

Charles Rogers
Narrator

David Taylor
Interviewer

September 14, 1997

St. Paul, Minnesota

DT: My name is David Taylor. This is one of a series of interviews in support of the African-American History in Minnesota Exhibit project. Today, I'm interviewing Mr. Charles Rogers. Mr. Rogers resides at 395 North Oxford Street in St. Paul. We're in his home. It is September 14, 1997, at eleven twenty-five a.m. Mr. Rogers is retired. He was formerly the assistant principal at Central High School in St. Paul before his retirement. He also has the honor of being the first black male teaching in the St. Paul public schools in the elementary school. He came here in the early 1950s as the first industrial relations secretary for the St. Paul Urban League.

Mr. Rogers, for the record, would you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your background, where you were born, your educational background, and when did you come to St. Paul?

CR: I was born in Jefferson City, Missouri, and I attended the elementary school in Jefferson City and the high school and college at Lincoln University. The elementary school was apart from the university, but the high school was part of the university. So I went through the university high school and went on through to college there.

Having graduated from Lincoln, there was very little that I could do there as far as employment was concerned. So I worked on a government grant called the CWA [Civil Works Administration]. I learned to be a painter and I painted about six months there with professional painters.

Then, I left this employment and went to St. Louis. After about six months there in Jefferson City, after having graduated from Lincoln, I went to St. Louis and found employment with the Adult Education. I became director of the evening school in suburban St. Louis. I was there for about two years. It seems for one reason or another, the day school principal left and I became the principal of the elementary school there in suburban St. Louis. I held that employment about three or four years. Then, I became interested in the Urban League because I understand that they were hiring an industrial relations secretary, a new concept in administration.

I'm getting ahead of myself. I decided before I got the job in—I wanted to go and get my master's degree. After having been a principal there at the elementary school, I decided I wanted

to get an advancement. So I, under the Separate but Equal Law, had an opportunity to get my tuition free and I could go anywhere in the United States of America and get an advanced degree.

DT: So, the state of Missouri would . . . ?

CR: Pay my tuition and books. I thought about Iowa. I thought about Meharry [Medical College]. I was interested in medicine. I ended up going to New York and taking up public school administration.

DT: At what school?

CR: At New York University. I went to Columbia about two or three weeks. I didn't like Columbia, so I decided to go to NYU. I got my degree there at New York University. I didn't get my degree conferred on me. I got an excuse because the war broke out, then, in 1941, while I was there working on my master's.

When June came, they gave me a grant and I got a chance to go and work on the government, where I took up ballistic metallurgy and explosives. I went back to St. Louis and I worked with the St. Louis Ordnance as an inspector of thirty- and fifty-caliber ammunition. I was teaching about fifty to sixty girls a week field inspection, and ballistics, and metallurgy, and explosives as it related to these thirty- and fifty-caliber ammunition cases. So, I was a supervisor in that area and, evidently, I was doing a pretty good job as they decided to promote me and I became one of the two assistant directors of the Ordnance.

Incidentally, they had separate plants there in St. Louis, at that time. They had two shifts and they had about 40,000 or 50,000 blacks. In the whole plant, I think, they had about 100,000 people there. They had fifty white personnel men and two blacks. We were working in a separate building all together. Then, I became one of the assistant directors of personnel. They had two of us. Then, they decided to put on two more after about a year. They had three men and one woman in their personnel in the black plant.

DT: They had a black plant and a white plant?

CR: Right.

DT: Interesting.

CR: The white plant would accommodate, I guess, around about 40,000 or 50,000 and we had about 40,000 or 50,000 blacks. They put on three shifts. Practically everybody—it looked like a St. Louis just—[Laughter] I worked there until such time the war was beginning to ebb and, finally, they were calling for the industrial relation personnel men. That was a new concept then.

DT: For the Urban League?

CR: For business even. The demand for industry that wanted to have people to come in, so if people had problems, that was what the personnel men did. I was a supervisor of the plant, at that time. Then, I got up to be assistant personnel director. People had income tax, just basic things, and I would figure it out for them. If they were having trouble with the employment, you'd look over the personnel records to see how they were fitting in. If they would be having personal problems on the job, they would have to come to me. That's some of the things that the personnel man did. That was a new concept all over in all of industry.

Practically, all the white guys—they were making requests for them. They were getting employment. I asked, "What about us? Do you have any demand for blacks?"

"No. There was too many of the blacks that went to war and got shot to hell like everybody else, but we haven't had no requests for black personnel men."

So, then I heard that the Urban League through one of my friends in St. Louis saying, "I got a request of the guy who was named executive director, a guy named Mr. Clark. He's working out there in personnel. We're trying to find some personnel men. You might be interested in the Urban League." I talked to him about it and he encouraged me to give it a whirl.

I wrote to Buffalo, New York, where they had a demand for them and he told me about it and he, also, had it in St. Paul, Minnesota. I had gone to New York. I knew how far it was to St. Louis. If I didn't like it in St. Paul, it was only about five hundred and sixty miles from St. Louis. [Laughter] I said if I didn't like it, why I could go back and it wouldn't be that far. Whereas, it was about eight or nine hundred miles to New York. Buffalo, New York, was the only other place where they had a demand, at that time. So, I came here to St. Paul, Minnesota, and I got the job.

DT: When was this?

CR: It was March 4, 1944, fifty-three years ago.

DT: Who was the director of the Urban League at that time?

CR: The director at that time was S. Vincent Owens. He's the one that made a request for it. I think this news came out to all the urban leagues and I think they must have had around about twenty-five or thirty then throughout the country. They said, "We've got a new concept. We're going to add onto the executive secretary a helper. His name will be the industrial relations secretary. His main job is to go into the industries and try to get the employers to give black potential workers a chance."

DT: What kind of jobs did blacks have up to that point?

CR: They were doing domestic work, cutting the grass, and waiting tables, the service jobs, basically. They weren't working in industry. They weren't working as bus operators. They were

not clerks. There were a few openings at the packinghouse and some of those jobs were not too good. I remember one man who was working in a lot of water and whatnot. He was just about ready to retire. He had arthritis so bad he could hardly raise his arms up. He wasn't getting hardly any compensation. I worked on behalf of him to see that he got some kind of compensation for his infirmities.

DT: Where was the Urban League office at that point and how large a staff did it have in St. Paul?

CR: It was on Fourth [Street] and Cedar [Street], I think. It had a very competent and efficient secretary. She could cut stencils. Her name was Bessie Powell. She since has married and had three or four sons or kids and one of them is a doctor now. The family got a citation by the Urban League. I believe it was just about two years ago. They had the executive secretary and, then, they had the secretary who could take notes and cut stencils, was almost an all-around business—she could do a very good job. We had three in all.

DT: What were some of the immediate things that you had to confront as the new labor relations secretary?

CR: The thing of it was that nobody had any jobs. For instance, I was interested in getting them interested in post office. I wanted to get them to operate the buses, streetcars, and I wanted them to work in the stores as clerks and such industries like Minnesota Mining, for instance, and the Bell Telephone Company. Those jobs were not available to blacks, at that time—they were available but they weren't hiring people of color.

I was able to get as far as elevator operators in the Bell Telephone Company. At 3M, Minnesota Mining [and Manufacturing], the only thing I could do at that time is I got three girls that graduated from the University of Minnesota. They were hired as machine operators along with women that had only an eighth grade education, if that much. Of course, my concern was after they hired them—I almost had to do everything I could to get them employed period—this is what the job had, but now why couldn't they give them promotion? Finally, these two University of Minnesota graduates—I think they were sisters—they left but at least it was an opening made then. At that time, there was no blacks at Minnesota Mining at all—period.

DT: Was it possible for black youth here to graduate out of high school with skills that would be employable? How many black youth went on to college to get skills?

CR: There were quite a few, a few, just like it was in my hometown. There were a few that graduated but when they graduated, they couldn't get a job in the system, in the school system. So, what they had to do was take off, go elsewhere. Some of them went to the south and some of them went to the east. I know a couple of fellows that had graduated from the University of Minnesota and they told them that they didn't have any openings in high school and they wanted to get in as coaches. One went to Pennsylvania and got a coaching job.

DT: This was the school system that wouldn't employ them?

CR: That's right. Also, when they'd go south, the south was saying, "Yes, we've been taking quite a few people from Minnesota, but we are sending our own up there to Minnesota to get their master's and Ph.D. degrees and we're giving them priority. What you'll have to do is open up there and hire your own people, have them help you. We're giving priority to our people that have gone on and gotten their Ph.D., got their master's degree, got an advanced degree. We're giving them priority. Sorry, we can't hire you." That's what they were telling us and it was very discouraging for those people that graduated from here at that time.

DT: You're saying then that there was kind of overt discrimination on several levels that kept blacks out of employment opportunities?

CR: That's right.

DT: Was there any attempt to redress that by city ordinances or state law? Was the governor concerned about any of this at all?

CR: Unfortunately, everyone was sympathetic but no one had enough fortitude or else, they didn't have the courage to stand up and point these things out and do something about it. We had organizations like the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and local people but, evidently, they weren't forceful enough to get the employers—get the people worked up enough to do something about it.

DT: I understand that, at one point, the governor selected a commission or a committee to look into the status of Negro workers in Minnesota and a report was written. I think it was a commission headed by one of the local Catholic priests that went around and asked about employment opportunities and why people weren't hiring. Do you recall that?

CR: They may have had. I remember that the Urban League couldn't pay me all that they were supposed to. They did have what's called the Governor's Inter-Racial Commission. But, it seemed as though it was kind of a weak sister. They weren't getting enough support.

We did have Father Gilligan, who was president of the Urban League at that time. He was quite a forceful person and he did have quite a bit of support from labor. He was quite an arbiter. He went all over the United States sometimes to help break the deadlock between the employer and the employee. He was, at that time, president of the Urban League and he was quite forceful and made a lot of the inroads.

But, the problem still exists and you saw where we had what was called the Negro Work in Minnesota. The Urban League couldn't pay me the full salary so the Governor's Race Commission assisted. I went all over the state of Minnesota to see what the problems, where they were, and what were they doing. That took me around about a year to do that. As you see later,

after I left and went into the school system, Whitney Young came in, of course, at that time, and followed up on it and some of the leagues from the Negro Worker.

Father Gilligan was the instigator of this study. It was a survey. It was a questionnaire. It was documented. It was around about three or four pages. In that, they gave the Negro population and the percentage of blacks that were employed. It gave the educational background on many, the demand for them. It said they have abilities to serve in many capacities and they have the ability to learn and be taught, but they were being overlooked. Where there was a demand for workers, they're not seen as fit.

They asked the question, "Would you hire a black under the circumstances?" They gave a lot of reasons why they could not. One of them, of course, was they said, "We could not hire because a lot of the people don't want to use the toilet facilities that blacks use and they don't want to use the drinking fountains. It'd be breaking the law if we permitted it." That was some of the excuses that the employee gave and the reason why they didn't want to hire—because of the law.

DT: And there was no law?

CR: There was no law. [Laughter]

DT: [Laughter]

CR: There was a law among them as far as the employees were concerned—the reason being why they didn't want to work with blacks. Then, another thing they were saying, of course—I asked them—for instance, Northern States Power—to get a meter reader. Of course, they said many things. One of them they said was that they leave their wives home, and blacks would be coming in the house to read the meter, and they were feeling as though they might take advantage of their wives and whatnot.

DT: Then hire black women. [Laughter]

CR: [Laughter]

DT: Logic.

CR: There were other things that were even worse than that that came in. Father Gilligan said that he was not permitted to use because people had given this out of their heart and confidential. He wouldn't permit it to be—

DT: You're saying that when the survey went out, they filled this information in and it came back, but he couldn't release any of this information because it was personal?

CR: That's right.

DT: People only gave it because they thought it was an anonymous sort of thing?

CR: That's right.

DT: How did, then, the governor's commission use it? You have all this information and you know there's discrimination but where do you go from there?

CR: There was some loosening up there. Quite a few did go out to the Anoka arsenal, the ammunition plant. But, that closed down and unemployment was quite heavy. The pressure began to go on.

DT: Does Cecil Newman have anything to do with that with his threatened boycott of the arsenal plant early on?

CR: Oh, yes, he had quite a bit—yes, he had quite a bit. In fact, it was almost full employment. At that time I came in, there were round about 3,500 blacks, in 1944 here. And most of them that weren't working on the railroad and whatnot were out there at that plant. When the war ended, we had the problem again—unemployment. A lot of people, most of them, a large number of them, mostly all of them, were on welfare.

DT: So, then, the task was to move them from welfare rolls onto employment rolls by working through, again . . . ?

CR: That's right. Asked where employers felt the need of getting assistance. He was quite an arbiter. He was not a great speaker like Les, but he, on a one-on-one basis, had a very good persuasive power and he did much to get employment opportunities for blacks and he did much for me to be able to go in and open up and have a one-on-one dialogue with employees. I was able to do a lot.

DT: I was told that, along with the Urban League, many of the barbershops that were owned by black proprietors often act as employment referrals as well.

CR: They did, but they were not ones that were promotional, where they had a chance to advance. They were jobs that gave them employment before a promotion is concerned, becoming directors, and supervisors, and the like.

DT: How did that work? Did someone tell a barber that they needed help somewhere and you would relate that to . . . ?

CR: That's right, they made him a very big guy. They had a lot of confidence in him.

DT: How many barbers were here when you came?

CR: There were around about five or six.

DT: Who might they be?

CR: I don't remember all of them but I'll just say there was Hall. There was Martin, and there was Howard, and Dick Smith. There's about two or three more that I can't remember offhand now.

DT: I assume that you got your hair cut regularly there?

CR: I got my hair cut regularly. Then, I had hair.

DT: Which shop did you go to?

CR: I went to Mr. Martin's shop.

DT: Tell me about Mr. Martin's shop. What kind of an environment was that?

CR: They say he was just like a black newspaper. He knew everything that was going on in the community and that he didn't know, he was told. [Laughter] So, there was an exchange of information. When you'd come in, you'd give some information and, in the meantime, he would give you some. So when you got through, you could know what was going on in the community. Some of it was good. Some of it was bad. It was very entertaining. It was like a dialogue. It helped you to get your hair done. [Laughter]

DT: [Laughter] Sitting in that barber chair as the Urban League labor relations secretary, he would tell you what you needed to do?

CR: Yes. [Laughter] So, it was quite interesting. You had a good relationship with them. You could make it your business to do that you know, I mean like and get information. That's been quite helpful. They were very supportive. It made it very nice and easier for you as a newcomer. I was able to pick up information and, also, able to give information and got support.

DT: Make network connections, too?

CR: Right.

DT: Sitting in that chair, what types of issues did you hear that were really most important for you to address or the community wanted addressed?

CR: Sometimes, you know, it would be police brutality and, sometimes, bootlegging. Someone would be picked up or was selling whiskey. Sometimes, it was discrimination. There were, sometimes, attempts for people to go in certain places to eat and they were not accommodated. Those places were publicized, in many instances. Sometimes, it did good. Other times, it kept people away. Of course, there was gossip that was passed on, people that would be, we'll say—

[Tape interruption]

DT: You said there was gossip.

CR: Yes, sometimes, there were marriages and whatnot, just a regular exchange of feelings that people had. It was just local news, happenings and whatnot, marriages and whatnot, just ordinary conversation.

DT: To your knowledge, did other community leaders come into these barbershops and got the same dressing down? [Laughter]

CR: [Laughter] Yes, my lord, yes! Although, I suppose that anyone that comes new into the community, of course, there's a lot of curiosity. They want to find out who you are, what you did, and where did you come from. They would tell you what to expect and whatnot. Of course, they would appraise and evaluate you and pass that on to somebody else. It was all quite interesting.

DT: How long did you remain industrial relations secretary for the Urban League?

CR: About three and a half years, almost four years.

DT: In that period of time, what do you think were some of the hallmarks of your accomplishments?

CR: I took a job myself and we opened up the school system. They were trying to tell me when I would try to open up employment opportunities that they had no openings in the secondary, but they had them in the elementary and they didn't have anyone available. I looked around and whatnot and there wasn't anyone available at that time, that got their degree in elementary school administration or else in teaching in the grade schools. I thought this was just one of these things. Incidentally, too, I worked both cities, both Minneapolis and St. Paul. As a matter of fact, I didn't get an interview in Minneapolis for superintendent, but I did two or three times here. I went back two or three times and they said, "You can't find anybody. We'll take you." I said, "You don't want to take me. I want to try to get someone else an opportunity." That went on like that for some time and, finally, I said, "I can't find anyone available right now, so if you're sincere, I'll go in." So, I took the job at Maxfield Elementary School.

DT: You began working for them when?

CR: That was in 1948-1949, something like that.

DT: At Maxfield Elementary School in St. Paul?

CR: Right.

DT: On St. Anthony [Avenue] and St. Albans [Street]?

CR: Right.

DT: One of the things you were trying to do was to get employment in the school system?

CR: That's right.

DT: What were some of the other things you thought you might have wanted—?

CR: After that, when I was there, they started hiring. They got, before I left there—I was about three years at Maxfield and four years at McKinley. They didn't make me principal. Of course, I'd already been one. They were not promoting me up other than to just make me transfer from one school to another. I, then, said that I will put in, then, for the high school. Then, they sent me out, after being three or four years at McKinley, to a school where they said they didn't want any blacks at all. They hadn't had any black custodians and they didn't want any black teachers.

DT: What school was that?

CR: That was Murray. Murray was mostly the professors' kids of the University of Minnesota. Seventy-five percent of them went to college. I went out there and I told the principal, who had formerly worked at Mechanic Arts— That's where all the blacks went, basically, other than going to Central—at that time, they had only a few that had even graduated from or even went to Central, because the line up here was Lexington [Avenue].

DT: The boundary.

CR: Yes, the boundary. Most of them went to Mechanic because they were southeast of Lexington. I went out there and I developed rapport.

DT: To Murray?

CR: To Murray. I stayed there fifteen, sixteen years. They had this walkout at Central because they had no black teachers. I think they had one and it was a special class or something like that.

DT: That was in—?

CR: It was 1968 or 1969, something like that, when they had the walkout. Then, the people were coming and they tried to get black administrators and it was such a bad situation. People came from all over . . . didn't want to get involved. Finally, they thought of me. Something like, 'we got Rogers. He taught—many of the kids that are walking out, he had their parents and if we can get him, we can more than likely get some of this trouble over with.' I'm assuming this is what it was because they called me to see if I would be interested. I told them I wasn't interested.
[Laughter]

DT: Was this the assistant principal position or a teaching position?

CR: The assistant principal position. I had my degree in school administration so I was ready. I'd already been a principal of an elementary school. I had that degree in public school administration and elementary and secondary, but, these people just overlooked it. In fact, I just want this in. When I came here, they had one Ph.D. and I was one of five or six that had a master's degree. I came here with a master's degree in school administration. These people were going to school and working on their degree. It was just, basically, discrimination, that was all. They turned away a lot of people that way, that were prepared, even blacks, I imagine. They got their application in. They looked at it and threw it in the trash basket—that's why.

I went to Central [High School.] I told them that I was satisfied there, but they tried two or three times to get me to come there. They said, "We need you now." I said, "Why is it now? This is January. Can't you wait till June?" They said, "No, we've got to have you now." So, finally, talking away and what not, I knew two or three guys there. In fact, Reno Rossini was there. He'd been at Murray with me as a teacher and, then, as assistant principal. He was probably on my side, too, and wanted me to come.

So I left and went there. Things subsided. Of course, they were thinking that I would be able to show such a difference in administration and whatnot to what was right. I said, "We have school rules and regulations. You will not be discriminated against, but you have to conform to the rules and regulations of the school." I had the name of having a black face, but a white heart. Finally, the people began to say, "We said we wanted a champion. We say we want a black and we're not given Rogers support." When those people came to my support, things started to make a difference and the problem seemed to resolve itself. We had no problems.

DT: You stayed at Central from . . . ?

CR: From 1969 to 1976.

DT: Then, from there, you retired?

CR: I retired. They did ask me to come down to be interviewed, but it really was just too late. I was ready to retire then.

DT: Interview for?

CR: Come down there for principalship.

DT: Oh, okay.

CR: But, I refused. I did sit on the board where some of my colleagues were making applications for principalship. [Laughter]

DT: [Laughter]

CR: I was very supportive of them. But they did ask me to sit and to evaluate, which shows the respect they had for me.

DT: Yes. Interesting. Backing up just a little bit, going back to some of the issues in the community that might have led to the students acting up, what was the black community like, let's say, in the 1960s? What sorts of things were going on that led to the types of tensions?

CR: The concept of "black is beautiful." There was the championing of equal rights and employment. The kids were very impatient. They could hardly wait. They didn't even want to be prepared. They want a here and now proposition. They weren't thinking in terms of preparedness, and it is dangerous to be given something you can't maintain. You don't have enough background and know where to protect yourself. If you don't have any background and no experience, no education, what good is it going to do for you to be on the job in which you can't command respect and do the work? They were not looking ahead.

They wanted to get ahead now. They had the concept "black is beautiful," and we want employment, and that sort of thing. That's where you had to be practical. In fact, get all [unclear]. They had signs up, "Boys" and "Girls" put up there. They'd erase that sign and put up "Ladies" and "Gentlemen." [Laughter] It was stuff like that, which is important, too, but, yet, that's secondary stuff. Preparedness is the thing you should be thinking about, staying in school.

DT: One of the issues was getting in school, getting educated so that you were prepared to go out in the work force and do something. What about housing? What about jobs? What about all these other sorts of things that as—?

CR: I'll tell you, housing was very, very bad. In fact, I was here almost a year before I found a place to stay.

DT: As league secretary, you couldn't find a place to stay?

CR: Right. Finally, I was able to find—I can't think of the realtors' daughter— They had over the— On Rondo and Dale Street, there was a drug store and this person had a three-room apartment over that. When they left town, that's where I had the first chance to find a place to live.

DT: Would that be Field's Drug Store over there on Rondo and Dale?

CR: Yes, yes. You know of that?

DT: I grew up [unclear]. [Laughter] Were there covenants on houses?

CR: Very bad, very bad. There were only two or three families beyond Lexington, I think. One that was down there was Steve Maxwell and—

DT: Murphys?

CR: Murphys. There was very, very few in between. It was very, very bad.

DT: So, you're saying that black people couldn't move out of the area because—?

CR: No. They claim that when I came here, they were all over, but they decided when the Pilgrim Baptist Church was established that people wanted to be in town where they'd be close to their church. They moved in and when they moved in and wanted to move out, they couldn't move out because it was discrimination. That's what I understand—the way it was. When I came here, they were all in and couldn't get out.

DT: Was there any attempt to address legislation that prevented restrictive selling in the deeds of these properties? Was there anything that the Urban League might have done to help break down the barriers in terms of housing discrimination?

CR: No, they couldn't do very much, apparently. They couldn't do very much. As I remember, when the freeway came through, I had just finished—I was at Murray then. It was around about 1958 and I went to Murray about 1956 or 1955. I remember that they got an eviction notice to me—that I was at 885 Rondo—saying that I had to move. I told people—to show you the inconsistency of how a rumor gets out—I told the blacks, “Don't move till they find us a place to live.” They were saying that they would give an eviction notice, but when they gave me one, I said, “I'm going to stay there because they didn't find me a place to live.” Then, along came some more blacks and they put a notice in the paper—I think I've got it somewhere now—“that Rogers is collaborating with the real estate. They don't want us to move.” They had a rumor where they could sell the house and move out at Highland Park, and Falcon Heights, and whatnot. Of course, I knew what their circumstances were. I'd had a survey made myself and less than three percent had equity enough to move. [unclear], the real estate company owned ninety percent of the contract, the mortgage on their homes.

DT: You're saying that there was one realty company here that owned many of the properties?

CR: Yes, that's right.

DT: And these properties didn't have enough equity to afford people to move out?

CR: To move out. Here, they're saying that “Rogers is collaborating with the real estate and keeping us from moving. Let's move. We can go out to Highland” and whatnot. That's what they said about me, but I stayed and held my ground. It came out then, the realtor was saying that some of the churches—I was trying to think of this church—Reverend Foot—what denomination his was. I think it was Presbyterian. He said that “if any of you find a place that you can buy or

rent, let me know, as your pastor. I'm more like a contact individual." So, out at Falcon Heights, I saw a lot out there and I told Reverend Foot that I saw a lot out there that I would be willing to buy and build. He said, "I'll have a friend, one of my parishioners, check it out, and I'm sure it will be all right, and you can buy it." He gave me the name of the lady and I told her, "You have a lot next door and Reverend Foot gave me your address and said you'd be cooperative and whatnot and to contact you. I'm just calling to see if it would be all right with you if I moved next door." She said, "What are you going to pay for your house?" I said, "Something about \$50,000 or \$60,000." She said, "Oh, you going to pay more for your house than I paid for mine." So, you know what that was?

DT: You didn't get the lot? [Laughter]

CR: [Laughter] Other times—I can't think of this realtor. This will come to me—the realtor said, "You're having a problem. You've been working at Murray, why don't you have one of the other teachers buy the house for you?" I said, "I don't want to do it that way." I said, "There's too much stigma there. If you fool the people and they find out that it's a fake and whatnot, you cause more trouble than the first." The same thing came with the NAACP. Am I talking . . . ?

DT: Go ahead. It's all history.

CR: "Why don't you get the NAACP to help you?" I said, "No, I don't want the NAACP to help me. If they know what the situation was, they would more than likely gotten someone earlier. Now, I'm going to go on my own. I've got to work with these people and if I can't work with them and they know me, then, it's not going to work for anybody. I'm going to go on my own." I refused and thanked them. So, I had no support with them. What I did hear—one of my brothers said when they heard that I was going to go there, they asked him, "What about Rogers out there?" He said, "Rogers been out to Murray too long. He would not fit with Central." [Laughter]

DT: What I hear you saying then is that there weren't employment opportunities in spite of all that the Urban League was attempting to do. That was slow to change, even in the 1960s. With the coming of the freeway and condemning of parcels of land and homes, there weren't any housing opportunities, if people really didn't have the resources to reinvest and they probably weren't paying the market value to begin with. Educationally, there were kids coming through the system, but they may not have been prepared, or had an opportunity even if they were prepared, to find gainful employment.

CR: That's right. You've explained every bit of it. Thank God!

DT: In light of all those things, you had the Urban League who were basically struggling, but not being particularly effective against the tide.

CR: Right.

DT: Interesting.

CR: I get mixed feelings. You don't hear me saying anything—you don't see me—organization, black history, and whatnot. If you see anything, it's that I have been in the paper. I don't go around talking about things. These are some of the situations you've explained very well. I have created some enemies on my observation even. I'm telling you now that people don't like that.

DT: What was your recollection of the attempt to pass the Fair Employment Practice Law here in Minnesota back in 1955—the FEPC?

CR: I thought that whatever it was, there weren't any teeth in it. The law was there but who was going to be the enforcer? People looked the other way when it came time to put pressure on the stores and whatnot, which shows that they had too much sympathy for the employer. Consequently, you weaken the law.

DT: The law was window dressing?

CR: Right. [Laughter]

DT: It meant well, but meant nothing.

CR: That's right.

DT: That says a lot about the experience in Minnesota, doesn't it? [Laughter]

CR: [Laughter]

DT: Let's talk a little bit about leadership. Who were some of the people that you recall that had taken leadership positions in the community? Do the names come to you readily?

CR: As I say, the man is gone now, of course, it was S. Vincent Owens, and there was Dr. Crump, and there was S.E. Hall, and there were several guys, that—incidentally, I didn't mention, who were veterinarians. They were doctors and, of course, I was from St. Louis where they had Homer G. Phillips Hospital where all the interns were. They'd say, "We're doctors—" and I'd say, "Gee, you all are doctors?" "Oh, they were horse doctors, veterinarians— Finally, they began to recognize them as being doctors. We had eleven of them here at one time. There was Dr. Barry who was on the board.

DT: Of the Urban League?

CR: No, not the Urban League board. He was with the school system.

DT: The Board of Education?

CR: The Board of Education. There was Carnie Mobley. He was right near. He was a member of the Sigma Phi Phi. He did some things in the community.

DT: Crouch?

CR: Crouch, yes. Let's see—who else? Jimmy Griffin, of course, that's about— Of course, there were others that I just can't remember now offhand.

DT: Going back a little bit—you made mention of a barber by the name of S.E. Hall.

CR: Yes.

DT: That he played a prominent leadership position in the community. What sorts of things did he do?

CR: He had a lot to do with employment. I understand that, at one time, when blacks were coming here, he was instrumental in getting them on at the packinghouse. Then, after awhile, they began to come in, then, he sort of shut down on that sort of thing. He was sort of anti—was against the influx of people coming in. I don't know. But he did play quite a prominent part and did work for the employment opportunities for blacks. He stayed right with the Urban League and was very influential in persuading people, such as it was—got employment for them.

DT: What role did he play with the Urban League? Was he an officer?

CR: Yes, he was treasurer. He handled the money and wrote checks. [Laughter] Wrote mine [unclear]

DT: This was in the 1940s?

CR: Yes. Of course, he had quite an influence on the Pilgrim Baptist Church. He was one of the Pilgrim leaders there.

DT: You mentioned, also, Eli Martin being a pillar of the community.

CR: Yes. He was an Episcopalian.

DT: Did he hold any offices or was he with the Urban League or with the NAACP?

CR: No, not that I recall. He could disseminate information. He could pick it up. [Laughter] He was quite influential in the church.

DT: The NAACP never came to him?

CR: [Laughter]

DT: That's good. We're running out of time here. What do you remember about barbershop culture that impressed you the most as a customer? Sometimes, when I've spoken to people about the influence of these barbers, people would say, "They usually encouraged people to continue in school and get an education."

CR: Yes, I could see that.

DT: "They had a fond regard for children." "They helped people think through issues."

CR: The thing that I found is they had the pulse on the lifestyle of the community and they had the respect of the community, many of them. They were worthwhile citizens, I mean, to emulate. Most of them, they'd have a good behavior pattern. I think that they had that kind of leadership that kids certainly could follow. I don't know about the adults. They did encourage kids and they did maintain a certain amount of respect themselves.

DT: They were also businesspersons. How important were these business establishments to the economy of the black community? Were there other businesses that you witnessed, at the time?

CR: No, I didn't notice anything other than their business. I don't remember them having other enterprises.

DT: But, there were other enterprises in the community?

CR: Oh, yes, yes, but not too many.

DT: To what do you attribute the lack of business enterprise in the community?

CR: I don't think they had the money. You didn't have too many people with too many skills here. In fact, you can count on your hand those who had—the railroad guys, and you had Mr. Godet, and you had the architect. Both of them were members of our church.

DT: Wigington?

CR: Wigington, Dr. Crump, and Dr. Weber. You didn't have too many professional people. It was a citadel for railroad men and, of course—

[End of interview]