

**Hallie Q. Brown Community Archives Oral History Collection:**

**Vol. 1, Rondo Movement History Interview Project**

**October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2025**

**Residence of Yusef Mgeni, St. Paul, MN**

**Yusef Mgeni Oral History**

**MW: Mackinnon Williams (interviewer, transcriber)**

**SM: Sedric McClure (co-interviewer)**

**YM: Yusef Mgeni (interviewee)**

**01:56:51 runtime**

**Subjects discussed:** His great-uncle Fredrick McGhee; the founding of St. Peter Claver African American Catholic Church; being born in St. Paul on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, and 26<sup>th</sup> 1948; attending St. Peter Claver Parochial School; a summary of his educational journey; the one year he lived in Washington D.C.; a summary of the lines of work he has been in; Fred McGhee's role in founding the Niagara Movement and the NAACP; his time living in Los Angeles, California; a cross being burned in front of his childhood home; his father not being present in his childhood; people in the Rondo community supporting his educational journey; the close-knit nature of the Rondo community; the Duluth lynching; Northern segregation; the Underground Railroad in Minnesota; being involved in the Expanded Educational Opportunities program at Macalester College; Black intellectuals and leaders visiting the Twin Cities; Rondo and North and South Minneapolis being colonies; the history of the Rondo neighborhood; Black businesses in Rondo; the employment available to Black men and women up until the mid-1960s; the railroads; Hallie Q. Brown Community Center; Black inventors in Minnesota; school experiences at St. Peter Claver; Cyrus Ettinger's investment in his academic career; working as a bomb inspector at John Wood Foundry; finishing high school; the Civil Rights Era in Rondo and St. Paul; the gang era in Rondo; the Black Power Movement in response to gangs and the drug epidemic; story about Mahmoud El-Kati in DeLand, Florida.

**People/organizations discussed:** Fredrick McGhee; the St. Paul Pioneer; Charles Drew; Daniel Hale Williams; W.E.B. DuBois; Samuel Hardy; St. Peter Claver African American Catholic Church; National Black Catholic Congress; John Ireland; Montreal Star; Stephen Theobald; St. Peter Claver Parochial School; University of Minnesota; University of California, Los Angeles; University of Southern California; the Humphrey Institute; Metropolitan State University; National Rifle Association; Tom Hardy; Corporation for Public Broadcasting; Howard University; Urban League; Inner City Youth League; African American Leadership Council; NAACP; Hallie Q. Brown Community Center; Norris Bumstead Herndon; William Sherman; Niagara Movement; D.W. Griffith; Arthur McWatt, Katie McWatt; US organization; Black Panther Party; American Civil Liberties Union; Pilgrim Baptist Church; Negro Leagues; Elmer Jackson, Isaac McGhie, Elias Clayton; The Innocence Project; National Lynching Museum;

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Bryan Stevenson; Moses Dixon; Perfect Ashler Lodge; Hallie Quinn Brown; Martin Luther King Center; Al Stafford; Community Employment Training Act; North Central Voters League; Great Northern, Northern Pacific Railroad; J. Edgar Hoover; Alprentice Bunchy Carter; Mahmoud El-Kati; John Warfield and Jan Warfield; John Patton; Gary Hines; Macalester College Black House; Malcolm X Pan-African Institute; Anyanya; Booker T. Washington; Marian Anderson; Paul Robeson; Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House; Nacirema Club; Cozy's Bar; The Elks club; The Celebrity Club; Joseph Rondeau; Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, A. Philip Randolph; Marvin Roger Anderson; Dred Scott, Harriet Robinson; Francis Scott Key; Billy Williams; Roy Wilkins; Whitney Young Jr.; Maudine Cooper; Frederick McKinley Jones; Garrett Morgan; George Washington Carver; Dennis Lewis; John Hope Franklin; Richard Wright; Ta-Nehisi Coates; Isabel Wilkerson; Benjamin E. Mays; Barack Obama and Michelle Obama; Cyrus Ettinger; Ermin Hogan; Maulana Karenga; Lerone Bennett Jr.; Abraham Lincoln; Antioch University; Stillwater State Prison; Cambone Kamara; Jim Griffin; Vusumuzi Zulu; Spike Moss; James Sackett; Ronnie Reed, Connie Trimble; Nathaniel Khaliq; Kwame McDonald; Gangster Disciples; Crips, Bloods; Sabathani Community Center; Anura Si-Asar; Minnesota Historical Society; Moussa Foster.

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YM: So Fred [Fredrick McGhee] had this case. I can tell you some of his cases were incredible.

SM: Can we do it afterwards? Let's get him— if you don't mind.

YM: Well, the man called Fred a, "Damn nigger liar," in the courtroom. Fred slapped the other attorney full in the face. The judge not only made the white lawyer apologize, he made him send a letter of apology to the St. Paul Pioneer— before the Pioneer Press. Okay, Fred died in 1912.

SM: That's right, he was over in Wisconsin. He got sick or something, right? He had a cabin or something.

YM: He had a cabin on the, what's that river they innertube on over there.

SM: The Apple River or?

YM: The Apple River.

SM: Yes.

YM: And who's the guy, Charles Drew used to come up here? Daniel Hale Williams, DuBois [W.E.B. DuBois]. And they would all go up to Fred's cabin if they were giving a major speech or writing a book, and they would all critique it and dry run it and, fine tune it. But, Fred was a hell of an attorney. Fred was the founder— him and Samuel Hardy were the two founders of St. Peter Claver African American Catholic Church on I-94 and Lexington. Fred also was one of the founders of the National Black Catholic Congress. And Fred traveled with Archbishop Ireland, who was a chaplain in the Civil War, who ministered to former enslaved people. Fred and John Ireland traveled up to Montreal. There was a Negro who was a columnist on the Montreal Star newspaper, whose name was Stephen Theobald. He was born in French Guiana, and they recruited Stephen, brought him to St. Paul, converted him to Catholicism, and John Ireland got him in the St. Paul Seminary. He was the third Negro Catholic priest in the United States, and the first one west of Chicago, who was the first full-time priest at St. Peter Claver African American parish, because John Ireland— Black Catholics weren't welcome in the white Catholic churches. So John Ireland the Archbishop, would serve Mass— St. Peter Claver Church was downtown. They bought an old Swedenborgian Church on Fifth and Market Street, which is where the St. Paul Hotel is at today. John Ireland said he was gonna serve Mass until he could recruit a full-time priest. Stephen Theobald lived down on Farrington and Fuller. His house is still there, right behind where the second St. Peter Claver Church was, they bought land. There's a church on the corner of Rice and Aurora next to where Sears Automotive was, right across the street from the House of Representatives. Neighbors— including Legislators across the street, said, "We don't

want no Negro church across from the state capitol.” So they made St. Peter Claver swap with a Lutheran church who owned land on Farrington and Aurora. And St. Peter Claver built their church on Farrington and Aurora. And the church on Rice and Aurora is a Lutheran church that Bob Battle is the pastor for. I’ll shut up. So go ahead, Mack. Sorry, I got a lot of stories.

MW: To introduce our interview, my name is Mackinnon Williams. I’m here with Elder Yusef Mgeni, as well as Sedric McClure from Macalester College.

YM: Just Yusef.

MW: Just Yusef? Okay. I’m here with Yusef.

YM: I’m an elder in training. I’m only 77.

MW: Sounds good. We’re here today for an oral history interview on some Rondo movement history. We’re at Elder Yusef’s house. Yusef’s house. Today is October 16th, 2025, and Yusef was just giving us some background context on his great uncle, Frederick McGhee, some of his family’s history. So to start off, Yusef, could you please briefly introduce yourself, say your birthplace and date, and then describe your connection and your family’s connection to the Rondo neighborhood?

YM: Okay, I am a native of the Rondo neighborhood. I was born July 24th, 25th, and 26th, 1948, because my baptismal record, my hospital record, and my birth certificate each have a different date. [Laughter] So I had three golden birthdays, I was living in California at the time, in LA and in Watts. And I’m 77 years old. I’ve been retired for 15 years. And I have always been an information freak. I attended St. Peter Claver Parochial School, a Black Catholic school. We

were taught by a group of Black nuns called the Oblate Sisters of Providence. And we had to study Black history. We read *The Miseducation of the Negro*. We read books on early African American history. When I was in the third grade, all the way up to eighth grade, I was bored when I went into the public junior high school and the public high school.

00:05:30

YM: I attended the University of Minnesota. I monitored classes at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] and USC [University of Southern California]. I took graduate classes at the University of Minnesota, the Humphrey Institute, and I matriculated from Metropolitan State University because I didn't want to give anybody credit for my education. I'm a lifelong native. Apart from the five years I spent in LA, I spent one year in Washington, D.C., where the women, the sisters outnumbered the brothers about 12 to one. And I was staying in the, what's the name of that hotel? It's a very large, very famous old hotel in D.C. I was in public broadcasting, right on television at the time. And it—it'll come to me. The National Rifle Association was across the street. And at 4:30, the employees got off work. 90% of the employees who do the telemarketing and the membership renewal and phone calls were Black women. And it looked like a sea of locusts was coming out of the National Rifle Association because it's like two thousand Black women were coming down the steps. There were about 38 steps. It was on a hill. I was waiting for a brother named Tom Hardy from St. Paul, who worked for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and taught at Howard University to come pick me up because we were going out that night. But I tell people I was born, raised, and miseducated right here at the taxpayer's expense in St. Paul, Minnesota. And I didn't have a white teacher until I— full-time white

teacher, until I started in high school. And people say, “You from St. Paul, Mississippi?” And I say, “No, St. Paul, Minnesota.” Because this was a very segregated town. There was like a bubble over the Rondo neighborhood. It was called Selby-Dale, Summit-U, Rondo, Darktown, and various other not so polite names. But— I was in broadcasting, I was in construction, I was in community organizing, I was in teaching, I volunteered for 40 years in the prisons to work with Black men and women and juvenile Black cultural groups. I’ve served on more than a hundred boards of directors, nonprofit, local, national, regional organizations, worked for the Urban League, for Inner City Youth League, for— volunteered, served on the boards of many of the nonprofits, African American Leadership Council. I’m on the executive committee of the Minnesota-Dakota Area Conference, NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. We call it the state conference. I’m also on the board, the executive committee of the St. Paul chapter, the Roy Wilkins chapter, which was founded— my great-uncle, Fredrick McGhee, created the Twin Cities chapter of the NAACP in 1911. He died in 1912. And at his memorial service at Hallie Q. Brown [Hallie Q. Brown Community Center], Black intellectuals and civil rights leaders from throughout this country came to Minnesota to participate in his memorial service. If you’ve seen the picture of the 13 men sitting at the foot of Niagara Falls. My great uncle, Fred McGhee, was the one sitting with the young 10-year-old on his lap. The 10-year-old was Bumstead Herndon [Norris Bumstead Herndon]. His father started the first Atlanta penny insurance company and was a millionaire. And if you take the Black Atlanta tour, you go to the Herndon mansion. Because all of the Black buildings in Atlanta were built out of brick. And when Sherman [William Sherman] burned down Atlanta, he burned down all the white

buildings. All the historical buildings were built by Black former enslaved tradesmen. And so W.E.B. DuBois credits Fred McGhee with being the founder and the original person who came up with the idea for the Niagara Movement. They rented a hotel in Ontario— in Buffalo, New York, and when they got there, the innkeeper said, “We don’t rent to darkies.” So they got on the tourist boat, went across Niagara Falls to Ontario, where a Canadian innkeeper was only too happy to rent them his entire hotel. And that’s when the first Black professional civil rights organization was formed, the Niagara Movement, 1906.

00:10:07

YM: Three years later, the Niagara Movement would morph into the national NAACP, which was an integrated national civil rights organization. The Niagara Movement was all Black professional men. Fred created the Twin Cities chapter of the NAACP in 1911. He died in 1912. And in 1913, they created the St. Paul chapter of the NAACP, which is 112 years old, in his honor, in his name. Later that year, the Minneapolis NAACP chapter was established, 1913. So the Twin Cities chapters, Minneapolis and St. Paul, are 112 years old. Those are literally not the first, but among the earliest of the civil rights organizations that were politically active. When *Birth of a Nation* came out, D.W. Griffith’s first motion picture, the Minneapolis and St. Paul NAACP picketed the theater every night to try and encourage the theater owner to discontinue showing it. The President premiered it in the White House and said it was like history written by lightning. But Fred was an incredible human being, died very young in his early 50s. And Fred belonged to several national Black professional men’s organizations. And there’s a book written about Fred McGhee [*Fredrick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861-1912*], but Arthur

McWatt—Katie McWatt’s husband—who was a historian, had significant challenges with some of the material contained in the autobiography and the biography of Fred McGhee. My Aunt Freddie, my cousin Fred, his father, Frederick, were all named after Fred McGhee. But lifelong native, other than the time that I spent in DC and in Los Angeles, I was in LA in the ‘60s. Okay. And you couldn’t have had any better rites of passage. You know, I was fooling around with US [United Slaves], with the Panthers [Black Panther Party]. *Hair* was playing on Sunset Strip. I was 6’6”, so I was going to a different jazz club every night, and I was 18 years old. I was dating 35-year-old civil rights paralegals from, what’s this, real radical public law organization? American Civil Liberties Union. I was dating paralegals—Black women—and living large, okay, 18 years old.

[Conversation is redacted per interviewee wishes]

But my grandmother was the first female and youngest president of the St. Paul Urban League.

[Conversation is redacted per interviewee wishes]

00:17:37

YM: So my mother was the first Black secretary in the St. Paul Public Schools, and they burned a six-foot cross in our front yard directly across the street from the front door of Pilgrim Baptist Church when my mother took the job as senior clerk typist at Washington High School on Rice Street. So my grandfather, my mother, my father, my grandmother, people in the, my father played in the Negro Leagues. He was a world champion bullshitter. I didn’t know him well enough to love him. He left—my mother fired him when I was two because he laid his hands on

her. And he promised to take me and my brother fishing. We would sit up all night and fall over and bump heads and wake up. Every time a car went past the house, we would jump up and grab our little toolbox with the fishing stuff, our little cane pole with the Seagram cork bobber. Still waiting for that Negro to come pick us up and take us fishing. Never did make it. But I'm a native. I'm a proud son of Rondo. Prostitutes used to shake my hand and press money into my hand when I was attending the University of Minnesota and say, "You're going to school over there at the U, aren't you?" And I'd say, "Yeah." And they'd say, "Well, when you get your education, we want you to bring it back and contribute to this community." And the Black nuns at St. Peter Claver handpicked me to be a priest when I was like in the second grade. That was not going to happen. And they used to tell me, "Be a credit to the race, boy, be a credit to the race." And I didn't know if they were talking about the hundred yard dash or the Indianapolis 500. "Oh, please!". I would go in the barbershop and the brother would say, "If I had your height, I'd have made a million dollars!" And I'd say, "You can have a million dollars, please let go of my cheek!" I shot pool to pay my first two years' tuition at the university. And later played golf, but not as good as I shot pool. So you can give me the high sign, telling you about myself. So grew up in this neighborhood. Referred to my best friends' mothers as "ma'deah", you know, mother dear, shorthand "ma'deah."

00:20:06

YM: And I had to ask my grandmother for permission before I could date somebody because we might be related. I mean, it was a segregated community. It was a small community. If you were six blocks away from your home in Rondo and put bottles up on somebody's fence and throw

rocks at them, somebody's mother or grandmother would stick her head out the window and put her hands on her hips and say, "Boy, if you don't cut that mess out, I'm comin' out there and whoop your ass. And I'm gon' call your mother and your grandmother and you're going to get your ass whooped two more times when you get home." We say, "Oh, please, the devil must have made me do it! Please don't hurt me. Don't call my mother and my grandmother. It'll never happen again. Oh, I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me." And we'd be picking up glass, man, putting it in—we used to have 55 gallon barrels in our backyard. We'd burn trash every night. We didn't have pickup. But I am a product of the Rondo community. I am a true son of Rondo. I've never forgotten that, and I've always been very proud of that. Because those Black nuns at St. Peter Claver gave us one hell of an education.

[Recording paused]

00:22:44

YM: But that's who I am. You know, I'm just an average Negro. Born, raised, and miseducated in St. Paul, Minnesota, and had a lot of mentors, Black men and Black women, who threatened to whoop my ass if I didn't amount to something and be a credit to the race. So I didn't have a lot of choice in the matter about getting involved. And I've learned a lot, I've remembered a lot, and I've been involved in a lot.

[Conversation is redacted per interviewee wishes]

MW: And one other question I had is— I know in the Voices of Rondo interview [HAND in HAND's RONDO ORAL HISTORY PROJECT], in that transcript, I saw that you briefly mentioned that your parents and grandparents remembered a lynching in St. Paul.

YM: There were a number of lynchings in St. Paul.

MW: Is there anything you're able to share about?

YM: There were— Jackson, McGhie, and I forget the third brother who were lynched in June of 1920 up in Duluth, Minnesota. [Elmer Jackson, Isaac McGhie, Elias Clayton] They hung the first brother so fast they snapped the rope. They had to put two ropes around his neck on 6th and Duluth Street, threw the ropes up over a light post and hung him. They hung all three of them. They were roustabouts with the circus, and a white girl was late getting home and she told her parents that she'd been raped by three Negroes. They tore down a telephone pole and used it as a battering ram to break into the Duluth City Jail and drag them brothers out. And people got on trains in North and South Dakota to come up here for that lynching in Duluth. They had the brother who started The Innocence Project. He's got the National Lynching Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. Bryan Stevenson— was their keynote speaker a year ago. They do a march every year in memory of somebody, Jackson and McGhie. I can't remember the third brother's name, but—

00:25:50

YM: There's a lake on Dale Street between Maryland and Front and Como. Growing up, it was called Nigger Lake. Now they call it Marydale Lake, Maryland and Dale. My grandmother made

us call it Steering Wheel Lake. We couldn't call it Nigger Lake, but that's what everybody called it. And on the west side of Dale, there was a small pond that was called Little Nigger Lake. And I could tell you a lot of stories about discrimination in this town. There was a terminal of the Underground Railroad prior to the Civil War operated out of the Union Depot by a brother whose name was Moses Dixon. And he has only recently been discovered, and a white woman historian, has been researching him and giving talks in a pub over near the High Bridge on Moses Dixon. So he was the conductor on the Underground Railroad in St. Paul back before the Civil War. There was the Perfect Ashler Lodge, a group of— a Masonic order that owned a building on Aurora and Kent, one block east of Dale and one block south of University. They sold that building in 1929 to a group of people in the community who named it after a Black woman who was very famous named Hallie Q. Brown. You know what they sold it for? A dollar. The Black community owned that building. The city owns the Martin Luther King Center and Hallie had to come up with a half million dollars to pay part of the one point, one and a half, \$1.7 million cost of Martin Luther King Center. Park and Recreation controls 48% of that building and Hallie leases the other 52%. Penumbra [Penumbra Theatre] leases their space from Hallie. Ever since it was started by Al Stafford, who created the acting group as a CETA, Community Employment Training Act, jobs program back in the late 60s, early 70s. But then you had the North Central Voters League back in the 50s and 60s on Grotto and Igelhart that was involved in voter registration, voter education, they ran Katie McWatt for city council. They ran one or two people for the state legislature. It was a civic engagement club, a lot of the brothers who were involved there were retired people who worked on the railroad. That's how a lot of Black men

got here on the Great Northern and the Northern Pacific Railroad. My father worked for the Great Northern, played in the Negro Leagues, played for the St. Paul Colored Giants who won the Black National Baseball Championship in 1906. The Colored Gophers. St. Paul Colored Gophers, 1906. This is before the Negro Leagues were created. And then he played for another group. I had one of my mother's sisters' husbands played for the Kansas City Monarchs. I played baseball and football and shot pool growing up.

00:30:09

YM: But this has always been home. Black folks tend to revolve around wherever mama's at, and mine happened to be here. So after I spent five years in Los Angeles, I came back. My mother died in 1999. And I lived in LA from—I graduated in '66, so from 1964 to 1970. That was when the riots were happening out there. It's when J. Edgar Hoover raided Panther headquarters in every city in the United States. That's when US and the Panthers got into the shootout on the campus of UCLA and Alprentice Bunchy Carter and another brother were killed. So I've been very fortunate. I've been blessed. A lot of Black men and women have taken me under their wing, have mentored me. And like I said, have threatened to whoop my butt if I didn't amount to something and make a contribution to the community. I was very involved with the EEO program at Macalester College [Expanded Educational Opportunities], with Mahmoud [Mahmoud El-Kati], with John Warfield, John and Jan Warfield, and with John Patton, who was a musicologist, who was one of the founders of the Sounds of Blackness, because Gary Hines, I think, had a football scholarship to go to Macalester. And that's where the Sounds were created, Macalester College. And that's why we used to go to Black House for the Malcolm X Pan-

African Institute. And we had radio programs, we had TV programs. We had a forum on the crisis of Black leadership. We would hold— we helped purchase 1000 transistor radios and sent them to The Sudan to a group called Anyanya who was fighting— we supported all of the liberation movements. We had marches on African Liberation Day. We had Kwanzaa celebrations at Black constituency governed community organizations, mostly at The Way in North Minneapolis. And we brought speakers. We brought South African actors, W.E.B. DuBois, what was the Tuskegee boy's name? Booker T. Washington, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson. Those people used to come to the Twin Cities to St. Paul or Minneapolis. And they would have to stay at Hallie Q. Brown or at Phyllis Wheatley [Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House] because they couldn't get a room in the white hotels. They would perform at Northrop Auditorium and then they would go to sleep in the Black community at a Black community center. And we used to have union picnics where every Black church in St. Paul and Minneapolis on a Sunday in July would have picnics at Minnehaha Park out near Minnehaha Falls. And you never saw so many pretty sisters in your lifetime. And my mother and my grandma would say, "Boy, don't leave the sound of my voice. Okay. If I call your name, your ass better be right here at my kneecaps, okay, in a minute." And it was called union picnics. There was sort of a social rivalry. Minneapolis had two colonies, South Side and North Side. St. Paul just had Rondo. Then after I-94 was built, all the poor white folks lived, the poor Mexicans lived on the West Side, which is strange because it's the South Side of St. Paul. And then the poor white folks and the poor Italians lived over on the East Side. So a lot of Black folks moved over on the Lower East Side. But interesting times.

MW: And you're referring to these as colonies. Could you explain that phrasing?

YM: Which?

MW: You said there were two colonies in Minneapolis.

YM: North Minneapolis and South Minneapolis. There were two Black communities in Minneapolis.

MW: Okay.

YM: There was basically one in St. Paul.

MW: You're saying the Black communities were colonies?

YM: Yes.

MW: Could you explain that further? I'm curious.

YM: Well, there were segregated communities. That was the only place that you could rent or buy or— and only the privileged few could buy their homes. Rondo was the business strip in St. Paul from Rice all the way to Lexington, or at least to Chatsworth. In Minneapolis, you had 4th Avenue, The Nacirema Club— Nacirema is American spelled backwards. You had Cozy's Bar, and then over on the north side, you had Cozy's. You had the Elks club. You had a lot of joints. We had the Elks. We had The Celebrity. We had a lot of Black— there were a couple of dance halls, a couple of bars. I wouldn't call them nightclubs. There were a couple of bootleg liquor joints. There were a lot of after-hour houses.

00:35:31

YM: There was a policy of containment. That's why we call them colonies. Because you couldn't live anywhere. You couldn't live on Aurora. You couldn't live on Dayton. You couldn't live anywhere west of Chatsworth. You couldn't live anywhere east of Farrington. And that goes back to the beginning of the century. There was a Frenchman whose name was Joseph Rondeau. R-O-N-D-E-A-U. sometimes spelled D-E-A-U-X. And he married a half-Indian woman, lived at Fort Snelling. There was so much discrimination against him that he moved in here. And this area was called the Rondeau Addition.

[Recording paused]

00:41:54

MW: One question that I was thinking of as you spoke about the neighborhood is, I was wondering, what were the common professions for people around you when you were growing up? And also what were the labor conditions? What'd you hear from people about their work?

YM: Sure. Well, up until the mid-60s, early mid-60s, the only jobs that Black men could get were working at the packing house, working on the railroad, or working in some of the hotel kitchens. There were several packing houses over on the West side. Black men could work there. was usually one Negro in each of the hotels shining shoes, there might be one or two in the kitchen. Most of the Black women— see up until 1980, in 1980 there were 447 different occupations listed by the Department of Labor. Women were restricted to just 11 of those 447 occupations. Black women were relegated to domestic work, janitorial work, raising somebody else's children, there were a handful in public education, but only a handful. Like you could

count them on your fingers. It wasn't like there were a bunch of us. And most worked— 50% of the Black people in this country in the 1950s worked for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, or what was the other train union?

MW: The Pullman.

YM: The Pullman.

SM: The Pullman Car Porters.

YM: Pullman, Pullman or Sleeping Car or the one of the waiters. And that's why A. Philip Randolph was so powerful. That is how he organized the first March on Washington. And a lot of that organizing was done in the basement of the Union Depot in downtown St. Paul. A lot of people don't know that. Hmm. And you still run into people like, you know, Marvin Roger Anderson from Rondo. He was a red cap. Babington-Johnson got here on the railroad. Mmhmm. So this was a railroad town, a river town. And the railroad came right up along next to the river.

00:45:00

YM: This was one of the final ports for the Underground Railroad. As people came here, some continued on from here up to Canada. But this was far enough north, it was a free state. Dred Scott and his wife lived at Fort Snelling— Harriet Robinson— and their daughter, while his case wound its way through the U.S. Supreme Court. And the judge who handed down the Dred Scott decision that said that Negroes have no rights which a white man is bound to respect, was from Maryland. And he had his law office. Guess who his partner was in his law office? Who's the boy that wrote Star-Spangled Banner?

SM: Francis Scott Key?

YM: Yeah. That was his office partner. And if you ever look up the original stanzas of the Star-Spangled Banner, it's real hard on Africans and enslaved people. Okay. So they were a couple of dirty bastards. They were. Now I forgot what your question was.

MW: About the labor conditions, that you were answering on the railroads and that domestic work and the service work. What did people think of that or how did they feel about their work?

YM: Well, the brothers on the railroad used to— we would say, “Hello, Mr. So-and-so.”

Somebody would say, “You look tired.” And he would say, “Well, I walked all the way from Seattle, back and forth on that train. I deserve to be tired.” They took a lot of pride in what they did. They worked hard on the railroad. They worked all day and all night, many days and nights. When they came home, you know, they might have three or four days off. They partied hard too. Okay. Those were the only jobs they could get. They were proud. They took a lot of pride in themselves and in what they did. I got to stop saying, “Um.” They were respected because they were hardworking people. Rarely missed work because if the slightest infraction, you'd lose that job and it might take you a year to find another one. So people valued them jobs. They often put in a word and worked real hard to try and get their kids and their relatives and their friends jobs when they were available. But they were basically the jobs that nobody else wanted. There were a couple in the post office. Like I said, there were a couple in the hotels, but they were shining shoes or working in the kitchen. They weren't at the desk. There might have been one Negro in Montgomery Wards, in St. Paul insurance companies, in the Great Northern Building, or, and we had a— the governor of Minnesota, the longest running employee in the state of Minnesota was

a Black man named Billy Williams, who was a baseball superstar when he was younger. And he was the governor's executive assistant and he worked for like 17 governors? And did not a bill go into the legislature that did not go across his desk. And he knew all the legislators and all the white men sucked up to Billy because Billy had the governor's ear and Billy was the governor's executive assistant. And when the governor was absent or drunk, Billy told how the state was going to run. The leadership in the community were the ministers and the professionals.

MW: Okay.

YM: Hallie Q. Brown created the St. Paul Urban League. Roy Wilkins was the chair of the board of Hallie Q. Brown. That's why they called the NAACP chapter here, the "Roy Wilkins chapter." And there was a young fellow named Whitney whose girlfriend was going to college here, and he would come up and visit her. Roy Wilkins convinced him to volunteer at the Urban League. You know what his last name was? Whitney Young Jr. You know who he was? He became the president of the National Urban League. So you had the president of the National NAACP, you got the president of the National Urban League, you got Maudine Rice [Maudine Cooper], you got Hilda Brown, you got all these people involved in the Harlem Renaissance and these national civil rights organizations come out of Minnesota.

00:50:14

YM: So we used to say there was Minnesota Negroes everywhere. There was just more of them here than anywhere else. And you can take that any way you want, good or bad. But there were people who were from here, Frederick McKinley Jones was an inventor. He invented the

refrigeration unit. A guy— general from the military came to Thermo King in Minneapolis. You know where International Market Square is on Glenwood and Lyndale? It used to be Thermo King. A general from the military came and said, “You know, the boys fighting in the war, are getting tired of Spam,” and you know, they couldn’t get them any fresh meat or dairy or vegetables or fruit because it couldn’t survive the boat ride over there. And the guy who owned Thermo King said, “Well, we’re going to have to really think about, it just can’t be done.” And Fred said, “Well, give me a couple of weeks, let me get back to you.” He invented the refrigeration unit. When you see these trucks pulling up with milk or meat or cheese or dairy goods or liquor or somethin’ cold, Fred invented the refrigeration unit. When you see somebody got one sticking in their window, that’s Fred’s invention. You know when you go to the movie theater and the ticket would come up through the thing? That was Fred’s invention. Do you know the soundtrack for silent movies? Was Fred’s invention. Okay? Fred had more than 100 patents. Fred was a teetotaler. So the guy who owned Thermo King built him an apartment on the 2nd floor in the factory. So all he had to do was get up in the morning, come downstairs, go to work. And Fred was a hell of an inventor. When Fred died, his wife got not a nickel of the patents that Fred created that earned tens and hundreds of millions of dollars for that company. She moved to Arizona and lived off of her Social Security benefits. That’s all she had. And she got none of, you know, Fred’s shares or anything from any of his inventions. And there were— a group of Black journalism students did a documentary, okay, on Frederick McKinley Jones. He invented the first snowmobile.

MW:

YM: Wow. I mean, he invented all kinds of shit, okay? And nobody, you know, you can't, you know, Garrett Morgan invented the stoplight. He invented the gas mask. He went down in a mine in Ohio and saved 35 miners and they accused him of witchcraft. 'Cause he took the mask on him. He had to hire a white boy to demonstrate his mask to the United States military. Because they didn't believe him. They thought he was doing witchcraft. Okay. Putting a mask on and walking through mustard gas, poison shit you know, all that. Black inventors. You know, it wasn't just the peanut boy, George Washington Carver, or the sweet potato boy, you know. The Black inventors were phenomenal. You know, Charles Drew, Daniel Hale Williams. Charles Drew died on the doorstep of a white hospital in Chicago that refused to give him a blood transfusion, which he invented.

SM: Wow.

YM: Okay. And Daniel Hale Williams dedicated— first open heart surgery— dedicated one of his books to my grandmother, my grandma Connie, when he came here to go up to Fred McGhee's cabin on the Apple River in Wisconsin to talk about some— one of the big shots was doing. So small community, very close knit, very tight, tightly woven. Whatever— in school, when somebody got sick and went to the hospital, they would take a classroom of us. We would go to the house. The boys had to cut the grass, cut the hedges, you know, wash this, that, the windows, you know. The girls would cook, do the laundry, clean the house, sew. and do all of that. When they came home from the hospital, they had a week's supply of food. The grass was cut, the hedges were trimmed, the windows were washed, everything. Well, we were wore out, okay? They worked a little bit of Black off our asses but that's where the community service

came from, okay? The mother house for the Oblate Sisters of Providence burnt down in Baltimore, Maryland. Seven 01 Gun Road out in the suburbs of Baltimore. I sold 5,000 of them, “World’s Finest Chocolate” candy bars. And they had a big glass bowl, bigger than a fishbowl. And everybody who sold a case of candy got their name put on a strip of paper and they put it in there. And they wiggled it around and they said, “Our first winner of the silver dollar is Charles Anderson [birth name of Yusef Mgeni]. And the second winner of”— I think I won eight of the 12 silver dollars.

00:55:13

YM: Boy, everybody was pissed okay? Because I sold so many of them to help rebuild the mother house because it caught on fire. And I hated them nuns until I got into public school and the white teacher said, “Look, as long as you don’t mess up in here, you get a ‘C.’ You don’t cause me any problems, I will socially promote you. Don’t have to do shit.” And you know what? I did even less than that. [Laughter] At St. Peter Claver, if one of the kids in the classroom didn’t do their homework, they’d beat everybody in the room. We had a telephone tree that started at 5:30 in the morning. “Boy, if you didn’t do your homework, you better stick all your fingers down your throat and throw up over everywhere, because if you come to school and we get beat, we’re whooping your ass at recess, we’re whooping your ass at lunch, and we’re whooping your ass all the way home!” Now, the girls had to hold their hand out in the aisle, and Sister had a yardstick, a flat yardstick. And on the other side of the yardstick was a blackboard pointer, you know, a thin piece of wood about the size of my index finger. And there were two or three rubber bands holding the blackboard pointer on the back of the yardstick. Now, the girls

had to hold their hand out in the aisle, and Sister would pull up her sleeve and you can hear that sucker coming. “Wsssh-Pow!” Okay, boy, that hurt like hell. The brothers, we had to hold our hands out with the knuckles up, and they would turn the yardstick over. We got the blackboard pointer on the back of our hands. Okay? So if you didn’t do that homework, you better get sick in a hurry, or we was gon’ whoop your ass.

SM: The tune— “Reading, writing, arith-metic, talk to the tune of a hickory stick.”

YM: Oh buddy. I mean, there was one young brother, name was Dennis Lewis, he’s still alive. He was cutting up in class one day. And all the nuns— and they used to wear them penguin suits, you know them habits, this was all you could see, everything else was covered up, hoods and thing went down, covered their shoes. And sister said— all the nuns had telephones on their desk. And she used to say, “Dennis, don’t let me have to call your grandmother.” And Dennis said, “Well, you better do what you got to go on ahead and do.” You know, trying to be bad. Sister said, “Hello, Mrs. Lewis? Yes, ma’am. This is Sister Infanta. Yes, ma’am, it’s Dennis. I would, I would— 5 minutes? I would really appreciate that, ma’am. Yes, he’s very distracting. Thank you.” And we started. “Ooooooooo.” His grandma would come in the classroom. She had a razor strap. She had an ironing cord. She had a belt. And you know when they would say, “Cut me a switch”? She would cut a switch that was the size of a fly rod. And she would peel all of the bark off of it. It was light green, okay? She whooped that Negro all over that classroom until he threw up, okay? And he cried, he hollered, he had whelps on his face, on his hands, on his arms. She beat the shit out of him, okay? This was the beginning of the school year. And from there on in, all Sister had to do was— “Oh, please, Sister, I’m so sorry. Listen, it’ll never happen again.”

The same as when somebody's grandma stuck the head out the window, "Boy imma come out there and whoop your ass." "The devil must have made me do it. It'll never happen again." We were angels for the rest of the school year, not a peep, okay? Boy they used to grill the shit out of us, man. I mean, we had algebra in the 4th grade. We had Latin. We had history. We had science. I mean, in the 4th grade, I was on a 12th grade reading level based on where the kids in the public schools were at. I had read every book in the school library. It wasn't a big library, but I had read everything in it. So my grandmother started giving me some of my grandfather's books— the Attorney, Attorney Anderson. And that's when I started reading *The Miseducation of The Negro* and John Hope Franklin and Richard Wright. Boy, Richard Wright took my ass to another planet. I read *Native Son*, I read *Black Boy*, I read *Outsider*. He wrote an essay on communism called "The God That Failed," and it's in a book called *American Hunger*. And *Black Boy* is in the first half. He submitted it for Book of the Month Club. They took the essay, "The God That Failed" out of it, and *Black Boy* was the Book of the Month Club nationally, the first half of the book. And it ends where he says, "I'm leaving Mississippi to take my soul and plant it in the soil of a warmer sun." And what's this boy's name? Ta-Nehisi Coates. What was his book called?

SM: That was Isabel, *The Warmth of Other Suns*.

YM: Isabel Wilkerson did *The Warmth of Other Suns*, and so did he. His first book was taken from Richard Wright.

[Recording paused]

01:01:00

MW: And so how were the—

YM: The public schools were terrible. They were terrible. Kids couldn't read, kids couldn't write, kids. If you really applied yourself, you could get a basic education, but they did not go out of their way. We had segregated classes. I'll tell you one other story that's real important in terms of my development. My mother worked at Humboldt High School, Mechanic Arts High School, Washington High School, and then she worked at St. Paul College, which used to be part of the St. Paul Public Schools system. When they called our house, she was not at home if I played hooky. I missed about 400 days of high school and still got offered eight scholarships. That's what them Black nuns, the Oblate Sisters of Providence, did to my ass. They edu-muh-cated the shit out of me. Our friends used to say, "Boy, wait till you go to Marshall Junior High School." It used to be a high school on Ashland and Grotto, up there across from the Unitarian Church. Benjamin E. Mays, Barack Obama School. Yeah. Marshall was the building on the west end of the block. The east end of the block was Webster, which was elementary. And then Obama was the whole complex, Michelle and Barack Obama. And— what was his name? He taught at Marshall Junior High School. And everybody hated his guts. He was a real disciplinarian. And our— kids' parents used to say, "Boy, wait till you get to Marshall. Mr. Ettinger, Cyrus Ettinger, is going to get in your ass." You go up to Marshall and show your ass. Well, the first week, my homeroom got changed to Mr. Ettinger's class, okay? And I couldn't figure out why. Everybody in his homeroom was a knucklehead, me included. I also had him for, I don't know if it was history, or what the class was. It was kind of like a civics class. And him and I used to cuss each

other because he would have called me up to his desk and he'd say, "Look, you see that 137?" And I'm just telling you the fact. "That's your IQ. You have the highest IQ in this school. And you're a damned idiot because you won't apply yourself." And I'd say, "None of your damn business what I do, whether I apply myself or not." And the kids would be like this, you know, like a tennis match. And he'd say, "You're just damn stupid if you really don't apply yourself." And I'd say, "Well, none of your damn business what I do," you know? And I mean, he treated us like adults, so we could cuss at him. He would cuss back at us. So, my mother went to get dressed to get to school now, because she was in charge of all the substitute teachers. So, she would go in real early, 6 o'clock, 6:30. And the phone would ring. "Hello? Who is this?" "Charlie, this is Cyrus. I talked to your mother and you got 15 minutes to get your ass to school or she's giving me permission to come and get you." "Well, I don't feel well. I don't think I'm goin' to school today." He'd say, "Listen, I've been teaching for 25 years and I have never missed a day. I know you can come to school with a runny nose. Get your ass to school." And I'd say, "Well, I don't have any clean clothes to wear." He'd say, "Well, you ever wonder why my knees and my elbows and my ass shine?" He said, "I paid \$13 for this suit and I intend to get both sides of my dollar and the edges. That's why I wear it every damn day. And you can sure as hell wear them perfectly good pair of blue jeans that your mother bought you that you wore yesterday. Just because the knees are scuffed, you put that shit on and get to school." And I said, "Well"— he'd already busted my fake cold and my clothes. I said, "Well, I don't have no lunch money. And if I skip lunch, I might get suspended. If I go down to lunch and don't eat, the kids will talk about me."

01:05:07

YM: He said, "What do [Inaudible] get for lunch these days? It's two bits?" He said, "I tell you what, lunch is on me today. And one more thing." And I said, "What's that?" He said, "You've only got 11 minutes to get your ass to school." Bang! I said, "Son of a bitch, 11 minutes? Shit!" I'd get up and brush my teeth and wash my face and my ass and get them blue jeans on and pull a Mahmoud and huff and puff all the way from Grotto and Central up to Grotto and Ashland. And I can remember a dozen mornings when he would be coming out of the building, putting his trench coat on and jamming his Lester Young pork pie hat on his head. He would see me a block away and he had a real weird laugh. He'd go, quack, quack, quack, quack. And he would turn around and go back in the building before I had a chance to catch up to him and thank him. And that happened a couple dozen times, okay? When I tried to play hooky, "Charlie, it's Cyrus." I said, "I know, I got 15 minutes or you're coming to get me. Shit." Then I would get up and get dressed and go to school. I later learned that the principal said, "I can pick 15-20 of these kids who are going to jail or they're going in the army or they're gonna drop out before the end of the school year." And Cyrus said, "Well, you shouldn't give up on them so quick. They tend to achieve whatever expectations we impose on them. And if we let them believe that we don't think they can do it, they'll do less than we think they can. If we convince them that they can, they'll do more than we expect they're capable of doing." So him and the principal had a bet, a bottle of brown liquor. I don't know what they were drinking, bourbon, scotch, something. So he had all of the knuckleheads transferred to his classroom, including yours truly. He would go into the office right after homeroom, and the clerk had one of them memeo machines, you know, with

the purple paper, and they would make copies of the attendance list. He would get the first one that came off the machine. His free hour was the first class period. He would go in the teacher's lounge and he would sit down at the desk in the telephone and say, "Charlie, this is Cyrus. You got 15 minutes or I'm coming to get your ass." And he would call every one of the knuckleheads in his homeroom and give us 15 minutes. And so I'd be on a lake up in northern Minnesota and I'd be saying, "Kiss my ass. Cyrus used to call you too? Shit. I thought I was special. What's he doing calling you?" "That's that shit. I thought I was special too. That son of a bitch was going to come and get me!" And my mother would be downstairs laughing and say, "Oh boy, you're in it now." He would call every one of us and tell us if we didn't get school in 15 minutes, he was coming to get our ass, okay? Other than those Black nuns—and I had the only Black teacher at Central High School, was a woman. Her name was Ermin Hogan [Unconfirmed]. She taught typing. I took her class just because she was the only Black teacher up there. At the end of that class, I was typing 90 words a minute on a manual typewriter that looked like a miniature piano, you know? It was about this tall, and in a royal typewriter. I was typing 90 words a minute. That is the most transferable skill I ever had. That's how I became a journalist. That's how I became a philanthropist. That's how I got involved in foundation work. That's how I got involved in public policy. Every job I had, within six months, I was making twice as much as anybody there, because I could—and when computers came out, I said, "Look at that, a little TV with a typewriter attached to it, shit!" and everybody else was doing like this, and I was, "brttttttt." They was like, "Damn! Will you type this for me? It should take me a half hour to do one page." "Sure." I mean, that was the most transferable skill I ever had. Computers? Pfft. For sissies. The

first job I had paid \$18 an hour, I was 15 years old. I was a bomb inspector at John Wood Foundry on Front and Dale. I went down there to see if I could get a job cleaning up the lunchroom or somethin'. The guy said, "Hell, I'm looking for somebody who can read a micrometer." I said, "I can read a micrometer." He handed me one. It's like a slide rule, but it's only about seven inches long, and they carry it in their pocket. And he said, "What is, three eighteenths of an inch? Here." And I said, "six hundred twenty-five ten-thousandths." He said, "Can you start tonight?" And I measured the tolerance on the bombs that we made the shells at John Wood, and they would put them on trains and ship them out to Arden Hills. They would load the ordinance in them and ship them over to Vietnam. And I couldn't sleep at night because I would dream about them bombs.

01:10:11

YM: I had the power to reach up and grab a rope and stop the entire assembly line, a hundred twenty-five men, grown men. And they all did piece work. So, when I pulled the rope, you know what happened? They stopped making money until they corrected the fault. They used to do arc flash to blind me and just all kinds of stuff to mess with me. But them Black nuns and Cyrus Ettinger— and my mother, my grandmother, my older sisters, the Black women who stuck their head out the window and put their hands on their hips, I owe everything I am to them Black women. And I'm not ashamed to say it, to tell 'em. As I got older, Black men started to take me under their wing and tutor me and mentor me and check up on me. But it was Black women primarily who threatened to whoop my ass if I didn't become a credit to the race and amount to something. So, I was a self-fulfilling prophecy. You know, I did not want to get my ass whooped.

I mean, the last thing I wanted to do was get her ass whooped. And when Dennis Lewis's grandmother came in there, I did not want to wrestle. I did not want to fight. I mean, the last thing I wanted to do was get my butt whooped. And I'm not ashamed of it either, because I took some horrible whoopings from some of the bully brothers in the hood. But, it was— we used to play a game called Eat the Peg. You know what the white boys call it? Mumble the Peg. You had to do peg in the ear and off the shoulder and over the back and off your knee. You had to do it off each of your fingers. If the knife landed in the dirt at it at an angle, you had to be able to stick three fingers between the ground and the handle of the knife, or you had to pass it to the next person. Now, why was it called Eat the Peg? Because somebody would take a popsicle stick and find some fresh dog dookie, okay, and get a rock and pound the stick through the dookie until there was this much of a stick poking out the top of the dookie. If you lost at Eat the Peg, you had to pull the stick out with your teeth, okay? Listen, I practiced in the dark! Because, "Get over here Negro, you playin' Eat the Peg today!" They used to make all of us little kids play Eat the Peg. I was the champion Eat the Peg player on our block when I was 10 years old playing with 18-year-old men, okay? Because I was not going to eat the peg. And, man, I mean, I would not change a thing. We were so poor, we couldn't pay attention. We used to say, "We're so poor, we can't afford to go window shopping!" We didn't even know it. But everybody was poor, you know? And everybody was like family. If you were over at somebody's house playing with somebody and it was dinner time, they'd say, "Boy, get in that bathroom, wash your hands and get to this table, okay?" And they would divide whatever they had, enough for them, to make sure there was enough for you too. I don't care whether it was fried chicken or spaghetti or

anything but chitlins. I could not handle the wrinkled steaks. In college, there was a brother who used to eat chitlins and he bought a bucket and they took it out of the refrigerator and put it on the table, took the lid off and put a— what do you call them lights? Blue lights.

SM: Infrared?

MW: The black lights.

YM: Put a black light and you wouldn't believe the shit that was crawling out of that bucket a half hour later. It speeded up the decomposition process, man. Whew! No thank you. When my mother used to clean chitlins, I had to spend the night at a friend's house because there was a vent in the ceiling and my bedroom was right over the kitchen and the stove was right under the vent. My mother would clean the chitlins, and— woman next door's name was Miss Jesse. And she would come over and ring the bell and say, "Teresa, can I have the part that you cleaned so I can have some chitlins too?" My mother would give her the part that she had cleaned, because when they say, "Clean as a chitlin," you know, chitlins are pig intestines. And my mother would, she would spend hours cleaning them chitlins, and put everything that she was not going to cook and eat, she put in a bowl she gave to Ms. Jesse. Ms. Jesse would cook and eat that. My mother would just have the casing of the chitlins, you know, and that's what she would eat.

[Recording paused]

01:15:36

MW: And so moving forward, I'm curious, how were the Civil Rights and then Black Power eras felt? How was that transition in your time here and then also in California at that point?

YM: Well, in California, it was US and the Panthers. Okay, the NAACP was active. There were many chapters in Los Angeles.

MW: US, the Maulana Karenga organization.

YM: United Slaves. There was a Pacifica radio station. I lived in the jungle. Did you see Training Day? You know where Denzel's girlfriend lived? That was the jungle. I lived in the jungle. All of the apartment buildings had swimming pools, palm trees, laundry rooms. My sister fell down the steps and broke her tailbone and I went out there and got two jobs, paid the rent, bought the groceries. My nephew was five years old and I became his surrogate father. And I was like, 10th grade, 15, 16, when I dropped out of Central High School and went to California, stayed out there for five years, came back, went to night school. Because of the education I had gotten at St. Peter Claver— night school was at Mechanic Arts, which is where the Supreme Court building is at now, across the street from the Capitol. And there were a bunch of immigrants who wore bib overalls and worked at Whirlpool, 3M, or American Hoist and Derrick. In the English class, they would read the funnies in the newspaper. So I went to the last two nights of night school. I aced every one of the tests. And the last night, I'm down in the lunchroom having a cigarette, drinking my chocolate milk during the lunch break for night school. We used to go from 6 to 10 o'clock and you had four classes. They had told me I'd have to go to both sessions of summer school, and then I would have to go to day school and night school the next year if I wanted to graduate with my peers. Well, all of my teachers were sitting at a table smoking. You could smoke in schools then, in a lunchroom. They called me over and they said, "You not only have not lost anything being out of school for a whole year—" Lerone Bennett Jr. wrote an essay in Ebony

Magazine called “Was Abraham Lincoln A Racist?” Because Lincoln said, “If I could save the Union by continuing to keep the slaves enslaved, I would do so, and if I have to set them free in order to save the Union, I will do that as well.” He was not our champion savior, although most Negroes when they got to vote, joined the Republican Party because it was the party of Lincoln and “Lincoln freed us.” But they said, “You not only haven’t lost anything, you’re ahead of everybody who’s in your grade a whole year. So we’ve decided to give you all of your credits for the 11th grade.” And I went back to 10th or 11th grade, whatever grade it was, I went back to my regular grade the next year, didn’t have to do summer school, didn’t have to do night school, and I was bored shitless. I was sorry they did that because I still got offered 8 scholarships, and I didn’t really apply myself. I just sat there and took the tests and passed all of my classes for the 11th and 12th grade. Same thing in college. I went to UCLA, I went to USC, I went to the University of Minnesota, and I was teaching for Metropolitan State University before I had a college degree. I was also teaching for Antioch University over in North Minneapolis. I was teaching in the prisons. I’d go to the women’s prison at nine in the morning. I had to be at the state prison at Stillwater at noon. I had to be at the state reformatory in St. Cloud by 6 o’clock, and I didn’t leave there until 11:30. Driving after dark on them icy roads in January from St. Cloud, coming 70 miles back to the Twin Cities, was a trip! And then on Sundays, me and a brother named Cambone Kamara would volunteer with the Black culture group at the federal prison up in Sandstone, 90 miles from here.

[Recording paused]

01:20:13

YM: So here, The Minneapolis and St. Paul NAACP picketed Woolworth's and W.T. Grant's in downtown St. Paul because Blacks couldn't eat at the lunch counter in the 1960s. St. Peter Claver School—the Black newspaper said it was a segregated school because it was mostly Black. But you know what? It was 60% Baptist. And there were white kids, Indian kids, Mexican kids, Chinese kids. But, it was a black school, Black Catholic school. And we had Black nuns who taught us. You know what the tuition was? \$15 a year. If your parents couldn't afford it, they could volunteer and be lunchroom monitors. And you could attend for free. We got a hell of an education. I'm telling you. Shit, when I got in the 9th grade, they were doing stuff in junior high school that we did in the 4th and 5th grade at St. Peter Claver. You know how much them nuns got paid? One dollar a week plus room and board because education was their mission. And there were St. Peter Claver schools all around the country. And them nuns taught at every one of them. Bedford-Stuyvesant, Harlem, you know, Chicago, all over the place. So it's in my DNA, it's in my education, it's in my upbringing. And it was in the ass-whoopings that I got. And I got my share. There was a small, very active part of the Black community, and that was the group that would protest, that would march, that would go downtown to the mayor's office or to the head of St. Paul companies or some major company downtown when a Black employee was being discriminated against. When Jim Griffin scored the highest on the police chief's test and didn't get the job, we marched down Selby Avenue. They created a position called Deputy Chief of Services.

[Conversation is redacted per interviewee wishes]

01:22:37

YM: But it wasn't St. Louis or Chicago or Indianapolis or any of the big cities. It wasn't Atlanta. And the ministers were mostly in charge of all the Black organizations. There was one Black architect— Lonnie Atkins— who was in charge of the Urban League. Like I said, Roy Wilkins was the chair of the Urban League and Hallie Q. Brown. Black professionals. There were a few— this used to be a Jewish community before it was a Black community. There were still a few Jewish elders who were very committed to civil rights, who volunteered for boards of directors, Urban League board, Hallie board. There's still a few, you know, good people, good people, who caught hell from other Jews because of their commitment to trying to help Black people get ahead. But as I said, there were Minnesota Negroes everywhere. They were just more up here than they were anywhere else. Depending on who you wanted to run with. You know, if you wanted to run with Mahmoud and Cambone and Vusi [Vusumuzi Zulu] and Spike Moss— Spike and I have the same birthday. So, every year we call one another and wish happy birthday. He turned 80 this year. I said, "Brother, you have been officially accepted into the Royal Order of Silverbacks."

SM: Because— he's from St. Louis, right?

YM: He's from somewhere in Missouri. Jefferson City or might have been St. Louis.

SM: I thought it was St. Louis.

YM: Could be, could be, I forget. He asked me to write the eulogy for his mother's funeral. I was really honored to do it. He and I have always been tight. It was me and him and Katie McWatt

would always go up to the prison when the brothers were getting beat up or they were gettin' jammed. And then we both worked for Antioch. Spike is a good brother.

[Conversation is redacted per interviewee wishes]

01:25:11

YM: I'm using a lot of your time. What's your next question, brother? I want to be respectful.

MW: I wanted to ask just about the Black Power era. And then I—

YM: The Black Power era. There were two eras. The first one was the gang era. Okay.

Integration hurt this community because everybody who could, moved out to Maplewood, to Roseville, to Apple Valley, to Burnsville, to Columbia Heights. If you got a promotion— you became a vice president for a major corporation— there weren't a lot of houses for sale in the ghetto with four and five bedrooms if you wanted a big family. So, in keeping with your new station in life, you would move out to one of the first row of suburbs, Maplewood, Roseville. Woodbury is a recent phenomenon. That was not always— there were very few, if any, Black people out there before the 1980s— 80s or early 90s. And that's the fastest growing suburb in the metro area. When the ministers and the lawyers and the doctors and dentists and architects and the professionals moved out, the gangs and the hoes moved in. If you had an after-hour joint in Summit-University— there had to be five or six of them— the police wouldn't bust you. Like I said, there was a policy of containment. As long as you kept that shit up in Rondo, you was all right. But if you tried to do it in Mac-Groveland, they'd bust your kneecaps, okay? Rondo only. And after-hour joints, they played cards, they shot dice, they'd make chicken wings or catfish

sandwiches or bratwurst or something. Somebody cooked, somebody got, 10% of the cut on whatever was in the pot. After-hour joints were open until people went home, usually when the sun came up. There was Willie Page, I mean, there was Salty Dog— would open up his coat and say, “Want to buy a sandwich, youngblood?” And you’d say, “No thanks, man.” He had chicken salad, he had lunch meat, and he’d say, “What about a half pint? You want to buy a half pint?” He had about 30 pockets with half pints of the cheap shit, Boot Hill and Cabin-something or other. And he’d have, you know, 15, 18 sandwiches in pockets in this side. Salty had a brand new Cadillac, but he also had a hooptie. When he was selling half pints and sandwiches in the after-hour joints, he was driving his hooptie. He said, “They’re not going to repo my hog.” But— so there were a group of people here who were trying to start a Black Panther chapter. The rumor has it that they were told if they killed a cop, they would qualify. And so, a white cop named Sackett [James Sackett] was killed on Hague and Victoria, one block from where Inner City Youth League used to be. And Ronnie Reed and Larry, I’m trying to remember what Larry’s last name was, were convicted. Ronnie’s girlfriend, Connie Trimble, had stomach cancer. They brought her back from Denver. She claimed that she made the call saying that she was pregnant, asking for a police escort to the hospital. The cops showed up, one of them got shot and killed. There’s a playground over on the East Side in the white neighborhood called Sackett Field. Nathaniel Kaliq and other people, Kwame McDonald, formed groups. We had the Gangster Disciples. We had Crips, we had the Bloods, we had a lot of the— and most of the Black gangs started as soul patrols. We had a soul patrol over in North Minneapolis that would ride through the community and prevent the white boys from jumping out of their cars and beating up Black

seniors and Black women and getting in their cars and going back out to the burbs. So, you had— the Black Power Movement was in response to the gangs and the drugs. Johnny Howard used to do marches over in Frogtown. And the hoe houses and the drug houses were like dandelions. You'd snuff one out here, it would pop up six blocks away in another slumlord's property.

01:30:03

[Conversation is redacted per interviewee wishes]

01:39:00

YM: Yeah, but what's next, bro? I want to get to everything you got before you gotta go. And you've been here for over 2 hours.

MW: Right. Those have answered my general questions. I was hoping before we close out— you could add anything else that you want to say— but then I was hoping, could you retell that Elder Mahmoud story with the—

YM: DeLand, Florida.

MW: Yes sir. Yeah.

YM: Mahmoud— Milton Williams [Mahmoud El-Kati] was a student at Wilberforce College in Ohio and from Miami. One of the other brothers at the college was from Miami who had his own car. And him and one of his buddies from Miami were gonna drive home for spring break. So Mahmoud asked him, "Can I get a ride? I'm from the other side of town, but I'm from Miami

too.” So they said, “Sure, you can help pay for the gas.” And he said, “Oh, I’m happy to help.” And so they got in this car and they’re driving to Miami. When they got to Florida— this was before the interstate and the freeways and all of that— they’re on a dirt road driving down the east coast of Florida.

01:40:13

YM: They pulled into a gas station in a small town that had a blinking light at the intersection in the middle of town called DeLand, Florida. And DeLand was where Jackie Robinson used to play minor league baseball and play golf. The guy checked the oil and did the windshield and filled it up with gas. And he said, “Are you young brothers here for the dance?” And they said, “Dance? What dance?” They said, “Well, right across the road there at the hi-hat club, they’re havin’ a dance tonight. And every pretty girl within 20 miles is gonna be there. It costs 50 cents to get in. They’re gonna have chaperones and there’s gonna be a big light bulb in the middle of the dance floor. They’re gonna have finger food and punch and stuff.” So they said, “Well, when is the dance going to be?” He said, “It starts in about 15, 20 minutes.” Mahmoud said, “Hey, we better stick around, check this out, see if we can get some phone numbers or something, you know, might have to come through here again.” DeLand is up near Orlando, up near Disneyland. So they waited around and drove across the road and went in and paid their 50 cents. They put a slow record on. There must have been two or three dozen people in there. And all of the young girls were sitting on a bench against the back wall. The brothers went over there and, “May I have this dance?” And would take these young sisters out on the dance floor. Mahmoud and these two brothers was watching them, you know, trying to get the lay of the land. And

Mahmoud said, “Well, how come nobody dancing with that pretty Black girl sitting on the bench all alone by herself?” And there was a brother standing nearby who was from that area. And he said, “That’s Jessie’s girl. Ain’t nobody gonna ask her to dance.” And Mahmoud said, “Well, shoot, they got chaperones in here and there’s a big light bulb burning in the middle of the floor. You couldn’t hardly do anything inappropriate.” He said, “I think I’m gon’ go over there and ask her to dance. See can I get to know her?” So he did. It was a slow record playing and they had their arms around one another’s neck and were dancing in the middle of the floor. And in a very short while, there was quite a commotion over by the front door to the hi hat club. Milton had his back to the front door, but the girl he was dancing with, her eyes got big as a silver dollar. Okay. And so Milton slowly danced her around to see what was happening, what all this commotion was, all this shouting and hollering. And there was a six foot eight Negro with his arm outstretched with a straight razor open in his hand, and five grown men were trying to hold him, saying, “Jesse, don’t kill him! Please, Jesse, it’s not worth it! Don’t kill him, Jesse!” By this time, Mahmoud’s eyes were big as a silver dollar. And the pretty Black girl that he was dancing with had her back to the door. So she danced around to see what was happening at the front door. And her arms were holding thin air, okay? She still had her arms around Mahmoud, but Mahmoud was gone! The two brothers said, “Man, we better get out of here.” They said, “Well, we better find Mahmoud.” So they went in the bathroom, he wasn’t in there. They went in the kitchen, he wasn’t in there. And they went outside and they went around the place and— those buildings, a lot of buildings were built on stilts because of the flood, you know, the spring floods. They got down on their knees and they looked underneath and they couldn’t find him. They waited around

for about, half hour and said, “Hey, he’s a grown brother. He’s goin’ to have to find his own way to Miami.” So they got in this car and commenced to— this hooptie— pokin’ their way down this dirt road with the bright lights on, going to Miami. And the brother in the passenger seat, all of a sudden— they were about five miles outside of DeLand. He grabbed the brother behind the wheel’s leg and said, “Look out, man, there’s a deer up there on the road! Look at his eyes, they’re shining.” So the brother who was driving— I don’t know if he had the bright lights on then or he put them on— but he slowed down and it wasn’t a deer. With his arms pumping up and down in the middle of the road, was Mahmoud trotting toward Miami, five miles outside of town. So they said, “Boy, you better get in that back seat before Jesse catches up with you.” And they would never let Mahmoud live it down.

01:45:10

YM: He made the mistake of telling me one time the story about Jesse. And we had a roast for Mahmoud over at Sabathani Community Center. It must have been— oh gosh, I’d say it was in the ‘90s.

SM: It was 1999.

YM: 1999.

SM: It was me, Anura [Anura Si-Asar]. It was three celebration [Inaudible] Remember all his friends set up at the History Center and Sabathani.

YM: I remember, the History Center, not Sabathani. They asked me to come up and speak because I knew Mahmoud so well. I had known him since he had— since Milton Williams, I first

got here. I said, “You know, a lot of people have told you all of the significant contributions that Mahmoud has selfishly made.” I said, “But Mahmoud was an adventuresome brother too, and few people know much about the adventuresome side of Mahmoud.” And Mahmoud was sitting down in the front row. He said, “Oh, please, Yusef, no, don’t tell, don’t tell that. Yusef, please, I’ll do anything.” I said, “I’m gon’ tell you about Mahmoud’s adventure in DeLand, Florida.” And Mahmoud just sat there shaking his head. Boy, then people rocked and rolled and fell out of their chair laughing and had a good time. And that was the culmination of the evening was Mahmoud's adventure of D-Land, Florida. But I always told it because I loved Mahmoud, I respected him. And it wasn’t to poke fun at him, but he’s such an innocent brother. He wasn’t fearless. He just would never do anything to rile anybody or do anything wrong or to get in trouble. He was always bending over backwards to help people. And if you needed five dollars and he had two, he would go borrow three and give you five. There’s another brother whose name is Moussa Foster. Do you know Moussa? Moussa is also a historian. Moussa went to a welfare rights conference with about 20 other Black folks, and they all rented one room in a hotel somewhere back east. And so they said, “Moussa, tell us a story.” Moussa said, “Well, if you insist, I rarely speak and I seldom have much to say, but let me tell you this story.” So, Mahmou— Moussa began telling the story, and after about 20 minutes, somebody turned the light off. Moussa continued to tell the story and people started snoring, okay? Moussa turned the light on and everybody was sleeping. And Moussa said, “Well, damn, I was just about to get to the good part!” So he turned the light off and told the rest of the story to himself, and then went

to bed. But we have been blessed with some brothers who were swift of tongue and spirit. I have a speech that— in fact, I'll give it to one of you, and one of you can copy it for the other one.

[Recording paused]