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Florida Civil Rights Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: DOI: F55-0001
Interviewee: Dr. Robert W. Saunders, Senior (RS)
Interviewer: Dr. Canter Brown (CB)
Interview date: January 14, 2002-January 18, 2002
Interview location: University of South Florida, Tampa Library
Transcribed by: Lauren Dominguez
Transcription date: December 16, 2004
Audit Edit by: Cyrana Walker
Audit Edit date: April 11, 2007
Interview Changes by: Mary Beth Isaacson
Interview Changes date: September 8-October 29, 2008
Additional Changes by: Arlen Bensen
Additional Changes date: November 19, 2008
Final Edit by: Catherine Cottle
Final Edit date: January 5, 2009

Dr. Canter Brown: Hello. I'm Dr. Canter Brown, and this is Monday, January 14 in the year 2002. Who would have ever believed we'd live this long? I am sitting here in the luxuriously appointed videotaping studios of the University of South Florida Library on its sixth floor with one of Florida's most outstanding twentieth century residents, Dr. Robert W. Saunders, Senior. The University of South Florida Libraries Resource Center for Florida History and Politics is sponsoring a series of interviews that Dr. Saunders and I will be conducting throughout this week about his truly remarkable and outstanding life of service to the state of Florida, to the South, and to the United States. First, Dr. Saunders, let me welcome you to the University of South Florida and express our appreciation for your willingness to sit with us and let us grill you over the next five days about your life.

Dr. Robert W. Saunders, Senior: Well, let me say that it's a pleasure being here because, being a Floridian, I would be interested in getting over the facts as the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and I saw it in my career. I think it's very key and very important.

CB: Well, that's exactly what we want to do, and I think that maybe we ought to start at the very outset of this. I want to go back and start about your early life today, but maybe we ought to make the point of why this is so important in a general sense from the very beginning. I know in my experience, younger generations already have come along who have no real sense of what Florida was like and the South was like, easily within our lifetimes and our memory, and the great struggle and sacrifice that so many people offered to change a very terrible racial situation in this state and in this region. And the tremendous courage that individuals like you, and especially you, showed to bring about

that very important change. Hopefully these interviews will help, along with your wonderful book, *Bridging the Gap*, to begin reminding people of the great heroism and courage that was required to make the state of Florida a better place to live, for all its citizens.

RS: You and other scholars have written about the history of Florida and the relationship that the conquistadors and what went on in pre-Civil War days, and what went on after that and the changes that came about. Certainly my concern is that many people do not know what happened and how we were pushed out of the picture and the fight to get back into the picture. That's why, in writing the book, when we talked about the title, *Bridging the Gap: Continuing the Florida NAACP Legacy of Harry T. Moore*, because really, Harry T. Moore is the bridge. I think that the killing of Harry T. Moore was an attempt to cut it off.

CB: I think on the informal agenda that you and I agreed on for these interviews, on tomorrow morning we'll be able to talk at length about your great predecessor, Harry T. Moore, who, with his wife Harriett, was killed by the Ku Klux Klan on Christmas night of 1951. I'm going to ask you once again tomorrow to answer a question that I've never gotten a complete answer from, and that is, how you had the courage to come down here and do what you did. You're going to have to dread that now for the next twenty-four hours—

RS: (laughs)

CB: —me asking that. Let me start. Let's talk about your early life since we want these interviews in the Resource Center for Florida History and Politics at the University of South Florida Library to focus particularly on your life and your career. If you don't mind, let's start with your early life. One of the things that you have told me and that you have written about and spoken about publicly is that, unlike many of the people you have worked with in your great career, your family's heritage was not so much a heritage in the United States as in another place. I was wondering if maybe we could begin by talking about that other place and some of the people that were so important to you there and why you consider that to be important for your life.

RS: It goes back to the fact that many of my ancestors came from the Bahamians, Harbour Island and so forth. My father was born in Nassau.

CB: And his name was?

RS: Bullet¹ Saunders. His grandfather was named Hannibal, and Hannibal was an escaped slave who got away from the master in South Carolina. The master had become acquainted with him and had given this slave certain responsibilities. When the time came, my father's grandfather was an accomplished seaman and a woodworker. When the slave owner became ill, he told my old man Hannibal to take the ship down and take

¹Dr. Saunders's father was named William Saunders, so Bullet may be a nickname.

the cotton or whatever it was, the trade they had, and to bring whatever trades they had accomplished back to him. When old man Hannibal got down to Harbour Island, he got off the ship and told the crew, take the boat back. He was staying in Harbour Island. Of course, that's the Hannibal side.

CB: Something that might be helpful to the folks who eventually see this interview is to know that Dunmore Town, the town on Harbour Island and the Bahamas, which is, as I recall, right off the northeastern tip of Eleuthera, was at one time the capital of the Bahamas, and a very important center for commerce and trade.

RS: That's true. Again, on my grandfather's side, the Rogers side, his mother was born in Virginia or Raleigh, somewhere up there. She was supposed to be a beautiful black slave woman who was on the market. It was an English sea officer who saw her and bought her. I don't know what happened, but he transported the white side of his family and Josephine Rogers, and they had a shipwreck off the coast of Key West or somewhere down there. He found the family and carried them into Dunmore Town, Harbour Island. That was the beginning of the Rogers side.

CB: Your father's side, of course, the Saunders family; your mother's side [was] the Rogers family.

RS: I bring in the Hannibals because the Hannibals played a very key role in developing Key West. As a matter of fact, there's a story about Joe Hannibal, who was the youngest of old man Hannibal's sons. He lived about two or three blocks from the famous writer, what's his name—

CB: Ernest Hemingway?

RS: Ernest Hemingway. He and Ernest Hemingway were good friends. It is said that, and this is in part of the collection here, that Ernest Hemingway's daughter or somebody was getting married and wanted Joe—Joe was an accomplished musician—to play for this wedding. Grand Uncle Joe told him he didn't have a guitar, or something. Ernest Hemingway told him, "Don't worry about it." Ernest Hemingway went to Havana, and when he came back he bought Joe a new guitar, so Joe played for the wedding. They were, you know, established. The article in the paper that's on file here said the Hannibal brothers and how they helped develop Key West. Again, the Rogers and the Saunders—well, actually my father came over from Nassau, Dunmore Town. The Hannibals, the Alburys, they were quite active. There is another thing. That is that my grandfather, James Rogers, Jimmy Rogers they called him, spoke Spanish fluently—and Italian, as did my grandmother and my mother. My grandfather, Jimmy Rogers, was a cigar maker.

CB: If you'll let me hold you there a second, because I want to come back once we get the family to Tampa. But if you want to continue talking about anything, we will. Just to recap, Shadrack Hannibal, a slave, takes his master's ship from South Carolina to Nassau and brings the Hannibal family to Nassau. Then his daughter, Christine Hannibal, is going to marry John A. Saunders.

RS: That's right.

CB: Thereby, eventually bequeathing you, your last name, and your family heritage. Now your mother's side of the family was also from the Bahamas, though, and you alluded to that briefly just now in referring to your grandfather, James W. Rogers. Going back a little further, you also were associated in that line with the Johnson family who eventually will become one of the pioneer black families in Tampa. Of course, the Meacham Child Development Center is named for Christina Johnson Meacham, a relative of yours, very important in early Tampa history. Mention a little bit about the Johnsons and the Rogerses and their move from the Bahamas to Florida.

RS: They moved coming with the cigar factory, and particularly during the time of the Spanish-American War.

CB: I guess I should have helped you a little bit more with that question. They go first, both sides of your family, to Key West. They're attracted initially by jobs in the booming cigar industry there in the 1870s and 1880s, if I'm correct.

RS: Let me point out something. Shadrack came to Key West, and he wasn't satisfied with what was going on. He went back to Nassau, and then he came back to Key West and brought his family.

CB: Which was not an unusual thing at all. There was a great deal of interaction between the Bahamas and Key West and later between the Bahamas and Tampa.

RS: Particularly because of the steamship *Cuba* that would leave Tampa and go to Key West and to Havana and so forth. That was the mode of transportation that they would follow to get here. There were a lot of marriages down there and whatnot. That's where the Johnsons and the Saunders, the Higgs, and you name it, established. A lot of the descendants now are in Miami. When they came to Tampa, Christina Johnson, who later became Meacham, and others of the family, came. They were teachers and everything. It is very interesting that Christina Meacham—I think that she was at one time tied in with the development of the NAACP and whatnot. As history records, she was also very active in the field of civic activities.

CB: Here you have a situation once the family is at Key West that they really have very different preparation and perspectives than a lot of people they work with. Slavery, of course, is still existing in Cuba when they're arriving in Key West. Many Cubans haven't come up to the cigar industry in Key West from Cuba, but slavery is still a reality there. And it's a very fresh memory in the United States still when they come to Key West. But they have a very different tradition, don't they, because conditions were different in the Bahamas.

RS: Well my grandfather always talked about Queen Victoria. The old Bahamians always referred back to the Queen. You know that she was reigning then. If you go to Nassau,

there is a line of stairs that go down, and they always say this is where the Queen walked up and down. There was more freedom, and I guess that was because of the fact that the British had done away with slavery—

CB: Eighteen thirty-five [1835], I believe, right around then.

RS: Eighteen thirty-five [1835]. I was talking with a county commissioner here, and he was listening to them singing “Amazing Grace.” I said, “Are you familiar with the song ‘Amazing Grace’ and how it came about?” He said, “No.” Of course, most people who sing “Amazing Grace” do not know that it is tied in with the slave trade.

CB: I didn’t know that.

RS: There was a young captain, a youngster, a nine-year-old boy, who was taken to sea by his father. He came up through the British Navy. Eventually he became a seaman. He escaped. When he escaped, they captured him back, and he was flogged and put back on the ship. He came up through the ranks on the British Navy and became the captain of a slave ship. It’s a very interesting story because when he became the captain of the slave ship, he would go into the harbor there in Africa, and they would load these slaves up and bring them back. As time went on, he became quite concerned because of what he saw. When he got back to England, he became one of the key people to work to bring about an end to the continuance of the slave trade. It’s very interesting. I can’t think of his name now, but all you need to do is look at “Amazing Grace,” and you’ll find that the writer², the author was well known and he was quite a figure in dealing with the elimination of slavery. I think that this had a lot to do with then freedom that existed in the Bahamas.

CB: It seems to me it must have had a lot to do, eventually, with the environment you grew up in. That you have families on both sides of your family, who are steeped in traditions of freedom that go back generations, and also who have benefited from the fact that the British Empire established schools for freedmen and freedwomen beginning in 1835. And so your family was not only—correct me if I’m wrong—but not only steeped in pride of and a willingness to defend their rights and freedom, but also were very well educated and able to communicate and articulate.

RS: This is a fact, and as a matter of fact, my grandmother, Marion, I always heard her say that she never was a slave, and she stood up for her rights. It’s interesting because when she was in Key West, her family, her brothers and her father, bought property and owned property in Key West, and when they came to Tampa they began to buy property and to own property and to become involved.

CB: Substantial citizens, Key West being a very flexible and open environment in the 1870s and 1880s and Florida’s largest city. People today forget that, that Key West was urban life in Florida then.

²F John Newton.

RS: If you go into the history of the civil rights movement in Florida, and I think you've done some work there, you find that one of the first efforts to establish the NAACP was in Key West.

CB: We're going to get to that in just a minute because your family will be involved in some of those initial efforts, and it seems to me, not by coincidence. To recap a little bit, the family's roots on both sides, whether on your father's side with the Hannibal and Saunders families and others, or on your mother's side with the Rogers and the Johnson families, both are steeped in Bahamian traditions, pride in freedom, pride in education, and a willingness to fight to maintain that pride and those freedoms. They come to Key West because the town, Florida's largest city, is booming in the 1870s and early 1880s with the buildup of the cigar industry. By and large, they either take jobs in the industry or else as teachers.

But then in the mid-1880s, Key West experiences a series of disasters, including a terrible fire at the same time that the railroad finally arrives in this remote little bayside village of Tampa. It got here in January of 1884. Within a couple of years, Henry Plant and others here in town were trying to see what they could do to develop some industry here to attract people to settle and develop the town, and they hit on the cigar industry in the midst of Key West's problems. And so it's really in that environment that your families sort of begin making a second migration, as I understand it.

RS: This is true. My grandfather became a cigar maker.

CB: This was James W. Rogers.

RS: James W. Rogers. Then of course Mary Matthews, who was the youngest sister of my grandmother, married Felix Marrera from Cuba, who couldn't speak English, but he was a cigar-maker, and he was dark-skinned. Here again you find the family integrating itself into, not only the English or whatever it might be, but also getting tied in with the Cubans and Spanish traditions.

CB: So a very cosmopolitan environment in the sense that the family is developing inside, and an urban environment. I recall reading in your book that you believe the Rogerses moved to Tampa in the very early 1890s. Am I right on that?

RS: You're correct. As a matter of fact, they were here before the Spanish-American War. As I look back through the city directories and whatnot, I track the family. For example, I find that they were living in Ybor City. Then they lived in West Tampa. Also, they were involved in the development of education institutions. They were battling for the elimination of discrimination, particularly in the field of voter registration.

CB: Even as newcomers, within their first decade here, James W. Rogers and perhaps even more importantly his wife Marion Matthews Rogers, are already insisting on a better world for themselves and their family and people like them. You had a rough environment here.

RS: When you look at the development of Tampa and you look at the Scrubs, and of course Burgert Brothers³, the pictures show the Scrubs as being one of the worst slums in the country. If I might allude to Dr. Benjamin Mays, who was in 1926, 1927, and 1928 the director of the Urban League here, Dr. Mays, when I was working with the federal government, I used to meet with him in the airport in Atlanta. He told me that one of the best things that ever happened to him was when they ran him out of Tampa. It was because of his fight trying to get rid of the slums and the conditions that exist and working with the various classes, including the white population, to bring about change. Again, the Bahamians played a key role. Christina Johnson Meacham became principal of Harlem School—

CB: Yes, which was the principal school for black children in Tampa.

RS: The principle school for black children. My mother is in a tape⁴, and I don't know if you've heard that tape, talks about going to high school at Lomax, and this is the development, I think, of the system, the development of the effort to expand education, especially when Blanche Beatty and her family were already also involved because they were established here.

CB: Your family, with the passage of years, fairly quickly is going to become more associated with the new development of West Tampa on the west side of the Hillsborough River and north of the Tampa Bay Hotel than they will be with Ybor City. Before we leave downtown Tampa and Ybor City with the family, there's one institution that already was there that your family, particularly through your grandmother, Marion Matthews Rogers and then your own mother and you were raised within it, is going to have a tremendous influence on you and on the development of the civil rights movement in Tampa. I wondered if maybe you would mention a little bit about St. Paul A.M.E. [African Methodist Episcopal] Church and its importance to you.

RS: Yes. St. Paul, of course, is the second oldest church in Tampa. It began as—they called it Brush Manor. The property was donated by the Brumicks and Madame Fortune, who of course was an ex-slave woman, Fortune Taylor Ransom. There was a minister who came from Ocala somewhere, who came in and organized the Brush Manor. Then of course as the congregation grew, they began to build another building, which was and is now the St. Paul A.M.E. Church, in the early 1900s.

CB: I remember you telling me that your grandfather James Rogers was Anglican, Episcopalian, but his wife Marion is Methodist and joined St. Paul and subsequently is

³F Burgert Brothers was a photography studio in business from 1899 to 1963, which took many photographs of Tampa and the local community.

⁴F This is a reference to an interview that Christine Saunders did with Herbert Jones in 1978. The interview is part of the Otis R. Anthony African-Americans in Florida Oral History Project and may be viewed on the USF Library website.

going to bring their daughter, your mother, up in St. Paul. She, in turn, is going to bring you up there.

RS: All of the Rogers children came up through St. Paul, and when the building was started—I think it was completed in 1914 or something—contributions were solicited. My mother talks about how the money was raised and she refers to the fact that the oldest sister, Beulah Rogers, was well acquainted with Madame Fortune. And Beulah used to comb Madame Fortune's hair and run errands for her and whatnot. My grandmother would bake pies, and they'd take the pies, and Madame Fortune would buy all the pies and then give them back to them and give the money to St. Paul.

CB: Fortune Taylor was the widow of a homesteader, a black homesteader, former slave in Hernando County, Benjamin Taylor. He had died early on, but she had gone ahead and gotten their homestead, which is roughly the area along the Hillsborough River, I guess, where the art center is right now and the art museum. Fortune Street still reminds us of her presence. She later marries a fellow named Ransom, and so by the 1890s is Fortune Taylor Ransom, but everybody called her Madame Fortune. She really represented in important ways, I think, the important role that black men and women had played in building up Tampa, a story that's really been lost.

RS: She owned property. As a matter of fact, you talked about homesteading. My mother describes her as a short, stout woman [with] dark skin. She lived in one of the houses with the slabs up and down. My mother says that she ask my grandmother, why did Madame Fortune live in this house when she was rich? Of course, she was rich because of the Fortune Street Bridge, which is still Fortune Street Bridge. I can't for the life of me see why they changed it from Fortune Street to Laurel Street, but that was done without, I think, black people having any word and trying to perpetuate or continue the historical significance of somebody like Madame Fortune. But my mother talks about Madame Fortune and the role that she played in the community and how she worked with the black kids and that type of thing.

CB: So you're going to grow in an environment—not to reduce this to too simple a point—but in a world in which you took for granted that black men and women were community developers, community builders. I think that surprises a lot of people, especially white people today, who have this very simplistic view of the past that blacks came out of slavery, and for a little while were kind of manipulated by corrupt carpetbaggers, and then happily accepted segregation just to be able to survive. The reality wasn't that way at all, that black men and women helped build the cities that Florida is going to become famous for.

RS: Particularly Tampa.

CB: Particularly Tampa, and that you and your mother—you were alive early enough, and certainly she was, to know some of those very people who rose out of slavery to help build this place.

RS: She knew the Brumicks and the—you name it. She went to school with some of the children, the Dobys and whatnot. It's very interesting also that at that time, West Tampa was a separate community. It was not part of Tampa. Many of the Bahamians had moved into West Tampa, and that's when they began to push for better education facilities. For example, young people now don't know about the Lesters. I talked to some of them last—you know Dr. Lester, who was a young—well, he died. He served in World War II, but his daddy was a postman. I remember Dr.—Reverend—Mr. Lester the postman delivering mail up and down Garcia Avenue. The fact that we are talking about the development and how the role that black people played, Mr. Lester the mailman was one who wrote the letter to W.E.B. Du Bois talking about conditions in Tampa.

CB: It led to the establishment of the first—

RS: The first NAACP.

CB: Nineteen fifteen [1915], 1914, right?

RS: Nineteen fifteen [1915] or 1914. And of course the NAACP responded and said, why don't you make this some kind of a civic organization? But then W.E.B. Du Bois came in, and the story goes that W.E.B. Du Bois was to speak out at the fair. When he was going to talk, the fair started the automobile races, and Du Bois said, "I'm not talking under this situation."

CB: Again, this was about 1914.

RS: About 1914. This is the beginning of the effort to agitate for an organization like NAACP. Let me just—

CB: Excuse me for interrupting, but it might be important to note that the national organization was very reluctant to establish chapters in the South or branches in the South.

RS: That's true.

CB: They were very fearful of the racial situation. They were a new organization, really only beginning in any real sense about 1910, 1911, and they were very resistant. The first overture, which your grandmother Marion Matthews Rogers joined—I'm trying to remember Mr. Lester's name. I think it was H.L. Lester—

RS: H.E. Lester.

CB: And others, they were told no, let's don't establish a branch here. Let's just establish a more informal organization in West Tampa. Within a couple of years, but within a couple of years a Floridian becomes executive director of the NAACP, James Weldon Johnson—

RS: That's right.

CB: —and visits the peninsula of Florida, leading to the establishment of—I can't remember if Tampa's branch was the second or the third. Key West was first.

RS: Key West was first. Tampa, Jacksonville, and then I think it was a little town up in north Florida out from Tallahassee. But—

CB: But here your family is at a time when the NAACP's national organization—of course, you will become one of the great figures in NAACP history in Florida—but at the time, your grandmother was attempting in the mid-1910s with friends and associates to begin institutionally resisting the increasing racism they see around them. The NAACP is actually reluctant to help them.

RS: This is true. It's particularly tied in with some of the things that happened to black soldiers in the 24th Infantry, for example, during the Spanish-American War and how they were treated. As a matter of fact, you in your writings have referred to the fact that the black soldiers—who were really the soldiers, the rough riders were just cowboys coming in here.

CB: They paved the way up—

RS: And Roosevelt refers to the fact that it was the 9th and 24th that saved the lives of these people going up on the hill. The fact that these soldiers went to Lakeland, I think, and they broke open a jail or something—

CB: In Lakeland and in Tampa.

RS: And in Tampa. They broke the jails open and got their companions out of the jail because they didn't like what was going on and the way that they were treated. My grandmother and those were involved. They were there and saw all of this. My grandmother often told me about the reluctance on the part of black soldiers. Even when they were developing Central Avenue, there was some reluctance because there was nowhere for these soldiers to go. So my grandmother—all of this came about and the demands that came out of it. Incidentally, I was out at the cemetery on 22nd Street, and the minister that wrote along with Lester to try and get the NAACP down here is buried right out there on 22nd Street.

CB: He was the minister at St. Paul A.M.E. Church, is that not right?

RS: I don't recall, but I think he was very active.

CB: In the early meetings, once a branch was established, West Tampa having had a less formal group, but once in 1916 a branch is established at times in St. Paul A.M.E. Church.

RS: That's when, incidentally, I recall my mother had the book by Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*. I recall reading that book. It must have been about 1930 or something. Even there, there was this Booker T. Washington traveling throughout the state. You had this conflict.

CB: It still surprises people today to learn that what we have, in history, come to call Jim Crow racial discrimination, legally mandated segregation, did not happen right after the Civil War. The rise of Jim Crow, much more so than not, is a product of the 1890s and the early 1900s.

RS: *The Strange Case of Jim Crow*, by Vann Woodward.

CB: Yes, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*.

RS: A lot of people haven't read that. That book has sold millions of copies.

CB: Oh, yes, it certainly has.

RS: It tells the story of the development of Jim Crow and how it came about.

CB: Here your family with their pride and their own accomplishments, their education, and also great pride in the tradition of freedom that they have grown up with in the Bahamas, are coming to Tampa in the 1900s, establishing themselves very well, getting involved in community institutions, but at the same time seeing with their own eyes this dynamic that Vann Woodward wrote about, the rise of Jim Crow in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Their immediate reaction, particularly your grandmother Marion Rogers, is to organize, to resist it. Even at a time when the NAACP is reluctant to let her do that.

RS: Right. My mother talks in this tape about my grandmother organizing some of the parents from West Tampa and going down to the school superintendent to demand a better school. She says that the school superintendent told my grandmother, "Go back to Odd Fellows Hall." My grandmother thought they were talking about the white Odd Fellows Hall, but when she got there she found they weren't. They were talking about another building.⁵

CB: Which they didn't own. (laughs)

RS: Which they didn't own. This is what you're talking about because they were, even then. I recall that my grandmother and my mother told me that they were thought—talking about filing a lawsuit back then to attack segregated schools. This is before the concept that we know even came about. Back then they were talking about filing a suit to end racially segregated schools.

⁵ Once again, Dr. Saunders is referring to his mother's 1978 interview with Herbert Jones.

CB: Of course, already this tradition of legally attacking legally enforced racial discrimination was beginning to have a few successes. For example, about the same time the mid-1910s, the U.S. Supreme Court is going to outlaw racial covenants in deeds, surprising a lot of the nation and thus setting a precedent that the NAACP—and much of your work in Florida is going to incorporate legally attacking segregation, while at the same time—

RS: Let me just say—and of course, I hate to advance to recently, but you mentioned covenants. The lawsuit that was filed against the city of Tampa to desegregate recreation, Francisco Rodriguez was the lawyer, along with I think somebody out of Thurgood's [Marshall] office. The city agreed to end segregation in public recreation, and then they compromised on one thing because of Ballast Point. The deed—and you can search this—had a restricted covenant in it. If anything happened, that was to revert back, I think, to the Peter Knight family, or something like that. This is a part of history that—

CB: In the next few days, with your permission, I'm going to go much more deeply into the activities of the lawyers you worked with: Francisco Rodriguez, and of course the great Thurgood Marshall. I think I did—as you already know, I'm the most fallible of human beings (Saunders laughs)—and I think when I said the Supreme Court outlawed racial covenants, what I meant was racial zoning at that time.

The only point I was trying to make is just that already, even before you were born, members of your family in Florida, in Tampa, are beginning to take up the institutional reins that eventually you will hold in your hands in guiding the civil rights movement in Florida. We touched on the fact that, in Tampa, not only were there institutions that were going to provide a solid center for your family's life, like St. Paul A.M.E. Church, but there were remarkable individuals like Madame Fortune. I think it will surprise a lot of people to learn that, not only were blacks still in public office in several places in Florida, most of the cities had one, possibly two, black councilmen in the early 1900s. As a child, you remember living near one of the most outstanding of those individuals who had become a major property owner in West Tampa, who had been a major public federal official in Tampa up to 1913, former state representative from—Alachua County? I think it's Alachua County, Gainesville—Joseph N. Clinton.

RS: I remember Mr. Clinton. I remember his wife. They lived across the bridge, Garcia Avenue Bridge, on the corner of Garcia and—oh, I can't think of it.

CB: Palm?

RS: Palm. He had a beautiful home there. I recall as a kid going there and my mother came and my grandmother. I recall this old man sitting there.

CB: We'll get into it later, too, but he's going to not only be a visible symbol to you of the role of black individuals in public affairs, he having been a very distinguished state representative and later federal official in Tampa after the turn of the twentieth century.

But his son will also, in a sense, influence your love of music. (Saunders laughs) People may not know that the famous musician—well, you—

RS: Red Clinton.

CB: Red Clinton.

RS: Red Clinton, yes. Matter of fact, you know, it is very interesting when you start talking about the good neighborhood we were—I was raised up in, my mother and whatnot. You had Italian, Spanish, and black people.

CB: This is Roberts City in West Tampa, a cigar community.

RS: I was able to see the sort of integration to a point where, when it got to Short, Main or Chestnut [Streets], then it began to—you saw the black people and the housing, and that was established by black. But again, all of these people were able to get along.

CB: So here we have, as Jim Crow segregation in the early twentieth century is really being institutionalized and individuals are beginning to organize institutionally to oppose it, almost unbelievably, you're going to grow up in a little community in West Tampa, Roberts City; that to some extent is racially integrated.

RS: That's true.

CB: Which is a much different experience, I think, than many of your peers had.

RS: We were raised up, the Fontes, the Contes, the Matassinis, the Mirabellas, the Rogers, you name it. We were all raised up together. On this tape I was talking about, my mother talks about the flu epidemic in what, 1918 or something like that, and how my grandmother and the community, white and black, worked together to fight this epidemic of flu. There was no—the problem was that we wanted to work with each other to prevent this thing from spreading and that type of thing. It's very interesting when you start really looking at it. The problem was that, again, the old Jim Crow began to set in. And as the politicians gained control and began to set up efforts to prevent black people from registering and voting and whatnot, then you began to see Jim Crow as it came about and the need for people like Meacham, Christina Meacham and Blanche Armwood and her family and others, who began to realize that something had to be done. And of course the first efforts were to more or less compromise with Jim Crow. That brought about the Booker T. Washington School on Ninth [Avenue], which was a compromise. And of course when I got old enough, I was able and studying sociology to see what was happening and to put two and two together. And the need for James Weldon Johnson who came in 1915, coming back in 1917, to really establish the NAACP. Of course that involved people like Blanche Armwood and Clinton and the Brumicks, and all of those.

CB: Here's another theme that is going to be important as we talk about your life and your experiences. You're already seeing as a young boy in the 1920s and early 1930s, in

Tampa, a tension within the black community about what direction to take. People who are more open to compromise or acceptance, and others, again like your grandmother, who just simply are not the kind of individual who are willing to compromise. The influences you were getting most at home were what?

RS: Don't give in. (laughter)

CB: Before we move on—and this is going very well, the direction you're taking this—but I wanted to mention one other person that I think most people are unaware of in terms of Tampa history, Southern history, Florida history, but who was an early influence in your life but whose origins as a community leader here are back in those mid-1910s when the new St. Paul is being built, the first steps are being taken to fight Jim Crow, attracting the NAACP and other things. That was a black newspaper. It's not the first black newspaper in Tampa, but a very special one was founded by a very remarkable individual. He's going to have a real impact on your life. I wondered if you might talk a little bit about the *Tampa Bulletin* and Reverend Marcellus Potter.

RS: You know, it's interesting that you bring that up because Reverend Potter was an influential individual, a powerful individual in the AME church. He was a minister—

CB: An ordained minister, and a presiding elder later.

RS: An ordained minister. And his wife was quite influential. Of course they played a role in trying to work with us young black brats, you know, bringing us into the paper and trying to teach us to type and sell papers and whatnot. The interesting thing is—and Ed Davis, which I guess we'll get to later on—mentions that back in the thirties [1930s] when—black men were being held incommunicado, and they were afraid that they were going to get lynched up in north Florida. Some politicians would get in touch with Potter. Potter would drive up there and get the guys and bring them back to Tampa. Potter was very influential also with the NAACP. Many people don't know that when he and Mrs. Potter left and died—they left a legacy was the vision of the estate between the National Urban League, the National NAACP, and employees of the *Tampa Bulletin*. Some people don't know that this was part of their legacy, passing on something to us.

CB: Here you have the *Tampa Bulletin* by the time—we're about to get you born here. I know you never thought we would get to it. By the time you're born, you have a very courageous editor closely associated with the church you were brought up in, St. Paul A.M.E., who is publishing what is rated as one of the ten top black newspapers in the country, out of Tampa. And who is a model, I think, of courage and leadership. Am I correct, too, that he also is your first employer?

RS: In a sense because, yes, he gave me the first papers to get around and make a nickel or a dime. Then of course he would bring us in and try to teach us about the newspaper business, particularly the mechanics of it. Some of us weren't interested in becoming—interested in developing the ink relationship. He was quite a figure. That paper, of course, represented in a sense the A.M.E. Church in Florida, but it was an outstanding—it was a

powerful paper. And he did a good job because it was tied in with papers like *Amsterdam News*, *Chicago Defender*, and that type of thing. And that was that relationship between the black press nationwide, and the fact that the *Tampa Bulletin* was there.

CB: Am I right in thinking from what you said that, in a sense, you never felt like you were part of an isolated community down in Tampa, that through the *Tampa Bulletin* and in other ways, the world was being really brought to you? You were seeing broader horizons, or am I making too much out of that?

RS: In a sense, I was like one or two others of us who were—we were very eager. Sometimes we wouldn't wait for people to tell us to come on in or do this, that, and the other. We were nosy. This is true when I began looking at the Central Life and meeting people at the Central Life [Central Life Insurance Company of Tampa] and the Atlanta Life [Atlanta Life Insurance Company], the Afro [Afro-American Life Insurance Company of Jacksonville], and that type of thing. And of course getting acquainted with some leaders in the community.

CB: You were used to poking your nose in doors, but then you were used to the doors opening when you did.

RS: Yes, you know, I was thinking the other day, Mrs. Bronson—Helen Williams Bronson, the wife of Dr. Bronson, president of Bethune-Cookman—her father was a foreman on the Atlantic Coast Line [Atlantic Coast Line Railroad]. They had double sessions at Booker T. [Washington Middle School], and the junior high school would get out at about 5:30 or six. The train that we worked on would leave about 6:30 or something like that, going up to Albany. I would go down to the station and just watch him because as he worked to build up the steam and everything in there. I got to know him. This is the type of thing, you know, you're going around and you're learning, and you're watching people. There's a lot, particularly in a community that's growing and particularly with the development of black people in the railroad industry. A. Philip Randolph and that type of thing.

CB: Another Floridian.

RS: Yes, another Floridian.

CB: You saw models, not only at home, of great black leaders in your life like Joe Clinton, Marcellus Potter, but also you saw Floridians in major, national positions of influence, like James Weldon Johnson and A. Philip Randolph.

RS: When I was on the staff of NAACP, A. Philip Randolph used to call Medgar Evars and me—he used to call us his sons. “You're my boys.” But yes, we saw it being nosy and walking around that [Tampa] Union Station. Then of course that's when I became aware of racial segregation at the Union Station.

CB: How old were you, would you say when you were really aware of that?

RS: I was about eleven or twelve years old, something like that. My grandmother or mother would be wanting to know where I was, and I would be wandering around Tampa.

CB: We ought to, I suppose—we've been talking almost an hour; maybe we ought to get you born, so that we can at least have you officially a part of this interview.

Pause in recording

CB: Well, we've been talking for about an hour now, and I think that the only decent thing is to get you born so that you're an official part of this interview process. We've talked a little bit already about the fact that you grew up in a certain environment in West Tampa and Roberts City. We've talked about your mom's family, her parents, James and Marion Rogers, and your mom was Christina Rogers. She met a young man in the late 1910s who had come to Tampa, we think, just before World War I. He saw service in World War I, I believe, in France and came back, and they are going to get married on Christmas Day of 1919. So who is this dashing young fellow?

RS: My daddy. (both laugh)

CB: William D. Saunders.

RS: I mentioned the Hannibals, you see, and he learned his trades and skills down in Key West. He was a master mason. In World War I, he became part of the engineers. Now I never got to talk to him because I think he might have been in that part of the United States Army that was working with the French over there, because they always talked about the black engineers. When he came back, that's when he and my mother got together.

CB: Christmas Day wedding. You have a beautiful photograph of them that day.

RS: When they were married, they went back to Key West and stayed with Uncle Joe Hannibal, the gentleman I told you about. Then he came back to Tampa.

CB: It's there on June 9, 1921, that an important event occurred in your life. Isn't that correct?

RS: You're referring to the fact that I was born.

CB: You entered the world. That's right. They are back in Tampa. Were you born at home?

RS: Yes. As a matter of fact, there were no facilities, hospitals and whatnot. During that time, there were midwives.

CB: Clara Frye Hospital was really more an emergency care facility.

RS: There was no Clara Frye Hospital. We lived on Garcia [Avenue]. It was 1404 Garcia then. Most births were being born in these homes. Because midwives were doing the—

CB: Did you know the midwife later who delivered you? Did you know her name?

RS: No. I knew that Dr. Williams, Reche Reden Williams, was the attending physician, but I never knew her.

CB: Having talked a little bit about how the world you grew up in there in Roberts City from your home on Garcia Avenue, it was a fairly cosmopolitan world. It was to some extent, I know it could be exaggerated easily, but to some extent an integrated environment, very keyed on the cigar industry. Mr. Roberts, after whom Roberts City was named, had a cigar factory just down the street.

RS: J.W. Roberts.

CB: Near your home, yes. But violence was really a part of that world, too, wasn't it? Along with the rise of Jim Crow and the beginnings of the resistance to it had come the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, among other violent, vigilante-type white supremacist organizations. I know you have written about a couple of incidents that you will remember as about, I guess, a ten-year-old boy, the beating of Joseph Shoemaker in Tampa and also the kidnapping, tarring, and feathering of Fred Crawford, who I believe was a socialist labor organizer.

RS: It's interesting, particularly with Fred Crawford, because I was educated by Leland Hawes, and I mentioned this.

CB: The distinguished writer for the *Tampa Tribune*.

RS: Leland wrote about it. But I had not told Leland about the name of Fred Crawford. An Italian woman who was married the owner of the fish market on Howard Avenue read it and called up Leland, and said, "Yes, I remember when Fred Crawford got beat." Leland called me and said, "Look, there are people who realize and know what happened." I said, "Yeah, because we all were concerned about that."

CB: Was it Crawford or Shoemaker who lived across the street?

RS: Crawford.

CB: Crawford was actually living across Garcia Avenue?

RS: Right across the street from us.

CB: You remember, still to this day, the hubbub that erupted out of that. It was something right that even he wasn't killed.

RS: This was a time when they were organizing and attacking socialists, particularly a group that lived on Palm Avenue or something. There's a book about that. This was an effort to put us in our place and anybody that was helping us.

CB: There were people within the Tampa Bay area during the 1920s who were being lynched, not just kidnapped, beaten, tarred, and feathered, which is horrible enough. Do you remember hearing about and reading about people being lynched while you were a child?

RS: Yes, I did. I never paid too much attention, but I'm aware of the fact that the Tampa Police Department was vicious. In West Tampa there were two cops that we called, Lesgo and Mr. Davis. They patrolled up and down, particularly in the black community, especially down on Spruce where the old Blake School is now. That was a black community, shotgun housing development. They made it a practice of arresting and beating and I recall for an example—you ever heard of the term the Black Mariah? They had one of these black forts that they used to come down, and there was a police call box on the corner of Garcia and Roberts Street. They would get these black people and bring them down, and they called up and the Black Mariah would come up and put them in jail. That's when I became—he was beating a black woman. That's when I ran out and said, "Hey, quit beating that woman." And that's when Mr. Frank, who—later he and Lesgo and Davis were patrolling Central Avenue. I'm watching all of this because these guys were reasonably sane with us in West Tampa, beating us up and everything, but when you got on Central Avenue, it was a different story.

CB: You've never told me the episode about you running out with them beating a woman. That's in Roberts City. How old were you then?

RS: I must have been about eleven or twelve.

CB: So now early 1930s? You attempted to intervene?

RS: Oh, yes. Let me point out my grandmother. I remember my Aunt Marie.

CB: Marie Librand.

RS: Librand had just come out of Clara Frye Hospital, it had just been built. She had just had a serious operation. These two policemen walked into my grandmama's house and accused her of renting rooms for white men to come in, you know. We had a little dog, a vicious dog. That dog was raising his hair. My grandmother told them if they didn't get out of her house, she was going to sue. And she meant that. But this is the type of thing that was going on. They'd walk in your house.

CB: You'd become intimately familiar, though, as a young man, young boy, with the reality of violence as a part of the Jim Crow system.

RS: Definitely.

CB: So when tomorrow I ask you how you had the courage to come back to Florida in 1952, you can't say you didn't know about violence.

RS: I knew about it. As a matter of fact, we saw how this law enforcement operated. My grandmother didn't hesitate because she spoke out and one of the things about the need for the NAACP to be established was the fact that beatings and lynchings and that type of thing and the need for a civil rights organization to come in and do something about it. As a matter of fact, one of the lawyers, the first president of the NAACP after it was organized, was a lawyer, Perkins, who was president. Then Perkins went to the Army. I think he was married—

CB: World War I, that's right.

RS: Yes. He didn't come back to Tampa. He went to Jacksonville and became very active in the civil rights movement.

CB: I think we ought to mention, too, or I should ask you about the fact that you not only grew up in West Tampa or Roberts City, according to how we want to say it, but that you also had a very different experience for a couple of years in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Unfortunately, your folks, the marriage had not worked out. Your parents separated. Your mother chose to take you to a very different environment for a while. Where was that and what happened?

RS: This was New York City, and my oldest Uncle Steve was there. My Aunt Beulah was living in New York and my grandmother and my mother. This was when black people were leaving the state and going north because there was nothing here.

CB: Florida had entered the Depression in 1926, years ahead of the rest of the nation.

RS: If you read the WPA [Works Progress Administration] reports about what was going on, Jim Crow in the WPA and the fact that black workers were getting a dollar and a half for two weeks, and white workers were getting more, and that type of thing. Black people were leaving and going north. I heard my grandmother say, "All the boys for the north." This is when we left to go to New York.

CB: You attended P.S. 103 and P.S. 48?

RS: P.S. 103 on the corner of 119th Street and Madison Avenue.

CB: Were these integrated schools?

RS: These were integrated schools.

CB: Was that an eye-opener to you, or were you too young to really—

RS: It's very interesting because the teachers were white, and the students were integrated. We had Jewish and Catholics. I recall this question about religion in the schools. I remember that up there then on Fridays they had religious services. The Catholic students would go to the Catholic school. We would go to the Protestant school. Let me point out something. When we got to New York, we lived on 119th Street, 29 West 119th Street. Right next door to it was the Manuel Tabernacle A.M.E. Church. The pastor was Reverend D. Ward Nichols.

CB: Who's later going to play a very important role—

RS: A very key role in my life. The back of the church had a playground and whatnot, and D. Ward used to run us home; we were living right next door. Later on when I became field secretary, D. Ward was the bishop of the only Episcopal district in Florida. He used to tell me, "Boy, you remember when I used to run you out?" I said, "Yeah." (laughs)

CB: He was going to help keep you alive, but we'll save that, again, for a little bit later so you can talk about it in context. But while you're in New York City, the Depression hits the rest of the country. In 1931, your mother's going to decide to come home. You've told me the story of that trip home. I don't think people understand what it meant for a black family to make a trip from New York City to Tampa, Florida by car.

RS: Let's back up, and let's deal with the Union Station.

CB: Yes, okay. Going?

RS: Going.

CB: Okay, fair enough.

RS: I sent a letter to what's his name, who was heading the modernization of the Union Station, making it historical, former commissioner. I said, "How are you going to cover ___"

CB: Ed Turanchik.

RS: Ed Turanchik. I wrote him a letter. I said, "How are you going to deal with the segregation that existed?" Because as you went into that Union Station, you had on the west side, a colored waiting room they called it, and on the east side was the white waiting room.

CB: Were these maintained the same way? Very nice, comfortable?

RS: No. You know better than that. (laughs)

CB: A lot of people who are listening to you right now don't know, though.

RS: They were, you know, clean, you might call it—

CB: Always inferior to what the whites had.

RS: —inferior to what the whites had. When you left to go to the trains, I recall that the train that we went up on was the Atlantic Coast Line. When you walked out of that gate, you had to walk all the way past all of these Pullmans and day coaches to get to the colored coach, the Jim Crow coach. That was something because that's the first time that I had ever been on a train. That whole trip going up was something because particularly after you left Jacksonville, it looked like all of the black people were leaving the South [and] going north.

CB: (laughs)

RS: They were crowding them into this—particularly at one point it was a half car. Then I think out of Savannah, the train went back in, and they put a whole car in. That was the thing that I recall very vividly.

CB: I imagine as an eight-year-old boy, it did seem like the whole world was picking up and leaving.

RS: (laughs) Coming back, the Depression had hit. I remember them selling apples in New York, ten cents an apple, the veterans and everything. I was a kid.

CB: No stockbrokers jumped out of windows and landed on you or anything?

(both laugh)

RS: My Aunt Marie was teaching in Winter Haven, and she had bought a new 1931 Chevrolet. She sent the car up and brought us back to Tampa. We had to come through the—

CB: Did you have nice motels or hotels to stay in on the way back down?

RS: Oh, come on. What are you talking about? (laughs)

CB: What was the manner in which you got back, in Aunt Marie's car?

RS: It was nonstop. Freddy had been traveling, driving up and down, and chauffeuring. He knew all the tricks of the trade. We didn't stop at any service stations because when you crossed the Virginia line, you were in no man's land. When we'd get into a town like maybe Richmond and then into—going on down the line—

CB: Raleigh and Columbia.

RS: Yes, yes. He knew. There were, in these towns, places that you could stop.

CB: But your family knew or felt fear that if they stopped at the wrong place, even to ask for directions, it could be a potential threat.

RS: That's right. That's right. As a matter of fact, some of those towns, particularly when you got into South Carolina and on into Georgia coming into Brunswick and that type of thing, it was rough. Segregation was maintained strictly. You didn't go to a service station and talk about getting into the waiting room. They tell you, in a minute. Your place is out there in the back or in the woods somewhere. But it was an education because again, that's the first experience that I had as a kid coming back.

CB: You're now ten or eleven years old. You've been in a somewhat integrated world in New York City, very different attitudes around you. And you come back and see the reality of this life you had left. You must've been in shock.

RS: In New York you see the Mount Morris Theater on the corner of 116th Street and Fifth Avenue. It wasn't segregated. You pay your ten cents, go in there, and stay all day if you wanted. The kids were having a good time in Mount Morris Park, which is now Martin Luther King Park. It was totally integrated, an entirely different type of life. Of course in Harlem, they had begun to develop the segregated type housing. Studying history, I realized that the segregation in New York goes back to before the Civil War when the Irish were concerned about being forced into the army to fight. I didn't realize at that time that this was the type of thing that was going on. On 125th Street by the Apollo and that type of thing, restaurants and all that were open. There was no problem.

CB: But there sure was a problem back in Tampa.

RS: (laughs) Yes.

CB: Making a living was one. Your mom got a WPA job, Work Projects Administration, once it was created in 1933, in a sewing room?

RS: Yes, the building that became the school on the corner of Marion and Constant. As a matter of fact, that became a high school. You probably know the school I'm talking about, too. That was a warehouse. All these women who were working on WPA were in there making clothes and that type of thing. That's where she worked because she was a seamstress.

CB: You're living back in Roberts City with your grandmother and your mother. You've told me before, and correct me if I'm wrong, that the influence you were getting at home from your grandmother, Marion Rogers, and your mother was that you needed to be a lawyer, right? They wanted you to be a lawyer, but you kind of had other ideas, and I think the WPA is partly responsible. I'm going to start this, and then you correct me or go any direction you want with it. One of the things the WPA did in Tampa was that it

sponsored musical groups, including a group called the Hard Rockers, which was organized by one of your teachers, Rufus Spencer. Was that at Middleton High School or at Washington High School?

RS: No, this was a WPA project, a separate project.

CB: It kindled a love of music.

RS: My Aunt Agnes was an accomplished musician, as well as my Aunt Beulah. This lady that called up to Leland Hawes about Fred Crawford—Leland called me and said that she mentioned Tona. My youngest aunt was named Agnes, but they called her Tona. This lady told about how they would gather at my grandmother's house and play the piano, and they'd all sing and everything. This is a community that we lived in. You see, that's when I realized that my grandmother always tried to make it possible for her kids to be able to get that kind of training or education. I recall that she had the first gramophone that you wind up and put the records on. The WPA started projects. They had the sewing project, and then they had Captain—I forgot his name—came in and started teaching how to play instruments.

My Aunt Josephine bought me a helicon bass. I ended up playing bass along with a young fellow named George Britt. They taught us, the band; they developed the band and whatnot. At the same time in West Tampa, Faith McQueen Coleman had choral group working under the WPA. So many nights out of the week, this choral group would meet, and they would sing. She would teach songs. There was one fellow named Bill Anderson, a heavysset fellow, who was the pianist for Mrs. Coleman. Mrs. Coleman was an accomplished musician herself. Bill Anderson was a Finnish musician.

The two things that happened were that there was a Bill teaching music, and the band, we were being taught musical instruments in a hall on the corner of Scott and Central. We're picking up on all of this. Yes, and so I ended up playing in the band along with young Robert Gardener whose mother was a school principal here, P. A. Ervin, the son of the dentist. We had a good marching band. As a matter of fact, I think in one article I wrote, I talk about the fact that we marched in Plant City before they would let black bands march into Tampa in Gasparilla [Parade].

CB: In the Strawberry Festival.

RS: In the Strawberry Festival Parade, we marched in that parade.

CB: You stole the show, I bet.

RS: Oh, yes; oh, yes. As a matter of fact, out of that band came some real good musicians. Ralph Bowden became a trombonist, and I think he played with—I forgot the name, a well-known band. Some of them joined in with Red Clinton and Banjo Boy Hawkins and that group. I recall, as a kid, with my horn, Banjo Boy and the others used to let me sit in and play the bass as they rehearsed.

CB: You brought up an important point, I think. You had models of so many kinds in your life. Tampa was also a model of the music scene by the mid and late 1930s. The heart of the black business and entertainment district was the Central Avenue-Scott Street corridor.

RS: That's true, and you find that a lot of the musicians were from Nassau, coming up from Key West.

CB: Bahamian influence.

RS: Out of Central Avenue many of your well-known black musicians would play there. Some of them would play gigs down in the white bars. Even—what's his name, the blind singer?

CB: Ray Charles. I was going to ask you if you had any memories of Ray Charles during that period.

RS: Ray Charles. Yes, I had. Ray Charles was there, and Ray Charles lived on Governor [Street]. Incidentally, he was rooming with one of the best piano teachers in Tampa.

CB: Music really, in the mid- and late thirties [1930s], thanks, in some part to the WPA and President Roosevelt, really becomes a central focus for a good part of your life. Also, it draws you into that excitement of the night life, of the Central Avenue district, and places like the Bucket of Blood.

RS: Well, you had a number of beer gardens and that type of thing: the Red Lion, the Bucket of Blood. Of course Watts Sanderson had one of the better class places, the Blue Room. Central Avenue was the focal point. These musicians, when they'd get through playing downtown, they'd all come down to Central Avenue and gig and that type of thing.

CB: It got to where, if I'm correct, that you were really making your living by the mid- and late 1930s in and around that entertainment scene, Central Avenue and Scott Street.

RS: Let's put it this way, I was making a little money. Rufus—what's his name?—the assistant bandmaster was named Rufus. I forgot his last name.

CB: Rufus Spencer.

RS: Spencer. He took some of us out of the marching band and formed a dance orchestra. We began playing for dances, school proms, and whatnot. Some of us got together, because I was playing at the piano, and there were several of the trumpeters and one or two of the saxophonists, and we'd play the black bars, the Peach Bar and whatnot. We'd make money that way.

CB: Come 1939, you're a senior at Middleton High School in Tampa. It must have been a tremendous temptation to want to say, "I'm having a lot of fun with this music and this exciting scene down on Central Avenue, and I think I may try and pursue that fun." Wasn't there a temptation there?

RS: In the sense, but no. See, I began working at the Central Theater. I had become familiar with Central Avenue earlier because my Aunt Josephine had gotten a shoe repairman, Mr. Kelly, to hire me and another young fellow in his place repairing shoes. We saw this up and down Central Avenue. Then, when I was at Middleton, I began working at Central Theater after school, especially after football season. I'd go to work at 4:30 or so and work until maybe eleven. That's when I got to know practically everybody who was anybody in Tampa and knowing what was going on, on Central Avenue.

CB: Here you are. You are a major player on the Middleton Tiger football team. You're developing a real interest in, and talent for, music. You're starting to earn some money. You're having a lot of fun. You're getting to know the entire heart of the black community in Tampa and building ties. Then you up and leave it. Now that's hard to understand.

RS: What happened—when I graduated from Middleton, you see, that's when I got a scholarship at Bethune-Cookman [University] playing football. And that's when I left and went to Bethune-Cookman.

CB: You didn't have to take it, did you?

RS: No, but there was no money, you know, to pay for education, and this kind of stipend was helpful.

CB: What role would you say your mother and your grandmother played in your decision?

RS: My grandmother and my mother—my grandmother, particularly, wanted me to go to school to be her lawyer. (laughs)

CB: She didn't hide it, did she? (laughs)

RS: No, no. She was quite a believer in education. Because you and I never talked about the Matthew side of the family that was in Tampa, her sisters and whatnot, and the fact that they were well educated. The education was pushed by them. When this opportunity came to go to Bethune-Cookman, I went.

CB: Here you are, a pretty tough young man and veteran football player, but you did not want to go home and tell your mama and grandmother that you were going to turn down college, did you? (Saunders laughs) There was no question where they stood. You didn't even need to raise the issue.

RS: No question where they stood. I didn't even raise the issue. (Brown laughs) You see after all, let me point out you haven't talked about the Tilt of the Maroon and Gold. That game was played between Bethune-Cookman and Morris Brown, and then we played Tuskegee. Here we come, the football team from Bethune-Cookman, several of us are from Tampa on that team. We were the stars. (laughs) It was enjoyable.

CB: Coach Preston Peterson, the great football coach at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, recruited you in 1940. World War II is not going to begin until December 1941, although it's already ongoing in Europe. He brought you to Daytona Beach to the school to play football, to go to school, and he got you a National Youth Administration job.

RS: That's true. Mrs. Bethune was one of the persons who were high up in the NYA, the administration. And of course she had a lot of influence.

CB: Mary McLeod Bethune.

RS: Many of us who went there had assistance from the federal government, the NYA, and that type of thing.

CB: She was very closely associated with Mrs. Roosevelt, too, wasn't she?

RS: Mrs. Roosevelt had been there the year before I went to Bethune-Cookman. She had been on the campus.

CB: What was it like getting to know Mrs. Bethune? What were the first things that come to your mind remembering her from those days? She's going to be a part of your life later on, too. She's not going to just occupy a couple of years and be gone, but in those days, what are your memories of her?

RS: Quite a figure.

CB: You called her Mame, as I recall.

RS: We called her Mame, but we didn't call her that in front of her face.

CB: (laughs)

RS: That was a contraction of Madame. She was quite a character. She was inspiring. As you walked into that white hall auditorium, on the head of the stage, it was written "Enter to Learn." And then as you walked out the front door going out into the Second Avenue it was "Depart to Serve." And that was our motto. She would come home. When we had Vespers services and that type of thing, she would always speak. I had a part-time job. I'm going to tell you. You didn't just play football. You worked, too. But I never will forget that Lutrell Bing, who became a commissioner here.

CB: A friend of yours growing up in Tampa, I believe.

RS: No, he was at Bethune-Cookman. We played football. Lutrell Bing and I called ourselves the campus dishwashers because we were there three times a day washing those dishes. Mrs. Bethune at times would come through, and she'd talk to us about how we were getting along and that type of thing. At any time you could talk to Mrs. Bethune. I remember several occasions; many times I'd gone into her office and talked to her.

CB: Here you are, just like with Reverend Potter at the *Tampa Bulletin*. You're having this one-on-one relationship with a national figure. I mean, your horizons just simply were never allowed to get narrow, were they?

RS: Not exactly. As a matter of fact, opportunities came about as a result of being involved with these people. At Bethune-Cookman you not only met Mrs. Bethune, I remember at one or two occasions, Hamilton Fish, the senator from New York, came down, and he spoke with us. Fats Waller came down and spent a week there. I used to sit up and watch Fats Waller play the piano.

CB: (laughs)

RS: Fats would tell me, go down the street and get me something and bring it back. I'd sit down.

CB: That was iced tea?

RS: (laughs) I'm not going to say what it was. Erskine Hawkins and all the big bands came. They played there at that school. A lot of notable people came. We'd get to meet them. That's because of the influence that Mrs. Bethune had.

CB: Even while you were there in what she had created as a very demanding but nurturing environment, you still had a taste of how bitter and violent the racial system then in force in Florida could be. Particularly, when you spent a summer in Pompano Beach, I was wondering if you'd talk about that.

RS: The school people who Mrs. Bethune knew had businesses. Mrs. Hill operated a resort down on the Atlantic Ocean. I had the opportunity of going down and working for about two or three weeks. There were three black employees: two women, the cook and the helper, and then I was there. We lived about fifty feet behind the house where the white help lived and where the guests lived. One Sunday, Mrs. Hill sent me into Pompano Beach to bring back some ice. I had left some laundry or something in Pompano, and went over to pick it up. When I was driving back and got to the place to pick up the ice, these two—I don't know what you call them; they looked like Klansmen to me—came up to me and said, "Old lady Hill called, and she wants you to stop over and get something else," or something like that. They wanted to know, had I been down in nigger town? And that made me mad. I said, "Old lady Hill wasn't using the same term they use. She knows how to get in touch with me, and I'm on my way out there now." They started out toward

the car, Mrs. Hill's car, and I started the car up, and they had to get out of the way of the car because I was hot.

CB: (laughs)

RS: That was a Sunday morning. As a matter of fact, I never told anybody but Dr. Moore about this, who became the president of Bethune-Cookman. When I got back, I hadn't been back to the resort fifteen minutes before these two guys drove up, and they're talking to Mrs. Hill. She sent for me, and when I went in there, she asked me what had happened, and I told her. She told them, "If he's in Pompano, don't you ever touch him." She must have been mighty rich or something.

I looked at these guys, and I said, "Now wait a minute." I look at them, and I know what could happen. I told Mrs. Hill, "You just pay me right now. I'm catching the next bus out of Pompano." Mrs. Hill tried to impress upon me to stay. I said, "No, Mrs. Hill. You pay me, and I'm leaving." I think the next bus left about two o'clock that afternoon, and I was on it. And when I began working for the NAACP that's when I became aware of the Chambers case and that Associate Justice Black had just issued that hot opinion against the state of Florida about something that happened in Pompano Beach.

CB: That's right. Three men had been arrested in that area in the mid-1930s, and a confession had been coerced. The case was appealed, the convictions, and in 1940, the U. S. Supreme Court had overturned—

RS: On Abraham Lincoln's birthday.

CB: —on Abraham Lincoln's birthday, overturned a whole series of local state rulings in a landmark decision to outlaw coerced confessions. To me, that case is so emblematic, or symptomatic, of the situation in Florida. People today think of Florida as an entertainment heaven, a relaxed paradise. It's important at every step of the road to remind people how very bad the racial situation was at times in Florida. How the Jim Crow system institutionally attempted to intimidate and grind down African Americans and how the Ku Klux Klan was around just about everywhere to add pressure, not only on the police but on the—

RS: The judicial and the state and local government. I was not aware of that case at that time. And incidentally, this is one of the cases that Harry T. Moore used to build up the NAACP.

CB: Florida newspapers didn't really trump that decision too much, did they?

RS: I was sensitive to know that here we are, living out in the back of this place with palmettos surrounding us, two black women and myself. I'm getting out of here. Mrs. Hill tried to tell me, "Don't leave." I told her, "No, I'm leaving." Later on, particularly when I started working for NAACP, I began to put two and two together. When I started

working in Brevard County I really understood what was happening back then and even then.

CB: I believe you told me that you were the one who ended up telling Mrs. Bethune about the bombing at Pearl Harbor on the morning of December 7, 1941.

RS: Yes, as a matter of fact. Bing and I were working at our usual task. We had this little radio, and we heard it. We wrote it on a note and carried it over where the services were going on. She happened to have been there that day. We gave it to Dean Bond, and Dean Bond gave it to her. Of course we weren't in the Vespers services, but she stopped everything and began to make the announcement. That was interesting because Mrs. Bethune later on, when she had all of us in the auditorium, she had us singing, "Do You Think I'll Make a Soldier?" We were supposed to respond, "Yes, I think I'll make a soldier." I knew what she was doing. She was saying, "Look, you've got a role to play." We brought it to her attention, and that's how we did it.

CB: Before we leave Bethune-Cookman because you are going to be a soldier before we know it, but this business of washing the dishes, now that was an honor for good grades? The less demerits, the more you got to wash dishes?

RS: No. Mrs. Bethune believed in responsibility, building character. Some of the fellows worked out in the yard. These were football players and others, particularly those who had NYA scholarships. Some worked in the laundry and whatnot. Some opportunities we had to go into the house and work incidentally—when I came back, her secretary, her administrator was a good friend. I knew her when she was with the Central Life Insurance Company. See, Mrs. Bethune was president of Central Life. I got to know her, and she was an inspiration to many of us.

CB: Soon enough, you are going to find yourself as a soldier in the Army Air Corps, stationed at Tuskegee Air Base. While your sight kept you from being a flyer, you quickly found your love of music drawing you into a world you probably didn't expect to find in the military.

RS: I got there. You see, Tuskegee, when you walked around Tuskegee, you had Ph.D.s walking around as buck privates and PFCs [privates first class]. The climate was that this, you know, this was an experiment. And so a fellow by the name of Berchman Cooper from Key West, he and I went down there and decided we wanted to try out with the band. That's when Al Downing was assistant then—I think he was second lieutenant at that time. Then there was a captain who was in charge of the band at Tuskegee. And yes, I played in the band for a while.

CB: You did a little bit more than that, as I recall.

RS: What happened was that you only had so many soldiers to make up that unit. This is when I became acquainted with Fred Minnis.

CB: A captain at Tuskegee.

RS: Yeah. He was in charge of social services. Also, he was in charge of developing educational programs and whatnot. When I was at Cookman, I had taken business administration, typing, and whatnot. I began doing work for him and ended up in supply. What happened was that there were some of the talented people at Tuskegee. The young lady that now works for CNN, I forgot her name. Her husband was there. You had guys who had been writers and worked with newspapers. And so we got together. We got to writing music and wrote a show called *Roger*. Minnis was encouraging us. We ended up going on the road with it, and we played Tampa, Tallahassee, and Jacksonville. We went all the way up to Atlanta. We played the Pentagon. They escorted us through the Pentagon. We played Watergate. Not the Watergate building, but they had this platform out there on the Potomac River. We played that. What they had us on was a war bond tour.

CB: Raising morale and raising money.

RS: Yes, yes. All of us were active. As a matter of fact, I had a role playing—imitating Rochester. Then I had written the arrangement of “Accentuate the Positive.” That was in the show. These guys—this is talent. This is what was at Tuskegee.

CB: Once again, World War II. We’re drawing to the close of our second hour talking here. Somebody, once again, got you back. You’re having fun. You’re being creative with the music you love, but somebody came to you, and said, “Bob, this isn’t the road for you.” Who was that, and what happened?

RS: That was Fred Minnis. As a matter of fact, Captain Minnis, who later became a major, was encouraging us to don’t waste our time because of the G.I. Bill. He said, “Take advantage of it.” He insisted on taking courses while we were there. He told me, “Don’t waste your time. Don’t waste your money. Take advantage of the G.I. Bill.” He said, “I suggest that you go to a northern school.” When I got out of the Army, I was accepted at Fisk.

CB: Fisk University. At that point, you were going to fulfill your grandmother’s dream and become a lawyer.

RS: I don’t know what I was going to become. (laughs) She was dead then.

CB: Fred Minnis had not only gotten you back to music in the Army Air Corps, but he had turned you back that, no, you have a life.

RS: Fred Minnis was an attorney over in St. Petersburg. As a matter of fact, his son came to me about three or four months ago and whispered in my ear that I had written about his daddy in the book—he didn’t know, and nobody knew. I said, “The man was inspirational to us.” He thanked me for writing about his father in the book.

Fred Minnis was well educated himself. He encouraged us to go somewhere. I never will forget the type of caliber of people at Tuskegee. There was a psychologist named [Robert Russa] Moton. He had come into the Army as a buck private and applied for a direct commission. They took him over to Maxwell Field to be interviewed by this board. When he was being questioned, they were throwing these questions about psychology and that type of thing at him. The chairman of the board of officers that were interviewing him asked him, "You know a mighty lot about these questions and the answers," and Moton told him, "I wrote the book."

CB: (laughs)

RS: This is the kind of caliber people you had at Tuskegee.

End of Part 1

[January 15, 2002]

CB: Good morning. I'm Dr. Canter Brown. This is January 15 in the year 2002. It's a Tuesday morning. I'm here with Dr. Robert W. Saunders, Sr. in the well-appointed video studios at the University of South Florida Library. We are conducting a week-long series of oral history interviews with Dr. Saunders, one of Florida's most outstanding twentieth century residents; and, more than any other single individual, the leader of the civil rights revolution in Florida in the twentieth century; and the author of *Bridging the Gap: Continuing the Florida NAACP Legacy of Harry T. Moore*. Dr. Saunders, welcome to our second of five interviews this week.

RS: Thank you for being here and for the opportunity to discuss the events, particularly those after the killing of Harry Moore, which was so important.

CB: That's what we're going to do today. Let me do one thing. I should mention by the way, in case I just forgot, that these interviews are sponsored by the Resource Center for Florida History and Politics of the University of South Florida Library, Dr. Mark I. Greenberg, Director. Having said that, yesterday we really spent our entire time reviewing your family history, how your family came to Florida and then to Tampa, the influences on you as you were growing up, and we discovered that they were really formidable in a lot of ways. We got up to the end of World War II. You of course served in the Army Air Corps at Tuskegee, Alabama, but had found your early love of music really stood you in good stead (Saunders laughs) where you found yourself in a traveling show that you helped co-author. I guess that's the right word; co-write.

RS: Yes. What's interesting, the fellows that got together, there was Bill—I can't think of his last name. When you look at the talent at Tuskegee—and I didn't mention it yesterday, but the members of that Tuskegee band, 90 percent were professional musicians.

CB: By then you were pretty close to being a professional yourself.

RS: I don't know about that. (laughs) Certainly when you start associating with those guys, you know. I'm coming from the South, and some of these fellows were from Erskine Hawkins's band out of the college in Montgomery. Then others were from various orchestras—none of them were from Duke Ellington's band. When you got to know them, you say, these are top musicians, and here you are, associating with them. It's better luck. I think that's why we were able to pull together that show. Plus the fact that they had so many of us around there that were talented and of course untalented like me. We had to find something to do in the after hours, you know.

CB: Today we're going to explore in some detail though that where your love of music had come back, and no doubt at times you were thinking about how much fun it might be to pursue some sort of musical career or some other kind of career that you were influenced by several individuals to set your sights on a higher calling, in their estimation, both in the Army Air Corps, and back home in Tampa and that was going to lead you on a series of journeys that eventually would take you to Detroit, Michigan and a call to come back to Florida amidst tragedy in 1952 to head up the Florida NAACP. I'd like to explore that today with you, as well as your first several years back in Florida: the conditions you found, how you were able, in very difficult times, to get the Florida NAACP operating again, and working for the causes that you had come to be such a eloquent spokesman for. Who was that individual at Tuskegee who very forcefully got you back on a different track?

CB: Captain Fred Minnis.

RS: Yes.

CB: He completed law school and came back and opened up a practice in St. Petersburg. He had another partner there. They played a very key role, along with one other lawyer. I didn't mention the Webb's City case, which I didn't mention in my book, but which is a key case because Minnis and those lawyers really backed up the youth group in St. Petersburg when they were picketing Webb's City.

CB: Of course, Webb's City being the world's largest drugstore, located in St. Petersburg.

RS: What happened was that with the kind of guidance and leadership they were getting and Bob Carter, who was the lawyer for the NAACP nationwide. He is now a federal judge and was the lawyer representing the national office in the case against Webb's City. That's a very interesting case because Dr. Webb decided to go into court. He sought an injunction against the NAACP but it was the Webb's City case that really began things moving in St. Petersburg.

CB: Captain Minnis not only encouraged you to look for a calling. I guess he was encouraging you to be a lawyer as your grandmother had done, but he's going to stay an ally of yours in the civil rights movement when you come back and will initiate, in your estimation, the civil rights revolution in St. Petersburg.

RS: What's very interesting is that, when I came back to Florida, many of the people who were instrumental in my education began to really work, most of them behind the scenes but a lot of them out front. It was through this kind of cadre that we were able to move. I'd like to mention Dr. [Leedell W.] Neyland at Florida A&M University, and the executive director of the Florida Teachers Association, who is now dead. When I, for an example, began working in Tallahassee, particularly with the two events there. One, the raping of the coed and arrest of four white boys and the bus protest, it was Dr. Gilbert Porter who opened up and gave me an office at the Florida State Teachers Association to do the work that was necessary in correlating and moving everything.

CB: We'll go into some depth with the events once you returned. Let's get you back, first, from World War II. In 1945, early 1946 I guess it was, you came back to Tampa briefly, and you worked for the *Florida Sentinel* newspaper. You had a column. (Saunders laughs) What was the name of your column?

RS: "Central Avenue Buckshot." (laughs)

CB: The "Central Avenue Buckshot." [You were a] society columnist.

RS: It was anything that I wanted to write about. Mr. Andrews said, "You write." I did in the several months that I remained and before leaving.

CB: Did you seriously consider at that point staying in Tampa, or was your mind already made up to pursue a law degree?

RS: My mind was to pursue law and to go into undergrad, and of course then go into law school.

CB: You mean of course you'd been at Bethune-Cookman for several years before the war. You need to finish your bachelor's. I know your beloved grandmother, Marion Rogers, had passed away by the time you got back.

RS: She died in 1950.

CB: Oh, in fifty [1950].

RS: Fifty [1950].

CB: So she was still alive; she must have encouraged you to go on with your education.

RS: Well, yes, but she was kind of old then.

CB: And your mother.

RS: But she was still feisty.

(both laugh)

CB: Where did you determine you were going to go to get your degree? How did you choose that?

RS: I thought about Fisk, and I was accepted at Fisk. On the way up, after what happened in Tampa, I began to see the discrimination that was existing and the treatment of veterans who had come back, particularly in the Florida employment service, whether they had separate rooms, and that type of thing.

CB: The government had created programs to ease the transition.

RS: Ease the transition. They had what they called the 51-20 or something like that. After you got out of the Army, for a certain number of weeks you were given twenty dollars a week.

CB: I think for a year. 52-20, was that what it was?

RS: 52-20, yes. I went down to the Florida Employment Service and the way I was treated there—see, I never got the 52-20 because I said, “Heck, I don’t need it.” That’s when I decided to go on my own.

CB: As a person you’re increasingly sensitive to the racial injustice that you’re seeing around you. Was it making you angry, or did it just make you want to get away from it?

RS: It made me really—I guess I got this from my grandmother and working with some other people, particularly those in the NAACP. It made you angry, and you were concerned about bringing about change.

CB: You were already thinking in that line in 1946.

RS: Plus the fact of having been at Tuskegee Army Air Field, which was a segregated entity of the Army Air Corps. Most of the guys who were there were energetic, had professions, and were of the same feeling as I was that hey, we are just as good as anybody else. I think that the fellows who became pilots exhibited that in combat. Those of us who remained as enlisted personnel, non-commissioned officers, we were able to stand up against some of the things that happened there.

CB: When you thought about becoming a lawyer in those days, did you have in mind that you would use those skills in civil rights work?

RS: Definitely because—I mentioned yesterday that I had read Booker T. Washington’s—a copy that my grandmother had bought—*Up from Slavery*, and there were other books—it was instilled in me, and actually I’ve got to give credit to Ed Davis, who lived about two or three blocks down the street from us, who also played a role in my coming down.

CB: We'll get to that. At this point in the mid-forties [1940s], he already has been very active in teacher salary inquisition cases, I believe, and in NAACP activities.

RS: Right, and writing letters to the attorney general and others in the state, concerning what they were doing about keeping black people from voting. He was very active and had been fired from his job in Tampa as a principal because of his activity in the civil rights movement. Ed Davis.

CB: He was closely associated with the man. Florida had become in 1940, forty-one [1941], the very first state to create a state conference of branches of the NAACP.

RS: Nora Griffin, Ed Davis, Harry T. Moore, and one or two others, yes.

CB: And Harry T. Moore is the first president of the conference, and then I believe about the time you come back to Tampa after World War II, the state conference of branches creates a position of executive secretary, about 1946.

RS: Well, when I came down, Harry T. Moore was already the executive secretary. After his killing, the national office decided that the person who would fill the shoes would be a member of the national staff.

CB: Yes, and I do want to get into that, and I'm sorry to keep interjecting, but what I was going to ask, for this period of time, the mid-forties [1940s], just after World War II, did you know Harry T. Moore then, or were you otherwise associated with the NAACP?

RS: I was, in essence, aware, and my grandmother and others of the family were associated with the local NAACP. When I came home out of the Army and was working for the *Sentinel*, Mr. Andrews, Harry T. Moore came by on one occasion. That's the first time that I had ever seen him and we said hello, something like that and that was it.

CB: So, other than just one brief introduction, at that point in your life you really had no active involvement with Harry Moore or with the NAACP.

RS: No, no, no.

CB: Your mind's on college. You're directed. You're going to finish your bachelor's degree at Fisk, and you're going to get a law degree. I recall yesterday you said that Captain Minnis had encouraged you to go to school in the North to get your law degree.

RS: Well, Minnis was concerned that you understood the workings of government and the workings of discrimination, and one thing he insisted on, and that was to know that discrimination was just as prevalent in the North as it was in the South.

CB: You were about, as I recall, to discover that, in fact firsthand, in a way that is involved, short-circuiting your plans for Fisk. Am I correct that on the train on the way to Fisk, you stopped over in Cincinnati?

RS: On the bus. (laughs)

CB: On the bus. What happened?

RS: When I got to Cincinnati, I decided that I was going to look around. I became acquainted with the editors of the Cincinnati edition of the *Call and Post*—

CB: The *Cleveland Call and Post*.

RS: —which had a separate edition for Cincinnati. What happened was that they said, “Stick around.” When I stuck around then they gave me a job and a salary, and of course I needed that money.

CB: You had just, by accident I think, run into somebody involved with the *Call and Post* in Cincinnati that you did not know before. Isn’t that right?

RS: Jimmy Smith. Jimmy Smith was the editor. What happened was that Jimmy said, “You can do the circulation and write and other things. I ended up writing columns, news, and that’s when I got to learn about Madisonville and the general area of Cincinnati.

CB: Did you find that that northern city was a racial paradise?

RS: Definitely. As a matter of fact, when I got to Cincinnati, I found that black people could not, for instance, and were not using restaurants even though the state of Ohio had a law that prohibited discrimination.

I’ll give you one illustration or two. The first was that around the west end where all these problems are now, that was strictly a segregated situation. When you came across the Ohio River, you ended up in the west end. There was an effort being made by the *Call and Post*, Jimmy Smith, the NAACP, and the Urban League to open up recreation in Madisonville and that type of thing. Eventually, they agreed that there would be no segregation in recreational facilities. They said that they would open up a swimming pool—I think it was in Madisonville—and that black kids could use the recreational facilities there and on the east side. The next morning when we went out there to see what was happening, the swimming pool had been filled with glass. Overnight, the opposition had made it impossible for the black kids to use.

Another thing that opened my eyes—and this is very key because it related to some of the things that had happened in Florida regarding lynchings and that type of thing and how black young people were caught up in the web of bad law enforcement. In Price Hill—that’s going up into sort of all white, upper-class—a white woman claimed that she had been raped by a black man. One afternoon she was going on Sixth Avenue crossing John

Street and the car that she was in was driven by a white, male companion. They had to stop at the traffic light. This white fellow said something to this black boy that was standing on the corner there. The black boy was kind of upset, and he approached the car. When he approached the car, the car with the white couple sped off, but a block down was a police car. The police car sped up and arrested the black boy. Well, Jimmy Smith, the kind of reporter that he was, began looking into this. What we found out in digging the facts was that if this black fellow that they had arrested was really the rapist then Jimmy wanted to know why they didn't give the white woman a physical examination because the black boy was a veteran and had been confined to a veteran's hospital being treated for venereal disease. But that never was brought up in court.

CB: You wrote about this story.

RS: Jimmy wrote it and I worked with him on it, yes.

CB: What was the result of your—and his—efforts?

RS: I think they gave the kid something, two or three months for assault or whatever it might be. Another thing, Chief Weatherly, the chief of police and I became quite friendly. Weatherly thought I was a home boy. (laughs) This is when I became familiar with police passes and the power of the press. When I got a police pass, anything that went on, there I was. I said, "Wait a minute. This is my avenue." And then of course, while there, I took a couple of extra courses at the University of Cincinnati, one in journalism and one in creative writing in the evenings. That helped me. I learned a lot because crossing over from the Mason-Dixon Line into what was supposed to be God's country, had discrimination. Now, one other thing, I never knew how close Jackie Robinson and I would come.

CB: Here's somebody who is not only an outstanding athlete, but who, at that very moment is one of the most notorious figures in the United States because he had versed what many whites had considered a sacrosanct racial barrier (Saunders laughs) and he is going to come back and repeatedly play important roles in your life and future career. Tell the story.

RS: Working with me closely in Florida. But one of the assignments Jimmy told me that, I think, the Dodgers were playing in Cincinnati, or something. And Jimmy wanted me to just float through. It was very interesting to see what was happening. Every time Jackie would come to bat, if he got a hit, the black fans would (claps), but if he struck out the white fans would (claps). And we picked up on this, you know. And it was very funny, particularly because around that ballpark, black people weren't using those restaurants around there. I mentioned this to Jimmy, and Jimmy said, "Hey, this is what I wanted you there to observe what was happening." And naturally, we did that.

CB: He was, of course, famous for, among other things, the dignity and grace with which he bore those insults—

RS: The insults, yeah.

CB: —and bore that pressure. How did that image affect you or that model affect you? Or do you feel it did?

RS: He didn't pay any attention. I guess you couldn't hear what was going on in the stands down on the field. But Jackie took it gracefully, you know, as I could observe. When it was his time to come to bat, he came to bat. When he was on the field and made an outstanding play, the black people would (claps). (laughs)

CB: You're going to end up soon being in very threatening and difficult situations, too. Yet, with his continuing friendship among that of others, you're going to be noted for the dignity and the grace with which you handled very difficult circumstances. Just as one observer, I have to believe that in some small measure at least Jackie Robinson, this great man, deserves some of the credit for that.

RS: Well, you know—

CB: You got aware of him on a firsthand basis almost by a fluke—

RS: Right.

CB: —by having stopped over in Cincinnati.

RS: Yes, because when I came to Florida as field secretary, all I had to do was pick up the phone. On two or three occasions, Jackie spoke in Tampa. He spoke in Clearwater. He came on radio shows and he went into Ocala. When he got to Ocala and saw what was happening there and what Frank Pinkston was doing, he was amazed at the way that black people in Ocala and Marion County had been organized, and he remarked about it. He spoke in Jacksonville and when—he was always on call, always on call.

CB: He's going to show up again in our story, although a couple of days from now. You said you did take some courses in Cincinnati. That, I believe, rekindled your desire to go ahead and get your degree and go on to law school. So really your stay in Cincinnati didn't prove that wrong, did it?

RS: No. I wanted to more, and then of course conditions had come about that I moved to Detroit to satisfy the desires of somebody else.

CB: You enrolled in the University of Detroit first, I guess.

RS: No, the first thing I did—

CB: I mean the Detroit Institute of Technology.

RS: No, the first thing I did was to try to get into Wayne University.

CB: That's it.

RS: When I got to Wayne University and presented my credentials and whatnot. The person who was taking the information wanted to know where was Bethune-Cookman, and so I had to educate him as to where was Bethune-Cookman. But in order to survive, you had to work and that's when I began to look around. I found that Detroit Institute of Technology satisfied all that I needed, all the credits, all the courses that I needed. One thing that happened was that they had a good journalism curriculum. I got involved in that. Detroit Institute of Technology was quite an interesting school.

CB: It's interesting at this point in your life—and you're still a very young man—you've already worked for the *Tampa Bulletin* under its great publisher and editor, Marcellus Potter. You worked for the *Florida Sentinel* in Tampa under its editor and publisher, Blythe Andrews. You worked for the Cincinnati edition of the nationally recognized *Cleveland Call and Post*. This is a lot of journalism to pack into a young life here. But, still, journalism wasn't what you had your mind on, was it? You were still focused on law school.

RS: Yes, but in attending DIT, one thing, and you, being a lawyer—

CB: Now that's an ugly accusation.

(both laugh)

RS: —they concentrated on, for an example, constitutional law. And the textbook was Evans's *Casebook on Constitutional Cases*. [*Casebook on American Constitutional Law*] And here I am, an undergrad, and in the DIT they are concentrating on preparing to move into law school. It was interesting that when I did get into the University of Detroit Law School, that phase I had already been through. They taught us how to brief cases and everything. But then another thing, DIT was catering to veterans. All of the courses and the training that we got filled the need for those of us who had been in the Army in World War II. They were preparing us and whatnot—now may I just jump ahead and say that DIT had a Lawrence Institute. Lawrence has absorbed all of the records and everything from DIT, and I am recognized as an alumnus of Lawrence Technical Institute, which is out on Ten Mile Road.

CB: That's fair enough. Well, congratulations.

RS: Thank you.

CB: Now you were having some other experiences during these Detroit years. Of course you were benefiting from the G.I. Bill, but it really wasn't enough to have a life on in Detroit. Where else did you find yourself employed, and what were the circumstances?

RS: Well, first two or three months that I was there, I started working at a department store named Crowley's [Crowley Milner & Co.]. I looked around, and I saw that there were no black people in the better jobs or anything and they had us working out in the kitchen. Well, that wasn't for me. And a friend of mine told me, said, "Hey, the Ford Motor Company is hiring and they pay good salaries." So, you know—

CB: This is the famous River Rouge plant—

RS: Right.

CB: —known for its labor problems.

RS: (laughs) That's where the union began to organize. Henry Ford would go to Jackson Penitentiary and bring the goons down. (laughs) But I got out of school one day, and I had on my nice attire and went out there. The woman who was taking the applications said, "Well, we're not hiring today." When I went back, I told this friend what had happened. He said, "Well, you go back and get into some greasy overalls or something and go out there." (laughs) And I did and I got hired.

CB: They wouldn't hire you wearing a coat and tie?

RS: No. (laughs)

CB: If you wear dirty overalls they would hire you.

RS: That's where I learned—somebody said that every time you picked up an automobile always realize that there might be some dead body rolled up in that steel.

(both laugh)

RS: But this is interesting because you observe what's happening and when I was going to the assignment at Ford, I noticed that there was this big building, and there were guys sitting there looking at books and reading and everything. I said, "What is that?" And somebody told me, said, "They're the engineers. They're the planners." And this was interesting because I'm learning now how the automobile industry operated and how you got into mass production. And these guys are the thinkers. Every day when I passed by, I'd look in there and see these guys, oh, they would be pointing and everything. And I think one thing that I learned or heard about was they were talking and planning, I forgot what they call it, a machine or something that at the end of a certain period, after they had reached their quotas, production, that machine would automatically begin turning out parts for another. And, you know, you learned a lot if you observed carefully but I learned a lot also about labor organizations working at Ford.

CB: That was going to be my very next question. Would you share with us about that experience, learning about labor organizations?

RS: Well, I learned one thing, that the UAW [United Auto Workers] was just as political (laughs) as anything on the outside and that you had to be careful because you had all kinds of cliques and tie-ins and whatnot. But—

CB: But you quickly became active in union affairs.

RS: Yes. Well what happened was that there were certain people there—because when I was at Ford I was still going to school and these guys said, “Hey, we want you to be our union steward.” First I was appointed to fill a position. And that’s when I began to understand how management operated and how you dealt with labor problems and the foreman. It was interesting to see the foreman come by. He was interested in the production. And when the shop steward wasn’t looking, he was telling the guys. (laughs)

But taking up the problems of the laborers, you know—I became interested in union politics. Ford Local 600. That was supposed to be the largest union in—what is it, Dearborn? It’s interesting how it operated because each Ford unit is a separate entity under the union. The Freeman coal header, then you had the steel, where they roll the steel through on the shears and they cut it and they put it, you know, and send it to the shaper and that type of thing. Each one of those buildings had something separate. And it was a separate unit, and it had its own under the Ford Local 600 UAW operational unit. I learned how unions operate. I began to learn about bargaining. I never will forget John Bugas. And if you ever read the legend of Henry Ford, Bugas—I don’t know whether he is still alive, but he was one of the brains behind the Ford development economically and whatnot. One thing I learned also is that there were a lot of guys like me who were just hanging on there to work until they got their degrees or whatnot.

CB: But now, your future in union affairs though was not that limited, was it?

RS: No. On one or two occasions I’ve met—what’s his name, the president of UAW?

CB: Walter Reuther.

RS: Walter Reuther—sitting down talking in these meetings. I found out that the unions were interested in those of us who were inclined to get into law or whatever it is because of the activities of the union, which covered every phase and facet of its workers. For example, I recall an elderly gentleman there who had been with the Ford Motor Company for years. That’s another thing that you learn when you were there, that these guys that had been there when the unions were organizing, they tell you some good stories about how the goons would go to their houses if they found out they were union. When you walk down that line and you see these parts coming and this old man, who probably was getting ready to retire or something, got his leg caught in one of those shears and just ripped his leg off. The union steward had to take care of that. You had to cover that because you had to protect that union worker, and I learned a lot about that, too. It was an education, an education. I learned something else. Don’t get caught up in any strikes. (laughs)

CB: But now I've got to ask you though, if you don't mind expanding on that, exactly what do you mean by that?

RS: Get caught up in the strikes? Remember that a lot of—well, don't remember—really, and you see it now, labor. At that time of course the Wagner Act [National Labor Relations Act] Hartley was passed, and it gave a lot of power to labor unions and whatnot.

CB: National labor relations.

RS: And you see, there was this—the management is fighting unions, and unions are fighting management. There's a disagreement. They start negotiating contracts. All these issues come up. Management says, "Oh, no, we're not going to give in." The union says, "Okay, you're not going to give in, we'll go on strike." And some of those strikes—I remember one strike that they had up there, which lasted about—maybe—I can't recall the exact limit of time, but about two months. We were on the picket line. If you had not prepared for that, that little bit that they got from the union didn't tie you over.

CB: Did you not see the strike as an efficient way to accomplish the union's goals or an effective way?

RS: I saw it that way, and then when I was in Cincinnati with the *Call and Post*—remember, Cincinnati is definitely Republican territory. That's Taft. At that time they were fighting to pass the Taft-Hartley Act [Labor-Management Relations Act]. I saw how the newspapers and everything were leaning in the direction of passage of this new law. It's interesting if you are an observer—and really I was being trained to be an observer. I think this is what journalism is all about. And you pick up on these things, you see. They had what they called the Lincoln-Douglas Republican Club, which was made up of black professionals and so forth, in Cincinnati. They were leaning in that direction, but the labor class, when you look at the laws that came about when the Taft-Hartley Act did away with the conditions, of the grants, of the winnings of the Wagner Act, it was an entirely different thing. When you get into labor management relations, you learn a lot about how this thing operates. You learn how civil rights plays a role in it, because certainly the labor was more oriented toward helping the minorities, especially after the riots in Detroit. Labor played a key role in elevating the opportunities of black people to gain the kind of opportunities that they never had before, and to lift them out of doing the dirty work into cleaner jobs.

CB: It sounds like, to me, what you're saying and—you correct this—that you're looking, by the late 1940s and very early fifties [1950s], for some middle way between labor strike activism and acquiescence to push your feelings for the need for some sort of progress, improvement, in race relations in the country, eliminating the injustice you saw. It's right at this time, if I'm not mistaken, that you begin volunteering with the NAACP in Detroit. Is that right?

RS: That's right. Plus the fact that I had an instructor who was head of the sociology department, he—it wasn't a bible—but the book that was written by a sociologist from Sweden or somewhere, I forgot the name.

CB: Gunnar Myrdal.

RS: Myrdal. There were two volumes. This is what we had to follow, you know—and that's interesting because I don't see that happening in education down here. Our assignments were based upon what Myrdal was saying. Myrdal was talking about labor conditions in America and racial conditions. You see, all of this was instilled as part of the education process. Of course when I started doing volunteer work with the NAACP, the NAACP in Detroit was tied in with the labor movement. It all fit together. When you look at the riots that occurred at—what, Belle Island or something?

CB: Belle Isle.

RS: Belle Isle. And you find that what caused those riots, misunderstanding, bringing in people from Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Deep South, different races and classes. Bringing them in and not preparing. When these individuals with different attitudes and what not, got together, they clashed. It was just a rumor that a black boy had raped a white woman, and all of a sudden you've got a big riot.

CB: Not too long before you got to Detroit.

RS: One of my assignments in this sociology class was to study that. I observed something that when you talk about class, I had classes. The Italian youngster, or maybe a black youngster, does something in the white upper class, and it's considered to be a crime. When you get back into the community, it's not a crime. It's just fun. The upper class white community is trying to maintain its structure. You learn all of that. I learned that by studying under—I forgot this instructor's name but—Myrdal. They don't teach this now. I mean, some people think about it as being communistic, but it isn't communistic. It's a prediction that was made and which had to be corrected. I think we're happy that people like Truman became president. They were looking at changes and whatnot.

CB: This is certainly a time when President Truman is inspiring the possibilities of the birth of an activist civil rights movement. Of course, in 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court had outlawed the Democratic white primary in the South.

RS: Which played a prominent part in Florida.

CB: Also in 1948, President Truman by executive order will desegregate the United States military, and also the Federal Work Force.

RS: When I was in Pensacola, I came down as Pensacola's new secretary, and I was invited to come on board. You know what that is. The commander of the Pensacola Naval

Station welcomed me on board as the NAACP representative to look at the station to see how they were complying with the president's order. Let me point out something that's key, too. Very few people know about the fact that President Truman had established a committee to study the need for change. And Walter White—this is when I became familiar with Walter White, I hadn't met him—but Walter White was on that committee.

CB: Then the executive director of the NAACP.

RS: And the executive director of the NAACP and the recommendations that came out of the report that was given to Truman played a key role in these decisions. Now you're getting down into the nitty-gritty of the civil rights work and how we were trained to identify discrimination and how to overcome it. But a lot of people don't know how to do that.

CB: Let's get you graduated. All this work that you're doing, you're working at the River Rouge plant, you're in union activism. Increasingly you're volunteering with the NAACP. Nonetheless, you were able to graduate January 26, 1951 with a B.A. from the Detroit Institute of Technology, and you soon entered the University of Detroit Law School. (Saunders laughs) You did well in law school, but money became a problem, didn't it?

RS: Money became a problem. I will tell anybody who goes into a professional school, particularly a law school: don't take fifteen [credit] hours and try to do forty hours of work. (laughs) It just won't work. I came out of DIT, and about two weeks later I was in law school. I stayed there almost nearly two years. It was a strain. That's when I was working voluntarily with the NAACP. It was a learning process. Some of the guys that were in my class, I communicate with them now.

CB: During this period of time you had come to be very familiar with a man who was about to emerge as a national leader in the NAACP, but who then was a Detroit leader of the NAACP.

RS: When I was working there, he had been the director. You're talking about Gloster Current?

CB: Gloster Current.

RS: Gloster plays a role in what happened to Harry T. Moore. I didn't know Gloster at that time. We had organized a youth council and named it after Gloster. What happened was that Gloster was on vacation, and I was in there helping with voter registration or something, volunteer work. This guy comes through, and they tell me he's the director of branches for the NAACP, which is the bread and butter part of NAACP. I was teasing him, and I said, "Are you all hiring in the NAACP again?" He looked at me, laughed, and walked on off. Two or three days later he comes back and says, "Are you really interesting in working for the NAACP?" I said, "Yes!" He smiled and walked off. About

a week or two later, I received a telegram from Walter White. He said, “Come to Freedom House on 20 West Fortieth Street and be prepared for an interview.”

CB: New York City.

RS: I went up, and when I walked in there was Walter White, Ed Davis, president of the state conference of branches, Paul Perkins, who is the lead attorney in the Groveland case⁶, and they begin talking and whatnot. Ed actually knows my family because he lived two or three blocks down from us when I was a kid.

CB: Now, you were aware at this point, but I believe you’ve told me in the past that it really didn’t register that highly with you that on Christmas night of 1951, not too many months before your conversation with Gloster Current and your summons to New York City to the NAACP headquarters, that Harry T. Moore and his wife Harriett were bombed to death Christmas night 1951 by the Ku Klux Klan at their home in Mims, Florida.

RS: That’s true because we read it in newspapers and everything, but I’m in Detroit, not Florida, and it doesn’t register as hard as it would.

CB: Walter White and Gloster Current and others are struggling to figure out what they can do in the summer of 1952 to get a person in place to begin rebuilding. I want to talk about why it needs to be rebuilt in a second, but to rebuild the Florida NAACP. They had real plans and hopes. Everything was key to finding a certain type of individual, not only a capable person, but someone that couldn’t be accused of being bought.

RS: Communists.

CB: Communist. Two things then: communists or carpetbaggers.

RS: I say communist because, really, people like Strom Thurmond and Bilbo—I don’t think [James O.] Eastland was the senator [from Mississippi] then.

CB: Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi.

RS: Mississippi, and you see—they had been battling with Du Bois, and Du Bois had gone to Africa. As a matter of fact Du Bois left the NAACP in 1952 or 1953, before I got there.

CB: W.E.B. Du Bois, the great sociologist and author, historian, had been the editor of the NAACP’s—

RS: *Crisis Magazine*.

⁶Four young black men were accused of raping a white woman. Saunders discusses the case later in the interview.

CB: —since its creation.

RS: And the brains behind the idea of the NAACP. They were concerned because the NAACP is moving in a direction of new programs, particularly the anti-lynching act. They laid the groundwork for voting. They were laying the groundwork—the Groveland case had worldwide consequences.

CB: There's also, as I recall, a little litigation that the NAACP was helping to encourage that involved cases from a number of states, including Florida, aimed at a very key civil rights issue.

RS: Poll tax.

CB: Well, actually I was thinking of segregation in public schools.

RS: Public schools—well, the U.S. Supreme Court had already ruled in one or two cases that in higher education, several states had to open up, that it was unconstitutional. Of course, Herman Sweatt—some of them call him Heeman—Herman and I became very good friends. Because when I came on board, he was brought on as sort of a field secretary for Texas. We got to talking about the Texas case.

CB: He had litigated to desegregate the University of Texas.

RS: The University of Texas Law School. The Supreme Court came down because the University of Texas said they were going to do what Florida was going to do with Florida A&M, and that they were going to set up a separate school for black students, you know, a law school. The Supreme Court had ruled in the Texas case, *Sweatt v. Painter*, that you could do this, but remember the basis for their decision was that black lawyers would be practicing in a—and this is where the sociology comes in—a white institution established by the white power structure. You couldn't expect to get justice out of it. You could go ahead and set up the separate school if you want to, but you still have to admit Sweatt.

Sweatt and I talked about it. And this is ahead of the story but Sweatt and I used to get on the subway and ride up to Harlem. We talked about the University of Florida cases. Sweatt told me one of the big mistakes in Florida—this is coming from the plaintiff in the Texas case—was that black people in Florida had too much confidence in the white politicians. They thought, you know, that they were ready to give in and that type of thing. I could go into details about my observations and studies after I got back. This is true because a lot of people think that the University of Florida case was one case. It was really two because the first case involved five or six plaintiffs. That's when the Florida Supreme Court took control. They said no, you know, but that's ahead of the story.

CB: We will get, in the next couple of days, to the Hawkins case and desegregation and the University of Florida Law School. For right now when you're meeting in the summer of 1952 in New York at Freedom House with Walter White and Gloster Current, someone

else stuck his head in the door that's going to become a very important figure in Florida NAACP history and in your life.

RS: In walks Thurgood Marshall. I'm looking up and I say, "Uh-oh, I'm in high cotton," (laughs) because Thurgood is leaving the battle. He has given advice to Florida. I had never met him in person. He came in and introduced himself, and we talked. After that first meeting, I went back to Detroit. Then I got another telegram saying, "Come and be prepared to stay for orientation." That's when Thurgood really came in and gave the story to me. Clarence Mitchell, who has been called the hundred and first senator, came in and talked about the lobbying part of NAACP and Washington—which a lot of people don't understand that this was key, the lobbying that was going on. Thurgood brought on the Groveland case. He talked about the other cases and what was needed to be done.

CB: Excuse me for interrupting, but we're at the end of our tape for our first hour this morning. If you don't mind, if you'll forgive me for being rude, let's take a break here for a couple minutes and then come back and pick up with an offer that the NAACP is about to make you, (Saunders laughs) and I'm going to ask you, why did you take it?

RS: (laughs) Crazy.

Pause in recording

CB: I'm Dr. Canter Brown, and I'm here with Dr. Robert W. Saunders. We are having a series of interviews over this week. Today is January 15 in the year 2002. This is our second session this morning. We're reviewing Dr. Saunders's remarkable life and career as a civil rights advocate, and in particular his central role as the executive secretary of Florida's NAACP during the civil rights era. Dr. Saunders, I believe the point we were at when we adjourned our first session this morning was, you were at Freedom House in New York City, having then been a resident of Detroit, although you were a Tampa native, being wooed by Walter White, Gloster Current, and Thurgood Marshall to come fill a gap in Florida that had been opened by the tragic Ku Klux Klan murders of Harry T. Moore and his wife Harriett Moore, Harry T. Moore being the executive secretary of the Florida NAACP. But we were just beginning to talk about the fact that Walter White and his associates really had in mind some fundamental changes in how the leadership of the Florida NAACP was going to be handled or organized, and also they had very important plans in mind for what the Florida NAACP should be doing. I wonder if you might be willing to talk a little bit about that.

RS: Some of the plans included the fact that the field secretary had to be free from being affected of the pressures that were brought on by the white power structure and the effect of those pressures on certain black leaders who still went along with the separate but equal. The field secretary had to speak out and carry out the policies of the national organization. These policies, of course, were passed by the national convention and adopted by the board. Of course, that was key; that's one of the things that they were concerned about. The number two thing is that in working the communities, you had to be able to recruit leadership and not only recruit leadership and get in and work with old

leadership to bring them around into the new way of thinking. This I found to be quite interesting because—I'll give you an illustration.

There was an old man by the name of P.D.L. Williams in Palatka. I never heard of him until I began working in Palatka. Then I found out that he was the fourth individual, along with Harry, Ed, and Griffin, who was working to end the discriminatory salaries. He began telling me about how they had to go from county to county to meet in order to keep the power structure from knowing what was going on. Then he began working and carrying me around Palatka. He was still teaching. About five miles outside of Palatka, he had this one-room school with a steel pot-bellied stove. He carried me. He said, "You see where we are?" But he opened my eyes to a lot of things.

Then, of course, I had the opportunity of meeting Griffin, talking with the young man who was the brains behind the University of Florida case, who went to work with the United States Commission on Civil Rights. A lot of people don't know that this young fellow was the brains behind a lot of the work that the Civil Rights Commission was doing. The NAACP was concerned that we began implementing a lot of the new legislation and the ideas that was coming down from Washington

CB: You briefly mentioned in our first session this morning: this is an era of increasing excitement about the possibilities—we're talking about the summer of 1952 now—for civil rights advances. There have been some court decisions that seem to be paving the way for further major decisions, which, of course by 1954, are going to result in the *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision, which will call for the desegregation of public schools, Florida being one of the cases in that group of cases. So, the NAACP is gearing up in the summer of 1952 to expand its program.

RS: That's true.

CB: To further this revolution. It is going to do that by trying out new initiatives. As I understand it, Walter White had in mind two states to use as targets for trying out those initiatives to help hone the ideas and make them workable. And what did he and his associates talk to you about? What were those states?

RS: Florida and Mississippi. If you go back and look at the programs that were going on, the initiatives, you'll find that Florida and Mississippi were really the lead states. If you look at North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee, there wasn't too much activity, but there was activity in Florida and Mississippi. The field secretary was given a lot of leeway. We were given the responsibility of training the leadership, recruiting the leadership. One of the keys also, from the mental responsibilities, was the fact that money had to be raised to carry on these battles. And of course, in the South very few dollars were coming in. The money that was coming in took care of the battles were coming from other resources. But we met, organized, and worked with them. For an example, I was fortunate in working—again I mentioned Dr. Gilbert Porter and Principal Williams of Booker T. Washington High School down in Miami and some others, who had been in the vanguard from the educational perspective. Florida State Teachers Association in

working to lay the groundwork for a lot of things and they supported what we were doing.

CB: Here we have, as I understand it, by the summer of 1952, a very special situation, which is arising, that directly affects Florida and is directly going to influence the way your own participation will develop. The NAACP, under its leader Walter White, is determined that Florida and Mississippi will be laboratories for experimentation for civil rights initiatives. They are very sensitive to having someone who is not a quote “carpetbagger” or cannot be accused of being a carpetbagger or being accused of being a communist.

RS: Well, the governor of Florida, after the killing of Harry Moore, had been accusing Walter White and the NAACP as being—

CB: This is Fuller Warren.

RS: Fuller Warren. I think he called them communists and those agitators from Harlem coming down here, upsetting the good colored folks in Florida and that something had to be done about it and so forth. And you see there was this back-and-forth. Walter White told me, “We’ve decided we’re going to send a Floridian down there. Let him know that there are Floridians that disagree with what’s going on.” He said, “You fit that tag.” That was an eye-opener to me that I represented what the national offices viewed as a key factor in offsetting the thinkings of the politicians down here.

It was important because we had to deal with it. We dealt with it very effectively with the help of Ed Davis, who was a master at it, and then we had black lawyers beginning to come out of law schools and whatnot and work with us, like Johnson in Jacksonville, Leander Shaw, and [Joseph] Hatchett, who was in the Supreme Court then went to the Fifth Circuit. All these fellows and Rodriguez, Fordham, and [G.E.] Graves, they were that new breed of trained individuals who were working and came together when we needed them. Malcolm Cunningham down in Palm Beach County who said—when we had the meeting in Tampa, we were aware of what the legislature was doing—Malcolm said, “Let’s send everything to New York.” This is lawyers working with us.

It was the development of a new type of attitude. I never will forget that Jack Greenberg, who took over after Thurgood left the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, wrote me about fifteen years ago and wanted to know about the lawyers in Florida. I think what happened was that, even when they set up the segregated law school at Florida A&M, they didn’t realize that they were setting a trap for themselves because these people came out and began working with us, too.

CB: I have to ask you this before we get back to Florida and you’ve become involved in the day-to-day activities. Here’s the situation: Florida historically, and we’ve touched on this a little bit, is probably as violent or more violent in racial terms than any state in the South. Florida on a per-capita basis led the South in lynchings. Harry T. Moore, your distinguished predecessor, and his wife had been blown apart in their own bed on

Christmas night by the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan was running rampant. The head of the Klan every four years was running for governor openly in Florida. The governor was denouncing NAACP carpetbaggers.

Here you are in Detroit. Even though you had to temporarily leave law school, the fact was you left under good circumstances and could have gone back once you could financially bear the price. Yet, here comes Walter White saying, “We need you to go to Florida. We want you to go to Florida. We want you to give up all this you’ve built in Detroit, all your contacts there, all this nice lifestyle you’ve got in Detroit, and go back and take the chance that you won’t be murdered to do something good.” (Saunders laughs) I’ve asked you this before, and you’ve answered it, but I have to ask it again. What prompted you to say yes?

RS: Challenge and the idea being instilled that black people wanted to be free. Having talked with individuals and being raised in a community of individuals who resisted, but they resisted under pressure, and of course if you go back and look at—you mentioned Florida being one of the leading states in the highest per-capita lynchings. What about the poll tax? It was the first state to pass a poll tax.

CB: To restrict—

RS: To restrict voting, you see, Florida was, in essence, moving in a direction of taking the leadership. I think of the things that concerned me was Ed Davis told me that Governor [LeRoy] Collins, when he was in the legislature, was a sort of liberal segregationist, whatever that meant. Collins spoke to the Southern Governors Conference after the 1954 decision and said something about, “Why don’t you leave us alone? The South will correct itself in its own time,” words to that effect. Roy Wilkins took him on. Then when Roy took him on, the state conference took him on, and a white woman in Miami who was a key figure in the NAACP. Perry kept hammering him about that statement. This left us in limbo. Wait a minute. What is he talking about? That’s why we were—

CB: You’re very careful at getting away from answering my question like you always do. I still would appreciate it if we could get back to the question about what prompted you to accept this job. You’ve told me before, and I think you were absolutely sincere, that you were honored just to be asked, which is a phenomenal statement to me.

RS: Well, as a youngster, I was about thirty years old, just out of the Army, trying to feel my way around, taking advantage of the G.I. Bill and so forth, and too unknown. Gloster didn’t know me from Adam’s house cat. Walter White didn’t know me. By virtue of the fact that I’m working as a volunteer in the NAACP, people are watching. I often tell young people, now that I’m old, you don’t know who’s looking at you. Gloster comes into Detroit, and I learn later on that the two things that he had noticed were my volunteer work and the fact that I’m a Floridian and experienced with newspapers. I never told you, but I also did some work for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The NAACP is looking and saying,

Wait a minute, maybe this guy has the things that we're looking for. Plus I'm a Floridian and in Tampa.

CB: You'd already survived UAW politics at the River Rouge Plant.

RS: And worried everybody in Florida to death. Mr. Rogers, G.D. Rogers. Anybody who was anybody in Tampa, as a youngster, I worried them to death, Potter and all them, and Ed Davis. This is fitting right into their mold because I had not been affected by the issues involving racial segregation and that type of thing. I think that this is what we're looking at.

CB: Is there any chance at the point you're about to answer Walter White's question if you'll take the job, that you heard the voice of people like Marcellus Potter, Joe Clinton, and your grandmother Marion Rogers whispering in your ear, "Take it"?

RS: Yes, well, you see those are people that played a key role. Lester, Mr. Lester the mailman, his wife was one of the teachers in West Tampa School.

CB: Carrie Lester, I believe.

RS: Yes. I told you that when Mrs. Meacham died that on that day my Aunt Josephine, who was very active and a teacher. I was at the house when the family was preparing for a funeral and everything. Christina Meacham and Dr. White, Jake White, a member of the St. Paul A.M.E. Church who was instrumental in helping to bring about Boy Scouts. We couldn't participate in scouting in Tampa. Cyrus Green, the head of the Urban League. I recall when they set up the Boy Scouts, they put us all in an open air truck and bussed us up to Tallahassee, and we had a jamboree out there on Florida A&M campus. That's the first time I'd ever been there. These individuals also played a role. I think that kind of a background helped to instill me with the kind of attributes that they were looking for.

CB: I keep wondering about how a person could have that courage. You can't tell me it didn't take it because even in that room, even if it wasn't said, people understood the threat of violence. They have the example of Harry and Harriett Moore. Even the state conference of branches president, Ed Davis, has parting words for you that touch on that. What did he tell you?

RS: "Stay out of those little towns." Again, while I took his words, I learned also that when you got up into Live Oak and when you traveled into Lake County, people like Mrs. Lang, who were there and who had stuck their necks out, they were really supporters. When I talked to them, they were ready to go. Let's go. We'll support you. Pulling this cadre together, even though Ed said, "Stay out of the little towns," I reminded Ed. I said, "Look, if you're in Ocala and you got up one morning and walked out to pick your newspaper up and you found a bomb that didn't go off under your front porch." Ed and I talked about that. He laughed. Again, I credit Ed Davis with a lot of the knowledge and forethought because he was key, a very important figure.

I was looking at some of the letters that he wrote back in 1932 to the attorney general of Florida were questioning some of the issues that they had dealt with. Ed wanted to know how did these affect black people. When I got to talking with them about the equalization of salaries for teachers and how the teachers got together—particularly in Pensacola—the first suit that was brought, which brought about the beginning of the change bringing about equalization of salaries for teachers. I read the book by Neyland and Porter, *The History of the Florida State Teachers Association*. When you go back and read that, Mrs. Bethune, back in 1920, was one of the key figures. There's a story—you might be aware of it—about the passage of the law which gave women the right to vote, but there was a quirk in the law.

CB: The poll tax didn't apply to women.

RS: Didn't apply to women, and Mrs. Bethune used it and organized about five thousand women, and she fought the Klan off.

CB: The Klan approached her on the campus of Bethune-Cookman College.

RS: This is a history that when I got to working, and when I came to work for the association and walked into Mrs. Bethune's office and sat down and talked with her, she told me this, "Don't let anybody make up your mind. You reach your own conclusions." I often went back to her. Let me point out that a friend of the woman that I was going to marry, (inaudible) Wilma Williams, who was one of the secretaries at Central Life, became Mrs. Bethune's administrator in Daytona. I was often in and out of that house because Wilma was a good friend of mine and a good friend of Helen's.

CB: Your soon-to-be wife.

RS: Helen was living with Wilma, and I knew more about what Mrs. Bethune was doing because Wilma was there. And then a whole lot of people—

CB: You did accept the job, (Saunders laughs) and you very quickly moved to Florida. One of the first decisions you had to make was where to headquarter the NAACP. Where did you choose?

RS: I choose Tampa.

CB: You came home.

RS: That's because of the people that I knew and the work that they had done. And then also I knew that I would have support from people like [Harold] Reddick and others who had been in this battle and were ready to go. There's another thing that I took into consideration, transportation. Tampa is a hub. Good transportation, even though I tried riding trains, but I soon found out I had to get an automobile.

CB: We ought to mention on the record, by the way, the princely salary you're going to draw for putting yourself back on the firing line in Florida.

RS: What was it? I'll let you mention it. (laughs)

CB: No, I'm hoping you can remember it. (laughs) You got five cents a mile, I think.

RS: Five cents a mile, and I think it started out about twenty-eight hundred dollars.

CB: Twenty-eight hundred dollars a year.

RS: As we progressed, it increased. I never will forget. Rory called me and somebody had complained about me and wanted to know why I didn't get along with the governor down here.

CB: This is later. Roy Wilkins, who will succeed Walter White as executive.

RS: Roy had called me in and wanted to know what was wrong with me and the governor. I told him nothing. I simply was carrying out the policies of the NAACP and responded. When the conversation was over, Roy told me, "Go back and do your work; I'm going to raise your salary." (laughs) Roy gave me another three thousand dollar a year increase. You know what that did.

CB: (laughs) You didn't know where to spend all the money, did you?

RS: It was interesting. The fact is that if I had gone to Orlando—you see, remember the Klan had already bombed the ice cream store on Orange Blossom Trail. The Klan was very active in Orlando. Just across the county line you had Ocoee—

CB: The little town of Ocoee where in 1920—we were just talking about the elections that year—several dozen black men and women lost their lives defending the right of a veteran to vote.

RS: To vote. And you see, in those days there were a lot of efforts to frighten black people.

CB: Well, let's get into that in just a second, because that's so central to the circumstances that you're going to find. I mentioned the salary because I thought we ought to reiterate that your circumstances were different. Harry Moore was paid, if he received a salary at all, by the state conference of branches based upon what amounted to voluntary contributions by local branches. The last year he was in office, I think he was on half salary or the finances were in a critical state already in Florida. But you were going to be paid by the national office, which gives you a secure salary, but it also ties you directly to national policies, as you mentioned.

RS: That's true.

CB: Harry Moore had gotten into trouble with the national office. The NAACP, as you have written in your book, is a non-partisan organization. He had increasingly identified with the cause of the Florida State Voters League, which he helped to found in the aftermath of the 1944 decision outlawing the white primary. He had begun endorsing candidates, at times on NAACP stationery. He also, not only had been increasingly identified with partisan politics in that way, but in the eyes of the national office, he had neglected fundraising and organizational building to concentrate on a couple of legal cases, particularly—and you mentioned this just a minute ago—the Groveland case, which came out of Lake County. There you had a situation of three young men—I guess originally four, possibly—

RS: Four.

CB: —accused of rape, the classic situation. It rose in July of 1949, and Lake County, which is the area not only of Groveland, but of Leesburg, was notorious for Ku Klux Klan activities and for its sheriff, Willis McCall, who you will come to know well. The same month, November 1951, that the national NAACP office aided efforts to relieve Harry Moore of his duties as executive secretary of the state conference of branches, they offered him a different position. The same month, really just days before, Willis McCall had gunned down two of the defendants in cold blood in the Groveland case and never was prosecuted for that.

RS: That's true.

CB: And in fact, remained in office as sheriff of Lake County.

RS: As long as he wanted to be sheriff.

CB: As long as he wanted to be sheriff. The fact was that by concentrating his efforts so strongly into pursuing the Groveland case, as meritorious as that was, the organizational structure and the financial posture of the state conference of branches and the local branches, as you again had written in your book, had deteriorated. There was infighting within the state organization as a result of his policies, and then the question of whether he should be relieved of his duties. So, it was very important the next year to the national office to have someone who responded to them, not someone as executive secretary, the former title—you were field secretary, a new title—who could more easily follow their own agenda.

RS: The policy of the NAACP is very strict. One thing you've got to realize—Gloster Current headed the branches division; that is the bread and butter part of NAACP. I can envision Gloster now becoming quite concerned about the fact that membership's been dropping and that type of thing. Harry, of course, as you pointed out, lived off of contributions, and as he traveled he could raise. But you had some people in Florida who didn't agree with Harry's policies, and some who really were afraid of what was

happening. Some of them accused Harry of taking out of the pot, which he wasn't doing because there wasn't that much money coming in. You had these factions.

They didn't take into consideration that this was a sacrifice to have. He had lost his job in Brevard County School System. His wife had lost her job. It wasn't until four years later that she could get employed. It was really a sacrifice, and he was giving his all. Here again you had situations in which the economic conditions of certain black people in certain areas, hinged upon the pressures that were brought on because of the Jim Crow segregated system. Harry was fighting for better jobs. He was fighting for equalization of salaries for teachers. Captain Hall—Ed Hall, I think it's Ed Hall—of Eatonville, an elderly gentleman who was brought in here earlier, was at the meeting in November of 1951 when this conflict came up. He told me when I interviewed him that it was terrible that some people attacked Harry and accused him of things. Then another segment, because Harry wanted to go all out—and this is what Captain Hall told me, and other people. Harry wanted to attack all forms of segregation in Florida. There were people backing off from that because they were scared. He said that this is another reason why some of the local so-called uniform politicians were not backing Harry.

It's an interesting story and conflict with the fact that the national office Harry kept asking for support, but there was no money going into the national office. Thurgood, of course, was depending on what was happening in Texas with a subpoena and another case in Oklahoma where the Supreme Court had already knocked out segregated graduate schools. The issue in Florida was how do we support the work of the NAACP when you've got all these diversionary actions? Another thing that is key—and I have looked at it very carefully—during time of the Pepper—

CB: Smathers. Nineteen fifty, U.S. Senate race, U.S. Senator Claude Pepper, who was perceived as a New Deal liberal Democrat—his former protégé, a young congressman veteran from Miami, George Smathers, ran against him, Smathers on a very conservative platform.

RS: You can call it conservative, or very racist.

CB: And accusing his opponent of being “Red Pepper,” or at least his associates did.

RS: I got to know a fellow by the name of Phil Whitman. Phil Whitman's name is seldom brought up. Phil is with the CIO PC. During that campaign, Phil came into Florida. The CIO was putting money into that campaign against Smathers. This is why Smathers got so vicious against unions and that type of thing. One of the letters that Harry sent out, he warned against these new black politicians who were coming into play. What I found out talking to Whitman was that a lot of these guys, black people, were thinking in terms of money that was out there. The work that they had to do, trying to oppose Smathers's policies and racist campaigning that was going on.

But again, the fact that there was the issue of school teachers' equalization of salaries that school boards were opposing so viciously and other areas. They were attacking the efforts

on the part of the NAACP state conference, which had just been formed. Another issue that had to be taken into consideration was Strom Thurmond—the Dixiecrats—because Thurmond was running for president. They were attacking the civil rights movement, and they were threatening to take away what little support the Legal Defense Fund, the legal arm of the NAACP, was getting from contributions that were tax deductible. Eventually this led to the breakup of the Legal Defense Fund in the NAACP. Thurgood was going over because of the threat that was going on to take away all the support that the NAACP was having. All of this was tied in with what was happening, and Harry never gave up. He said, “We need to go all out.”

CB: There were a lot of folks around that didn’t want to go all out, that were afraid to go all out.

RS: I recall that I went to a meeting with the executive board of the Florida State Teachers Association in Palatka. I think it was in 1953. A white instructor from Florida Memorial College came to me because I was saying, “Why don’t you all set up a scholarship for Harry T. Moore for teachers?” He came up to me and said, “Why do you keep pushing Harry T. Moore? Don’t you know he was nothing but a politician?” I had to straighten him out. This is what was going on.

CB: There was a lot of fear, just plain, abject fear. The Klan was so seemingly omnipresent.

RS: They were not being prosecuted. They were violent. McCall started talking about bringing the White Citizens Council into Florida. The fellow from Tennessee came in down to Miami and began working against school desegregation and a fellow named McGee, entertainer, when he bought a house out on Thirty-Second Street. The pressures there had been there. There’d also been the bombing of Little Korea in Miami [by] the Klan.

CB: Just as an indication, let me ask you this, of the circumstances, the Klan, and their position, how they might or might not have been protected. About ten years ago it was revealed that the FBI had many of the Klan’s cells in Florida infiltrated. So reports were regularly going back to Washington. Even in light of that, to your knowledge, has anyone ever been prosecuted for the murders of Harry T. Moore and Harriett Moore?

RS: No. A young man, who’s president of the Fort Pierce branch, had a war veteran, a white war veteran; the veteran came to him and told him that he had manufactured the bombs or something like that, but the Florida Department of Law Enforcement is supposedly investigated it. He said there was nothing to it. This guy was an alcoholic or something. Nobody’s ever been prosecuted. What I read then was one, the secretary of the Klan who raised the question when being questioned by the FBI, but I think he committed suicide or something a year or two later. I think the word is that, with him went all the evidence that was needed.

CB: Now, the other state that you're going to be paired with to some extent, I want to get into that, is Mississippi. Within the past decade or so, in a number of instances, Mississippi has attempted, I understand, to redress a lack of prosecution in the past or effective prosecution, and has succeeded in a number of civil rights matters. To your knowledge, has the state of Florida or any subdivisions of the state of Florida attempted to redress in a judicial way, any types of those kinds of injustices from that era?

RS: Recently, under one of the recent governors, the state has purchased the property of Harry T. Moore's house stands—stood. They're going to make that a national park.

CB: But judicially speaking, none of the instances of bombings or other activities related to civil rights efforts in Florida.

RS: If you want to go back to, up in North Florida, the period where the 1923—

CB: Rosewood in Levy County.

RS: That came about because of pressures that were put to bear by the Holland & Knight law firm. That in itself was about the extent of what has been done. There's never been any that the Florida Supreme Court has apologized for the way that they handled the—

CB: That was an extraordinary event, wasn't it? You were an honored guest in it within the past several years.

RS: Yes, and I was amazed. I'm sitting up there listening to this, and Leander, every now and then he'd cast an eye over at me. (laughs)

CB: We ought to mention, I guess, that Leander Shaw—you alluded to him earlier—taught at the Florida A&M University Law School when it was in its first period of existence, and became an attorney and worked with you on NAACP causes in the late 1950s and 1960s. And is now a justice of the Florida Supreme Court and former chief justice of the Florida Supreme Court.

RS: There's a letter in my files about the four kids in St. Augustine were held by juvenile authorities, and Leander addressed an issue to the national office asking for legal support and funds so they could fight what was happening. Because we believed that when they put those kids in jail over there and the court was holding them as delinquents because they sat at the (inaudible) fountains that this was going to spread throughout Florida. That's what we were doing, trying to forestall that. We were active in that.

CB: We will get in some of our future sessions more in detail on that. Before we get into the nitty-gritty of you taking up the reigns of authority in Florida, let me—for a second—keep us in a little broader overview. The NAACP isn't just going to hire you and turn you loose. It is going to pair you with a counterpart in Mississippi very quickly, and it's also going to create a regional structure with a very talented regional coordinator to bring you and your Mississippi counterpart, and eventually your other southeastern counterparts,

regularly together to report, coordinate, and plan. First of all, the man who is going to become your great friend, who is appointed as your counterpart in Mississippi?

RS: Medgar Evers. I came on board in fifty-two [1952]. Medgar came on board in the early part of fifty-three [1953], and we became very close friends. We worked together. As a matter of fact, I spoke for him on occasions, and he came down and spoke for me. When he was killed, it was really shocking. I had just been in Mississippi at one of these public meetings here a couple of weeks earlier. I observed what he was doing, the people that he had down—Curt Flood, the baseball player. He had notables coming in there to help him. We were developing the same thing in Florida.

CB: A part of the way, and we're going to talk some more in future sessions about your work with Medgar Evers and some events that you all participated in together, and then the circumstances of his death. He is appointed in 1953, the year after you accept the Florida job. Also in 1953, the NAACP acts to give you a sort of coordinating umbrella unit for the southeast, and it appoints someone who is going to be very active in aiding your cause in Florida, as well as Medgar Evers's in Mississippi. What is that that's created, and who is it that's going to head it?

RS: Ruby Hurley was brought on, and she was brought on about a year before I came down. She became the regional director for the southeast region. Her office was in Birmingham. She withstood all the pressures of Bull—

CB: Bull Conner.

RS: —Bull Conner and the threats that were made. I never shall forget that—the national convention was in San Francisco. When she was getting ready to come home to Birmingham, I wrote and said, “Don't land in Birmingham; continue on to Atlanta,” because of Bull Conner, the legal action that had been taken against the NAACP. She went to Atlanta. She often talked about the fact that a lot of the pressures that she had in Birmingham had to be left there.

CB: She is going to almost immediately begin holding regular sessions of the southeastern regional field secretaries. Is that correct?

RS: These meetings were held, and the state conferences also were brought into an organizational structure. We would exchange ideas. Many of the ideas that were developed by Medgar and myself were transferred to other states. If you look at the activities of these states, you'll find that many of them were patterned after what was going on in Florida.

CB: Something that has been lost to history. Even with that support and organizational structure and knowing you were a part of a bigger organization, the conditions you found in Florida when you got to Tampa in September of 1952 were pretty devastating, weren't they, for the NAACP?

RS: For the NAACP, yes, because some of the old leadership were becoming aged and that type of thing. There were few young people involved in the work. One of the things we had to do was to begin working with young people. We had to begin recruiting new leadership. As I would go into communities and talk with some of the elderly persons who had worked with Harry T. Moore, they would tell me that, well we're retired now, and so forth. I remember talking—

CB: A lot of people were looking for an excuse to back away, weren't they?

RS: Yes.

CB: Again, with this Klan terror in the background.

RS: Plus the Klan terror and the type of thing that was being generated as far as, not retaliation, but efforts to prevent. For example, integration of law enforcement. We knew that if we were to correct many of the adverse attitudes of law enforcement in Florida, you had to bring black officers in there and give them the same training and working along with white officers. My experiences had been, when they did that—we used to hear on the radio, for example, in Tampa, “the niggers.” They cut that out. That's because black officers were being brought in. Later on, we were working to see that these black officers were given the same opportunity to arrest people. Not based upon race, but because they were law enforcement officers. This is part of the battle.

In Miami, they had black officers down there, but they used to patrol up and down Second and Third Avenue. But as times changed and Father Gibson and those came in, we had really a different atmosphere. The change was brought about in Miami in that way. In Fort Lauderdale, we had to really go in there and work because that's the only county in the state of Florida that—or Fort Lauderdale, the city, brought suit and joined me from coming into Fort Lauderdale. They were saying that I was, in organizing and working with the youth who were trying to integrate the beaches, that I was preventing the City of Fort Lauderdale from enjoying the guarantees of the Interstate Congress Clause. We had a four-day hearing down there, in which Frank Reeves of the Howard University was the lawyer and Graves, and when it was all over—Frank made the comment when it was over and the judge had ruled in our favor, Frank said, “That's the first time I ever desegregated a city without having to go into federal court.” (laughs) These are things that were happening and the changes that were coming about.

CB: You have an organization in disarray. Many of the leaders are growing elderly. They're growing tired. There's a climate of fear. And also, what was the financial position of the organization?

RS: What'd you say? (laughs)

CB: Money.

RS: We had to begin a program. What we did was to begin having public meetings in which we brought prominent speakers in, for example, in Tampa.

CB: You were desperate for money.

RS: We were desperate for money. The lawyers were working, and they were not being paid. They were working, traveling on their own, out of their own pockets and everything. We had to have money.

CB: The opponents of the NAACP in those years—and I was growing up not far from Tampa in the 1950s and early 1960s—and I could easily remember this money pouring in to support the NAACP, these charges, you know, Yankee money. How would you characterize the money situation during your entire tenure, which is going to last from 1952 to 1966? Were you comfortable financially?

RS: No.

CB: Did it get a lot better? Were you chronically in need of money?

RS: We were always chronically in need of money, and as a matter of fact, we had to beg. We had to work on organizations in Florida, some of them, when you made a public appeal at their meetings, they'd give you fifty dollars or a hundred dollars. The first real big contribution came from the Masonic order in Florida, and that came about because of the backgrounds with the treasurer and myself to widely override them, the grand master. Because when I'd go in there and make an appeal, the grand master would say, "The NAACP is here to make an appeal." He'd walk out. We overcame that. One way it was done is that I became a minister. The same thing is true with the Elks. We had to work to get them to realize that there's a need to contribute. In that way, we began to get the organizations involved. I can always say that we got good response from the A.M.E. church.

CB: Early on, after coming down, you appealed to the church for support. Isn't that right?

RS: That's right. The presiding bishop when I came down was a vice president of the NAACP, as was Mrs. Bethune. They were two of the first people that I visited.

CB: Was that Bishop Flipper?

RS: I'm not sure.

CB: Or was that Bishop Carey Gibbs?

RS: Gibbs came later. I went up to Edward Waters [College] and had a conference with the bishop and told him that I was assigned to the state of Florida. He said, "Okay, you've got the support." It was different working with the Baptists because Baptists and Methodists are different, you know. We finally got around to getting things done, but we

had to work through local Baptist leaders who were members of the Baptist organizations and white organizations.

CB: Because they're not organized in a hierarchy, like the Methodists.

RS: Hierarchy, right. Once you lay the groundwork, the politics began to take fold. When some of the local Baptist preachers began to become active in the branch, like McKissick in St. Augustine, they were in the Baptist structures. They would bring it up when the organizations met.

CB: The A.M.E. Church was your early staunch.

RS: In A.M.E. Church, all you do is tell the bishop. (laughs)

CB: The Central Life Insurance Company also, with Mrs. Bethune's influence.

RS: The Central Life Insurance Company was always a supporter of the NAACP. As a matter of fact, the plaintiff in the Brevard County case was fired. Central Life hired him. There was a policy there that anybody that was fired, Central Life would hire them.

CB: Mrs. Bethune had been president of the company through some of that period, and then who succeeded her?

RS: She became president, I think, in fifty-one [1951] or fifty-two [1952], somewhere around there. She was succeeded by Edward Davis. Ed Davis really got behind the program.

CB: I hate to say it. It's hard for me to believe we're already at the end of our second hour today. Let me just make one point, and you react quickly. We've got about a minute and a half. In spite of all the obstacles you met when you came back, you and state conference president Ed Davis immediately launched a major campaign at a state conference meeting in October 1952 when Ed Davis called for complete and immediate integration of Florida. How in the world did you find yourself doing that?

RS: I had Ed Davis behind me. (laughs) Actually, he was a power. We were able to begin laying the groundwork because of the University of Florida case. After the case had been tried again and went up to the court of appeals and then back, the Fifth Circuit said, This is what you've got to do. The word began to spread. That's when the legislature got scared.

CB: Here you are. We're at our time. You've just come back. You open a headquarters. You have no money, and yet you launch a major campaign to restore confidence in the NAACP. With your permission, when we open tomorrow our session, we'll begin right there. Thank you.

End of Part 2

[January 16, 2002]

CB: Hello. I'm Dr. Canter Brown, and I am here with Dr. Robert W. Saunders, Sr. in the recording studios of the University of South Florida Media Center at the invitation of the Library's Resource Center for Florida History and Politics, Dr. Mark I. Greenberg, Director. It's January 16, 2002. It's a Wednesday, early in the afternoon. Dr. Saunders and I have been carrying on—I think it's not so much an interview as an extended conversation about his remarkable life and career as a hero of the civil rights movement in Florida. I want to welcome you back, Dr. Saunders.

RS: Thank you. I don't know about being a hero. I'm a survivor. (laughs)

CB: Well, your wife told me you're her hero.

RS: Well, I'll accept that. (laughs)

CB: Yesterday we got up to around 1952 and 1953 when, as you well know, in the wake of the terrible Klan-directed murder of your predecessor, Harry T. Moore and his wife Harriett Moore, you were asked by the national NAACP leadership to leave a very comfortable and promising life in Detroit, Michigan, where you had gone to continue your education and eventually get a law degree, to come back to Florida, your home state, and try and not only put the state NAACP back together, but to help develop Florida as one of two laboratory states for NAACP initiatives as a beginning of a more aggressive policy at the dawn of the civil rights era. We had talked about how poor the NAACP was in Florida. Money was a chronic problem. We had talked about the fact that many of the individuals who comprised the leadership had grown elderly and really wanted to step aside, or at least didn't have the energy they had. We talked about the fact that terror, as a result of the murders, clearly was a factor in people's minds. Fear was pervasive. Yet, you came back.

I wanted to start today, if you don't mind. When you accepted the job in the summer of 1952 at Freedom House, the NAACP headquarters in New York City, Walter White, the executive director, offering it to you, the president of the Florida state conference of branches, Ed Davis, gave you some advice. Since Florida's an urban state, and we'll be talking today and tomorrow a lot about what you did in the cities of Florida, I wanted to start briefly with his advice. I have an episode that I'd for you to talk about that you write in your memoirs that, to me, is very emblematic or symptomatic or representative of the fact that you simply could not heed the advice you were given and how dangerous it was not to heed that advice. What he told you was—I may not say it exactly right—"Stay away from those little towns."

RS: That's what he said.

CB: But you didn't do it, did you?

RS: No. As a matter of fact, I found that there was a need, particularly because Florida didn't have too many metropolitan areas. In the small communities is where most of the police brutality was taking place. There was a failure to—there was no political power as far as the black people were concerned. As you know, Harry T. Moore and those had just begun to build up the political strength of the black community in Florida. Another thing was that many of the elderly people had a great deal of experience in the area of civil rights. I refer to the fact that there was, in Fruitland Park, a couple named Lang, one Goldie Lang. In Leesburg there was another lady. I can't think of her name, but she was a real fighter in Lake County. There were other people who—sure, they were growing in age, but they had been in the vanguard of the efforts to work with Harry T. Moore.

CB: That took something for folks in Groveland Park, didn't it, in Lake County, where Sheriff Willis McCall was presiding with his very definite attitudes of white supremacy.

RS: Well, that's true. Remember, even after I came on board, two black youngsters who were arrested by McCall—we got them out because of the fact that one of McCall's deputies had said that the evidence that was used was false.

CB: This was a case that, as I recall—and I may have the wrong one in mind—we will be talking about Virgil Hawkins and the successful suit to desegregate the University of Florida, ultimately successful, but not for Virgil Hawkins—is this the case involving his brother?

RS: No, this is a case involving the Chambers, I think, the young fellow that—two of them or one of them was accused of raping a white woman and sentenced to the electric chair. Eventually, he was freed because of the fact that the evidence was shown to be—

CB: It was one of Sheriff McCall's deputies who came to Tampa.

RS: Came to Tampa and sat down with Rodriguez and me and told us that he was dissatisfied because of what was happening and that the evidence that had been used in convicting the young fellow was false evidence. The dirt that was used to develop the cast did not come from where he had said it came from.

CB: I want to come back to that in just a minute if you don't mind. The deputy's actions offer a way to illustrate, to me, that there were individuals of good will who were white, who did not oppose, and some who actually supported, to their detriment, the activities of the NAACP and the civil rights movement. By the same token, I think you have written about and talked about resistance within the black community to what the NAACP was doing. With your permission, I'll come back to that in just a second.

But, first, getting back to this little town problem, the isolation of these communities, the almost seemingly omnipresent threat of violence when it came to racial matters or at least in some areas. You wrote about an instance that occurred in 1956 in just about as isolated a place in Florida as you could get. That was Liberty County up in the Panhandle—not in Bristol, the county seat, but outside of Bristol, involving the Reverend Dee Hawkins. I

wondered if you would talk about that and the threat that you faced at that time, personally.

RS: In Liberty County, black people had not registered since Reconstruction. Dee Hawkins was an A.M.E. preacher who lived about five miles outside the town. He was trying to organize black people to register and vote. As he went about his work, the threats started arising. As a matter of fact, in order to pull it together, we had to meet in Blountstown. When twelve black people went down and registered, and when they registered all hell broke loose. Dee Hawkins called me, I think on a Saturday. I was supposed to be going into Miami. I told him, "Look, don't worry; I'll be up there." What happened was that the Klan had been threatening Dee Hawkins for one thing. Dee told me that every morning when he got up, he'd find that his timber line had been cut back and that during the night that they were threatening him, telling him to come out, we want to talk to you, Dee.

CB: He owned property. He owned a tract of land outside of Bristol. For his own protection, he had cut away the woods around his house.

RS: Cut away the woods around his house. Remember, that is timber country. This is how they earned some of their money. Hawkins said that the Klan was inviting him to come out because of what they were doing to register people. Hawkins told me, "I got a shotgun in here, and I got a ninety-year-old mother back there. If they harm her, I'm going to kill somebody." I went up there, and Helen—

CB: Your wife of almost fifty years. We will talk about it to some length later.

RS: She got wind of it, and she said, "No, you're not going up there by yourself."

CB: Now, why do you suppose she said that? I'm going to try and draw this out of you.

RS: She, being my wife, and also she knew what happened to Moore because she was a student of the Moores. Naturally, she was, as my wife—I'd be on the road, and she'd be home with my son alone. These calls were often going to my house.

CB: Would you say it's fair to say that she was afraid you wouldn't be coming back from Liberty County?

RS: She was afraid that going up there that early Sunday morning that something might happen. Plus the fact that the threats had risen to the point where, I think, the next day, eleven or twelve of those black people withdrew their names. I got in touch with Governor Collins's office and reported what had happened. Collins responded by saying that the sheriff had reported to him that these people withdrew their names voluntarily. My response to Collins was that I don't see how he as governor could take the word of a sheriff where you had this type of discrimination going on, and where these people had withdrawn their names that it needed to be investigated.

The fact was that people were scared. That Sunday morning when Helen and I got up there, there was nobody on the streets. We went out and talked to Dee, and I gave Dee the information where he could get in touch with me and where he could also get in touch with Clarence Mitchell, who was the head of the NAACP's lobbying office in Washington. A powerful houseman came to working the federal government, but even there some of the cabinet members were trying to get involved. I believe and I am quite sure that this was one of the instances which led to evidence to support the need for a voting rights act, although Florida does not get too much credit for it. There are clippings and everything in my collections, correspondence between Collins and myself. I think the attorney general, Richard Ervin, was involved. These clippings were in the newspaper. The reason these people withdrew their names was that they were afraid. Reverend Dee Hawkins eventually moved from Bristol. Last time I heard, he was in Tallahassee where he died. He was a brave man.

CB: Florida had had a history, and it seems to me in understanding the situation you're coming into, it's important to keep this in mind. A history of racial violence directed at people who wanted to vote, simply to vote.

RS: This is true. For example, when the 1944 decision of the Florida Supreme Court, which opened up the Democratic primary.

CB: U.S. Supreme Court.

RS: Yes, U.S. Supreme Court. When black people went to register in Quincy, the president of the NAACP branch in Quincy had his house burned down. They moved away from Gadsden County because of what had happened. This type of thing was going on all through the Panhandle, in particular.

CB: The problem didn't go away overnight, did it?

RS: No. This is one of the fears that some of the people had, particularly the Klan. They said that the work that Harry T. Moore was doing in voter registration and the fact that the number of black registered voters in the Democratic primary was increasing, there was worry from the Klan element that this nigger's getting too powerful; we've got to do something about it. This is, we believe, one of the elements that led to the killing of Harry T. Moore.

CB: So here you come into a situation that, even though the leadership of your own organization has warned you about, to do your job faithfully, you were—and I'm not trying to overstate this, and you tell me if I am—you were having to continually put yourself in a threatening position, a physically threatening position.

RS: This is true, because in Miami-Dade County and Hillsborough, Jacksonville, black people were organized, and they were fighting back. In these smaller communities is where much of the effort to stop progress and to prevent, for example, black teachers from getting their equal salaries or voting. In those smaller communities, you didn't find

black elected officials. You didn't find black police officers and that type of thing. If you do a study, you'll find that most of the persons who were incarcerated up in Raiford [at the Florida State Prison] were from these smaller communities. They were calling for help. You couldn't ignore it.

CB: You would put thousands upon thousands of miles on your car every year either driving alone, or usually at most with one companion, into and throughout Florida. The best protection I think you felt you ever received came from your church, the A.M.E. Church. I wondered if you would explain that.

RS: Bishop Carey Gibbs—I constantly attended the A.M.E. conferences—Gibbs made me what you call the head of the social services for the Tampa district. And of course, when he gave me that label, then that opened doors for me to get into the A.M.E. churches, particularly smaller A.M.E. churches, because I found that even in small communities, some of the A.M.E. ministers were really afraid. There were A.M.E. preachers who had played a role and were still behind it. We had to get into it in order to get a story about what we were doing and to get support. We had to get into the organization.

CB: As I understand it, he actually gave you credentials in case you were stopped by white law enforcement or extralegal white law enforcement so that you could show that you were not a NAACP organizer, that you were an A.M.E. churchman.

RS: Well, I'd tell them I was from the A.M.E. church. In some of the books that I've written, I read Larry Rivers's book and how important religion, even in the slave days—

CB: Professor Larry Rivers of Florida A&M University, whose book *Slavery in Florida* came out last year.

RS: A lot of times when the slaves were clapping and singing, the master didn't know what was going on. This is the type of thing that we developed because when you said that you were from the church, apparently a lot of the whites in the rural areas still were tied into what happened in the slave days, you know, that we were religious; leave us alone and let us clap, and we'll be okay. What they didn't understand was that there was a protest. Religion, the way that black people used it, and the slaves used it, often it was a code that was transferred from one area to the other. This is what we were doing, using some of the things that our slave ancestors used as a means of communication through the religious organizations.

CB: Here you are now in these early years: 1952, fifty-three [1953], fifty-four [1954], fifty-five [1955], fifty-six [1956]. You're having to spend, not all your time, but a lot of time simply traveling throughout the state, trying to piece back together an effective NAACP organization, recruit new talent, new leadership. You have credited on those lonely journeys, not only your wife Helen as being a partner in them, but the state conference of branches selected a new president to succeed Ed Davis in 1953, whom you

have mentioned often as being a dynamic force assisting you in the work in those early years. That was William A. Fordham.

RS: William Fordham was a lawyer. He had just finished law school. He set up his office in Tampa. He joined a partnership with Francisco Rodriguez. If you read the history of the Groveland case, you'll find that it was Fordham that went up to Raiford. In questioning the three youths who were up there, he found a lot of blood on the clothes and everything. It was this report from Fordham that opened up the real effort to fully investigate what happened in the Groveland case.

CB: In our sessions yesterday, we talked at some length, or we at least mentioned at length, the Lake County Groveland case where three black youths—or four black youths originally—had been arrested supposedly for rape, two of whom were later gunned down in cold blood by the county sheriff and had been a prime cause of Harry T. Moore's.

RS: There were four who were accused of rape. The one had gotten away; a posse organized by McCall killed him up around Perry. There were three that were left. Fordham did a lot of work, and Fordham and I would get on the road at night to Madison to meet with some teachers up there to talk about organizing a suit or something for teacher salaries.

I think I told you, on the way back we stopped in Perry at this service station. Fordham was going to gas up, and I went to the restroom. When I came out, this young, white attendant looked at me and said, "Hey so and so, what are you doing back there? Don't you know we don't let niggers in there?"

I said, "I'm no nigger; I'm a stockbroker of your company." (Brown laughs)

He looked at me and said, "If you're a stockbroker I'm going quit working for it." (Brown laughs) Fordham stopped him from filling gas, and we laughed about that all the way back to Tampa. (Brown laughs)

If I was a stockholder of that company, he was going to stop working in it because he didn't want to work in any company that had black people. This is the type of attitude we ran into as we went into the road and on the road. Fordham, as a young lawyer, came on, and he did a good job, he and Rodriguez.

CB: Francisco Rodriguez, your attorney from Tampa. Did any of the three of y'all on these trips carry a gun?

RS: No. No.

CB: A Bible, maybe? (laughs)

RS: We probably had a Bible, but it was a small one. We got to be well known in small communities. The small communities began to call on us. The way it progressed,

particularly after the first state conference meeting that was held in Fort Lauderdale in fifty-two [1952]. Walter White came down. Then the people began to know that they had the backing of the national office. We were able to ease the tension and do a lot to bring back into the fold some of the people that had—

CB: How long would you say it took, and I guess we're counting in years here, before you felt that the statewide organization was back in an effective working order?

RS: I think the fact that the type of public relations we were doing—and naturally I was writing press releases and working with the *Pittsburgh Courier* and with various black papers. The word got out, and within two or three years the membership at the meetings began to pick up. We started getting more activity from some of the old leaders and new leaders coming in, who were actively wanting change and who were willing to work for it.

I'll give you an illustration: In 1953, I think it was, I was working in Sarasota, out below Bradenton. We had a new president elected who ran a merchandise store on Twenty-Seventh Street. He organized not only the Sarasota Youth Council, but he reorganized the branch. Because he was a businessman, he took the leadership. I never shall forget that—the youth wanted to use Lido Beach. This is something I didn't write in the book. The youth began going over to Lido Beach. This president would go with them, and he reported that as they were going across the bridge that the police department was there writing down tag numbers. I got the impression that, because he was a leading businessman and had so much contact with young people and in the community, that they didn't bother him too much.

At the same time, we began another project in Sarasota. They were having problems with the housing projects there. It was under his leadership that we began to deal with the housing program and trying to straighten out the problems in the public housing in Sarasota. It's unfortunate that a lot of things that we were involved in couldn't get into the book. This is an instance of what I'm talking about.

CB: Something else now, here you're developing in these early years—

RS: His name was Neil Adams, I think.

CB: Neil Adams. In those early years, you were trying to recruit and develop a cadre of young activist leaders to rebuild an organization and to advance it. At the same time, were you experiencing opposition from within the black community?

RS: In some communities, yes. As a matter of fact, there were people who opposed. Some thought that we were growing too fast. I recall that I had one prominent leader before the 1954 act—and I don't want to call his name—who came upstairs when I was writing a report and told me that Roy Wilkins, Thurgood Marshall, nor me were going to be able to desegregate these schools because these white folks weren't going to let nigger children go to these white schools. When the 1954 decision came down, the first person

I'm shaking hands [with] was this individual. The victory, the Supreme Court came out. As we began to get these victories, then other people want to get on the bandwagon, too. I cite that because this is the individual who told me they weren't going to let black kids into these white schools, and they were going to get a lot of black teachers fired. He turned around and became one of my best friends. This is what it took, and we had to get into the field to do that, to let people know what was happening.

CB: Were there areas or communities in the state where you experienced more opposition within the black community, as opposed to some areas or communities where you remember enjoying not having that kind of opposition?

RS: Most of the opposition, in many instances, came from—Belle Glade, for an example. I was trying to reorganize the Belle Glade branch, and I was able to get a permanent person there to say, "Okay, I'll head it." We were going to have a meeting on a Sunday evening, and the mayor of Belle Glade sent word to the person who was going to lead it to tell him not to have that meeting because the Klan said they were going to break it up. This guy called me, and I said, "Look, we tell the mayor that his role is not to stop us from having a meeting but to protect that fact that we were meeting." I think we backed the mayor down, and we had the meeting. This is the kind of response that you give that people will say, wait a minute. There must be something to what he is saying. When you can back the mayor of the town down and go ahead and have your meeting, then you pick up a lot of support. This is in many communities that we were able to do that.

CB: Even in your hometown of Tampa, where you established headquarters, did you meet with that kind of opposition within the black community?

RS: Organization-wise, there were groups that were interested in doing their thing their way.

CB: You have spoken at times that, by no means all well-to-do business men, but some well-to-do business men felt that their well-being was threatened by the kind of activism —

RS: I'll give you an illustration. The three contracts I had with B.B. King. I got B.B. King to give us three dances.

CB: This was at a critical time, early on when finances were terrible.

RS: We needed finances because we had the problems in Tallahassee. We had to pay fines and lawyers. I was sitting in the office one day, and this individual found out that we had this contract with B.B. King. He walked in, and he was raising his hand because he said that we were treading on his ground and that he was a promoter. "Why don't you let me give you four hundred dollars, and you give me that contract?" I looked at him and cussed him out. I got to thinking afterwards that, suppose I had acquiesced into what this guy wanted and had B.B. King come down and we raise more than fifteen thousand dollars from the three dances in Orlando, Lakeland, and Tampa. We couldn't use that

money to pay the bonds for young people who had been put in jail in Tallahassee. That type of opposition came from people who had, I think, their own—

CB: How about people who felt that either their prominence in the community as a spokesman in the community was threatened, or else that there was white pressure on their business interests? Did you not experience that kind of opposition?

RS: There was opposition as we moved into the area of developing leadership, particularly among youth councils. There were some people who felt that the mere fact that young people were picketing downtown stores, theaters, or whatever it might be, that this was causing problems in the community. They were telling young people that the adult branch leaders in one branch wasn't supporting them. At the same time they were saying to the young people that the branch wasn't supporting them, the president of the branch had given a young youth council two hundred dollars to get some more placards. Again, I think the greatest amount of support and effort came when the young people began carrying out the picketing and trying to desegregate the beaches.

In Fort Lauderdale, there was opposition to Mrs. [Eula] Johnson, who was president of the branch down there. Some of the ministers didn't want young people trying to desegregate the Fort Lauderdale beach. The mayor of Fort Lauderdale was putting pressure on Mrs. Johnson, and I recall that one Saturday night—and this is what brought fear to people who had domestic jobs on beaches and whatnot. One Saturday night, the police came down on Northwest Sixth Street in Fort Lauderdale and arrested nearly a hundred people, young people, no cause at all. This put fear into the minds of some of the parents and whatnot.

What happened there was interesting. When the cases came up in court, G.E. Graves was the lawyer, and there was a student lawyer from North Carolina who had come down to assist me and the work. We were sitting out there in the audience, and we noticed that the Fort Lauderdale police were coming to the window and pointing. You know what—the term, when they identify witnesses? I forgot what they call it; the legal terminology. We told Graves what was happening. Graves went to the judge, and asked for a recess and came back and talked to us. Graves went back and asked that the cases be dismissed. The Fort Lauderdale judge said, "Dismissed under what grounds?" Graves said because they had violated the rule. You know what I'm talking about now. The judge called us up, and we told them that the police were coming to the window and identifying witnesses and then testifying against these witnesses. The judge dismissed all of these cases. I understand that after they were dismissed, he called the police department and gave them the devil.

This is the type of thing that was frightening people because they didn't know what was going to happen. The police department was stopping these young people at the bridge from going over. In some instances in Fort Lauderdale they had arrested four juveniles, and the juvenile courts would not release them because they said they were sitting at the counters, and they were too young to participate. I never will forget there's a letter in the files where Leander Shaw, who was a lawyer, along with Earl Johnson, handling that

case, wrote to the national office and asked for additional assistance because they thought that this was going to be used throughout Florida, they were going to put these juveniles in jail and hold them and that type of thing. In many instances, we didn't get support; the financial support came from the national office.

CB: One last question on that line. With your background as a journalist, did you feel that you received the full support or the support you wanted from the state's most prominent black editors and publishers?

RS: Yes, most of them. Particularly the—

CB: Now you say most of them.

RS: There were perhaps one or two in small communities but the *Miami Times* Garth Reeves incident—Garth Reeves was a cousin to Frank Reeves, a lawyer that came down and worked with us. There was a newspaper in West Palm Beach. Mary Williams edited that. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, there was no problem there because that was a nationwide newspaper.

CB: A lot of people may not realize that the *Pittsburgh Courier* ran a Florida edition.

RS: A Florida edition to the paper. Dr. [Von Delaney] Mizell in Fort Lauderdale, who was despised by the power structure there, ran a paper. The *Florida Sentinel*, of course; we were able to get along with the *Florida Sentinel*. In Jacksonville, Eric Simpson had a paper there that—Eric was very supportive in backing the youth in the protests there. There were one or two other papers, but the point is that a lot of these papers were connected with the nationwide network of black media. They were getting support from papers like the *Amsterdam News* and so forth, *Baltimore Afro-American*. Generally speaking, we were getting stories into the paper or the press. Sometimes I was writing them and getting them to the press.

CB: In a related area, in these early years of your tenure, the early and mid-eighteen—excuse me, 1950s, not 1850s; I'm feeling old today—within the NAACP in Florida, did you experience opposition to the direction that the national office wanted to take matters and that you intended to take them as secretary?

RS: Remember, the policy of the national [NAACP office] took precedence. The mere fact that I was on the payroll of the national office, in many instances, they could not offset what I was saying because I was following the policy of the national, in spite of what they felt.

CB: You did experience opposition, but you just couldn't prevail?

RS: I did experience opposition. In some instances, they didn't want to—some people wanted to do one thing, and they were willing to sit down and compromise with the white power structure, which, in essence, when you studied it was a perpetuation of Jim Crow

practices and segregation practices. When we imposed a national office program, then there was that conflict, but eventually, we won out because the national NAACP program was the program that was, in many instances, based upon legislation passed by the Congress of the United States.

CB: You and President Ed Davis, as we discussed a little bit at the end of our conversation yesterday, announced within a month after your arrival back in Florida in October of 1952, that the goal of the Florida State Conference of Branches was complete and total integration. That had to stir controversy, I would think, within the NAACP family. Did that persist?

RS: You have to understand that Ed Davis was a strong person. Then he had people like Dr. Gilbert Porter, another strong individual, working out of the Florida State Teachers Association. Not to leave Mrs. Bethune out, because Mrs. Bethune was outspoken. There were other factions. For example, a few of the social organizations that weren't flourishing, they were doing things that they didn't want the power structure to stop. Generally speaking, once Ed made that announcement, Ed was a powerful person himself. Ed became president of Central Life Insurance Company. The policy of the Central Life Insurance Company was to support NAACP. Wherever I went and there was a Central Life office, that was my office, too.

CB: Were you aware during those years of any attempt to unseat you as field secretary?

RS: Sure. There had been attempts. There had been complaints going up to Mr. Wilkins. Mr. Wilkins called me in one day and wanted to know what was wrong with me and the governor.

CB: I'm talking about from within the NAACP in Florida.

RS: Well, the complaints came up from Florida. You see, I'm on the national staff. I'm working for Roy. They had to go to Roy. Roy called me in, and we talked. I showed him reports and everything that this is what I'm doing, following the policy of the association. It was funny. Roy told me, "Go back. I'm going to give you a twenty-five hundred dollar raise. You go back and do your job." With that kind of support from Roy Wilkins, who is the strongest voice in the civil rights movement telling me to go back and do my job.

CB: But at least, again, in our understanding of the position you were in, in those years, you could not afford to overlook at any point along the road, opposition from within the family as well as from the white community.

RS: That's true because, in some instances, the opposition in the family was really a voice in the sentiments in the white community. Again, when you're working in this type of work, you understood that. You had to know how to get around it. Usually, we'd get it by communicating with other organizations in the black community or working with leaders of other groups. In most instances, working with the Urban League because in Tampa and Jacksonville, Urban League and NAACP worked hand-in-glove because in

Tampa, they wanted to take the funding away from the Urban League, and we had an agreement that the Urban League keep quiet and the NAACP would take their battle. The same thing was true in Jacksonville. That kind of camaraderie working together to support each other, that means that we built up stronger support.

CB: Against the opposition.

RS: Against the opposition.

CB: You mentioned, a little while ago when you were discussing the incident with the Reverend Dee Hawkins in Liberty County, an appeal to Governor Collins. I wanted to ask you, in these early years, Florida had three governors—really four—if I could get you, very quickly, to synopsise your relationship with the first three. The fourth one, because of his national prominence and his reputation, I'd like to go into a little bit more depth if you don't mind.

Fuller Warren was still governor when you came back to Florida in the summer of 1952. He had gotten elected more as a progressive type of politician and had successfully unmasked the Ku Klux Klan by law in Florida. He changed his tune very quickly, it seems. By the time you were considering coming back, he was making statements—I'm not quoting him exactly here—about communists and outside agitators and carpetbaggers coming down from the north to stir up matters in Florida.

RS: He was saying that those agitators from Harlem were coming down. This is what Walter White told me, that he and Walter White were having words. He was saying that those agitators and communists from Harlem were coming down here and stirring up problem among the good colored folks in Florida. He wanted them to stay out of it. He was opposed to the NAACP. The NAACP was on him because nothing was being done to work or solve the problem, or the thing that had happened to Harry T. Moore. He resented that kind of pressure.

CB: Did you have any personal dealings with him once you got back, in his very brief tenure?

RS: No, when I came back, fortunately he had almost disappeared.

CB: Also at the time that you came back, Florida had just had a gubernatorial primary. It had been a very heated one, but a young politician pledged to cleaning up corruption in the state. One of the cities on the lower Atlantic coast had gotten Democratic nomination from Fort Pierce, Dan McCarty. I know a lot of people in Florida saw his election, perhaps not in racial terms, but generally speaking as a breath of fresh air, old politics, gone; a new day in Florida politics. What were your expectations for Dan McCarty, and what involvement did you have with him during what was going to turn out to be a tragically short administration?

RS: He had made promises to Ed Davis and to the state board of NAACP that there were going to be changes. He had set about to do that. As a matter of fact, I believe he was going to hire black people into state government offices and whatnot.

CB: These are specific promises that he made?

RS: This is what I was told by Ed Davis; but he died, I think, four months after he got elected.

CB: August or September of 1953, very late summer.

RS: He died. That's when Charley Johns, because at that time—

CB: Excuse me. I don't mean to be rude. Did you have any personal dealings with Governor McCarty during that brief time, that eight or nine months he was governor?

RS: No, because Ed Davis and the state board and I were going along as—

CB: They already had their ties?

RS: They already had their ties with them and had worked politically through the progressive organizations and whatnot.

CB: So they had aided Dan McCarty?

RS: They had aided him, yes.

CB: Okay. The Florida constitution at that point, there was no lieutenant governor. The president of the Florida Senate has succeeded the governor, at least until the next general election had turned out. The Florida Legislature at that point, as you well knew, was the most mal-apportioned (Saunders laughs) legislature in the country, and was ruled by what was coming to be known as the Pork Chop Gang from the Florida Panhandle, smaller populated counties but that had huge clout in the legislature. Johns really represented that spirit. He was from Starke, little community up in northeast Florida.

RS: Highway 301. I never shall forget it. Charley Johns's insurance agents.

CB: If you don't mind talking a little bit about Governor Johns when he was governor. We're going to get to some of his activities later on in a minute, but what were your dealings with him in the two years or so that he was governor? Almost two years.

RS: When he became acting governor, he didn't do too much to better any conditions. As a matter of fact, the Pork Chop Gang controlled politics in Florida. They overruled Dade County and Hillsborough and everything; and the efforts to end segregation, that was not part of their program.

CB: How would you characterize [Governor Johns's] racial attitudes as expressed in public?

RS: Remember now that we were in court with the University of Florida case. All you need to do is look at what was coming out of the Supreme Court and the kind of accolades that were going up to the Supreme Court from what they were doing. It gives you an idea of the racial tendencies, or what was happening in Florida. Johns—I think I was telling you about a situation in which, when he was running against Collins—was it Collins?

CB: Yes, 1954.

RS: Somebody from the new staff or something contacted the editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier* to get support for Johns, thinking they would get it from the black community. The editor came to me, and I told them we can't support politics. We cooked up an idea. The idea was go back to Johns and tell him that he has to appoint people before he gets to be elected because he's still the interim governor. They went back, and sure enough they told Johns.

I met with the president of the Beauticians Association in Florida, Orange Blossom Beauticians Association, lived in West Palm Beach. I gave her the whole rundown. She didn't leak what we were doing, but she went along with appointing people in advance and appointed five beauticians from five districts in Florida. As a matter of fact, there was a lady named Bessie Dixon in Tampa who worked with us on that. The thing is that he appointed these people, but he never got the support of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. I guess Johns got mad about that, too.

CB: Here you have a man, if I'm characterizing what you're saying correctly, who in public is expressing hard racial attitudes and in private is trying to cut a deal for the appointment of blacks to at least minor public offices in return for votes.

RS: He's trying to build up a strong voting population against Collins because Collins, according to Davis, when he was in the legislature, even though he was a segregationist, he was more or less a moderate segregationist, if I might use the term. Any time something was needed to help black people, Collins is said to have supported it in the Florida legislation. Again, what Johns was doing—politics, good politics, "I'm going to do this; I'm going to make five appointments," that kind of thing. But it didn't work.

CB: It didn't. (Saunders laughs) That's true. In 1954, the Supreme Court in Florida ruled that under the constitution, the acting governor, Johns, had to stand for reelection for a two year term. The associates and allies of Dan McCarty unite to support the state senator from Leon County, LeRoy Collins, to run against Governor Johns. How would you characterize State Senator Collins's views on segregation at that point?

RS: Well, as I write in the book, a moderate governor from the Deep South or something like that. Collins of course was looked upon as a good friend when he was in the

legislature, but not to the point of desegregation and that type of thing. When Collins got elected, what brought our attention to him was the speech he gave before the Southern Governors Conference, in which he says something about leave the South alone. “We’ll solve our problems in our own time,” and that type of thing.

CB: He becomes governor. I’m going to have to wind up our session for this hour pretty quickly here, and we’ll pick right up in our second session today. He becomes governor, immediately gives a speech espousing what appears to be hard segregationist views. You begin trying to find a way to work with him. I’d like to talk some more about that as we begin our second hour in just a little while.

RS: Okay.

Pause in recording

CB: Hello, I’m Canter Brown, and I’m here at the lovely University of South Florida Library Media Center for a second session of interviews today with Dr. Robert W. Saunders, Senior. Today is Wednesday, January 16, 2002. We are the guests of the Resource Center for Florida History and Politics of the University of South Florida Library.

Dr. Saunders, we have been talking about your early years as field secretary for the Florida NAACP. We’ve covered a variety of subjects related to the conditions that you found and had to work with in the early and mid-1950s. In our first session today, we had ended by talking about the first Florida governors you dealt with. We had just gotten a young state senator from Leon County elected governor in 1954, by the name of LeRoy Collins. He probably is the most famous of all of Florida’s twentieth century governors. I think we all remember him, or he is remembered, as a moderate on racial matters. Yet, we ended our last hour with you pointing out that in one of his first speeches in office in 1959, he seemed to be espousing a segregationist hard line.

RS: This is true. I mentioned that he had spoken to the Conference of Southern Governors and espoused, “Leave us alone; we’ll settle our problems in our own way, in our own time,” words to that effect. And then Roy Wilkins responded. Then I said something. Ruth Perry, a white woman who was the granddaughter of the Confederate general from South Carolina, who was on the NAACP board and secretary of the Miami branch, and who ran a constant column in the *Miami Times*, took him on. This was the beginning of the effort to try to find out where he was coming from. Then of course at that time, he had a legislature up there that was following the prints of the program coming out of Virginia and out of Alabama and Mississippi. And that is, you know, the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission.

CB: I guess I should offer some context here. During the gubernatorial campaign of 1954 in Florida, the U.S. Supreme Court finally ruled in the collection of public school desegregation cases that have sort of been grouped together under the name *Brown against the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. The Supreme Court unanimously

ruled that, based in part on the philosophy you mentioned yesterday of Gunnar Myrdal in his classic 1940s study, *An American Dilemma*, that separate but equal was inherently unequal and that public schools must desegregate. But the court did not give a timetable. It heard more arguments, and not until a year later in 1955, Governor Collins's first year in office, did the court issue its now famous statement of "all deliberate speed—"

RS: Which nobody knew what that meant. (laughs)

CB: —and which segregationist leaders, beginning in Virginia with the columnist James Kilpatrick or Kirkpatrick⁷, for the *Richmond Examiner*—I can't remember the name of the newspaper—called for a policy of massive resistance. This hits Collins and Florida politics. The waters are already boiling. In the eyes of state officials in the early 1950s, civil rights was not a high visibility issue. That was one of the things you had struggled with, trying to get it into high visibility. Now, all of a sudden, in 1954 and fifty-five [1955], it's the topic on everyone's mind, and the state begins to polarize with Collins at the helm.

RS: And, of course, Collins was trying to find a way to get around the polarization. He established what he called the Fabisinski committee. On that committee, he had one black person by the name of Lee, an official at Florida A&M University, who, in the eyes of the NAACP, had never done anything to work towards eliminating discrimination, et cetera.

We called Collins's office. We met at the office of Andrews, which was a change in attitude. Along with him were Fordham, Rodriguez, and myself. We called the office of Collins, and I think his chief aide or something, who was a former employee at the *Tampa Tribune*, answered, and we protested the placement of a black person on there who had never been involved in the civil rights movement, had never spoken out, or anything. We thought that it needed to be someone who understood what the decision was about and was going to speak out in the interest of desegregation implementation. We were told that the forming of the Fabisinski committee was a governor's committee and that was it. We believed that the Fabisinski committee and Collins forming it was not for the purpose of desegregation, that it was to find means of slowing it down.

Our answer to the governor through his aide was that, if this was going to be his policy, then we would begin filing suits in every county in Florida that we could. The result was that I think you'll find that more school suits have been filed in Florida than any other county. At the same time, Collins was under pressure because of the state legislature. He was also under pressure because of what they were doing to try to close down Florida A&M. They were talking about closing it down and sending students home. The legislature was sending resolutions to the Florida Supreme Court for refusing to open up the University of Florida Law School. Apparently, what Collins was doing was not in the best interest in our approach as to bring about compliance with the law.

⁷F James J. Kilpatrick of the *Richmond News-Leader*; later a nationally syndicated conservative columnist

We kept bringing pressure to bear, and I think it came to the point where the legislature began to set up laws that were intended to close schools and to maintain segregation. Collins's committee, the Fabisinski committee, in our opinion, wasn't doing anything. The pressures that were brought to bear because of the fact that the courts were moving, and we were going to court, slowly Collins came around. Very slowly. He began to rebuff the legislature for what they were doing. There was a conflict between Collins and the legislature because he was saying, "Hey, this is the law of the land and we've got to do something." Again, it had to be pressure put on him. The pressure was such that, not only were we approaching him for what was happening in the courts with regard to desegregation, but what was going on in the prisons, particularly with the Groveland case and that type of thing.

As time went on, Collins began to speak out to the legislature. It was very interesting what was happening because, in essence, I think that he was the one that really put them in their place because they were passing legislation and wanting him to sign laws and all that kind of thing. I don't think Collins wanted to do that. Eventually, we began to meet eye-to-eye with Collins on some things. Collins began to become more of a moderate and to move the state in the direction that it should be going into.

CB: He is going to remain governor for six years. He will be reelected in a very bitter election campaign in 1956 against several openly hard-line segregationist candidates, including Sumter Lowry from your hometown of Tampa. And Collins will defend segregation in that 1956 campaign. But at the same time, he already has begun, it seems fair to say, to signal a desire to find a new way for the state and for the South. He refuses to endorse the massive resistance campaign. In September 1955, he made an appointment that surprised a lot of people. It was not to a major office, but he placed a young, black attorney in a position as an assistant state attorney. I gather from hearing you speak over the years that this signaled something very important in the black community.

RS: I think you're talking about—was it Hatchett?

CB: Marvin Arrington.

RS: Marvin Arrington, right. This was a signal because, I don't think ever before had any appointment of this nature been made.

CB: It's not exactly the beauticians' board, like Governor Johns made.

RS: His name wasn't Marvin Arrington, his name was—his mother was from Tampa. Arrington was working in Miami. His office was in Miami.

CB: Henry Arrington.

RS: Henry Arrington.

CB: Excuse me.

RS: But again, this marks that Collins is looking at the need to bring black people more in line into state government, in running against Sumter Lowry. Sumter Lowry, I forgot what they called him, but Lowry was calling Collins. You're right. It was a very bitter campaign. Sumter Lowry was talking about closing down the schools and doing away with the efforts to implement equal rights. He wasn't too far from calling black people, you know, the capital N. Unfortunately he was from Tampa. It was interesting that Collins defeated him. I think that that was a victory that black people played a key role in, getting Collins into office. I think he appreciated that.

CB: Now, Governor Collins did something to open up a private channel of communications with you that I don't believe any other governor did. I think that, over time, it not only helped you in fulfilling your responsibilities, but it gave you a way to push him into a more and more moderate and more and more pro-active leadership position.

RS: I got his telephone number. (laughs) Many people don't know that, that I had his private telephone number.

CB: This is the phone that rang beside his bed at the governor's mansion, or at the Grove; I guess he lived in his wife's ancestral home.

RS: The night that we got him on Christmas Eve, that phone was in the mansion, that's when Virgil Hawkins's nephew—McCall had arrested him. Nobody knew where he was. Virgil Hawkins's brother and Rodriguez came to my house, and we talked. We called the mansion. Mrs. Collins answered the phone on Christmas Eve and she said, "The governor is asleep." I insisted that she wake him up, because we felt that there was something important. Eventually Collins came to the phone and talked to me. Then he talked with Rodriguez. Then he talked with Virgil Hawkins's brother. He said, "Don't worry, I will find out where this boy is and look into it." The next day, the boy was released. That's a result of that direct call to Collins and the type of communication that developed after that.

CB: You started building a relationship with trust. You mentioned Virgil Hawkins, and his name has come up several times. I think maybe this is as good a place as any to—we've talked about the Brown against Board of Education decision in 1954 and fifty-five [1955], whereby the U.S. Supreme Court orders the desegregation of the public schools. Earlier decisions appeared to have ordered desegregation of graduate and law programs. A young man, Virgil Hawkins, applies for admission to the University of Florida Law School. This is at a time when the state's power structure was concentrated in the alumni association of the University of Florida and its law school.

RS: Let's back up a little bit.

CB: Certainly.

RS: The first case was filed in 1948, with about six qualified persons seeking to get into the various courses of higher education. And immediately after it was filed—the first lawyer was named Atkinson, who was a white lawyer from Orlando, and Horace Hill, a black lawyer from Daytona. What happened was that immediately the chief judge of the Florida Supreme Court took control of that case. Ed Davis, in talking to him, said that another mysterious thing happened and that was that the white lawyer, who was known to be a liberal and whatnot, suddenly was called in—he was a reserve Naval officer—he was called into the Navy, which removed him. And then a few months later, Horace Hill said because of illness, he was getting out of the suit. And that’s when Francisco Rodriguez became the attorney working out of Thurgood Marshall’s office. The Florida Supreme Court is instrumental in holding up on that end. The theory that was given was that the state had promised to set up a law school at Florida A&M University. Again, I mentioned yesterday about Sweatt, he and I talking about this.

CB: Herman Sweatt being the plaintiff—

RS: The plaintiff in the Texas case.

CB: —*Sweatt v. Painter* that ordered the desegregation of public law school.

RS: Right, and Sweatt said that, in his opinion, one of the mistakes that was made was trying to have so much confidence in the political structure in Florida and thinking that the Florida Supreme Court would follow what was being done in other states like Oklahoma, the McLaurin case in Oklahoma⁸, and the Sweatt case, and open up the University of Florida, which they didn’t do. Now, Thurgood was trying to get something done, but then the case was going up and down on appeal to the Supreme Court. The Florida Supreme Court was just thumbing their noses at the United States Supreme Court.

CB: In fact, just months after the second Brown decision in 1955, the Florida Supreme Court simply denied Virgil Hawkins right under the Brown decision because of “present grave and serious problems.”

RS: Those problems that they were hinging their reasoning on was that the danger that would be done as a result of Hawkins going in. However, according to the book by Constance Baker Motley, and I would suggest that anyone interested need to read that book—I forgot the name of the title⁹, I have it on my shelf—in which she discusses the Hawkins case. And she points out that the word came down to file a new case using Hawkins as the lone plaintiff. The court turned that down, and that was appealed to the Fifth Circuit. The Fifth Circuit remitted it back to the district court judge, what was his name?

CB: Carswell?

⁸F McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents.

⁹F *Equal Justice Under Law: The Life of a Pioneer for Black Civil Rights and Women’s Rights*.

RS: No idea. It'll come to me. Anyway, the case was remitted back to the District Court in Tallahassee. The District Court continued to sit on it. And finally, the court ordered that the district federal judge in Tallahassee open up the University of Florida. And Connie quotes him in her book—and I know of it because I was around there—and this judge in Tallahassee said that “I have been ordered by a higher court to open up the University of Florida Law School, but if I had my way, black students going into the University of Florida would have to post a bond to cover the damage that would be done as a result of their going in there.” And in the book, Connie says that she looked at the clerk of the court, and he was frowning, and this judge was just speaking. She said that this was strange, but anyhow this is how the court got open, because another higher court ordered the District Court in Tallahassee to open the case.

And the result was that, while Hawkins didn't get in there, but other students got in there. Hawkins got into a school in Boston where he completed his law degree. But that case was filed in 1948. I think it wasn't until 1959 or 1960 that the University of Florida was open. And it was a continuous battle going back and forth.

CB: Here we have this situation; early to mid-1950s, civil rights is fairly low on the public horizon in Florida, although racial violence is a not unusual item to read in your local newspaper. All of a sudden 1954, fifty-five [1955], the Brown decision, the massive resistance movement, the Hawkins case desegregating the University of Florida, and then lo and behold, December 1955, Mrs. Rosa Parks refuses to go to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and the civil rights movement seemingly erupts nationwide.

RS: I would suggest that people who want to get a real start on that read the Roy Wilkins book, *Standing Fast*, in which he gives a complete rundown about what happened and why the NAACP was not active in Alabama. Because we were in court with [John Malcolm] Patterson—is it Patterson, the attorney general or something in Alabama, who —

CB: He was a governor for a while.

RS: But he was the one that enjoined the NAACP from working in Alabama. When the case involving Rosa Parks—it's very interesting how that evolved because the former president of the Montgomery branch was trying to get support for a case, and that's when they had a meeting of ministers, and the ministers were debating about what they were going to do. I think this former president of the Montgomery branch, who was a good friend of the former president of the Tampa branch—both of them were Pullman porters, very good friends of A. Phillip Randolph. He said from the balcony when these ministers were debating, “You're a bunch of cowards.” Dr. King had come back from vacation. King got up and said, “I'm no coward; I'm a leader.” That was the gelling of the movement.

But Roy Wilkins gets into great detail because Roy talks about, also, how they wanted to compromise with the city of Montgomery about busses and that type of thing. Roy and Thurgood said—and this is something that people don't know—that if the NAACP was

going to pay, which they did pay for that suit, they were going all the way to the United States Supreme Court. They were not going to go along with any compromise in Montgomery. The result was the Supreme Court, which had already in what we call the Irene Morgan case¹⁰, a case that had something to do with Florida, in interstate commerce. Then the court said, no, not only is segregation unconstitutional in interstate commerce, but is also unconstitutional in intrastate commerce. It's an interesting, interesting case, but a lot of people have not read the full genesis of it and what happened.

CB: For our purposes, the Montgomery bus boycott, which lasted about a year, beginning in December 1955, drew national attention and is often cited as the origins of the modern civil rights movement. Of course, its great hero, Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior becomes the great leader, in national terms of the civil rights movement. On the other hand, you with Ed Davis, William A. Fordham, Francisco Rodriguez, and others have been building back Florida's NAACP infrastructure for four years at this point, by the spring of 1956, as a result of which Florida is not far behind the Montgomery bus boycott. Montgomery, after all, being a small town that is the capital of a Southern state—how appropriate then in May 1956, the Tallahassee bus boycott would erupt. A leader will emerge from that event. Although it never attracted the attention that Montgomery did, it nonetheless had a profound impact on the civil rights movement. It was a success, and it was led by Reverend C.K. Steele. Now, Reverend Steele has often been associated with Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which will be founded in early 1957. Was he associated with the NAACP as well?

RS: Steele was president of the NAACP in Leon County. What happened there, when the two young ladies refused to—

CB: Florida A&M University students.

RS: —Florida A&M University students refused to sit in the back, that's when they arrested them. That night I got a call from someone from the college chapter up there. Incidentally, I give a lot of credit to a young lady named Daisy Young, who was in the registrant's office there and also was the person who was in charge of working with the college chapter. Somebody from the college chapter called me and told me what had happened. That morning, I caught the earliest Eastern Air Lines flight and went up and got Steele up out of bed. We went to the house where these two young ladies were staying, and talked to them and told them that the NAACP would support them all the way. The next morning, after we met with them, Reverend Steele was on the phone with me talking to Roy Wilkins. Roy Wilkins also committed himself, backing me, what I'd said, that the full support of the NAACP behind the movement in Tallahassee could be expected. He said, "I'm sending you a check for one thousand five hundred dollars to get it started." Then of course, Reverend Steele said, "Don't send it to the NAACP, send it to the Atlanta Life Insurance Company." Incidentally, we were talking to Roy from the Atlanta Life Insurance Company.

¹⁰Irene Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia.

CB: There was a climate of fear, I suppose.

RS: Climate of fear. And in reading publications covering the boycott in Tallahassee, they quote Steele as saying he didn't feel or there were those who didn't want the NAACP to be in the forefront, because they feared what the politicians would do as a result of the NAACP being in there. That let me know and let others know that the state of Florida feared the NAACP's intervention.

CB: The bus boycott erupts. I may have the months wrong, but I believe while the legislature is meeting in special session to consider recommendations for opposing the Brown decision and other civil rights initiatives, including recommendations to outlaw the NAACP. You didn't make any friends in the legislature, but as if that were not enough, the bus boycott begins in May of 1956; you're the president of your local branch, being the great leader of it. The next month, June 1956, you file suit to desegregate the Dade County school system, the largest public school system in Florida.

RS: That's interesting.

CB: Were you trying to send a message here?

RS: (laughs) Father Gibson had become president of the Dade County branch.

CB: This is Father Theodore Gibson, a white Episcopal priest.

RS: A black.

CB: Oh, he's black. Excuse me. I was thinking of Ruth Perry. I apologize.

RS: Ruth Perry was white, and who was secretary of the branch. Father Gibson had been to the conference that was held in Atlanta by Roy and Thurgood, in which they set forth the procedure for getting parents to submit petitions to the school board, calling for immediate implementation and whatnot. When Father Gibson and Graves got together, they began to prepare petitions. Graves told me—and I don't know how many petitions—but Graves said that there were about close to two thousand petitions that had been filed, but Graves could never substantiate that to me.

I do know that there had been a number of petitions filed, and that Father Gibson was on vacation. When he got back, these petitions or something had disappeared, so Father Gibson got angry and said, "We're going to do it again." They did it. The case was filed with the national. The lawyer was Robert L. Carter. And this was, I think, the first case in the state—well, not the first case because there was another case that was filed in West Palm Beach by a lawyer who did it on his own. And the issue there was not challenging the Florida pupil placement law because Thurgood did not want to have that law declared constitutional. But anyway, the Miami case—

CB: Thurgood Marshall, I guess we should mention again, being the lead attorney for the NAACP legal defense fund and later the distinguished justice of the U.S. Supreme Court—very active in Florida.

RS: Now, when the case was filed in Miami, the lawyer was Robert L. Carter, the general counsel for the NAACP. I had the distinct distinction of distributing the subpoenas for all the principals in Dade County. It's interesting that when I got as far as Perrine or into Coconut Grove, the word had spread to the school principals that we were issuing these subpoenas, and it seemed that all of them disappeared.

CB: Started getting harder to find. (both laugh) It's an exciting and dramatic summer. The legislature is meeting to figure out ways to outlaw the NAACP and blunt the civil rights movement. The Tallahassee bus boycott is ongoing against calls to send the National Guard into the Florida A&M University campus. You file suit to desegregate the largest school system in Florida, but that's not enough. In September 1956, you had your attorney, or at least the NAACP had its attorney, Francisco Rodriguez, accuse Hillsborough County of systematically excluding blacks in the juries.

RS: Well, you know we'd already served notice that we were going to, because of our belief that the Fabisinski committee was formed to slow it down—desegregation—that we were going to begin filing suits using the procedure that Thurgood had given us, and that is getting parents to submit petitions. And certainly in Hillsborough County, yes. That became the Manning case¹¹, and I think was the longest continuing case in the history of school desegregation. Just recently did the court of appeals rule that it met the conditions of the Supreme Court. The Tampa branch doesn't believe that. I think they're concerned about appealing that decision.

CB: We also ought to mention at this point, how actually in Hillsborough County, your own county, did public schools first become integrated?

RS: That's another interesting story, because first we filed sixteen petitions in 1956, and the school board did not respond.

CB: So your initiative, the NAACP initiative, even though the first major suit is filed in Dade County, the initiative really begins all over the state—

RS: Right.

CB: —by demanding integration.

RS: And in Hillsborough County, the word came down. Carter wanted to know what was happening, and we told Carter that we'd file these petitions and that we had four plaintiffs who had written letters asking for the NAACP to represent them in the federal courts in Hillsborough County. One was Mrs. Manning's, and I can't think of all the names. I told

¹¹F Manning v. Board of Public Instruction of Hillsborough County, Florida.

Bob, "I got the four letters here." He said, "Send them up to me, and I'll give them to Thurgood and have Thurgood contact Rodriguez and ask him if he wants to be the attorney in the Hillsborough case." Rodriguez accepted that and that was the beginning of it.

The federal district court in Hillsborough County dismissed it on the grounds that we had not followed the pupil placement law, you know, that type of thing. It was appealed to the Fifth Circuit after Bob Carter had called down and wanted to know what was happening, why it hadn't been appealed. When I went to Rodriguez, Rodriguez said because there was no money. When I talked to Roy Wilkins, Roy Wilkins said, "Tell Rodriguez he has an airplane ticket at the airport. The money for filing the appeal in the Fifth Circuit in New Orleans will be waiting for him when he gets there." That's how he got the appeal to the Fifth Circuit. The Fifth Circuit, again, remanded it back for a rehearing. That's when Judge Bryan Simpson came down and had the hearing. That was 1962, I think, when Simpson came down.

CB: So this is taking some time. Can you identify the first black child who broke the color barrier in Hillsborough County public school system?

RS: Yes. Reverend Lowry had a child who was physical handicapped.

CB: Reverend Leon Lowry.

RS: But nobody knew about that. I filed a petition. I carried my boy, when he became six years old, to MacFarlane Park [Elementary School]. When I got to the door, Mrs. Mitchell, the principal, handed me a memo that I had to take my boy to Dunbar [Elementary school].

CB: A black school.

RS: A black school. I did that. Now, the following year, when the riots were going on in Jacksonville, I was in Jacksonville, could not get away from the condition up there. I sent a telegram to Crockett Farnell, the superintendent of Hillsborough, stating to him that I wanted to follow up on the attempt to get my son into MacFarlane Park. Crockett Farnell gave the telegram to a black principal and told the black principal to give it to me and tell me that I had to be present in order to continue the appeal. I got angry and told this principal, "You don't want to be sitting up in front of the federal judge asking questions, answering questions." She gave the telegram back to Crockett Farnell. However, things were happening, and Constance Motley came down when Judge Bryan Simpson came down to hear the appeal. Connie wanted to know what we had been doing during the time that the case was on appeal to the Fifth Circuit. I told Connie that we had filed close to 169 petitions with the school board, and there had been no action on them.

CB: It was only in Hillsborough County?

RS: In Hillsborough County. The morning that Connie went to court and Judge Bryan Simpson was presiding, she did two things. One, she asked that black teachers be included in the action because Rodriguez forgot to include black teachers in the Andrew Manning suit. The second thing she asked the judge to do was to order the school board to bring those hundred sixty-some petitions into the court. The court told the school superintendent that he had fifteen or twenty minutes to bring those petitions in. When they were brought in, Connie took her time and counted them. She looked up and said, “Your Honor, one’s missing.” The judge said, “Which one is that?” She said, “That of the Saunders child.”

What the school board had did, was about five months before when they found that this case was coming up for retrial, they immediately called my wife, myself, and Rodriguez and told us to bring the boy to the school board immediately. That was a circus because they put my son in the middle of the floor with all the Klieg lights on him, and the school board answering the boy, asking my son questions—and not the lawyer or his parents. They asked my son why did he want to go to MacFarlane Park, because my son had a different answer. But I thought he said, “Because I want to see what’s going to happen.” But anyway the hearing was going on, and that’s when the judge in 1962 ordered the school board to begin moving. That was done under Judge Bryan Simpson. They didn’t do anything until 1970 or 1971, and that’s when the case came up again. That’s when the 70/20 or something like that was ordered on the school board.¹²

CB: But your son had in fact, earlier, broken that color bar. That’s really what I was getting at.

RS: They hurried up and got him into that school because they were afraid that there would be proof that they were not acting in good faith. The interesting thing is that for about a month, my wife and I had a police escort taking my boy from home to MacFarlane Park and back. Very few people in Tampa knew that this was happening.

CB: His name is?

RS: Robert Saunders, Junior.

CB: Did this experience poison him on Tampa and Florida? I mean, did he lose out? Where is he now?

RS: No, as a matter of fact. He’s in Tampa. He’s on the Sheriff’s Department working in the warrants department.

CB: He’s a senior employee of the Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Department.

¹²F Referring to the target ratio for integration, which varied by school level but was around 80 percent white, 20 percent black.

RS: He made friends. And he says I used him as a guinea pig to break open the boys' club and Little League baseball.

CB: Well you did, didn't you?

RS: Yes. (laughs) Somebody asked me, why was it done? I said, "You see, I'm a leader. Why should I let other people do what I should be doing?" And of course, my son doesn't talk much about it, but he was really pretty scared. In the opinion that came down from Judge Bryan Simpson in 1962—and very few people have paid attention to this. There were about six paragraphs in which he refers to the efforts of the Saunders parents to get their son into the school system. He said that very few parents would have the patience that we had to do it. That's in the judge's opinion that came down in sixty-two [1962].

CB: I just wanted to make sure we credited Bobby Saunders with breaking that color bar in Hillsborough County, and you using him as a guinea pig.

RS: (laughs)

CB: Summer of 1956 still, just a dramatic time in the civil rights movement in Florida. The Pork Chopper dominated legislature is going to have its say, too. They attempt to interpose the authority of the legislature against the U.S. Supreme Court. Governor Collins refuses to allow that to become law. He's not allowed to veto a joint resolution, but he writes on the face of it his own opinion about this effort. Thereby begins his own public moderation, I think. The legislature is able to create an investigative committee. Its first chairman was State Representative Henry Land, but it's known as the Johns Committee because your old friend, Governor Charley Johns, comes back as a state senator to chair the committee in succeeding years. This is August 1956 when it's founded.

The next month, your state conference president suddenly is detained by Tampa police without real explanation. In January of 1957, the Reverend C.K. Steele's home is fired upon in Tallahassee. He is still president of the Tallahassee-Leon County branch. In March of 1957, the Johns Committee issued subpoenas. I believe subpoena number one, if I'm not mistaken, went to Robert W. Saunders, Sr.—

RS: (laughs) I don't know why they wanted to pick on me!

CB: —investigating communist and other nefarious influences in the NAACP in the civil rights movement in Florida, also making inquiries into illegal support of the Hawkins case, desegregating the University of Florida, still a hot spot for response. The NAACP responded, and you testified in March 1957 to that committee. You do write about this extensively, and you've talked about it, but would you care to reflect upon your experience with that investigative committee and the nature of the NAACP's response to the subpoenas?

RS: Well, number one, the state conference executive committee had met. We knew that something was brewing. We knew that they had already set up the money. Henry Land was the chairman. Let me point out something. The funny thing is that there is a member of the NAACP in Liberty City, and he looks exactly like Henry Land. When this individual got his subpoena—this is a little ahead of the story—he asked Henry Land, “How’s cousin such-and-such?” (laughs) We fell out of our (unintelligible).

Going back to the story, yes, the subpoenas went out. The Florida State Conference had already met and agreed that we were not going to cooperate with the committee because we knew that they were following patterns that had been set up in Virginia and the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission. We were going to resist them. When the subpoenas came out, Reverend Lowry and I, and one or two other people, got the first. It said, “Come and bring your records. Credit needs to go to all the black lawyers in Florida.” The lawyers said, “No, wait a minute, we’re going to come up with a plan.” The plan was that these lawyers would go around, pick up all the records from branches, and that these would be sent to New York. And of course, when Hawes asked me to bring my records—

CB: Hawes is the lead investigator.

RS: The lead investigator from Tampa. Incidentally, he’s the lead investigator who began working on the University of South Florida after the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the NAACP. But anyhow, I went to Tallahassee, and I carried my records. When Hawes called me on the bench to the seat, he said, “Are these your records?” I told him, “Yes, they’re my records.” What I had brought him were clippings. We had a clipping service. We gave him clippings from every newspaper about what the committee was doing in Florida. And of course, Hawes didn’t like that.

The interesting thing is that I had gotten a letter. When I got back from staff meeting in New York, my secretary gave me this letter with a money order and a letter that they had written and drawn lines. It said, “To the Tampa NAACP.” I told my secretary, “Give that to the NAACP branch.” In the questioning, Hawes got so angry with me that he suddenly pulls out a copy of this letter, and he said, “Do you remember seeing this letter?” He thought I was going to say no. I didn’t lie. I told him, “Yes, I’d seen it.” [Hawes asked] “Why isn’t it in your records?” I said, “Because you said give it to the Tampa branch NAACP.” He really fell out then, but I was tickled because his old trap had fallen apart.

CB: But we are back in that position that we find ourselves in repeatedly here. Our hour session is drawing to a quick close. I would like to pick up right here with the Johns Committee and subsequent events tomorrow morning when we continue. I’d like to mention and see if this is true, that other than in your collection of personal papers that are held in the University of South Florida Library Special Collections Department, the records of the Florida NAACP prior to the subpoena of the Johns Committee, to the extent they exist at all, are in the NAACP papers in the Library of Congress.

RS: This is true. I received from the young lady who’s in charge of the corporate papers in New York permission to go into those files at any time. What you have here are copies

of my reports and whatnot about investigations, and campaigns, and going into branches responding to complaints.

CB: If anybody needs to know why they have to go to Washington to study the Florida NAACP, the reason is the Johns Committee. Let me thank you so much, and I will look forward to seeing you again tomorrow afternoon, and we'll continue.

RS: What time tomorrow afternoon? (laughs)

CB: One o'clock.

RS: Thank you.

End of Part 3

[January 17, 2002]

CB: Hello again. I'm Dr. Canter Brown, and I am here with the distinguished Floridian, Dr. Robert W. Saunders, Sr., the leader of Florida's NAACP during the civil rights era. We're in the process of a series of interviews that began several days ago. Today is Thursday, January seventeenth, I believe. We are talking about Dr. Saunders's distinguished career. We are here thanks to the generosity and encouragement of the Resource Center for Florida History and Politics of the University of South Florida Library, Dr. Mark I. Greenberg, Director. We are in the luxuriously appointed video studios of the University of South Florida Library Media Center. Having said that, Dr. Saunders, welcome back for another delightful two hours of conversation.

RS: Thank you. I've enjoyed it. After all, I realize that this is a major contribution to the role of civil rights in Florida, and will do everything to open the eyes and ears of people to what really went on and what happened.

CB: Yes. It is important, and as you know, we just came from a very nice luncheon hosted by the Resource Center. It was made clear by members of the history faculty and the development office here at USF how they see these interviews as a key tool for teachers to open up Florida history and especially the civil rights movement for their students. Let me thank you for myself and for the University of South Florida for agreeing to undergo this rigorous ordeal of ten hours of interviews over five days.

RS: I appreciate the opportunity, and I think the NAACP appreciates it.

CB: Well, good. Yesterday, you'll recall, I made a major faux pas and confused Marvin Arrington, who I had known years ago when I worked in Atlanta, with Henry Arrington, who was the first African American appointed to a major position in the modern era in Florida government. Governor Collins appointed him an assistant district attorney in Dade County early in his administration. In order to let me off the hook for that mistake,

you have asked me to let you correct a mistake that you claim you made yesterday. Let me give you that opportunity now.

RS: Yesterday I stated that the president of the Sarasota branch was Neil Adams. Neil Adams, of course, was with the NAACP in Dade County. The president of the Sarasota branch was Neil Humphrey.

CB: Neil Humphrey. Good. We had gotten to exciting events when we knocked off yesterday afternoon. We were in the administration of Florida Governor LeRoy Collins, which was a tumultuous era to say the least. In particular, we had been talking about events in the spring and summer of 1956 when the civil rights movement, after years of effort on your part, and of other NAACP leaders such as Ed Davis, William A. Fordham, Francisco Rodriguez, and many more, had built the organization to a point that it really could begin to be effective in Florida. Just at that time, the Montgomery bus boycott erupts, only months after which, with NAACP sponsorship and assistance, the Tallahassee bus boycott erupts. At that same point, the NAACP begins demanding integration of the public schools in Florida and files suit to desegregate the largest school system in Florida, the Dade County system. Also, your attorney, that summer, denounces Hillsborough County for systematically excluding blacks from juries, making a point with statewide application.

Meanwhile, the Florida legislature, the most mal-apportioned legislature in the country, dominated by rural legislators, primarily from North Florida and called the Pork Chop Gang, is demanding blood from the civil rights movement, and particularly from the NAACP. And, frustrated by Governor Collins's opposition to much of what they attempted to do, the legislature created an investigative committee, first chaired by State Representative Henry Land, but later chaired by former acting governor and Senate president Charley Johns, and known to history as the Johns Committee. The first target, as we learned yesterday from you, of the Johns Committee, was the NAACP and Robert W. Saunders. I believe you either got subpoena number one or subpoena number two that summer or early the next year.

RS: Let me point out something that we didn't bring about yesterday, and I mentioned about news clippings. I think one of the reasons why Mark Hawes, after reviewing those news clippings—

CB: He is the investigator for the Johns Committee.

RS: Because media people in Florida were following members of the legislature. I forgot the name of the senator from Gadsden County, who openly made a speech up there that one of the reasons for the Johns Committee was to get rid of the NAACP. This was documented in the press. That's why those clippings were so key and why I kept them and sent them up there, so that Hawes would know that we were monitoring what they were doing.

CB: It might be good if we mention again something we mentioned several times earlier, in case people don't see the earlier portion of the interview. You have kept your personal papers and donated them to the University of South Florida Library Special Collections Department. They are available to researchers there. You've also pointed out—and we discussed this yesterday—that because of the Johns Committee subpoenas in early 1957, the state records of the NAACP quickly were boxed up and shipped to national headquarters in New York, subsequently deposited in the NAACP collection in the Library of Congress. There is documentary evidence for much of what you're discussing.

Now, the Johns Committee, and you talked a little bit about your testimony yesterday and how you frustrated—you didn't characterize it that way, but I will—you frustrated the committee, that you would not turn over records of any consequence other than clippings. The committee, angry, decides to move its investigations into other parts of the state and eventually is going to subpoena several of your allies in the Dade County area. That is going to lead to a confrontation later in the year, 1957, then in early 1958, particularly a white activist and journalist, Ruth Perry, but most especially a black Episcopal priest, very active in NAACP affairs, Father Theodore Gibson.

RS: May I mention how Father Gibson became president?

CB: Of the Dade County branch?

RS: You had the Miami branch. You had the homestead branch, Liberty City, and so forth. We were having problems with the Miami branch. One of my responsibilities was to go in and see what we could do to assist it. That's when I first met G.E. Graves, the lawyer who became prominent in everything that was going on in Florida, along with Rodriguez. G.E. and I sat up one night at Dorsey Hotel. I was not one of those drinkers, but G.E. talking—

CB: Just sipping a little something all along.

RS: We were discussing the problems in Dade County. One of the problems was the police brutality that was taking place around Florida City and Homestead. We got into the discussion about the administration of the NAACP in Dade County and the fact that we had so many branches. Every time something happened, if it happened in Liberty City, Miami always was the NAACP Miami. Graves said, "I know who'd make a great president." I had known Graves about two weeks before then, and I said, "Who?" He said, "This Episcopalian priest in Coconut Grove," and he named Father Theodore Gibson. It was Graves that recruited Father Gibson to run for president of the Miami branch. That's how Father Gibson became involved.

CB: What a fortuitous selection for the NAACP, because the NAACP, realistically speaking, was in crisis by late 1957 and early 1958, because the legislature seriously appeared to be attempting to find ways, not only to expose, to whatever threats the membership and leadership of the association, but was attempting to find a way to outlaw the NAACP.

RS: One of the things that they were doing, they were trying to prove that the NAACP in Dade County—this'd be Miami—was infiltrated by communists. That was because there was a large white membership, primarily some of them from Miami Beach. The Pork Chop Gang didn't like that. The Pork Chop Gang didn't like too much after you got below the northern tier.

CB: You all certainly weren't getting together in the evenings after the hearings and knocking back a drink or two and laughing about the day, were you?

RS: No. (laughs) Anyway, I think when Father Gibson came in as president that was quite a knock to the legislature. It was supportive of the NAACP because Father Gibson was outspoken. He'd tell anyone how he felt. Plus, we were able to begin communicating and pulling the NAACP together in Dade County.

CB: Florida's most populous county, in case someone listening doesn't realize that. Father Gibson became so important because at this point of crisis for the NAACP, it is launching initiatives, and yet at the same time it is under immediate attack by the powers that be in Florida government and politics. Dr. Gibson is subpoenaed to appear before the Johns Committee in Miami, along with others. In a private meeting before that session began, he decided and expressed his lack of interest in cooperating. Please explain the whole situation.

RS: Let me just mention one or two events that happened before that.

CB: Certainly.

RS: The Miami legislative branch had filed a suit to desegregate public transportation. While that case was in process, Judge [Joseph P.] Lieb was hearing it. A group called the Philadelphian Club had met with the mayor of Miami. They said the NAACP doesn't have any membership there. They don't even represent the community, the black community. The mayor of Miami told them, "Well, the NAACP had this lawsuit against us. You go talk with the NAACP and see if they will agree to what you're asking." Well, this club, which was made up of prominent so-called community, social leaders and whatnot, and ministers, had proposed that we go to the court and say that give us two years to integrate busses in Miami and Dade County. It's interesting that while this case was being tried, Robert L. Carter, who is now a federal judge, was the lawyer, along with Graves, for the NAACP. We were meeting at the St. Johns Hotel in Miami. There was Ruby Hurley.

CB: The southeastern regional coordinator.

RS: Reverend Reddick, I think, I forgot his first name, an AME minister who had become state president at that time, Father Gibson, Graves, and myself. The message came that they had met with the mayor and that the mayor had agreed to the proposal that this group had made about desegregating the busses down there in two years. When they

brought this proposal to us, Reverend Reddick, who is now pastoring out of Jacksonville, made the comment, “Hell no; we’ll not accept it.” Father Gibson takes this message back to these chicken eaters. It’s amusing what’s happening. When Judge Lieb ruled, he gave Miami ninety days to desegregate the busses. This group that want to blockade everything, they wanted to propose two years. I think this is what the mayor of Miami was afraid of. He didn’t want to interject himself into that, but the court gave Miami ninety days to desegregate the busses, and they did it. This is the first suit. Then we get into what you’re getting into now.

CB: With the Johns Committee. I checked with your book. It was A. Joseph Reddick.

RS: A. Joseph Reddick, right. He left Miami and went to pastor out at Tallahassee, and then they sent him into Jacksonville. It’s amazing that he stood up against us. This is the kind of leadership that’s developing in Florida in opposition to those who want to go slow, and that type of thing.

CB: We should add, since these interviews are focused on you, on years of your effort supported by others to recruit new talent into the NAACP.

RS: That was one of my responsibilities, to recruit new talent.

CB: We’re at the Johns Committee crisis. The hearings in Miami are looming. You all are meeting prior to the actual committee convening and Father Gibson expressed his disgust at the whole affair and his willingness to refuse to cooperate. Paint the picture for us, if you will.

RS: There are a series of events that took place there. There is a young man named Frank Legree, who—I don’t know if he’s still an entertainer—but Frank bought a home in Allapattah, around that area. And immediately the White Citizens Council, which had recently been organized, began picketing Frank’s house and threatening to burn it down. Father Gibson is the president and the word came that on a particular Saturday night that the [Ku Klux] Klan and the Citizens Council were going to parade around Legree’s house and that they were going to light a cross. There was a white fellow who was working with us. He’d infiltrate the Klan meetings, and then he’d come back and sit down and talk with us about what went on. Father Gibson went to the then-attorney general, state’s attorney general down there, and Father Gibson told him that if anything happened to Legree’s house that he was going to expose the fact that the attorney general had been notified of what was going on and of the efforts of the Klan talking about burning Legree’s house and picketing. They were picketing around it. I think that the public needs to know about Little Korea, which is the [housing] project around Twelfth Avenue and Sixty-Second Street, that the riots took place, and the Klan and whatnot. All of this is tied in.

CB: If we could, if you don’t mind, focusing back on the Johns Committee and Father Gibson. You have written about and talked about a plan formulated to defy the committee and that was going to put Father Gibson in jeopardy of imprisonment.

RS: What happened was that the committee decided to meet in Miami. They subpoenaed all of the officials down there. They subpoenaed Ruth Perry. Ruth Perry is the secretary of the Miami branch. She constantly writes an article in the *Miami Times*. She does not bite her tongue about how she feels. On this particular event, Perry is subpoenaed, and is the—I think she is the first or second witness at the hearing, which was held in the Miami—the big building where the police department of the municipal courts were held. They began to browbeat Ruth Perry. They're telling Ruth Perry that they want her to turn over the records of the NAACP. Ruth Perry said, "I'm not custodian of the records of the NAACP." Hawes wants to know who is. She said, "Father Gibson."

The representative to the legislature makes a request to Johns to speak. He gets up and begins parading up and down. I didn't mention that the members of the White Citizens Council and the Klan are the front row occupants there. This guy is parading up and down, and he's doing it for political reasons. He says in effect that anybody who refuses to cooperate with this august body of the Florida legislature has no business being a citizen of the state of Florida. Ruth Perry breaks down and starts crying because they're wearing her down. They recess, and Frank Reeves, who was one of the lawyers in the Brown case working with Thurgood on the school desegregation case, and who was assigned to work with us in Florida, and Graves tell me, "Get Father and tell him to get in the car. We want to talk to him, take him to lunch."

We got Father in the car, and at that time Reeves says to Father, "You want to break up the committee?" Father says, "Hell yes." He's angry now after what happened to Ruth Perry. They took Father to Graves's office, and they sat down. While we were eating lunch, they wrote a statement that Father is to read to the committee when he gets back. They also rehearse Father on what to say. When we got back to the hearing, we were on time, but Reverend Graham, a well-known Baptist minister in Miami, was late. Graves brings to Hawes's attention that you have an agenda, you can't wait on a witness who's late. He had means of taking care of a late witness.

Hawes, unknowingly, says, "Okay, we'll proceed." He calls Father Gibson to the stand. Father Gibson walks up, takes his oath, and this Hawes begins to ask him, what's his name? He said, "I'm Father Theodore Gibson." Hawes says, "What's your occupation?" Father Gibson said, "I am rector of the Christ Episcopal Church in Coconut Grove." Hawes says, "What is your role with the NAA—" When he says NAA, Father Gibson holds up a finger: "Just a minute, sir." It's getting amusing to me then because I know what's happening. Father Gibson says, "I have a statement I want to make." Father Gibson reads the statement that the lawyers have prepared for him. When he finishes, he says, "And furthermore, I refuse to testify before this committee," and gets up to walk out. Hawes says, "You mean to tell me that you're not going to testify before this legislative body of the state of Florida?" It's funny. Father Gibson turns right around and says, "I mean just that, sir."

The Citizens Council white folks were there, and the members of the Klan were there. They were aghast that this man has the audacity to walk out on a legislative committee. The TV cameras are turning. The news media is following them and everything. I'm

sitting back there having fun because I know this is what the lawyers had designed. Immediately they voted to hold Father Gibson in contempt of the legislature. They proceeded to take him before the circuit court in Tallahassee. He holds them in contempt of the legislature. The case is then appealed to the United States Supreme Court. A five to four decision, the court rules in favor of the NAACP.

CB: The arrest and prosecution was in January of 1958. Was the Supreme Court decision that eventually exonerated Father Gibson, did it come very quickly?

RS: I think it did. I'm not sure.

CB: Actually, it took years. It's not until the early 1960s that Father Gibson is exonerated.

RS: I think what we did was to more or less halt the activities of the legislative committee.

CB: Is it safe to say that from the moment of the Miami hearings, actually from the moment of the original hearings in Tallahassee in March of fifty-seven [1957], the Committee made no substantive progress in attempting to obtain the records to the NAACP or to develop and see implemented legislation to restrict or prohibit the NAACP in Florida?

RS: They sent Roy Wilkins a letter with a copy to Bob Carter, and I think to Thurgood, inviting them to come down and testify—and this is when Land was the chairman—and to bring the records that had been sent to New York back and turn them over to the legislature. I think there's a letter in my files where Roy responded to them, and Roy said in essence, "I don't know anything about this." This is the colloquy that's going on between the legislative committee and the NAACP national. From the top down, they're refusing to cooperate.

CB: As this process is unfolding in 1957, 1958, and 1959, what in 1956 had looked like the verge of a great leap forward for the NAACP all of a sudden cast it back into shadows that it had operated out of a few years earlier. People were afraid now. The Klan is more active. Through 1958, for example, racial violence built throughout Florida as Father Gibson's appeals are beginning to be heard. We even had a situation that I believe you're very familiar with that year of the possibility of the lynching of Jesse Woods in Sumter County. I wondered if you might quickly mention something about that.

RS: The state conference is meeting in Tampa. All of the top leadership, including Dr. Von Mizell, who is another key figure from Fort Lauderdale—

CB: You're starting to get a lot of very talented leadership from southeast Florida, the lower Atlantic coast.

RS: At that meeting, Von went downtown and registered in one of the white hotels. Nobody said anything to him. But anyway, we're meeting in Tampa at St. Paul A.M.E.

Church. Roy Wilkins is the speaker for the next day. I had to pick Roy up at the train station, and when the Champion, the Tamiami Champion¹³, came in, Roy said to me, “What about this lynching or would be lynching”—I think he said—“in Wildwood, Florida?” I said to Roy, “We know nothing about it because we’re in conference here, and the news media hasn’t said anything about it.” Roy proceeds to tell me what happened is alleged that white Klansmen broke the jail down in Wildwood and took a black youth out. They don’t know what happened to him. I told Roy, “We’ll get right on that.”

CB: Excuse me for interrupting, but how had he learned about it?

RS: If you ever read Roy’s book, you’ll find that all of your black railroad men knew Walter White, Roy Wilkins, and Thurgood. When the train pulled into Wildwood, that’s where it switches. One part goes down to Miami. The other part is to Tampa.

CB: We might point out at that point that, I believe, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was led by a Floridian.

RS: A. Phillip Randolph.

CB: Who would become your ally in Florida—

RS: And also the author of the first march on Washington or the threat of a march on Washington.

CB: Let’s don’t jump too far ahead. Let’s save Jesse Woods.

RS: That Monday morning, I got up and went by the office and let Rodriguez know where I was going. The longshoremen, I never knew that the Tampa longshoremen were guarding my house and everything. They said, “You’re not going there by yourself.” There’s one fellow who is appointed to travel with me. We get into Wildwood, and the streets are absent. There’s nobody on them except one elderly black gentleman. I stop, and I said to him, “We’re traveling, and we want to know where we can get breakfast.” He says, “I’ll show you.” He got in the car, and we turned it around. He says, “Are you from the NAACP?” I told him, “Yes, we are,” and I gave him my card. He said, “We’ve been looking for you.” He carries us out to State Road 48, and we’re traveling west. The book says east, but we’re traveling west on 48. We get to a turn off, a sandy road. We go about a mile or so into one of these areas where it reminds you of earlier days during slavery.

CB: Semi-tropical wilderness.

RS: There are media people from everywhere, people with cameras. I identified one of the two guys from the Associated Press. Seated on one of the porches is a stout guy with a pad. This elderly black fellow said, “Don’t stop here, because that guy sitting there says

¹³F Passenger train.

he's from the governor, and we're not going to talk to him," meaning Governor Collins. We proceeded on. Later on we talked with some people, and they told us what happened. Woods was accused of winking an eye or something or insulting a white woman in the A&P [Supermarket] store in Wildwood. He was arrested and locked up in this jail.

That night, the jail was broken into. Woods was taken out into the woods. They beat him and left him for dead. The family said they thought he was in Miami, that he had been taken to Miami. What happened, Will Woods was not dead, but he was beaten so that an uncle of his and his aunt were leaving to go back to Fort Walton where this uncle was working on the road project. He came to the edge of the road. The uncle saw him, carried him back to one of those houses, wrapped him up in a rug, and put him in the back of the car, got him out of Wildwood, and took him up to Fort Walton. By that time, we had asked Father Gibson and Richard Powell in Miami to communicate with a family down there to see if Woods has been brought there. They don't even know where he is. We go back into Wildwood. The same elderly fellow who met us on the streets on [Highway] 301 in Wildwood says, "Come with me; I know where we can get the information." We go back to Highway 48, and we go down to the Withlacoochee River. There's a white fellow there who operated running rowboats and everything. He says, "I know what you're here for." He says, "The family is down the river about a mile, fishing. You can use the boat and go down there."

Incidentally, traveling with me was Bettye Murphy, a journalist from the *Baltimore Afro American*. Rodriguez had asked me to let her go along, because she is the only black major media person there. We get into the boat, and we row down the Withlacoochee River and about a mile or so down, there's about eight or nine people out there with cane rods cast out there. We pull up to it. On the Withlacoochee River, there are these little sand islands and whatnot. This elderly fellow walked up and talked to somebody. He said, "This is Jesse Woods's aunt." He said, "These guys are from the NAACP. They're working on the case. They're trying to find out what happened to Jesse." The elderly woman said, "I'll tell you what. You go back to my house, and when you get to the front door, there's a board there that you can lift up. There's a letter from Fort Walton Beach. That's where he is."

We went back there, and sure enough, when we got to the house, we lifted this carpet up, and there was this board. We lifted this board, and there was this letter. Things began to get really amusing then. We got back into the car, this fellow the longshoremen had sent with me and Bettye. We go back to Tampa. I just walk into Rodriguez's office, and I said, "I'm going up north," or something to that effect. Bettye Murphy says, "I'd like to go with you." She agrees to pay my transportation round trip, provided I let her go along as the representative of the black press. We caught National Airlines out of Tampa, and we got in Jacksonville and went over to Panama City. We got the treasurer of the branch in Panama City to drive us to Fort Walton Beach.

Sure enough, when we got to this house, nobody was there. Bettye Murphy did something that I never would have done. She tried the door and went in. When we went in, in the back room we found the rug, medicine, and towels, bloodstained and

everything. We knew we were on the right track. We waited around, and about half an hour later the uncle and his aunt came back and told us that they had taken Woods into Dothan, Alabama and that he was in the custody of an AME preacher in Dothan. Betty wants me to go into Alabama. I wanted to go, too, but we were in litigation with Alabama.

CB: A state that at that point had outlawed the Ku Klux Klan.

RS: Had outlawed the NAACP.

CB: I'm sorry, the NAACP.

RS: They had outlawed the NAACP from operating in Alabama, and I knew if I was caught in Alabama, [I would be held] in contempt of court, so I told them no. We went back to Panama [City] and into Tallahassee. We told a dentist there by the name of Nick Williams, we brought him and Daisy Young, who played a key role in the sit-in in Tallahassee, what had happened. Bettye was on the phone calling her paper long distance. Bettye, after about fifteen minutes, heard the operator say, "They found that nigger who was supposed to be lynched down in Wildwood." Bettye hung up her phone and said, "No, I'm going back to Baltimore." I was on my way back to Tampa. That frightened her because she didn't think that the telephone operators were listening in on the telephone calls.

When I got back to Tampa, as soon as I drove up to my door—my wife had gone up to play pinochle with some of her friends and carried the boy with her. There were two FBI men waiting for me. This is my first confrontation with the FBI. They said, "Come on down. We want you to come down to our headquarters. We want to talk to you." When I got down there, they said, "We understand that you know where Jesse Woods is." I said, "Yeah." They said, "We want you to tell us where he is." I said, "I'm not going to tell you anything until I talk with the governor of Florida. I want to be assured that if he's brought back to Florida that he's going to be protected."

They got in touch with Collins and told Collins what had happened. I talked with Collins, too, and told him that I was going to advance the information to the FBI, but I wanted his assurances that Jesse would not be harmed. The FBI went into Dothan and got Jesse, brought him back, and turned him over to the state of Florida. The interesting thing is that they prosecuted Jesse Woods on minor charges of something. I forgot what it was. The last I heard of Jesse Woods was he was down in Miami. This was an interesting case because that's the first time I've ever been involved in investigating a would-be lynching.

CB: This is happening in 1958. This is when most folks alive today would look back and think, Florida had burst into the modern world. You're having to drive through the night with guards and end up trekking up in boats up the Withlacoochee River, digging letters out of floorboards, and finding bloody blankets to save a man's life from lynching, Jesse Woods. You've talked about Governor Collins, the fact that he was a segregationist when he was first elected and when he ran for reelection, although he had opened up lines of

communication with you, given you his phone number by his bed at his home, which you used whenever you felt you needed to. You were beginning to develop some trust, but the NAACP continued to pressure Collins to move towards a protector of and advocate for civil rights. In the Jesse Woods case, he honored his promise to you. Jesse Woods was protected.

RS: He did.

CB: On the other hand, the same year, 1958, Governor Collins ordered a ban on the Ku Klux Klan, but he also added a ban on all NAACP demonstrations, saying that they were quote “calculated to incite riots.” What did you feel about that?

RS: Reverend Lowry and I talked about this.

CB: This is Reverend A. Leon Lowry of Tampa.

RS: A. Leon Lowry who had become state president. Lowry was also subpoenaed. Let me point out that Lowry went to Tallahassee to respond to the subpoena of the legislative committee. Lowry had an appointment because he was teaching a religious course. He asked to be excused. The legislative committee refused to excuse him, and Lowry walked out on the committee. They didn't do anything to Lowry. The point I'm making is I think what happened, Lowry got together with me, and we drafted a twelve-page letter to Collins. We can't find copies of that letter, but Lowry preached the sermon. We are of the opinion that that was the letter that began to change Collins. The fact that we had the gall to write to him and talk to him about his position and what needed to be done, and everything. Plus, we knew that what he was doing with regard to efforts to curtail education was copying the plan coming out of Virginia. All we had to do were read the *Tampa Tribune* editorials, and we knew what was happening in Virginia. Because you know the *Tribune* was partially might be owned or at that time was owned by some paper out of Richmond.

CB: Still is. Media General.

RS: We knew Collins was playing politics, and I think he was getting ready to prepare to run against Sumter Lowry.

CB: He had already beaten Sumter Lowry. One thing that you did do, Governor Collins made his ban in March of 1958. In November at your state conference meeting, you pressed the adoption of a resolution setting the state's NAACP goal as, and I'm quoting here from the resolution, “the elimination of any racial discrimination in voting, schools, housing, government, and industry by 1963.” Apparently, and I'm just guessing here because the record is fairly sparse, but the organization and you as field secretary simply did not recognize any ban on NAACP.

RS: No, we didn't, because we believe that curtailing education when it was required by the state legislature, the constitution was unconstitutional. Remember, we were filing

lawsuits all over the state. The first lawsuit was filed in Dade County. An attorney out of West Palm Beach had filed his own lawsuit, Harlan. The next suit was out of Pensacola, and the lead plaintiff in that was Dr. Augustus. I related to the president of the branch who, at that time, was moving to be the lead plaintiff. Then we began to move all over the state.

CB: Yes. From what I can gather, there was a renewed effort at legally attacking racism and segregation. You have written, though, that as a result of the Johns Committee and the fear engendered by Klan activities, things like the thought of the lynching of Jesse Woods, that people were reluctant in many areas to step forward again. Day-to-day activities beyond legal initiatives were suffering during this period of 1958 and 1959. You were once again finding yourself struggling to hold together your organization.

RS: That's when we begin to try to raise monies with the Night of Stars in Miami, the first Night of Stars program raising money at a theater on Fourteenth Street with Sammy Davis as the star attraction. Then a year or two later, we had the Night of Stars on Miami Beach in which Sammy Davis and Marguerite Belafonte's husband Harry Belafonte, and the Treniers. We had just about anybody who was on Miami Beach at the Miami Beach Auditorium. This is the way that we were moving. We were getting full support from the entertainment world and the sports world, including Jackie Robinson. We began moving people into communities. In Tampa it was 1957 or 1958 that we had Congressman Jimmy Roosevelt into Tampa.

CB: President Franklin D. Roosevelt's son.

RS: We were bringing powerful figures into the state.

CB: Trying to bolster spirit and reinvigorate.

RS: This is before the effort to the search committee from the Democratic Party was looking for a site location for the next election.

CB: There was a 1960 Democratic convention.

RS: We threw a hammer in that, and the convention was moved to California. Collins never came out and gave us credit, but he did come out with a statement saying that the state was not ready for it. For the benefit of the people who are listening to this, Rodriguez and I drafted a press release questioning the bringing of the Democratic national convention to Florida in Miami Beach, even though Miami Beach was making all kinds of promises. Eastern Air Lines allegedly had sent a plane to Tampa to bring Reverend Lowry down to meet with them. Our position was that black delegates would be traveling to Florida. The state public accommodations, motels, and hotels were still racially segregating. We felt the Democratic National Convention should not, unless the state did something, hold its hearing there. All of this was bringing pressure to bear on the state.

CB: Politics in the state had taken a turn for the worse that year as well during 1960. In those days, the Democratic nomination for governor still guaranteed your election. Elections were held during the summer time. Governor Collins was barred by the Florida constitution from seeking reelection. He would go on within a few years to become President Johnson's ambassador to the civil rights movement. That summer, an avowed segregationist, Farris Bryant, wins the Democratic primary and subsequently the governor's office.

RS: What did you call him?

CB: An avowed segregationist.

RS: What did Frank Pinkston call him in the book?

CB: You have to tell me.

RS: Frank Pinkston, in the index, is leading the effort to desegregate and to bring about an end to segregation in Ocala.

CB: Farris Bryant's hometown.

RS: Frank Pinkston, it says in the book, that if my good brother thinks that everything is okay in Ocala, then he needs to come on home and take a look at it. This is the attitude that is building up.¹⁴

CB: The climate that built that summer as this election unfolded, racial tensions mounted to the point that in August of 1960, if I'm correct, Ku Klux Klansmen confronted civil rights demonstrators, including NAACP members, in Jacksonville and attacked them with baseball bats.

RS: That was the climax of the effort to attack segregation. It did not have the support of Burns. Haydon Burns was the mayor of Jacksonville. Burns controlled politics and some of the major black politicians. For example, I knew that one prominent person in Jacksonville, who had said that I couldn't share this membership campaign because of our contact with downtown, I later discovered that they were receiving a grant. The city was going in to run a day nursery or something. Burns had all kinds of ways of tying in with the black community.

There was the Berrier Ice Cream case, in which some of the Youth Council members had begun to picket. We had reached a conclusion when [Rutledge] Pearson, who had been chosen as a member of a professional baseball team from Jacksonville. When that team got into Jacksonville, they refused to let him go into the ballpark in the entrance with his

¹⁴F RS is paraphrasing from a speech that Pinkston gave at the NAACP Florida State Conference Meeting in 1963, which is included as an appendix to *Bridging the Gap*. Pinkston said, talking about Governor Bryant, "If my 'homeboy' really believes that Florida has no segregation problems, that everything is 'lovey dovey,' then I invite him to come on down home, because things have gone wrong here."

teammates. Pearson got together, and we decided that we were going to try to bring about a change in the NAACP branch. That's when we begin recruiting young adults into the NAACP, who we eventually took over.

CB: Let me call you on that because the next point I wanted to raise relates directly to young people. Having made this statement, I then want to go back eight years to when you took over in Florida. In February of 1960, several young people from North Carolina A&T University sat down at a lunch counter in Greensborough, North Carolina and refused to leave when ordered to do so, thereby launching the now-famous sit-in movement. In Florida, the sit-in movement arrived very quickly, to be followed by swim-ins and wade-ins at beaches. You have mentioned in your memoirs that initially you were reluctant to embrace the sit-in movement. I want to cast back eight years. Is it not correct that one of your first initiatives as field secretary was to initiate broad-based recruiting of young people and the creation of youth councils and even youth encampments for freedom?

RS: That's true.

CB: What was the history of the NAACP's efforts and your efforts to incorporate youth during those eight years from 1952 to 1960?

RS: We knew that we had to prepare them, and we had to prepare the NAACP leadership because most of the programs were involving elderly people, older people, and not too much work had been done on encouraging youth leadership. Even though, in Tallahassee, the situation there involved, under the help of Daisy Young and Dr. Emmett Bashful, we ended up with the largest college chapter in the country. We began to build youth programs throughout the state of Florida. Another thing that helped us was that as the sit-in movement grew, some of the youngsters who had gone to school in these other areas began to come home, among them Frank Pinkston. And they began to take over leadership in the communities. That's why we had the sit-ins developing.

CB: Is it Fred Pearson in Jacksonville?

RS: Rutledge Pearson.

CB: Rutledge Pearson also had grown out of the youth council movement. Here you have eight years of effort in recruiting young people, obviously beginning to pay off by 1960, the development of mature but youthful leadership, that at the point the sit-in movement breaks out in 1960, is prepared to grasp that momentum and run with it. If you don't mind, I'm going to ask if we could call a halt to our first hour of recording and give you a few minutes to catch your breath. We'll be back in just a few minutes. Thank you, Dr. Saunders.

RS: Thank you, Dr. Canter.

Pause in recording

CB: Hi, I'm Dr. Canter Brown. We are back on Thursday January 17, 2002 for our second hour-long session of conversation with Dr. Robert W. Saunders, the distinguished former field secretary of the NAACP in Florida from 1952 to 1966. And Dr. Saunders, in our first hour today we had gotten into the 1960s. We've found that the 1950s were going to prove very tumultuous and stressful that the NAACP had not been able to accomplish all of its goals due to onslaughts politically by conservative, reactionary legislators and other political figures and day to day and place to place because of Ku Klux Klan type violence and threats of violence.

On the other hand, your organization had survived these attacks, and in fact you had begun, as we were discussing right at the end of the last hour to develop a capable cadre of youthful leaders drawn out of your own youth council and youth encampment for freedom programs that were capable of picking up the gauntlet. And this is happening in 1960, at a time when Florida moves beyond Governor Collins's more moderate leadership to the gubernatorial tenure of an avowed segregationist, Farris Bryant of Ocala. The same year, out of North Carolina comes the youthful sit-in movement, which has the effect, in many respects, of reinvigorating the civil rights movement throughout the South and infusing it with the tremendous energy of thousands of young people, many of them college students, but also high school students and even junior high school students. We had begun to touch on, at the end of our first hour this morning, your initial reluctance to wholeheartedly embrace the sit-in movement. I hope you'll take just a minute to express your attitudes and the basis upon which you held them at that time.

RS: I wasn't opposed to the sit-in movements because, number one, I'm black. I was a youngster myself and the victim of having to go to the back door to get a sandwich. I knew what it was all about. I had suffered what had happened under the efforts to prevent us from having equality. I mentioned the fact about Fordham and myself coming down from Madison and when we stopped at the service station, what the young fellow told us about using the restroom. However, during the first period in the 1950s, we were under tremendous financial burden. Much of the money that went into the fight for freedom in Florida, battling the legislature, court cases, going to the Florida Supreme Court, to the United States Supreme Court on occasions, and protecting individuals or black men who had been falsely arrested. Some of them had been sentenced to death at Raiford when we knew they were innocent. This was a tremendous expense. On many instances I had the lawyers writing to me saying, can I get some money? We need money.

Certainly it's a matter of fundraising. That was a hard task because some of the leadership organizations in Florida either had gone, passed on, but were not concerned about what was happening out in the community, but was concerned about the existence of their own organization. Raising funds meant that when the sit-ins came on, we had to be prepared to carry out the responsibilities that were necessary. Let me point out that when the sit-ins began, we had some youth from Florida who participated in that, who had gone to Tennessee to the school that Rosa Parks attended.

The first real sit-in occurred in Oklahoma under the auspices of the NAACP Youth Council in Oklahoma. The sit-in demonstrations were not new to us, but certainly when you start getting into the freedom fights, you better have some money to pay bonds, to have lawyers, and to be able to persuade public opinion in your direction in support of what you're doing. This is what we had to get into. We had a lot of young people coming back from these other universities and institutions into Florida and becoming involved in setting up this type of program throughout the state of Florida.

May I add that, at the time of the St. Augustine situation, we had sit-in demonstrations going on all over Florida. That's why Gloster Current and Roy Wilkins agreed to hire Frank Pinkston to help me in St. Augustine, because not only was it in Jacksonville, we were dealing with the Klan and baseball bats in Jacksonville, we were involved in Tallahassee. We were involved in Pensacola and Panama City, Tampa, Orlando, Fort Lauderdale where they arrested the hundred-and-some kids. We had to go into court there because the city of Fort Lauderdale tried to enjoin me from coming in under the guise that I was preventing the city from enjoying its constitutional rights under the Interstate Commerce Act. All of this is going on.

CB: You're thinking you ought to be able to enjoy yours first before the city of Fort Lauderdale.

RS: But the thing is that all of this is going on, and it's a new avenue pushing ahead. We were not behind. We were along with it, and in some instances in front of the other communities and the other states.

CB: Once again, you have anticipated my next question and offered me a perfect segue into it. Here you have Governor Bryant's administration. You have the continuation of Klan-inspired violence in Florida, massive resistance in many areas to the whole idea of desegregation, chronic, critical fundraising problems, as you point out. Your opponents always claim you're very well funded. In fact, you're going from day to day hoping you'll have enough money to get through the foreseeable future. Yet, the NAACP launched initiatives that, in the face of state opposition, forced the beginnings of racial integration in the public schools of twenty counties during Governor Bryant's four years in office. I would point out one of those counties was my home county of Polk County. As you already know, my senior class in high school, which was 1965-1966, was the first Polk County Class integrated. Certainly we were better off for it.

RS: When I look at your gray hair, I would think you are older than that. (laughs)

CB: Before you and I started working together, my hair was dark. I don't know about that. Also—we touched on this the other day—that it's during this period that your own son, Bobby Saunders, Robert W. Saunders, Junior, integrated the Hillsborough County public school system in January 1962 when he began attending MacFarlane Park Cuesta Elementary School. By March of 1963 and during Governor Bryant's administration, you were able to proclaim, and did proclaim, quote, "The move toward integration of Florida's public schools leads the South."

Before I ask to your reaction to all that I just said, I point out too that you've mentioned before the importance of your attorneys. You clearly are concentrating during this period of time on legal action to force integration, a tradition of the NAACP. You benefit from the assistance of numerous very capable attorneys, most of whom were black, including several young attorneys who are going to have stellar careers in Florida: Leander Shaw, a young professor at Florida A&M Law School, who is now a member of the Florida Supreme Court and former chief justice, and Joseph Hatchett, who is now a member of the U.S. Court of Appeals; very distinguished attorneys who are assisting you, young people lending a hand with the legal efforts. Here is massive accomplishment at a time when you are facing ever-mounting problems. The revolution is not really seeming to be accomplished. The more you try, the more opposition you seem to face. What are your feelings about me saying that, and what did you decide to do in light of all of this?

RS: We were aware of the fact that the White Citizens Council, Sheriff Willis McCall was inviting the White Citizens Council into the state, and they were organizing. In Ocala when Frank Pinkston and those began the voter registration program there, it's estimated that around 120 black people were arrested under false pretenses, you know, that they had filled out the application wrong. I recall the story that there was one gentleman who was arrested in 1920, and the charges were that he had done something, a misdemeanor or something. To give you an illustration of what we were faced with, Joseph Hatchett, Leander Shaw, Rodriguez, and Earl Johnson out of Jacksonville, who was very active in the St. Augustine case—don't let me leave out Toby Simon, who was with another group. I forgot the name of it, but it wasn't the NAACP. That group of white attorneys were helping. But the source of the money for it all had to come from the NAACP.

This is a statement I'm going to make, and it's key. Black people in Florida have not paid for their freedom. They're enjoying the fruits of the freedom, but when it came to raising the money, it didn't come. Most of the money in the legal cases came from the NAACP legal defense and educational fund, which was headed by Thurgood Marshall. And of course there's a story that tells why there was a dividing of the legal defense fund from the NAACP parent corporation and is setting up the legal defense fund. And that was brought about because of the pressures that were being brought by Southern segregationists, who threatened to take away the tax-exempt status of the legal defense fund in the NAACP, so it was a matter of protecting that. Most of the money in the school cases came from legal defense and educational fund, thanks to the goodness of Thurgood.

CB: But it's just this fund shortage and what became a very fearful climate. Folks today, I think, look back on the civil rights movement and think that it was a matter of progress building on progress with no setbacks, but it was really peaks and valleys, wasn't it?

RS: Definitely, because you could bet that any time we got into a school desegregation issue that the powers that be were going to appeal, and they had laid the groundwork for appealing everything. Take Polk County, one of the last counties to file a suit—and, incidentally, one of the last counties to file a suit to bring about equalization of teacher

salaries. As we got to working and we brought pressures to bear, and particularly after what happened in St. Augustine, I said, “Thank God for King coming in, although—”

CB: If you don’t mind waiting just a minute to talk about St. Augustine, we’ve got some trips to take first. What I have been leading up to— Let me underscore again. In the early 1960s, the level of racial violence and the resistance to civil rights advances was growing in many areas of the South. The Freedom Riders, for example, had in that period begun to try and desegregate interstate transportation facilities. In the famous incident in Montgomery, Alabama in May 1961, their busses were attacked by a mob. You also had a problem during that period that numerous civil rights organizations developed with their own ideas about how to approach the movement. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, of course, had grown out of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1957. The Congress on Racial Equality had expanded its activities and membership. In the early 1960s, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee began harnessing a lot of the youthful energy, one effect of that being a competition for funds and public attention.

It’s at this point that the NAACP decides that there is a missing element to bringing the movement forward any more than it had already gone. That was that it simply had to force the federal government to its side. In connection with which in 1962, Roy Wilkins, then the executive director of the national NAACP, organized a trip to Washington by leaders of the various states and of the national organization, to confront President [John F.] Kennedy and demand his support for a civil rights act. This is the act that will be passed two years later, essentially.

President Kennedy, up to this point, has been very reluctant to express support for civil rights endeavors. I have brought with me evidence of your participation. I’m going to haul it out right now. I believe, with your wife’s help this morning, I took this off your wall at home. (Saunders laughs) This is you right here meeting with President Kennedy, obviously. This is Aaron Henry, the president of the Mississippi State Conference, and other dignitaries. This photograph is of you and others in 1962, meeting with President Kennedy to urge his support for passage of a federal civil rights act.

Your close friend, Medgar Evers, and we’ve discussed that the two states of Florida and Mississippi were utilized by the NAACP as laboratories for their initiatives, that you and Medgar Evers had grown very close, that you often assisted each other in your various states, and you two served in the committee to organize the meeting with President Kennedy, I believe. He is in this picture. We just don’t know where, as I understand it. He apparently is blocked somehow from the camera angle. But you and Medgar Evers and others were there, together with Aaron Henry from Mississippi, to speak with President Kennedy. Could you just take a few minutes and talk about the intentions of that meeting and trip and your impressions of it?

RS: The NAACP had been pressing for full implementation of the 1954 civil rights act— Brown decision. They had been working also with the voting act of 1958. In 1962, the national convention had convened in Philadelphia. The NAACP chartered a twenty-two-coach train to go from Philadelphia to Washington. All the delegates to the convention

were to lobby their representatives in the House and the Senate. The committee that you see there was made up of key representatives from each state, including some top civil rights leaders from throughout the nation. I smile because at the time, Medgar and I weren't even thinking about that committee. We were walking from car to car. Roy saw us and said, "Hey, you two come here." He was in this car. What do you call these—parlor cars?

CB: Pullman car, or a dining car.

RS: Dining car, not—it's a car with all the facilities for meetings and whatnot. In it is the top leadership of the NAACP, including Joseph Rauh and others from other organizations working with the NAACP and board members. Roy says, "I'm going to put you and Medgar, you two, on the committee." I'm looking at Medgar. I don't know what committee he's talking about. He says, "I'm going to put you on the committee to meet with the president." I was pleased because to have the executive director of NAACP organizing this committee and he's going to put two of his field staff people on there. When we got to Washington, while the other delegates were going into the representatives and with the senators—incidentally, I think Reverend Lowry might have been on that committee, but there's no picture of him.

CB: The Reverend A. Leon Lowry of Tampa.

RS: We were carried into—this is a very interesting experience for me and I know for Medgar—into the lobby of the White House. We have all these plates from the presidential administration. We're looking at it and standing around waiting to go up to see the president. About half an hour later, we go up to the Oval Office, and President Kennedy welcomes us, brings us into the oval room, and then he sits down in this little rocking chair, and he's rocking. Roy approaches him with the purpose for the meeting and says that the chairman of the board will present the petition from the NAACP and that it's calling for the complete passage of an all-encompassing civil rights act. The chairman of the board reads this—I forgot how many pages—and says the NAACP requests that the president immediately introduce legislation to bring about this all-encompassing civil rights act. Kennedy listens very attentively. When the chairman of the board finishes, Kennedy gets up and says, "I don't think this is the right time."

I could feel something going through us, and then of course when we get back on the train, Roy, when he gets back to the convention, expresses his dissatisfaction with the answer that Kennedy had given and tells the convention that he feels that even though what had happened, it gave us an opportunity to meet with him, and this probably was an opening. What happened was that the convention voted to continue to move in this direction and gave to Clarence Mitchell, the director of the NAACP legal office in Washington, the responsibility for lobbying and getting this through.

Another interesting thing is that, as we were moving out of the office and down to the lobby, up comes Mrs. Kennedy. She says to President Kennedy, "Jack, look at what I found." She said she had found something from some earlier administration. Kennedy

says to her, “Yes, darling, but meet Mr. Wilkins of the NAACP.” She says, “Hello, Mr. Wilkins,” and then she goes back to—and this is amusing, you know? The ultimate bill that came down was that draft that was submitted by the NAACP to Kennedy. That twenty-two-car delegation coming down from Philadelphia had a lot of pressure and brought a lot of tension that focused what we were saying and what black people were saying in general.

CB: Although not enough to force President Kennedy to act.

RS: No, but eventually I think that—

CB: If you don’t mind, let’s talk about a couple things that are going to happen before it eventually occurs. It appears to me, from the advantage of looking back over time, that the leaders of the NAACP decided after the meeting with President Kennedy that they had to crank up the volume to get his attention. It doesn’t seem to me that it’s a coincidence that within a few months, or less than that, of arriving back in Florida, you had the state conference, meeting at Sarasota, plan a massive march on Tallahassee to demand civil rights. Also, a few months later in February of 1963, you help conceive the idea of pressuring for the desegregation of the nation’s oldest city, St. Augustine, in anticipation of its quadricentennial celebration, which was planned to attract national and international attention. How badly have I mischaracterized that process or evolution?

RS: You haven’t—what’s the term you used? (laughs)

CB: I had to look that up before we came in here today.

RS: This is correct. As a matter of fact, one of my responsibilities was to begin implementing the national policies. We got the state conference to agree that we would follow up on efforts to open the eyes and educate the people of Florida, particularly the black people, as to what was expected to come down the pike. One of the efforts, of course, was that we were concerned about working on the governor. Governor Bryant was and is—I don’t know, is he still alive?

CB: Gosh, I think he is.

RS: He was a segregationist. On one occasion when the St. Augustine situation was going on, I talked with him—or supposedly talked with him. The meeting lasted about fifteen or twenty minutes. All he did is sit up and look at me. When it was over he said, “What’s happening in St. Augustine is a local issue, and I’m not going to interfere with it,” words to that effect. I thanked him and walked out. In the meantime, we were building up pressure in Florida, and we came up with the idea of a march on Tallahassee.

CB: You are planning this a year before the famous march on Washington.

RS: That’s right.

CB: It is going to be a precedent, which will help guide thinking towards the idea of a march on Washington.

RS: Pearson, Rutledge Pearson had become president at that time. We set up the church committees. Reverend [J.H.] McKissick, who I think is dead, now, was in St. Augustine. Reverend Steele, we asked him to be chairman of the local committee in Tallahassee. Father [David] Brooks, he's an Episcopal minister. The church committee took this under their umbrella. We were working. This is when we had the conflict with CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], Patricia Due and her group. CORE wanted us to give them our membership rolls. We would not do that because we wouldn't turn those rolls over to the legislative committee. However, Reverend Steele called me one day and said that he had tried to get Dr. Gore—

CB: President George Gore.

RS: —president of Florida A&M [University] to work with them and to give certain help and amenities and that Gore wouldn't do it. I told Reverend Steele, "Don't you approach Dr. Gore again until I talk with him." In the meantime I talked to Pierson, and brought Pierson up to date on what was happening. I went to Tallahassee and met with Dr. Gore. I told Dr. Gore about the march that we were planning, and Dr. Gore opened up all his—gave us help. He opened up a feel for the delegates to meet in. He said that any student that was in class, that he could not excuse them to participate in the march, but any student who was not in class could participate. Then also he called in the head of his manual arts department and told him to give us what we wanted in banners and whatnot. This is all we needed. We didn't even have to put any more money into the march. In the meantime, CORE was still pressing for our membership rolls. They went to the press and said that the march would not be successful because they had not had the opportunity to work throughout the state. On a meeting the night before the march, they demanded—

CB: Which will occur in March of 1963.

RS: Nineteen sixty-three. They wanted to have a meeting with Ruby Hurley was there. I told Ruby, "No, this is Florida. You stay out of it." I met with them, and I told them we were not giving in. What they wanted to do at that time was to change the line of march to go east or north in Tallahassee and then come down the main highway back to the meeting place. I considered it, and the lawyers considered it, unwise since there was an agreement between Steele and the cities' fathers that this would be our line of march. We said, "No we're not going to break it, because this is sort of a contract." We're trying to win people over, so we stuck to it.

The morning of the march, I was pleased because I was hoping it would be successful. The busses started coming in, people driving in, and when we saw Jacksonville come in with about eight or nine busses, I knew we were successful. That had its effect. I always remember that as we marched by the capital, under the governor's window—and that was done purposefully—Bryant was looking out the window at us. There were pictures taken, I think, of that. It had its effect, and it did a lot to mobilize more help. We had

successfully had a march through Tallahassee where they had had the bus protest and everything. It was carried by the press.

CB: People were willing to come out in the open again, emerging from the climate of fear that had existed in Florida.

RS: Frank Pierson coming in from Marion County, and a bus load, school busses coming in from Fort Meyers, and all over the state. It was satisfactory to me because when I approached the state conference with the idea, there was no idea about them even accepting it, but the church committee under the guardianship of Reverend (inaudible) of St. Augustine and Reverend McKissick, who's dead now, and Father Brooks and Steele. I have to give them credit even though, in some instances, we had to take the leadership. They did a good job.

CB: Here you have a very successful event in March of 1963 at the same time as St. Augustine is about to explode. I want to get into that in some depth, but first let me mention by way of context and then to ask your personal response: in terms of regional affairs, at the same time as the very successful march on Tallahassee, racial violence has erupted in Birmingham, Alabama. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference is pressing desegregation there. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is arrested and jailed in Birmingham. It is at this point that he writes his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Bombings, the following month in Birmingham rocked the city. It is only at this point in May of 1963 that President John F. Kennedy takes action, and he sends federal troops into Birmingham, Alabama. In the adjacent state of Mississippi the following month, your dear friend Medgar Evers is gunned down and killed in cold blood. What did you feel after the high of the march on Tallahassee to, within a matter of weeks, mourning the death of your dear friend?

RS: I had been in Mississippi at the invitation of Medgar, because we were trying to build a liaison between states. I spoke at one of his mass meetings a couple of weeks before he was killed. I recall the church's mass meeting was packed. I mentioned the fact that Kurt Flood and I flew back to Tampa. Kurt was telling me about the baseball player, about his effort to change the way in which baseball treated its players. There were other notables there. Then I made one or two trips with Medgar. Medgar was haggard because he was working night and day, and they were working on him. Because he at that time—had he done work with opening up the University of Mississippi?

CB: Yes.

RS: That was another headache on him. The morning that he was killed, I was asleep. Helen shook me. The radio was playing, and Helen shook me and said, "Did you hear that?" I heard something. I don't know what it was. And then she told me Medgar was killed. I got up, in shock. Here a close friend and a young man that came on board almost several months after I came on board at the NAACP. We were working together. We'd go to hotels, and we'd stay in rooms together.

Let me just give you one illustration of how close we were. The national convention was meeting in Atlanta. At that time, the hotels were segregated in Atlanta. We were staying at Clark College. Medgar and I were sharing a room. About eleven o'clock, Medgar bursts in the room and says, "Come on! Get ready! Let's go! We got something happening here." I said, "What's happening?" He said, "We have to picket the Heart of Atlanta, the principal motel." I said, "What's happening there?" He said Dr. Bunche, Dr. Ralph Bunche, the undersecretary of the United Nations, was to be the main speaker. The United Nations had made reservations for Bunche at the Heart of Atlanta, and when Dr. Bunche got there, they refused to give him his reservations because he was colored. They used another term, you know. The word got to the NAACP, particularly the youth. When I got my clothes on and everything, ready, refreshed, and whatnot, Medgar and all of them had organized the youth and the convention, and we were marching down to picket the Heart of Atlanta. Medgar was very active, and he didn't play.

But I bring that to your attention to show how close and what kind of individual Medgar was. When he was killed, remember, he had been to Tampa as well. In 1953 the southeast region met in Tampa, and Medgar was here along with Vernon Jordan, who was on the staff, and people from all over the southeast region, including the national office. When the funeral was to be held, I didn't want to go, and Roy told me I had to go. I said, "Okay, the boss says I got to go." I have to go. To see Medgar laid out at the Masonic Temple where his office was, was something that struck all of us and let us know that the dangers that lie before us and the type of things that were developing.

CB: What did his death say about your own situation with Florida? You're about to have a run-in with the Klan in St. Augustine. (Saunders laughs) You have been living for ten years under the threat of violence at any moment. I don't sense in all the years that we've known each other that you thought about that much. I never can understand how you have such courage that you simply didn't think about it. Something so tragic and so deeply painful to you personally as losing Medgar Evers that way, you had to have thought about it.

RS: Anybody would ask this type of question that you have brought to me. I have always said I have three things: a good god, a good life, and a good doctor. This is something that I always kept before me.

CB: Good longshoremen's union in Tampa.

RS: Good longshoremen because when my son—we were working on school desegregation and some other issues, I didn't know that the longshoremen were staked out, watching my house.

CB: Other people were aware of the danger you were in, even if you didn't allow yourself to be.

RS: This is true. I give credit to, although sometimes Perry Harvey, Senior, and I didn't agree on everything—but Perry Harvey was one of the individuals in the longshoremen's

union in Tampa. Perry Harvey threw the longshoremen behind us and everything we did, including, in many instances, memberships. I was always aware of the dangers. Last night when they were talking about—

CB: We were in a wonderful evening occasion at some of your close friends' and relatives' homes in Thonotosassa.

RS: When they talked about coming around the Highway 41 in Inverness, and I mentioned that I knew about that curve and the fact that the Trailway [Continental Trailways] bus station was there, and the incident of the highway patrolman in my mind telling me slow down because there was a four or five mile area there speed limit. I saw the red light behind me and all of these cars pulling out from the Trailway bus station behind this trooper, and when he stops me, I guess something always tells you the correct answers. When the trooper asked, "Is this your car?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Are you a preacher?" I said, "No." He wanted to know was I a school teacher. I said, "No." He said, "Who do you work for?" My mind said, tell him the truth. I said, "I work for NAACP." The state trooper turned around and told these guys to go back.

That, in essence, tells you the effect of our work, even on the highway patrol, because we were definitely giving the highway patrol—I mean, the fact that you're talking about the highway patrol now and what they're doing with regard to identification and whatnot. Back in those days, we were on the highway patrol because they didn't even have black patrolmen.

CB: And wouldn't for years.

RS: When I did that, I knew that the word was out. These guys were aware of the work of NAACP and the pressures that were being brought to bear, particularly in the St. Augustine situation.

CB: Look at the change in you. In 1952 and 1953, you reached for, very understandably, the protection of the A.M.E. Church, and cloaking yourself in the benign credibility of a church official when you traveled out in the state. Here, in the early 1960s, as problems have actually gotten worse in many respects, you're refusing to utilize that cloak of security any more, and you're proudly, even when you think you're in a situation of immediate potential violence, proclaiming you're a representative, or the representative, of the NAACP.

RS: Remember now, the church is a good cloak to follow, but there are certain situations and conditions that you don't utilize the church. Here you're dealing with state officials, the state highway patrolmen. Traditionally, you know—Larry talks about this in his book —

CB: Dr. Larry Rivers, who wrote the book *Slavery in Florida*.

RS: Dr. Larry Rivers, how the black slaves, when they would be clapping and singing, the verses that they were using had nothing to do with slavery. It had something to do with freedom. There's a time when you use those type of—

CB: You brought that up the other day, but to me you still are so modest as an individual. I know that the death of Medgar Evers had to have had a profound effect on you, beyond just your personal grief but it seems like what it did was made you angry and made you even more determined than you were before and more willing to risk yourself.

RS: Medgar and I had worked very closely. And, of course, one of Morris Dees's staff people, when I raised the issue about Harry T. Moore's name not being on the monument, in Montgomery, of civil rights workers, I pointed out that the first civil rights martyr was Harry T. Moore. I couldn't understand why he wasn't there. One of his staff members responded to the letter and said that she had been to Washington, the Library of Congress. She was aware of my role in the civil rights movement, my name and whatnot. She had seen correspondence between Medgar and myself, regarding the finding of a witness that Medgar had been looking for in a case in Mississippi, but he was in Florida, and I had located him. That was that kind of relationship that existed, working together. Even in the Alabama situation, even though we were told that we couldn't come into Alabama, and I was glad when Bob Carter was instrumental in winning the effort to get into Alabama, but there was still communication. Another thing, you mentioned the mass meeting of the state conference meeting in Sarasota. That meeting was held at the Ringling auditorium and the speaker was Vernon Jordan.

CB: I noticed once again that you're refusing to answer my question here. You probably won't because again, you have a modesty that just doesn't allow you to talk about it, I guess. I don't mean to put you on the spot. Before you say something, let me quote Myrlie Evers from the back of your book. Your book was published in 2000 by the University of Tampa Press. We've showed it before, *Bridging the Gap: Continuing the Florida NAACP Legacy of Harry T. Moore 1952-1966*. Mrs. Evers, now Myrlie Evers-Williams, wrote, "I am pleased that with the publication of this work, the courage and contributions of Bob Saunders and the Florida NAACP finally will be recognized. Medgar and I knew Bob as a friend and as a colleague. He is an unsung hero and an exceptional human being who has given so much to the cause of justice and equality in America."¹⁵

I would stress her words "the courage." I'm not doing that to put you on the spot or to somehow artificially try to build you up because you certainly don't need me to build you up. But I think that people need to understand that Florida was not some benign semi-tropical paradise where the worst problem was that there were separate water fountains for a little while in some rural areas. It was not that way at all. Florida was a very violent, racist place. It was not by accident that the NAACP wanted to use Florida as a laboratory with Mississippi. In some respects, the states' racial attitudes and practices were very similar. The threat of violence was very similar. Medgar Evers, your dear friend, paid

¹⁵ CB is reading from the back of the dust jacket.

with his life. For fourteen, almost fifteen, years, you worked with that threat hanging over your head. I just think it's important for people to understand that.

RS: I can appreciate that, but I also recognize that I could not have survived without the help of people. We did have friends, both white and black. Let me give you an illustration. When the legislature was talking about passing—what is it? When you file a lawsuit, the term that is used—anyway, the legislature was talking about passing a law, which would make it illegal to file a lawsuit. And what they were saying was that we were illegally using plaintiffs—

CB: Barratry.

RS: Barratry. They were trying to pass an anti-barratry statute. After meeting with the lawyers and whatnot, we knew that with the type of legislature that we had, we couldn't beat that. What happened was that, with Nate Perlmutter, who at that time—he's dead now—was the regional director of the Anti-Defamation League out of Miami. The Florida Council of Human Relations and other groups, including white and several black groups, met in Miami to lay the groundwork, to see how we could prevent the legislature from passing that kind of legislation. It was decided. Perlmutter brought to the attention of this group, white and black leaders, that the Florida Power was providing legal representation to its staff who were injured on private property, and that this amounted to barratry. When that came out, all we had to do was sit back and watch the other people go to work on Florida Power and other corporations in Florida, and the legislature didn't pass it.

This is the kind of thing that, in Florida, we did have that kind of relationship. In Mississippi, Medgar was almost out there by himself. Incidentally, I even had eaten in his house. After he was killed, Charlie, his brother, asked me, he said that Gloster had asked him to serve as the field secretary for a while, and what did I think about it? I said, "Go ahead." Even though I knew that Mississippi would be in trouble with Charlie Evers to handle it. I don't know whether this answers your question.

CB: You didn't give up, did you?

RS: We didn't give up, no.

CB: In fact, you're about to get cranked up.

RS: While the legislature was trying to find ways and means to declare us illegal, we were trying to find ways and means to declare what they were doing as being illegal, and we had the support of powerful corporations in Florida, utilities and whatnot, who themselves were violating the statutes.

CB: We are drawing to near the end of our fourth day's session of these conversations. Tomorrow I'd like to pick up with the other initiative, in addition to the march on

Tallahassee that you inaugurated in the wake of your NAACP sessions with President Kennedy, the demonstrations in St. Augustine.

I have another visual aid that I promised your wife that I'll bring back home today, so I want to show it. Some historians have written about subsequent events in sixty-three [1963] and sixty-four [1964] in St. Augustine as being primarily a series of initiatives by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, headed by Dr. King, but I wanted to make the point early that the NAACP had been involved in St. Augustine for years before the Southern Christian Leadership Conference ever arrived. The demonstrations for the quadricentennial celebration were planned and instituted by the NAACP. Already, the community in St. Augustine had recognized your work there. I took something off your wall this morning, and I hope you're not upset at me.

RS: Teeth? (laughs)

CB: The outstanding black college located in that region, Florida Memorial College, presented you as early as 1961 with this certificate for your faithful and honorable service in the best interest of humanity in the area of St. Augustine. I think that it serves both as a way to close today and a launching point for our discussion of St. Augustine that, already by 1963, you and the NAACP was intimately familiar with circumstances there and would take an extremely active role in planning the demonstrations and in continuing the work there after the Southern Christian Leadership Conference departed. With that, we'll say goodbye for today and thank you again, Dr. Saunders. I hope you'll be back with us in the morning.

RS: After today, I guess I'll have to. (laughs)

CB: (laughs) To defend yourself.

End of Part 4

[January 18, 2002]

CB: Hello. I'm Dr. Canter Brown. It is Friday, January 18 in the year 2002. We are back with Dr. Robert W. Saunders, Senior, one of Florida's most remarkable residents of the twentieth century and the leader for much of the civil rights era of civil rights activities in Florida, as field secretary for the Florida. Welcome back, Dr. Saunders, to the lovely studios of the University of South Florida Library's Media Center.

RS: I'm glad to be here. I want to congratulate the two people who guided us through all of this. They didn't give me their names, but I hope that their names—

CB: We have our video crew: Jane [Duncan] and Nafa [Fa'Alogo], who have just made our week delightful, and we don't want to forget them.

RS: We have to include them because I understand you're telling me this is a historical document.

CB: At least your part of it is.

RS: Their part, too. (laughs)

CB: We also ought not to forget our host for this series of five days worth of interviews that we're concluding today with our last two hours. That's the Resource Center for Florida History and Politics at the University of South Florida and its outstanding director, Dr. Mark I. Greenberg. We want to thank them for hosting us here, as well as the Media Center and the USF Library.

RS: I think I can speak for, not only myself, but for the NAACP, and particularly for the Florida State Conference because this brings into focus the work of that group, particularly because Harry T. Moore in 1941 was the individual. He and Noah Griffin in St. Petersburg were the first to organize a state conference. We've been referring to Walter White. I think Walter White was the spokesman, the speaker who came down.

CB: At that meeting in St. Petersburg.

RS: That is a historical body that is strong. Even today they're very strong.

CB: You want to see if we can finish out your tenure as field secretary today? We went through some tough times yesterday that involved not only tremendous challenges to the Florida NAACP in the mid- and late-1950s and early 1960s, but terrible personal tragedy for you with the assassination of your dear friend and colleague, Medgar Evers, in Mississippi. There was more excitement on the way for you.

Just by way of context, to bring us where we are, 1963, Florida has ongoing activities designed in response, a good part, to President [John F.] Kennedy's unwillingness to commit to backing the civil rights movement at a meeting that you attended as one of the committee of representatives of civil rights organizations in the White House. Nineteen sixty-three is the year that Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference take on Bull Connor in Birmingham, Alabama, to the horror of the nation. Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is written while he is jailed in Birmingham in April of 1963. After bombings rocked the city in May, President Kennedy finally acts, committing troops to keep the peace in Birmingham.

It's the next month, in June, that year that your friend Medgar Evers was killed, although one advance occurred that month when Governor George Wallace is forced to integrate the University of Alabama against his opposition. In August of that year, 1963, the march on Washington, in some ways an echo of the march on Tallahassee that we discussed yesterday that was sponsored by the NAACP in Florida and occurred earlier in 1963. Nonetheless, the next month, September 1963, more bombings rocked Birmingham,

including the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The year ended with even greater tragedy in November of 1963 when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

It would seem that with all of this going on in the rest of the South, there would have been no way for Florida to make the headlines in civil rights activities here, but the fact was that, based upon planning, careful planning and organization by the NAACP, Florida in 1963 and 1964 will be not only capturing the headlines but will be appearing nightly on the evening news. And of course, that involved the second of the two-pronged spearhead of the NAACP in Florida in 1963, the march on Tallahassee being one thing and protests of segregation in St. Augustine, the nation's largest city, in anticipation of its quadricentennial celebration, eventually were to capture the national imagination and bring national attention to Florida. But historians, to some extent, have presented that.

I'd like to get into this in a little depth if you don't mind, as more of an activity of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and its great leader and future Nobel Peace Prize winner, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We began to touch on the fact yesterday that the NAACP had long been involved in activities in St. Augustine, and as early as October 1962, had begun to plan protests that were going to lead to a year and a half's worth of sometimes violent demonstrations and activities there. So having started that, I just mentioned that through the summer of sixty-three [1963], as Birmingham is being rocked, demonstrations are ongoing in St. Augustine. In the next year, in the summer of 1964, they will build in intensity. Eventually Dr. King will come there, will be arrested, and jailed briefly in St. Augustine. What were you doing and what was the Florida NAACP doing before, during, and after these very noteworthy incidents?

RS: St. Augustine was one of the tough areas to protest, particularly all of that area. Remember, that's near Hastings where the cabbage and potato farmers are, and a lot of migrant programs and workers. The NAACP, when I went there, really, the leadership was not in the hands of the black citizens as such. Traditionally, in some communities, the black principal often was a spokesperson for the black community. In a sense, this was true in St. Augustine. I don't blame that principal, because I can understand how most black educators, particularly in Florida and the South, had to survive. I understand even how Harry T. Moore's mother sent him to Jacksonville to be educated and then brought him back after a while.

This was part of the process of reorganizing. When I went into St. Augustine, I met with Dr. [Royal Wendell] Puryear, president of Florida Memorial College. Florida Memorial College is a Baptist institution. Dr. Puryear was upset because he felt that with a college there that the city and the county were not giving the kind of assistance and help that was necessary for an institution of higher education, even though it was black. We organized a youth council—a college chapter. I think it was sixty-two [1962] or sixty-one [1961] that the college chapter began to put pressure downtown. And the first person to be arrested in sixty-one [1961] or sixty-two [1962] was the president of the Florida Memorial College chapter. We got him out of jail and everything, but that did not stop that college chapter from moving ahead.

I need to give names I recognize before it slips my memory to Dr. Eubanks, Reverend Eubanks. Eubanks plays a role even in the writings of other persons on St. Augustine. This is the lady who became president of the branch because the person who assumed presidency when I went in there was a barber and a minister. He admitted that he couldn't perform. Then of course, you had the young dentist.

CB: He was elderly, as I recall, wasn't he, the president at that time? He acknowledged that he had got on in age to the point where he really couldn't—

RS: Yeah, he was elderly. He was a barber and that type of thing. Of course, Dr. Hayling later on moved into the community and opened up his office.

CB: Dr. Robert Hayling, who would become a real hero of the activities.

RS: His home was Tallahassee. He knew what had happened in Tallahassee. But the significant thing was that these young people at Florida Memorial College continued to move and organize, and we continued to work with them. Then the movement there recognized that St. Augustine had a slave market. This was a tourist attraction, and these young people resented that kind of thing, too. Eventually what happened was that as problems began to gel in Florida, for example, I mentioned Fort Lauderdale—where they wanted to keep me out of Fort Lauderdale—and Miami, Tampa, the baseball bat situation in Hemming Park in Jacksonville, which was terrible because even Mayor Burns could not be found when we were trying to contact him.

CB: We discussed that a day or two ago, and it took place just a couple years earlier than the time when St. Augustine is going to heat up.

RS: Now, you had Klan activity. As a matter of fact, there were two Klan newspapers that were constantly being published. In St. Augustine, the law enforcement began to follow the dictates of the Klan rather than other things that they should have been doing as law enforcement officers. Before that, there was so much going on in Florida: Webb City, the world's largest drugstore. Dr. Webb had gone into court to sue the NAACP. And of course, the picketing and the fact that the young fellow who is a relative to the group, the family out of (inaudible) that recently got the legislature to give the descendants of their people—

CB: The Rosewood families.

RS: —was the president of the chapter in St. Petersburg.

CB: Is this Arnett Doctor?

RS: Arnett Doctor. Arnett, you see, and these young people had become active. There was another person there by the name of Cox who was working at the junior college. I speak about Cox in the book, how the superintendent of schools in Pinellas County tried to put pressure on Cox because of what was happening in Webb City and that type of thing. All

of this is going on throughout Florida, and it kept me busy because I was having to find ways and means to—

CB: You were constantly out of town, weren't you?

RS: Out of town, and I had to find ways and means to—when these young people were getting into jail and whatnot. Plus the fact, I think, [Richard W., Junior] Ervin, the state's attorney general—was he state attorney general?

CB: Yes, at that point he was.

RS: Yes, and he was issuing orders. His advice to local communities ran counter to what we were doing. Then of course during that period of time, with all this going on, Reverend Frank Pinkston had been attending a school in Virginia. He had been participating in sit-ins and had been a very young man, and had been trained in non-violent and that type of thing, and then Pinkston came. He met with me, and he said he wanted to get involved. I got Gloster Current. Current told me to bring him to New York. I did that. When Pinkston went to New York, they talked to him. Roy Wilkins approved in bringing him on board for a short period of time and stationing him in St. Augustine.

CB: That certainly illustrates the priority that the national and state organization was giving to the events in St. Augustine. We're talking now about 1963, a year and a half before the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

RS: It was during this time that the young people from the college and some of them in the city began picketing downtown, that these four young individuals were arrested and held by the juvenile authorities. The juvenile court would not release them. I have often talked with Leander Shaw and Earl Johnson, who were the lawyers working with us there. Leander—when you talk about that situation, Leander smiles and said that's the first time he could not talk with his clients because the judge wouldn't let him. They appealed to the national office for help in that situation because these young guys were being held. The courts were saying that they were juvenile delinquents because they were participating in the sit-in demonstrations. Our stance was that it doesn't matter whether they were juvenile or not. They were black. All they were asking for were the rights to be granted just as any other citizen. A white kid is able to sit at a store and whatnot.

In the meantime, Hayling is there. Hayling is very dissatisfied. I was working out of Hayling's office most of the time. Hayling and I were communicating. Things are heating up. And the Klan began to organize. The law enforcement officers were really more Klannish than they were anything else. I think I mentioned Reverend Eubanks, because there was a shooting. I think the Klan was parading through the black community and the son of a white Klansmen got killed. I mention Eubanks because every time something happened, Eubanks was on the phone, no matter what time of night it was, calling me and telling me what was happening, and I needed to get a bondsman and a lawyer up there. Another key person in this is Charles Cherry, out of Daytona Beach. Charles Cherry, a bail bondsman, working at Bethune-Cookman College.

CB: I believe you and he are still very close friends.

RS: Very close friends. As a matter of fact, I think Cherry is a city councilman now up there. Cherry became state conference president later on. But on one occasion, after this killing, excuse me. I'm recalling now that—

CB: Take your time.

RS: Eubanks called, and we got lawyers in there. There were some arrests made. I don't know whether the Eubanks's son was arrested or something. Cherry had to go in and bond them out. As an aside to the story, Cherry was bonding so many people out in Tallahassee and everywhere else until the state wanted to take his bonding license. They may have taken it. I don't know. Then something else happened, and that was that somebody shot Hayling's dog or shot into his house. This angered Hayling. Hayling began talking about retaliating with force. Then of course Hayling wanted Mr. Wilkins to come into the community.

CB: I'll tell you what. Before we get to that, because that's going to occur in 1964, a couple of things are going to happen first that are going to set the stage for subsequent events. One thing, in September of 1963 at St. Augustine, Dr. Hayling did have his own run in with the Ku Klux Klan, didn't he?

RS: That's right. I think they shot into his house, and Hayling became angered. When they killed his dog, Hayling was really upset. That's when he said, "I got a gun, I'm going to protect my property." This of course brought the power structure there into play, and they began to watch Hayling very, very—you know—because what was happening was that the youth, no longer were they working out of Memorial College. They were working out of Hayling's house and office. This is where I was working with them. The city fathers began to pay close attention to this activity because the picketing would begin in Hayling's house, and Hayling was, in essence, financing it. They were picketing downtown, and then they'd go back to Hayling's house. This angered the founding fathers down there.

In the meantime, Frank Pinkston is working there, too. Frank is helping to organize these young people. He is working with them to deal with non-violence and that type of thing. The four juveniles are being held in the jails there, and the court won't let anyone talk to them. Frank Pinkston organizes the demonstration around the jail—I think—I'm remembering as it happened. This is the thing that upset a lot of people. This is when the courts came out and said that these young people are juvenile delinquents. Earl Johnson and Leander Shaw are representing them. There's a letter in my files here where Leander calls on the national office to give assistance because we began to think that this is the beginning of a new attack from Ervin's office, the state, that these young people who are picketing are going to spread throughout the state of Florida and begin putting these young people who are demonstrating in jail as juveniles. So we were moving to stop that, too.

CB: Getting back for a second to Dr. Hayling's September 1963 confrontation with the Klan, is my memory correct that you were supposed to be with him that night until a change of plans? Was that not the occasion when you were suddenly summoned back to Tampa?

RS: No. That was when the Klan had decided that they were going to have a regional meeting or something, and they had a Klansman coming in from Georgia and everywhere. We were going to meet behind the bowling alley on US 1. [There's a] big field down there. They were distributing literature and everything. Hayling told me that he and four fellows there who had filed a complaint. I think I mentioned the complaint that was filed against Fairchild. Herb Hill, who was then a labor secretary for the NAACP, had met with Fairchild and got them to agree that they were going to straighten out some things. This is when Hayling said that they were going to observe the Klan meeting behind the bowling alley. I told Hayling, I said "If it was me, I wouldn't go down there." And Hayling said, "This is U.S. 1. It's a public highway, and they can't stop us from going down there."

But experiencing the fact that law enforcement officers didn't like Hayling—they hated Hayling—the fact that all this literature that was being distributed was aimed at what was going on in St. Augustine and really aimed at Hayling, I told him, "You can go if you want, I'm going to get my clothes washed." (laughs) But what happened was that Hayling and these four young guys drove down the highway and the report that came to me was, as they turned around to come back the Klansmen were guarding the highway and what not, and when this car with these black fellows came in, they told them to drive down that driveway into where this Klan rally was being held.

Fortunately, some of the people from the Florida Human Rights Organization had infiltrated that meeting. They reported that when Hayling and those came in, the Klansmen began yelling, "Niggers, niggers, niggers." They started beating Hayling and these four individuals. It was the person from the Florida Human Relations Council—I think that was the name of the body—who got in touch with the sheriff. That's when the sheriff came down there and rescued Hayling and the four.

That morning, about—must have been about four o'clock—Roy Wilkins called me and said, "What about these black fellows who got beat in St. Augustine?" I told Roy that I had come because I had been working out of St. Augustine constantly without going home. I told him I was on my way back over there. He said—well, I think the *New York Times* had contacted Roy—and Roy told me, "They're supposed to be in the hospital. You go there and you tell them that the NAACP is going to pay their hospital bills and everything." When I got there, I went to the hospital. What I saw, I'm glad that I wasn't a fool and joined Hayling and those, because they beat the devil out of those guys unmercifully. Hayling got the brunt of it because they identified Hayling. This is before King came in.

CB: It's the same month that the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham is bombed. In this atmosphere that's building in the South, including Florida, touching off violence is problematic everywhere. There's the potential for violence all over the South and in much of Florida.

RS: Let me point out something that's very key. I don't want people to think that the NAACP was not working with other organizations, because Roy Wilkins was supporting John Lewis and his group, the Freedom Riders. Roy had been into Mississippi. Even though the NAACP was not active in Alabama, it was providing assistance. The idea that is given is that the NAACP was, on the outside, not doing anything, but this isn't true. See, Hayling went to Jacksonville after the Klan had its day in Jacksonville and got the baseball bats and beat the young people. Hemming Park—incidentally, there's an idea now that one lawyer is talking about there should be a monument in Hemming Park in memory of Rutledge Pearson, but that's jumping ahead.

But anyway, Hayling and the leaders of this group and one other individual and went to Jacksonville and talked with Pearson about bringing the youth and the group from Jacksonville down to St. Augustine. I think Rutledge told him that they had had too many problems in Jacksonville

CB: That's what I want to get into briefly here. September 1963 the Birmingham bombing, and Dr. Hayling and his companions are assaulted by the Klan in St. Augustine. President Kennedy is killed in November of sixty-three [1963]. As of the new year, 1964, Florida opens up a gubernatorial election campaign season. (Saunders laughs) And once again, segregation is the battle cry of most of the white politicians with ambitions in Florida, particularly, of all people, Jacksonville's mayor, Haydon Burns.

RS: Haydon Burns, yes.

CB: What had been your experience up to that point with Mayor Burns? What were his attitudes?

RS: Well, I was working with Rutledge Pearson. Incidentally, Rutledge was an athlete, superior baseball athlete. I think he was made a contract given to him by the Boston White Sox or something.

CB: Boston White Sox?

RS: Red Sox, or—what is it?

CB: I think it's Red Sox. It's Chicago White Sox.

RS: Whatever it was, it was a Boston team. When they came into Jacksonville for an exhibition game going north, Pearson could not go in the gate with his teammates. That kind of upset Pearson, and that got him to working. That's how Pearson became active in the NAACP.

CB: Getting back to Mayor Burns—

RS: There had been a series of situations, particularly the Berrier Ice Cream case in which—

CB: I think you talked a little bit about that yesterday.

RS: Yes. The young people in Jacksonville had begun to organize under the direction of Pearson, and they were very active.

CB: Again, excuse me for interrupting, but what I'm really hoping you'll do is share your perspective on the kind of leadership Mayor Haydon Burns, who was about to be elected governor, was giving within the intense atmosphere of the civil rights movement.

RS: Haydon Burns in our opinion was a segregationist. And there is a report written by—I forgot his name. He tells about what we knew, that the Klan had decided they were going to have a big meeting in Jacksonville. They had brought all the Klan leadership in from south Georgia and north Florida and around the area of St. Augustine and Hastings. They decided that on a certain day, when the black youth council members went downtown, the Klan was going to have baseball bats and trucks or something. They were going to beat these young people. Haydon Burns—we tried to contact him, but we couldn't find him. The report that we got in this news article that came out in this study—and this paper is on file downstairs here—said that Haydon absented himself and that Haydon knew what was going to happen. I think this article says that even the FBI tried to get in touch with him.

CB: From your perspective then, you considered Mayor Burns an enemy of the civil rights movement.

RS: He wasn't friendly with the civil rights movement. There are other things that concerned us, and that was the fact that Burns, in essence, politically controlled even so-called black leaders. Also, I had a classmate of mine from Tampa and Bethune-Cookman who was on the police force. When he was off duty, we would meet, and he was telling me about what was going on at that police force. Also, remember I mentioned the case of President, the black fellow who was selling moonshine or something and left Jacksonville. When he came back—he had tuberculosis—and when he came back, I think he was living in south Jacksonville; he hadn't been in town a day or two before the police went to his house and arrested him. As I recall, his death was suspicious in that he died while in the custody of police in Jacksonville. These things were going on, and we were trying to get Haydon Burns' attention to what was happening.

CB: One of the points I was trying to make with that question was simply that, here we are, as late as 1964, and avowedly segregationist candidates, some of whom have pretty poor track records in public service in terms of their attitudes towards the civil rights movement, this is what is making a splash in Florida politics still in 1964.

RS: Because Burns is preparing to run for governor.

CB: And lo and behold, just as he is kicking off his campaign, Jacksonville erupts in bombings, demonstrations, and riots.

RS: That's true.

CB: February and March of 1964.

RS: I recall that Governor Collins—and this is one of the things that began to warm us up to accept Collins, because Collins sent his key investigator or something and when he got in to Broad Street after the baseball bats—

CB: This is back in 1960.

RS: No, this is when the—

CB: Because Governor Collins went out of office in sixty [1960].

RS: Okay. This fellow came in, and he was talking to some of the young people on Broad Street or something and he wanted to talk to Ruby Hurley and myself. We were working there. These guys wouldn't tell him. We were staying with a dentist there, Ruby and I. They wanted to know should they tell where we were and let him in. We said, "Yes, send him in because he's coming from Governor Collins's office." This is when Collins gets into this speech that he made. I think that Jacksonville had a lot to do with Collins's new approach. I think this is when he made his comment about if you run a business that you had the right to serve everybody.

CB: His last several years, he certainly was—

RS: Jacksonville was the point where he made that speech that was picked up by the press.

CB: We've kind of dropped back in time here a little bit. But you raised a good juxtaposition, and that is here in the beginning of the decade, Governor Collins in his final year in office, he is reaching out, beginning to exercise positive leadership. But two years later, Mayor Burns, who is about to get the Democratic nomination for governor, reacts to events and the bombings and demonstration of rights in Jacksonville, not by reaching out to the civil rights movement—or at least I'm going to ask you that—but by an attempt at a hard police crackdown. Is that a fair characterization?

RS: This is true, because the police participated in the effort to break up the demonstrations. Our informants told us that the police knew what was going to happen. How could you gather at Hemming Park, which is one of the major centers in downtown

Jacksonville? How could the Klan come in with baseball bats and everything and gather at the park?

CB: Again, we have to be careful not to confuse two very different incidents here.

RS: Again, this is Burns. This is Burns as the mayor of Jacksonville. You mentioned about the police. I'm saying that the police had to know what was going to happen. I think, according to the report that was given to me, and to, perhaps, Pearson, that the FBI had infiltrated the Klan at this meeting. This is how we knew what was going to happen. Burns somehow or another disappeared from the scene.

CB: In 1964 again, actually four years after those earlier events, his reaction is an attempt at a hard police crackdown, followed by using his hard-line approach as one of his principal arguments of why he should be elected governor. And he wins, doesn't he?

RS: He campaigned on that, and I think this might be called a last-breath attempt by the Klan to instill control through politics. What was happening to get a governor in there who, in essence, didn't go along with the efforts to desegregate and move. Stetson Kennedy, the article that is on file downstairs is the article by Stetson Kennedy—Kennedy did—

CB: We should mention, I guess, that when you refer to an article on file downstairs, you're referring to the collection of your personal papers that is in the University of South Florida Library Special Collections Department.

RS: Yes, and Stetson Kennedy has about a four page article. Stetson goes into great detail because Stetson had contacts that were there, too. This is true.

CB: Well, here we are early in 1964, gubernatorial campaign heating up; the Klan remains very active and sometimes violent in Florida; bombings, demonstrations, and riots in Jacksonville early in the year; demonstrations ongoing in St. Augustine. And it's just at this moment, March of 1964, that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference enters the St. Augustine battle.

RS: At the invitation of Hayling.

CB: If you could, briefly explain those circumstances. You had begun to mention it.

RS: Yes, well Hayling met with the Pearson and the Jacksonville group. And it's interesting to note that every time you mention the Jacksonville group coming into St. Augustine, the sheriff and police department got nervous because they didn't want those guys from Jacksonville coming down there. But anyway, Hayling met with Pearson, and Pearson said that he would look into it. But then Pierson said no, that they had enough problems in Jacksonville that they wouldn't go down there.

Then Hayling asked Roy Wilkins to come in, and of course Roy had just come out of Mississippi. Roy was arrested in Mississippi, too, he and Medgar. Roy called me and said, “I have a telephone call from Dr. Hayling, wanting me to come down and participate in St. Augustine. Do you think that I should do it?” Well, we knew what Roy had run into in Mississippi. St. Augustine was worse than Jackson, Mississippi. And I said, “In my opinion, I don’t think you should come, but I’ll call Pearson, who is the state conference president.” Pearson told Roy that we didn’t need him, that we were progressing in working in St. Augustine. In the meantime, Pearson—we moved him out because Pinkston lived in Ocala, and if he went home he had to go through that forest, whatever that is, that forest up there.

CB: Ocala National Forest.

RS: Ocala National Forest, and we felt that, wait a minute, as active as Pearson was that they were going to get him. Pearson, we moved him out, and he began working in Ocala, Marion County. I might say that the Klan even shot into Pinkston’s house in Ocala.

CB: Again, on the subject of Southern Christian Leadership—

RS: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, there was a meeting between Hayling and a representative from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. And it was agreed that Dr. King would come into St. Augustine. And of course, I knew what we were doing. This is before I set down with Bryant.

CB: Governor Farris Bryant.

RS: I had warned Bryant about his not particularly speaking out and doing something. He was opening the door for other groups to come in, and Bryant sat back like a dummy and didn’t say anything. When he left, after about fifteen or twenty minutes, I bid farewell to Governor Bryant and left because the last thing that he told me was that this was a local issue, and “I’m not going to have anything to do with it.” We knew what his posture was.

CB: At that point, of course, it was national news.

RS: It was national news now. That’s when Dr. King and the SCLC came in. Now, I had a telephone call one morning from the director of public relations for NAACP one early Sunday morning, and he said, “I see in the *New York Times* that Dr. King is coming into St. Augustine, and he’s bringing with him Mother [Mary Parkman] Peabody, the governor’s mother.”¹⁶

CB: Massachusetts governor [Endicott Peabody].

¹⁶Mrs. Peabody was arrested in St. Augustine while participating in a sit-in.

RS: Massachusetts governor, and a Presbyterian minister was coming. He asked me, “Do you know anything about this?” I told him no. We didn’t know that King was coming in, which we didn’t.

CB: But he does. In June of 1964, he’s eventually arrested at a time when St. Augustine police start beating demonstrators in the streets of St. Augustine—national television coverage of these events. In the minds of federal lawmakers and many voters in this country, not coincidentally then, it is the next month, July of 1964, that President Lyndon Johnson is able to sign into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which I believe you have credited as beginning to break the back of segregation in the South.

RS: This is true, because Johnson began to meet with Roy Wilkins and Clarence Richard laying the groundwork for the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Johnson began to take some very strong stands on what was happening. The effect of it was such that even in Florida, the opposition were getting worried because they didn’t know what Johnson was going to do. All the while, King is active in St. Augustine. And the national attention is focused on St. Augustine. This is something that, again, had an effect economically on St. Augustine. I hope that we get into that. The Ponce de Leon Hotel.

CB: Our problem is we’re running out of time. We still have quite a bit of your life to cover. I think we should have, when we were first talking with the wonderful people at the USF Resource Center for Florida History and Politics, maybe we should have negotiated twenty or thirty hours of interviews.

RS: Now wait a minute! (laughs)

CB: But if you don’t mind, I want you to say anything that you consider important. I think it is important to make the point, but you tell me if this is a legitimate way to express this. In 1962, the leadership in the NAACP, especially Roy Wilkins, had determined the need for federal backing for the civil rights movement if it was to succeed. Progress had not been made as had been hoped. Resistance was building. President Kennedy was approached by leaders, including you, in the White House, and he did not respond in a helpful way, at least from your perspective. The NAACP leadership then determined to go out and create a situation in which federal authorities would have no option but to commit.

In Florida terms, you came back, and within a very short amount of time, the Florida NAACP was planning the March on Tallahassee, and within just a couple of months began planning demonstrations in St. Augustine. By 1963, demonstrations were ongoing in St. Augustine; the March on Tallahassee proved a great success. By 1964, as events throughout the South were capturing imagination, Florida zooms into the public spotlight with those St. Augustine demonstrations that you had been planning at that point for well in excess of a year and actively engaged in. Do you feel, then, that the efforts of the Florida NAACP deserve some of the credit for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964?

RS: I think that it does because we were in Jacksonville, Dr. Steele in Tallahassee was the first vice president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but he was president of the NAACP there. And of course, Tampa—and particularly in Ocala where Farris Bryant wouldn't even come into Ocala, even though the boycott against businesses in Ocala was so successful that stores were closing down. Pinkston was leading there. I didn't mention about the fact that 120 persons were arrested in Ocala who had been trying to register to vote. The word was that, and I think Ervin had something to do with the decision that—

CB: Florida Attorney General Richard Ervin.

RS: Florida Attorney General Richard Ervin had something to do with it stating falsification of records or whatnot. That's when Hatchett, who became a federal judge—

CB: Joseph Hatchett.

RS: Joseph Hatchett.

CB: An NAACP attorney.

RS: We had to send lawyers in there because they had put these people in jail, and we had to deal with them. I think that that particularly also was something that helped to move toward the voting act that came down.

CB: Again, for our purposes right now as we conclude this ninth hour of our conversations, and we are running right up on the end of our time for this hour. It seems to me that, as an historian, Florida and its NAACP has never really received much credit for its role in the broader civil rights movement. On the other hand, who would deny that the Civil Rights Act passage of 1964 was a crucial turning point? Now the federal government was committed to backing the civil rights movement, and the federal courts and federal law enforcement. That did not happen by accident.

RS: It did not.

CB: A major part of the reason was a campaign by the NAACP to draw the federal government into a commitment, and in part the events that allowed that plan to succeed were events that were planned and executed in Florida by you and by your associates in the Florida NAACP. I don't want to blow your trumpet here, but I just wanted to close this hour seeing if you felt that that was in fact the case.

RS: Florida played a key role, especially in the setting up of the quadricentennial celebration at the Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine. The powers that be in St. Augustine were counting on this big splash. Vice President Johnson said that after the NAACP protested at the request of Hayling and the branch out in St. Augustine—

CB: This is in 1963.

RS: Sixty-three [1963]. Vice President Johnson said that, if they did not let black people into that address that he was going to give at the Ponce de Leon Hotel that he was not going to speak. They became quite upset at that, plus the fact that they became upset because Smathers—

CB: U.S. Senator George Smathers.

RS: George Smathers sent his key aide in there. He reported to us that Johnson said that he would do everything possible to take away federal funds in St. Augustine.

CB: Here you have a Southerner who finally is bringing the power of the federal government to play in the civil rights movement outside a violent event such as President Kennedy and preceding in Birmingham. It is the same man who, the next year, will cap off the initiative by the NAACP by signing into law, as president, the Civil Rights Act. With that, I am so sorry, but I have got to call a halt on our ninth hour, and ask you if you will please have the kindness to stick around for a few minutes, and we will begin our tenth and final hour of these conversations.

RS: I'm enjoying this. I mean, I'm reliving history, and certainly I'll stick around.

CB: Great.

Pause in recording

CB: Hello, I'm Dr. Canter Brown. Welcome back for our tenth and final hour of fascinating conversation with Dr. Robert W. Saunders, Sr., who served his native state of Florida well from 1952 to 1966 as the field secretary for the Florida NAACP during the heart of the civil rights era and who, as we're going to learn in this final hour of our conversations, served the nation and his home state and county again in the future in somewhat different capacities. Welcome back. Can you believe, Dr. Saunders, that we've already been at this nine hours, and we're wrapping up this whole series of conversations?

RS: I can believe it. I've enjoyed it. It's helping me because it's reliving the past, and some things that occurred, even though we can't cover everything.

CB: It's clear to me that—we alluded to this in our first hour this morning—I guess we should mention that this is Friday, January 18, 2002. We are, yet again, in the lovely studios of the University of South Florida Libraries Media Center in the University of South Florida Library as the guests of the Resource Center for Florida History and Politics of the University of South Florida Library.

We were just talking about what was the culmination of a generation of effort in 1964 on behalf of civil rights and particularly the NAACP's efforts with the passage and signing into law by President Lyndon Johnson in July of 1964 of the Civil Rights Act of that year.

It didn't end the NAACP's role in Florida, nor did it end your service as field secretary in Florida. For example, I believe that I remember you saying that soon after the passage of the act, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference withdrew from the St. Augustine demonstrations. Did the NAACP withdraw?

RS: No. The NAACP stayed there. We worked under a woman as president of the branch. We worked in the area of voter registration, school desegregation, and as a matter of fact, I think that the work that was done has brought remarkable change to St. Augustine. I might add that Florida Memorial College, Dr. Puryear told me in sixty-two [1962] that he was dissatisfied and that he had recommended to their board that they move their college to Miami. That college is now down in Miami because of the fact that the people didn't treat it right in St. Johns County.

CB: I know that you did not feel that, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and then the next year the Voting Rights Act of 1965, that your job was by any means done. By then, after you had been, as they say, laboring in the vineyards at that point for twelve, thirteen years, sometimes, as we've discussed, in a very lonely or threatening environment, very frustrating at times, sometimes personally painful, and yet you must have begun taking some delight and some satisfaction in the changes you had begun to see occurring around you.

RS: Yes, I did, because we were moving ahead in school desegregation, as you can read in books, and particularly in Constance Baker Motley's book, the number of cases that she was involved with in Florida and the work of moving desegregation ahead.

CB: As I mentioned to you in one of our earlier sessions, it's at exactly this point, the fall of 1965, that my high school in Fort Meade in Polk County desegregated, the very first school in the county. Similar actions were occurring all over the state by then. Beaches were now being opened. The wade-ins and swim-ins had succeeded. Life was changing in Florida.

RS: We could go into not only the beaches, but even the parks, the recreations, and the swimming pools were open. It was an interesting change that had taken place.

CB: One change that I know you must have some interesting thoughts about was, while you were working day-to-day in 1965 and in 1966, often with the opposition of the state government and Governor Haydon Burns, you must have been fascinated to look at the evening news and see his predecessor, Governor LeRoy Collins, as President Lyndon Johnson's ambassador to the civil rights movement.

RS: I was well pleased because Collins, as in the book I point out, a moderate governor in the Deep South. Collins did a complete turnaround as a result of his experiences in Florida as governor.

CB: You feel you could take some pride in being one of the agents of that turnaround?

RS: When Governor Graham, Bob Graham, appointed him to the committee for implementing the Martin Luther King holiday, they took a picture at the new capital when they lobbied down there, and Collins was walking off. He was co-chairman along with Dr. Neyland from Florida A&M. I was on that committee. Collins was walking away because he had somewhere to go. I said, "Governor!" He turned around. I said, "I'm Bob Saunders." He looked at me, and we got to talking. I said to him, "You're writing about yourself, and people are writing about you, but nobody's talked to me about you." He looked at me and said, "You are darn tough." (laughs) You know, this let me know that even though Collins may not have acted as fast as we wanted, he was listening to us. And I can appreciate what happened at his appointment by the president, because he loves to talk about going across that bridge in Alabama.

CB: Selma, Alabama.

RS: Selma, Alabama.

CB: The March on Selma being March, 1965.

RS: As a matter of fact, I had dealings with the mayor of Selma, you know, and I went to the federal government.

CB: We're going to get to that in just a minute. Don't give away all the secrets yet. Other things were happening that touched you personally that must during this time have brought to light 1965 also. The president of the United States, Lyndon Johnson, a Southerner, appointed your dear friend and sometimes-mentor Thurgood Marshall to the U.S. Supreme Court.

RS: I remember the night that they had this big workshop in Washington, nearly three thousand people there. That program is in my files down there. I think to achieve these rights or something like that. Thurgood was speaking, and the band starts playing "Hail to the Chief," and in walks President Johnson. That's when he announced that night that he was appointing Thurgood as a nominee to the United States Supreme Court. I felt good because all these years I'd been working with Thurgood. And Thurgood has been educating me and the rest of us. I'd like to point out one other thing that after he became Supreme Court Justice, and we're moving now into my field with the federal government

CB: See, you're giving away all the surprises again.

RS: Go ahead, go ahead, go ahead.

CB: You will revisit Thurgood Marshall in the future. I don't think that's giving away too much. Did you have a sense at that time, the mid-1960s, that you really had accomplished something? Or was the day-to-day struggle still so great that you didn't have time to reflect on it?

RS: I felt that there had been accomplishment, and the accomplishments came about because of the fact that we had new and more aggressive leadership in the state conference, the educational facilities, particularly Florida A&M College, the effort and the kind of cooperation we were getting. It was interesting. It was a great deal and some of the things that personally affected my family in Hillsborough County. That is the fight that we had with my son to get him into the school system. Finally, the first black kid enters the Hillsborough County School System—MacFarlane Park Elementary School.

CB: Nineteen sixty-two.

RS: We went ahead and did other things with the boys clubs and everything, particularly utilizing the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

CB: Well, speaking of which, as a result of the passage of that law and other laws in its wake, you decided in 1966 to transform yourself from a civil rights activist on the ground to a civil rights enforcer. As a result of which, you will resign as field secretary of the Florida NAACP.

RS: I blamed Vernon Jordan on that. I was in Leesburg working on the school desegregation issue. My wife called me and said that Vernon had called and told her that there was a plane ticket for me at the airport and that I was going to Washington. He had told her to tell me not to turn down this opportunity because I had turned down two other opportunities. When I got to Washington, I found out that consideration had given to offer me the position of chief of the office of civil rights for the southeast region OEO, Office of Economic Opportunity Program in the southeast region. And that opened up a new avenue of opportunities and opened my eyes and gave me the advantage of learning more, working from state to state even in some areas where, for example, Mississippi and working to bring Governor Wallace around.

CB: I want to get to that in a second, but in sort of a measured way if you don't mind. First, what were your feelings upon leaving? Was in a bittersweet moment? Were you eager to embrace the new opportunity? Why is it specifically, if there is a specific answer, did you want to make this transformation?

RS: The transformation to me was progress. In essence it was a program. I didn't think that I could, you know, with the NAACP, yes. Here's an opportunity to do more and to work in areas where people like Medgar and some of my other colleagues in the southeastern states were still laboring. I'm being brought into a new program to work with the poverty and the poor. Here I became acquainted with people like Fannie Lou Hamer. You name it. All of these people in the southeast region who actually then depended upon the work of the Office of Economic Opportunity, particularly the Civil Rights Section.

CB: You're now clothed with the power and authority of the United States government. What you had fought for, and what the NAACP had sought, now its own agents are enforcing this law that they've helped to bring about.

RS: I learned one thing: that there was power in the position. I was able to deal with individuals who headed forward with staunch opponents. I learned that the dollar has power and that politicians look at the fact that they want that money.

CB: It makes a difference.

RS: I learned how to keep that money from them until they came around.

CB: You have spoken in our conversations about how important it was, the development of your own thinking and your maturing as a person willing to commit himself to Civil Rights activism. To see Jackie Robinson's great dignity and courage at ball games in Cincinnati in 1947 and yet how he persevered, making a great statement as the black pioneer athlete in professional baseball, professional sports. And he, as a friend, came back to help you. With that as a lead in, how is the announcement of your departure made in Florida?

RS: Let me point out that when I started working for NAACP, Jackie was on the national board of directors. Jackie became one of my closest supporters, and when I called on him, he always came. He spoke twice in Tampa and once in Clearwater. He helped in St. Augustine and Jacksonville. But on this particular time he was speaking in Tampa, and I whispered to him and told him that I'm leaving—

CB: March of 1966.

RS: —March of 1966—that I am leaving the NAACP and accepting the position with the federal government. I didn't want him to announce that, but when it came his time to speak, the first thing he says was that, "Bob Saunders is leaving." But it's interesting. Before he began to speak, he made this comment, "You're leaving, but who's going to run the NAACP?" I looked at him in surprise. Here's a board member making that mention to me. I told him, "Well, there will be somebody," and that type of thing. Then he gets on the podium and makes a public announcement that had not been made known that I was going to the federal government and that I was resigning from the NAACP.

CB: Is there any chance you'd be willing to tell us what you think he meant by saying, "Now who's going to run things?" I've been struggling for ten hours to get you to compliment yourself, and you won't do it.

RS: The field secretary, under the national policy, is a powerful individual in each state. You've got the backing of the national. You've got the backing of the best lawyers and the best staff. I mentioned about Herbert Hill and getting a fair trial in St. Augustine, the fact that the first real case against discrimination and employment was against Martin Marietta in Orlando. I hadn't mentioned that before. And we won that. All of this was some of the accomplishments and we were moving ahead. I felt that here's another golden opportunity because I think that all of us, under this new legislation, had more authority to do. As a matter of fact, when I was with OEO, I have pictures of Roy Wilkins

even coming in and speaking to the staff to change their attitudes about the civil rights opportunity program.

CB: Let me give you what I think he was trying to say, and you tell me if you think I'm too far off. I think Jackie Robinson was saying that they couldn't fill the vacancy that you were creating, that you had contributed so much and had built the NAACP into such an influential and successful organization that he simply questioned whether they could find anyone who could fill your shoes. Do you think there's a possibility that that's what he was trying to get at?

RS: That's your conclusion, but it has weight. (laughs)

CB: Okay, good. What I'd like to do in our very short amount of time that we have remaining is cover some pretty broad ground. I would like to touch at least briefly—these interviews as they were conceived by the Resource Center for Florida History and Politics here at USF, were to focus on your life and your service in Florida, so necessarily we have taken most of the time. I'd like to at least mention your subsequent careers because they were, in their own way, very distinguished. I'd like to give you a few minutes to talk about what you think your life has meant and the world you see about you today, where you see us as being. But first, you had, through your years of service, almost from the beginning back in Florida, until today, a partner whom you have credited with sustaining you and being your ally day-to-day and moment-to-moment, and who, as we have learned in our conversations, was more than willing to risk her own life to be with you and to support you. I know you wouldn't want to leave these conversations without taking a few minutes to talk about your wife, Helen Strickland Saunders.

RS: How true. She was born in Mims, Florida. She knew more about Mims. She knew the Moore family.

CB: This is Harry T. and Harriett Moore, your predecessor.

RS: Harry T. and Harriett Moore. Mrs. Moore was her teacher. The Moore family and her family were very close. I didn't know anything about Mims. As fate would have it, we became husband and wife. She taught me more about Mims and opened up my view, and I was able to meet Harry T. Moore's family and to learn a lot about Moore's activities there.

CB: When you moved back to Florida in 1952, you really didn't know her, did you?

RS: No, she was working at Central Life, and I knew everybody at Central Life and had been in there on several occasions. Even when Mrs. Bethune was president of Central Life, I would go in there and talk to her. I really didn't know her until after I returned. Then we tied the knot.

CB: Was it love at first sight?

RS: Oh, yes. She was the prettiest girl there. (laughs)

CB: (laughs) Well, she, being a very gracious, gentle person, is also a shy person. And yet, am I not correct that she emerged as a civil rights leader in Tampa in her own right?

RS: Yes, she did. As a matter of fact, she served as president of the Tampa branch. She served as the secretary of the Tampa branch for many years. Of course, her experience in education helped the branch to advance because she was recording a lot of this information, heretofore which was lost.

CB: At the same time, she had quite a successful business career, didn't she?

RS: Yes, she rose through the ranks in the insurance industry from a mere clerk. She became the corporate secretary for the Central Life Insurance Company. She's a genius when it comes to insurance. She knows insurance from one end of it to another. She taught me a lot about insurance and how insurance companies survive, you know; if I don't have enough money to cover a policy, I contract with another insurance company. And this was part of her job as the head of that department.

CB: Of course, you all remain happily married now, almost a half a century later. Do you think you could have done what you did had she not been a part of your life?

RS: No. I think it's fate that had that this was destined. It seems that everything in my career, something that I had no control of, I would move into a new town or something, and then all of a sudden, in walks Gloster Current in Detroit. I had never dreamed of being in Detroit and getting that job. I never dreamed about going to the federal government. My opportunities with the federal government opened my avenues of experience particularly with dealing with problems right here in Hillsborough County, when I came back to this county. But no, I was helped.

CB: You believe the Lord sent Helen to you?

RS: Either the Lord or somebody (laughs) because she is very brilliant.

CB: She certainly is an individual who has yet to get the recognition that she deserves, I think. Although fortunately through your writing and your public presentations, people are beginning to be reminded of her great contributions to Tampa and to Florida.

RS: Every time I talk about Ben Green's film about Harry T. Moore, you know, *Freedom Never Dies*, I was in there talking about Harry T. Moore with Helen.

CB: She's become a star, hasn't she?

RS: Oh, yes. They're calling from New York, people who know her, I saw Helen in that. I said, "Oh, Lord, she's getting more publicity than I am." (laughs) She's very active even in her church.

CB: At which she has very carefully maintained her adherence to the Baptist church as opposed to the A.M.E. Saunders household.

RS: Can't even get her off the Baptists.

(both laugh)

CB: Now, having been very careful to mention the debt that Florida, Tampa, and you yourself owe to her, let's take just a minute or two and go touch on your subsequent careers. From 1966 until 1976, you were the chief civil rights enforcer for the Office of Economic Opportunity out of its southeastern region out of Atlanta. And rarely hesitated to wield the authority of the federal government on behalf of the causes that you love so much; but that, in turn, brought you sometimes back to Florida. I know you dealt with governors like George Wallace. You've written about your confrontation with Governor Wallace over federal funding for programs near and dear to him. You also had run-ins with Governor Claude Kirk here in Florida, didn't you?

RS: One of the things that we did out of the poverty program was to organize equal opportunity associations in each of the states that they operated in. The first training session that we had was in Montgomery. We brought all of the recipients of the funds and the OEO officers into a training session dealing with affirmative action and the requirements of the Civil Rights Act under the poverty program. And of course, the *New York Times* had an office in Atlanta. And there was a reporter covering our activities after the training session in Montgomery. He came to me and said, "I overheard a telephone conversation," and they were calling another state, saying to them that you couldn't have this training and that type of thing. When I got back to the office in Atlanta, there was a telephone call from the state Economic Opportunity Office in Tallahassee, and the individual said that Governor Kirk had told them that we couldn't have this kind of training in Florida.

CB: Just again, to offer context, we're talking here about as late as 1967, 1968? Is that the period?

RS: In 1968 we were getting into the implementation of the program. This individual told me—well, I told him that if the governor has a complaint, I'm the head of the civil rights section, receiving these complaints and responsible for investigating them, and to send a complaint in. Instead of sending it into my office, they went to Washington. My boss called me out of Washington and said, "What's wrong with you and the governor in Florida?" I said, "I don't know. I understand that the governor has said—I can't prove this—but somebody called and said the governor called and said we couldn't have civil rights training, Title VI and whatnot, in Florida. I told him to send a complaint to me, but they sent it up to you all in Washington." My boss told me, "You hang around the office for about three or four hours, and I'll be right back with you." Sure enough, about three or four hours later, I get this call from my boss, and he said, "You go into Orlando and

you have that training. Anybody who gets in the way, including Governor Kirk, we'll take care of him from Washington."

We had the training in Orlando, and practically every program receiving OEO funds had their representatives in Orlando. I felt good because here I got the backing of the federal government behind me telling the governor of Florida in essence. Really, I don't think Kirk said this. I think these are people out on, you know, his office or whatever it might be who are saying this. It made me feel good because here I have everybody there including Fannie Lou Hamer came down to speak to them. We had their training. And the people in Florida who got the grant money had to be there. It was mandatory that they be there.

CB: You went to work for the OEO in 1966 in the heyday of the Johnson administration's support for civil rights and the war on poverty. But very quickly you found yourself confronted with an administration of an entirely different nature, that of President Richard Nixon. Yet, I can't help but notice that you survived those years. How is that possible?

RS: Well, I think we had done a good job. And we had, for an example, been successful in getting programs going, Head Start, you name it. And we had a constituency that was building up, particularly through the civil rights program and working through the agencies that we funded in the field. On several occasions we would go in and have Title VI hearings.

I remember one hearing in Mississippi, where we were funding Head Start. When we went in there to conduct the investigation or to look at it, I became concerned because the head of the Head Start program was not an educator or somebody who knew what this was all about. We had two or three lawyers from Washington including (inaudible), who was the legal counsel and had worked as an instructor at Florida A&M Law School. What we found out in going through this county was that we talked with white poor people, and the question we raised was, "Were you in opposition to your child going to school with black kids in the Head Start program?" We got answers like, "I don't care; they're going to school anyhow later on, so we might as well send them there." What happened was the school board had appointed, instead of putting a qualified person in charge of that program, they had the head mechanic of their shop to take care of school buses and whatnot was running their Head Start program.

CB: I hate to do this to you, but we can't get into all of the areas I know you would like to talk about because, almost unbelievably, we're already nearing the end of ten full hours of these conversations, which are what we have allotted. And there are a few other points I'd like to cover if you don't mind. In 1976, even though you had enjoyed your service with the federal government, and even though you had a great sense of accomplishment with it, you decided to leave. What was your thinking there?

RS: That was an invitation from Hillsborough County. Rudy Spoto—

CB: Your home county in Florida.

RS: —my home county in Florida—had applied for a grant from the federal government, \$15 million as I learned about it in Atlanta, to build the MOSI [Museum of Science and Industry] museum and the school board building. The head of the civil rights section had told me, and this is before I had been approached, that they had required that Hillsborough County have a written affirmative action plan with goals and timetables, which complied with the Philadelphia plan, which meant that even contractors had to have a program. You just don't write those programs overnight because you have to deal with statistics, labor force, analysis, and everything. Rudy was interested in getting that program going. He made the offer to me.

The thing that was interesting to me was in the application, in talking with the Civil Service Commission here in Hillsborough County, I became suspicious of discrimination. You know, we talked about how you identify discrimination. I'm a GS-14 [General Schedule Payscale] with the federal government. Rudy said he had to go to the Civil Service Board to get a salary and whatnot. Rudy came back and said, "Well, they say that can't pay you but \$16,000." I'm not going to give up a GS-14 position with the federal government for \$16,000. But we, with the backing of Rudy and some friends that we had, particularly—and I'm not going to name this commissioner that came to me and told me that he was chairman of the board. He said, "They don't want you here, but as long as I'm chairman, you get what you can." That's when I went to work and built a real program here in Hillsborough County.

CB: It seems that just the idea of being able to come home factored into this decision, back to Tampa. Is that fair to say? You had never sold your home, and in fact you and Helen still live in it today.

RS: The first house.

CB: Yes.

RS: Because we bought a house in Lincoln Gardens under the G.I. Bill [Servicemen's Readjustment Act].

CB: But the one you lived in when you left for Atlanta in 1966 you never sold, and you continue to live in it today. You had always seen Florida and Tampa as your home.

RS: There's one thing I learned, and that is that you never give up your base. I maintain my base. I paid taxes and was a citizen here, registered and whatnot, in Hillsborough County. While I was working in Atlanta, my home was down here. I tell a lot of people that when they do like I did, never give up your ground because then you lose your citizenship, and you have to go somewhere and establish yourself all over again. I didn't have to do that.

Let me point out something, and I know we're in a hurry. You mentioned Thurgood. Yeah, I had an opportunity to get with Thurgood again after he became Supreme Court Judge. This was the charges that had been lodged against me by Mayor [Beverly] Briley of Nashville, Tennessee, saying that I was not fair to these big cities in the South.

CB: When you were with OEO Atlanta.

RS: OEO. The subpoena was issued, and I had to go to Washington to appear before the McClellan Committee. Thurgood found out that I was there, and Thurgood said—he always called Medgar and myself, “Boy, you be at the Supreme Court at two o'clock tomorrow, because we'll be through arguing those cases. You tell that man at the end of that red carpet that you have an appointment with me.” I had to go in there. I spent two and a half hours with Thurgood teaching me how to deal with a United States Senate Committee. That was interesting.

CB: Pretty good teacher.

RS: Oh, Thurgood? Yes. (laughs)

CB: When you got back to Tampa, it had been your boyhood home. You had established an NAACP headquarters here. In 1976, Florida had really begun to change. Would you say that the reception you got from the local white business community, power structure, political community, the local newspapers, was a warm, open-handed reception?

RS: To make a long story short, I could not understand why the *Tribune* wrote a half-page editorial against my coming down and being heard by the Board of County Commissioners.

CB: So, in 1976, the leading newspaper in the community was highly critical of the county employing a man like you.

RS: They said because I was responsible for the blue ribbon committee report that they had been turned down by the federal government, which I wasn't. But I knew about it.

CB: Did you suspect there was more behind the editorial than just a question over one report?

RS: Oh, yeah. It's very interesting that there was still some opposition, particularly when it came to voter registration and everything.

CB: Nineteen seventy-six.

RS: It was still there. I had been sent into Florida in 1986, when the riots were going on here and in Miami [1989]. I was to report back to my boss in Atlanta with a report of what I saw. One of the things that I mentioned was the inability to have funds in even the poverty program to deal with the problem that existed in Tampa. And of course Roy

Bachelor, who was the director, the regional director, told me that when I came down to Tampa that OEO was committing itself to \$150,000 to deal with the riots here in Tampa. That's a long story, but I took that application back to Atlanta, and they got the \$150,000. This is what people don't know. It was OEO that funded the effort to bring about the change in Tampa.

CB: We ought to mention, I suppose, that your new job back at home in Hillsborough County from 1976 to 1988 was Director, Office of Equal Opportunity, for Hillsborough County. You served quite successfully in that capacity. So much so that when you finally retired in 1988, the president of the United States (Saunders laughs) joined with the community, and I think even the *Tampa Tribune* eventually, in praising your service, not only back in Tampa but through your life. I know that you prize this letter on White House stationery dated June 22, 1988 from President Ronald Reagan.

[The letter reads:] "Dear Mr. Saunders, Congratulations on your retirement as executive assistant to the Hillsborough County Administrator for Community Relations. Throughout your thirty-six-year career in the field of civil rights, you have been part of a special core of Americans that devotes its talents and energies to our nation and its progress. You should take great pride in your many years of accomplishment and the respect you have earned from friends and colleagues alike. Thank you for a job well done. Nancy and I are glad to share in this special time in your life and to send our best wishes for good fortune and happiness in the future." [End of letter]

Now, when you were growing up in Tampa in the 1920s and the 1930s, looking back now, did you believe that the President of the United States would be writing you to commend you for your life of service?

RS: No. As a matter of fact, that was a surprise to me when I got that. I got a call and said, "Look, there's an important letter down here, and you need to come get it." That was the letter that came from the President of the United States when I retired.

CB: What do you think, as you cast back now in your life, what made it all possible? We've talked about bunches of people and influences. We've explored the courage that it took, the determination, the patience, and how you developed that patience. As you cast back on this eighty remarkable years, what made you possible?

RS: Excuse me. My eyes have been running water since we've been here. But I think that it was the background that I got as a child, getting to know people, knowing and having a grandmother who didn't bite her tongue when there was opposition.

CB: Marion Matthews Rogers.

RS: Marion Rogers. Most of my family in Tampa are professionals. That came out of that.

CB: A great sense of pride.

RS: I think that all of this helped because my grandmother insisted on education. My mother didn't have a college education, but she did help my grandmother to get the others through. It was also the contact with key people, black people who had achieved. So many of them you write about.

CB: It's people like Marcellus Potter. People like Mary McLeod Bethune and many others who touched your life. Captain Fred Minnis you have given so much credit to.

RS: Particularly Mrs. Bethune because Mrs. Bethune has kept a lot of the careers of many of us. You can't leave her out.

CB: What did the sign in the dining hall say?

RS: In the auditorium, "Enter to learn, depart to serve." I recall when I talked to her when I came back to work for the NAACP, she was on the national board—she was vice president—she and the bishop of the Florida district. When I talked with her, she told me, "You make your own decisions; don't let anybody sway you," she said, "because you have an important job." She backed me until her death.

CB: How about your church? You've often credited specifically St. Paul A.M.E. Church here in Tampa, which we didn't really get to get into, but became a great forum for civil rights activities during your tenure.

RS: St. Paul is an institution, and it's unfortunate that people don't realize that it is an institution. People who lay the groundwork and built it intended for it to be that. I know my godfather, C. C. Green that we talked about—I learned that they intended for that to be a place where black and white people could meet without being segregated. The edifice is beautiful.

CB: It is, truly is.

RS: People need to realize the importance of this institution. It's not just a church, but an institution which recognized and came out of a religious background. You know the development of the A.M.E. in Florida and whatnot. What happened in Philadelphia when slaves walked out of Mother Bethel, that this is history. And St. Paul emphasizes that.

CB: You've written about it, and when you talk about St. Paul I can't help but remember the tremendous impact on you as a young boy. I think you were up in the balcony and listening to a black Congressman, Oscar De Priest, in the early 1930s, talk at St. Paul A.M.E., and it was individuals of that caliber who came into Tampa and into that church to lay the groundwork for the civil rights revolution.

RS: That's true. I won't name them, but I hope that the research is being done because even after I came to work, we began bringing important figures and outstanding people. I think at the University of Tampa at that dinner they gave, this lady and I got to talking

about the sisters. When I told her about their brother who was on the board of NAACP, he spoke here in Tampa when I came in. She said, “What?” I said, “Yes.” It helped. And particularly seeing the first black congressman since Reconstruction speaking in Tampa, people like Blanche Armwood, who was one of the persons instrumental in bringing him into Tampa, all of that is history. I won’t be able to write it all, but it is being done through people like you, the museum, and this institution.

CB: Other than your success in snaring Helen Strickland as your wife and your pride in your son Bobby, what would you list as the greatest accomplishment of your life?

RS: The greatest accomplishment of my life, I think, was right here in my own community, helping to establish a strong and good affirmative action program in government and being recognized by officials, elected officials in both city and county as having played a role in bringing it about. Without that, you couldn’t do it.

CB: I suppose you could argue that you outlived all your enemies.

RS: (laughs)

CB: The reality is that you won at almost every step of the way. Given the passage of time, the county and the community that proved so resistant to you coming back in 1976 in the intervening years have, in many respects, taken a 180-degree turn. It seems to me that that’s symbolized by the fact that this past year, 2001, the University of Tampa in beautiful ceremonies conferred a doctoral degree on you in honor of your lifetime of service to Tampa and to the state. You’ve received dozens and dozens of other awards. When I picked you up this morning, you had just received a letter that Hillsborough County is conferring an award on you for your service to the county, even when it had resented having to employ you to begin with. As you look around today, having savored such success over time, what do you see at the state of your community, your state, and the world around you?

RS: Number one, I know that what we have done in the United States could not have been done elsewhere. With people like—what’s his name, from South Africa?

CB: Mandela. Nelson Mandela.

RS: Mandela. And a lot of people don’t know that NAACP from the 1940s continuously had resolutions about South Africa and working in it. The institution and what we have done—I want to bring this up and make it very clear—what we’ve done is to bring about institutional change. We mentioned Gunnar Myrdal. What I learned was that institutions are established to protect the individuals who establish it and their beneficiaries. What we have done and are still doing is breaking into the institution, which was an all white, male institution. We have punctured it. We’ve gotten into it. We are a part of it.

For an example, women. Women could not participate. I think the Dred Scott decision, in essence, also dealt with the wife of the owner of Dred Scott, who could not inherit. A lot

of people don't realize that this is one of the things that was being considered by the courts then, because this wife of the owner of Dred Scott could not inherit Dred Scott. The history itself is very interesting, and what we have done is to break into an institution established for the purpose of most of the armies of the government who wrote the constitution were white males, so many of them owned slaves. There's been a tremendous change because that institution, we believe, has been punctured.

CB: Would you say the battle is won?

RS: No. No, because the power still lies in the groups who founded it, and many of the beneficiaries who are protecting their beliefs that this is something that was formed for their purpose. It's a sociological study. I think that institutions like this and other institutions that are dealing with racial problems are continuing to open up avenues so that all American citizens can participate without having to be kicked around as second-class citizens.

CB: Let me ask one last question in our last two or three minutes that we have. Many of the individuals who will be able to see and hear these conversations will be students: black students, white students. If you had one thought to share with them, one point you'd like to make with them, what would that be?

RS: Always be your best, because you never know who's observing, and your opportunities come about because of what they see and what they're expecting. I didn't know that Gloster and the national office was looking at me until Gloster asked me, "Do you really want to work for NAACP?" I said yes. That was a surprise because I never expected that.

CB: It seems to me that you have just written the synopsis for our entire ten hours of conversation and for your remarkable life of eighty years. You always did your best. Florida, the city of Tampa, the South, and the United States are in your debt for that. Thank you so much for taking your time—you remain, still, very active—to sit with us this week, to have these conversations, and I think bring open to a new generation and subsequent generations to come, the incredible story of your life and of the civil rights struggle in Florida. Thank you so much, Dr. Saunders.

CB: And thank you, Dr. Canter Brown

end of interview