whole city. And they were watching me to see if I did get off. I took my time and I finally got up. The

devil was in me. See, I'd been living up in New Jersey and had moved from Washington, D.C. to New Jersey. And you really didn't have no problem up in New Jersey. And I'm young too. You know, when you're young, you do stuff that you don't do when you're wiser. And anyway, I finally got up. Slowly got up. I really expected somebody to try to hit me but I prayed a little bit. I got off of that bus. And do you know, from that day to this, I haven't been back on a bus. I stopped riding. I knew I could get in trouble. I was just visiting home too. I had come back to visit, on a vacation. And I knew I was wrong in trying to defy them because the law was still on their side. But just like I stopped going to the movies and I just stopped riding the bus. That was the way that I had to deal with it. And a lot of people did the same thing. That's the way they dealt with it after a period of time.

Scales: Was that your way of protesting discrimination?

Wilson: That was my personal way of protesting. It was a risky way. But I didn't try that too often. I really didn't. You know, I was angry because I'm in my home town. My folks paid taxes just like your all folks paid taxes. At this point, I'm using my college head, you see. I'm not using my common sense head. I'm using my college head, my educated head, that said, "I have a right." And I understood perfectly when all

those students were able to boycott and sit in on the sit ins down there, you know, at the lunch counters. And I know how they felt because I had been there at that point. And these were all children whose parents, whose fathers had just come back and had fought for the country and everything. And they felt like they had a right to sit down. And that was the only way that the civil rights movement really got under way.

Because somebody had to be strong enough to stand up. And I think my husband was that way. He had been and done all these things. And when he came down here to Memphis, in fact, he put himself in great danger in Little Rock. This was an article he wrote, "No Turning Back Now". This is during that period of time of the Little Rock thing. And he's in Little Rock. Let me see. I was going to show you the one that really ... This is when Martin Luther King rode the bus. The Montgomery buscott and when they went back to do it, when they finally rode it for the first time, after the boycott ended, here he is on that bus, taking that ride. Because he was a reporter that went down. But there was another one I wanted to show you. This is the Little Rock Nine. And he had worked with Daisy Bates to get them into the thing. Here's what happened to him. They beat him. See his scar, on his neck. They knocked him down here. This is the blow that really precipitated his death. Because he got hit on the back of the neck with a brick. And here's another one where they kicked him. And he wrote this article

about it. Beating a reporter. About the mob attack. But he was so determined that they were not going to ... They wanted him to run. And he wouldn't run. And that's what made them mad because he wouldn't run. He said, "I'll die right here first."

Scales: How do people feel about the Commercial Appeal now?

Wilson: It still has some biases but the basic little things like the titles and things, it's long since been better. I ever worked down there. In fact, this was an offshoot of my working down there. I was invited to some articles. I wrote several articles. I worked as an intern during the summer. I never would have been able to work there had this other not happened.

This is some of the awards that he got for what he did. These are Daisy Bates and her husband. These are some other commendations that he got. This is when I was little. I'm standing on something high. I'm not as tall as he was. I was standing on some steps or something. But he was this tall. Now, you can see here. Realistic. We had just been married that summer. These people were so proud of what he had done over in Little Rock that this was one of the ways -- he just got awards n top of awards and certificates. These are some speeches that he made. I've been trying to write a book for the longest time. I just haven't been able to sit down and do it.

But I think I must do it. And this is his staff that was here when he left Memphis and went to Chicago. This is his staff. This man took his position, took over as editor then. This is torn down. This was the office. And this is when he died. He was buried from one of the churches here. But there's been a lot of changes in the town. And it was not done by people just sitting back and talking about it. They really have gotten out.

Many of the people, some are still living and some are not living. It takes a lot of courageous people who have struck a purpose and are not afraid to have the life of a lion.

Sometimes you can be foolish and go out there and do unnecessary things. But if you calculated well, most of the time the other person will have to listen to you.

Scales: Is there anything else you would like to add to the historical account that feel has been left out, as it relates to Memphis?

Wilson: Well, you had a number of club groups that were formed during that whole period to make up for the social lives. You had clubs, women's club groups, and you had male club groups. But for the most part, fraternities and sororities were the ones that sponsored the bigger things. They would sponsor a national figure to come to town because they had the funds. So we have had some of the most nationally known people to come to Memphis

because there were groups, the sororities and the fraternities took the forefront in providing the means to get them here. You know how you had to pay an honorarium and what not? And our church provided the auditorium. You could not go to the public auditorium and things.

Scales: What church was that?

Wilson: His name was Robert R. Church. And his daughter, his granddaughter, is still living. She's in her eighties. And she's a member of my church. But the school principals during the period of the fifties were, I think, the difference -- and the educational system was the difference -- in what happened in Memphis. Because so many of them were good, were dedicated to educating the children and I think for the most part, they did an excellent job. I think the turn about came I would think came around during the eighties when a lot of Ronald Reagan's policies pulled a lot of the things off the front burner. A lot of the civil rights things. And I think things have turned backwards since then. But up until that time, we were steadily -- and the schools were excellent. That was a period of time when the schools were able to offer scholarships to the Ivy League schools. My daughter was one of the recipients, was one of the beneficiaries of that sort of thing. She has a doctorate now and she's working at a college in Texas, Texas A & M. But

if it had not been for the civil rights things that were precipitated by some of these people in the South, legislation could not have been made. But I think when Reagan came in, and it started with Reagan and it progressed backwards with Bush and now with this -- And the Supreme Court now is just, you know, just tearing everything apart. But Memphis, I think, did as well as any of the other southern cities as far as taking advantage of legislation.

Scales: I don't have any other questions.

Wilson: I can't think of any thing that I didn't cover. We talked about education. We talked about religion. And I watched the political scene change a lot. We have many more blacks who have risen through the ranks and this is really where the problem with Memphis is now. So many blacks have risen up and are strong, that the whites are frightened. And they get that way. We're a threat to them. And yet, we aren't a threat in reality. But they see us as a threat. I just don't know what else that would help.

Scales: That's fine. I really enjoyed talking to you. I learned a whole lot. I have a few forms to fill out.

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