Raymond W. Cannon
Narrator

Steve Trimble
Interviewer

1977

Raymond W. Cannon -RC
Steve Trimble -ST

RC: You want me to tell you about that?

ST: Sure, yeah, I'd like to start out with that.

RC: Well, my name is Raymond Winford Cannon. C-A-N-N-O-N. And I was born in Northfield, Minnesota, January 28, 1892. I'm now in my eighty-sixth year. My grandparents on my mother's side settled in Northfield long before it was a state. They were free people in North Carolina, and they could see a war coming, and they didn't want to be caught in it down in North Carolina. So they took a coastline steamer from what they called Wilmington City and came northward either to New York or Boston. And then they proceeded on the railroads they had in that day as far west as they would go. And when they reached the end of the railroad, they proceeded on wagons until they got into Le Sueur County, Minnesota. From there, they made their way to Northfield. That was, I guess, about 1857. My grandfather answered Lincoln's first call for volunteers from Northfield, and he left with the old First Minnesota and transferred into the Eighteenth Missouri later on. And he wound up at Gettysburg.

ST: Do you know why he happened to choose Minnesota?

RC: No, I don't. I don't. They were going as far north as they could get. I think that was the idea that they had in mind at that time. While my grandfather was in the Civil War, all the hard money disappeared, coinage. People were hoarding it. There wasn't very much paper money either. So my grandmother had to resort to barter and exchange. If she wanted to buy some potatoes, she'd take it with a dozen eggs or something like that to the market, and they'd exchange. People in those days depended on hunting and wild game.

One day, while my grandfather was away, you see, the Confederates had stirred up the Indians in Minnesota to keep the state from sending reinforcements to the Union Army. One day, a band of Sioux Indians camped in the front end of their tract of land. It was a ten acre tract of land. They didn't bother them. They had to give them such things as needles and thread and little household items. One day my grandmother went out into the woods to pick some wild fruit. She heard a little noise behind her, and it was an Indian. He approached her, and he couldn't tell whether she was white or colored. She had long, black hair down to her waist and all. He patted her on the head. He could speak a little English. He says, “You colored or white?” She says, “I'm colored.”
He says, “Pakachee, pakachee.” That's Sioux language for “Get on out of here,” see? She understood it, and she got out and didn't return.

The home they had, where I was born, is now owned by Saint Olaf College. We lived at 909 Saint Olaf Avenue. I was born in Northfield, but I didn't live there. My father lived in Minneapolis, and my mother lived down there for the childbirth. I'm the first child. I had two brothers. The times were very hard. Somewhere in the late twenties or early thirties, somewhere around there, my grandmother passed away at the age of ninety-three. There was a young minister who was attending Saint Olaf in earlier years, and he used to stop in the home. She would relate pioneer days, the stories of them, the struggles they had and all. They found this minister—he was a man probably between thirty-five and forty then. He came back and preached the funeral at the Bierman Funeral Home. Those Biermans were related to the Bierman that coached Minnesota's football team. He just died a few days ago out here. He referred to a letter that had been given to him. It was a letter from my grandfather when he was in the Union Army down south to my grandmother. He said in the letter, “I'm sending you a quarter. It is all the money I have.” So that shows you the value of coinage in those days.

Now, on my father's side… My father was born in Union, Missouri. That's over toward the Kentucky border. His grandfather, who was my great-grandfather, was born in Lynchburg, Virginia. But being sold back-and-forth into slavery, he eventually got into Missouri, which became a slave state under the Missouri Compromise, if you remember. He was overseer on a tobacco plantation in Missouri. If you know how tobacco grows and how they take and strip the leaves and they're long bundles. And they hang them up in the warehouse after they've harvested them. The warehouse walls are slatted. The air can go through. That's the way they cure the tobacco. They were so mean to him that he waited until the crop was harvested, dried, cured all up, then he made up his mind not only to get revenge but to escape. He bided his time. He made two little boards, pointed at each end, one to fit each foot. He smeared them with cow manure so the scent would be destroyed as far as the bloodhounds would be concerned. He got his flint stones and got under that warehouse one dark night and kindled a blaze. And when he sure it was going to burn, he crawled out and ran to a nearby hill. Presently, the flames shot skyward. And he could hear the old mistress calling to his master, “I know you done something to some nigger, or this never would've happened.” They were hollering for the other slaves to get buckets of water. They had to pump it from the well. They had no fire department. When he was certain it was going to be a total loss, he made his way on foot up to Minnesota.

ST: Wow.

RC: He traveled at night. Daytime, he'd hide out in a tree or haystack or abandoned barn. He got a job at Long Lake, Minnesota, as a farmhand for an old doctor, a white doctor named Brooks. He stayed with Brooks until the Civil War was over. Then he went down to Missouri to try and collect his children. He had twelve children. He couldn't read and write. In those days, it was unlawful, you know, to teach a slave to read and write. But through inquiry and investigation, word of mouth, hearsay, and all like that, he located ten of them. The two little girls were never found. After they got back into Minneapolis, my father said he used to see his grandmother sometime upstairs looking at the two little baby dresses she had stowed away in the trunk. She'd shed a few tears, make some comment, and put them back in. They never found them.
The way they got out of Missouri, they were in debt. If you owed any money, they prevented you in various ways from leaving the state. He had new suit. He was six years old. He had a little suit that his mother had bought him. One night toward midnight, he was awakened by his mother. She dressed him in his new suit and then put him to bed. He could hear what he called the “old folks’” talking in undertones. He was too young to know what was going on. One of my father's uncles, who was also in slavery, he was the youngest child of my great-grandfather. He had learned to read and write just a little bit. So they had him mark the name on the table in this chair and that cupboard of the relatives left behind that they wanted to have those pieces of furniture.

About a little after midnight, they heard a noise—a team of horses with a wagon. Two of his uncles went out to investigate to see who it was. They found it was a German farmer. You know, Missouri had a large German population. This German farmer had agreed to take them away. So they all got in his big wagon with all their little belongings tied up. My father was bundled up by his mother and put in there. They drove into a little town called Kirkwood, which is now a suburb of Saint Louis. When they got to Kirkwood, they stayed a few days. Then they went to Saint Louis. And there my father said he saw train cars for the first time in his life, a string of flatcars. That was vividly impressed across the little boy's mind. They took a paddlewheel steamer—you know the old-time steamboats? It burned logs for fuel. They got on this boat, and at the same time, there were others who were coming north. One of them was a Reverend Hickman. H-I-C-K-M-A-N.

ST: Oh, the Baptist.

RC: Yes. He'd learned to be a stonemason in slavery, and he had studied, as best he knew how, to become a minister. He was in the little group on that boat too. Now, when the boat got up as far as, well, about halfway, at least—those stevedores, they're all black, you know, and they were a pretty rough lot—one of them picked a fight with my father's youngest uncle. He left the boat and later made his way to Minnesota, because they were vicious men. Roustabouts. When the boat got to Lake Pepin, there was a storm, and it had to tie up. So they were delayed. When the storm abated, they proceeded on to Saint Paul.

The Irish predominated in Saint Paul at that time. They had heard of free labor, and they figured that if they were going to get off in Saint Paul, why, they'd take jobs from them. So the Catholic priest sounded the bell of the little Catholic church. It was on a hill at that time. Those Irish formed a mob and met this boat with brickbats and clubs and wouldn't let them land. So they backed the boat down to Mendota. They got off there. The group my father was with made their way to what they called Saint Anthony, which is now east side Minneapolis. The other group eventually made their way back to Saint Paul, and Hickman founded a church in downtown Saint Paul called Pilgrim Baptist Church. They called themselves pilgrims because of the traveling. Hickman was a very eloquent speaker. He drew to his congregation people of all races that heard about him. Later on, they built a large, brick church. I think it was somewhere near Summit Avenue and University. I believe it was a block north of University. Anyway, it was around Summit.

ST: Yes, Cedar or something.
RC: I think they used that church up until around 1915 or somewhere into there. Hickman would come to Minneapolis some Sunday mornings. There was a man named Martin that had sort of a bus drawn by two horses, and he'd drive from Saint Paul to Minneapolis. They would hold religious services. That evening, they'd hold services in Saint Paul. When Hickman couldn't get the use of Martin's bus, of course, he would come alone then, and he came on what the old folks called a steam-car, which is a railroad. He'd come and preach, and then they'd have a big dinner out in the yard under the trees, an old Southern style. In the afternoon, they'd be reminiscing about their experiences in slavery and talking about this one and how that one was treated, and so on. Finally, they'd take up a collection and offer it to him. He'd refuse it. He'd take his car fare, and that was all. So that's the way the little groups started in the early days.

Now, I will come back to the maternal side of the house in Northfield. That little town was made famous by the James and Younger boys. My grandparents were there at that time. From the time of that raid up until 1908 or '10, that was the conversation piece, the main topic. Sunday after dinner, usually, it would veer around to that experience. That was considered something terrible at that time, of course. Nowadays, they'd be inexperienced bandits. But anyway, the building, I believe, that held the bank is still standing down on the Cannon River. Last I heard, there was a nightclub in it.

In Northfield, one uncle was chief of the fire department. Another uncle was identified with the leading newspaper. One of them had the contract for the painting and decorating of the park board. One of them was conductor on the railroad. The reason he got that job was because they didn't know he was a black man. He looked like white. There was an accident, and he lost his life on the railroad. He belonged to the Brotherhood, of course. The union. They didn't know he was colored until they had to escort the remains home to the funeral. And that's that. Now, I don't know what else I can tell you that would be of interest just now.

ST: You know that one grandfather that went to the Civil War. Do you have any stories about how he fared during the war?

RC: Well, he didn't get right into the thick of the action. He got into Chattanooga, and he got to be a corporal. We thought that was pretty good for a man of his limited education. He had a detachment of men, and they got lost in one of those caves down near Chattanooga. He was the one that found the way out and guided them. He happened to have some matches. You know, matches were not very plentiful in those days. When the war ended, he was at Gettysburg. And that's all I knew. He wasn't a casualty. He came back to Northfield and resumed his trade as a carpenter. He passed away about 1915. My grandmother passed away in— I think it was the early thirties.

I recall that both of them were active in the GAR [Grand Army of the Republic] organizations. He was a member of the old GAR, and my grandmother was a member of—I believe it was—I don't know what if it was Battle Circle. It was one of the circles of the women's auxiliary. On the Fourth of July and on Decoration Day, the biggest days in the town, why, the parade was probably a half mile long, and I remember my grandfather marching along with the others, and the women would be behind them. It was a quaint little town. Carleton College on one side of the Canon River, which, incidentally, is not named after us.
ST: I was wondering if...

RC: No, it's spelled differently. It has two N's. My name has three. And Saint Olaf College is on the other side of the river.

ST: Most of these things that you've been telling me, you've heard these from your grandparents, then?

RC: Yes. We heard them from grandparents and uncles and so on. I didn't realize the stories that the relatives my father had could have told me. I didn't realize the value of them in those days, or I would have taken them down, because my father had several uncles and aunts here in Minneapolis who had been in slavery. One of them had been in Sedalia, Missouri. It might be of interest to note that about thirty years ago, I was invited to give the commencement address at Hubbard High School in Sedalia. And there I stood, on a platform in the area where a great-uncle was in slavery. I mentioned it to the principal of the school. The principal happened to be a friend of mine, and we had served together in World War I in France. Slept in the same tent. All my father's folks, as far as I can learn, came from Missouri. I think we have a lot of relatives down there we have never seen and don't even know about.

One of my father's uncles, before the Civil War and while he was in slavery, drove an ox team for his master from Missouri out here in California. He worked and got $500 and bought his freedom from this white doctor. And he settled somewhere up around Napa—fruit-raising country, grapes. In the panic of 1893, he lost his farm, about 160 acres. He busied himself at that age and acquired another farm and persuaded a young couple to look after it, the two of them. If they did that, why, the provision was they would inherit everything when they left, which they did. So we have some distant relatives up around Napa and Vallejo, whom we have never seen, and we don't know anything about them. They're just strangers. We do know that some of them are no doubt up there yet. I've got this shut off now. What else you want?

ST: Well, okay, maybe get into your parents meeting and your growing up in Minneapolis.

RC: I'll leave this open so I can see it better. My mother...

ST: I can hold that for you if it'd be easier for you.

RC: I have to look at it. I've got trifocals on, you know, and they bother me a little bit. My mother, when she finished school in Northfield, came to Minneapolis. Because there were never more than four colored families—they called them “colored” in those days to be polite—they were listed as “Negro” families, you know. There were never more than four there. My mother was the only girl in the family. She had nine brothers. She thought her opportunities to know her people and to advance economically would be better by coming to Minneapolis. So she came to Minneapolis, and after she had gotten established, she got a job as clerk in the registered deeds office of Hennepin County. She was the first of her race to have that position. As far as I know, every time one of them got married or left for any other reason, another one succeeded. It
became a sort of a Negro job, you might say. Maybe it was for political reasons. They always had one as a clerk there. My mother was the first.

She was a charter member of Bethesda Baptist Church in Minneapolis. Before that, she sang in the choir of Saint Peter’s African Methodist Episcopal Church, which was the leading church at that time among our people, because there wasn't a Baptist church, and she was a Baptist. She worked at Saint Peter’s until the Baptists had a church. Saint Peter’s burned down twice, and the last time it was rebuilt on Forty-First and Fourth Avenue South in Minneapolis. Across the street from where Saint Peter’s church now stands was a lake. I and my two brothers had two ice-boats on that lake, which shows you how rapidly Minneapolis grew.

I was the attorney for that church. I didn't belong to any church until the minister came to my office. He was discouraged. I asked him what the bishop sent him to Minneapolis for. He told me, “To build a church.” I says, “You go on ahead and build it, and don't pay attention to what people say.” He says, “Will you stick with me?” I says, “I'll stick with you until the last brick's laid if you just do something.” So we started. And we acquired four lots and later on a fifth lot to keep stores from the nearby corners. When I left, we had a congregation of somewhere around 650. A beautiful, modern, large, air-conditioned church. It was constructed until the supervision of the Mattson Brothers contractors. Glenn Wallis, who was a member of the Minneapolis City Council, he and his wife were both architects, and they designed that church. When the ground was broken by the Masonic Fraternity, the cornerstone was laid by the Masonic Fraternity. The church was, during the week of dedication, one whole day and evening was given over to the Masonic Fraternity, the Shrine, the Order of the Eastern Star and the Daughters of Isis, because they had helped.

[pause in the recording]

UNKNOWN: …had a school in Washington. He was a Presbyterian minister. He had been educated in Europe. The deacon [unclear] charge of the schools for thirty-six years. Then his brother was also a teacher for a while, but then he went into other type of work, and he became the first recorder of deeds in Washington and also he was on the board of Howard University.

ST: One of those two, then, was your father?

UNKNOWN: No, that was my great-uncle.

ST: Oh, okay.

UNKNOWN: My mother's people were all educated. My grandmother was a principle of the school. Someday, if I have time, I'll go and show you the picture of all of the superintendents of the schools at that particular time. I have a picture of my great-uncle underneath it. He was the only colored superintendent at the time throughout the country. They had hundreds of coloreds.

ST: You came from quite an education family, then, so to speak. Probably easy for you to be a teacher. I came across two sisters who taught in the Saint Paul school system named the Carr sisters.
UNKNOWN: Yes. They were way back.

ST: Right. In the 1880s, I think.

UNKNOWN: I didn't know both of them, but I knew one of them. Then there was [unclear] who was a teacher there too. But she was later. She left schools and went into social work. She taught grade school before she was older. Then there was a long lapse in between there, when there were no colored teachers in the system.

ST: I know one of them was Minnie. There's a Minnie Carr and a Bessie Carr, I was thinking, too. Or maybe that was…

UNKNOWN: Well, this would be Bessie Carr you were thinking of. I don't remember the Minnie Carr, but they were all friends within our family.

ST: Do they have any relatives left that I could get in touch with and find out more about them? Other families?

UNKNOWN: There would be… I’ll tell you, what is the judge's wife?

RC: Maxwell.

UNKNOWN: Maxwell. Judge Maxwell's wife is a member of that family.

ST: Okay.

UNKNOWN: So you might be able to get quite a bit of information from her.

RC: Your mother also went to Fisk University and the University of Chicago, didn't she?

UNKNOWN: She didn't go to Fisk. My mother sang. She sang in Europe with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. But she didn't attend there. But she did go to the University of Chicago and also the [unclear] music there. She sang, she taught music. She taught piano, violin, and voice for many years, privately.

RC: She was in the Saint Paul city library too, wasn't she?

UNKNOWN: Yes, she was. She was curator of the art room.

ST: What was her name?

UNKNOWN: Gladys Victoria James.

ST: Your father's name was?
Edward Albert James. He was [unclear]. He lived in Europe, in fact, until he died.

He determined the freight rates.

He was considered the…

They used to lend him to Sears and Roebuck and the big mail-order houses, you know, to establish the carrier charge.

He was considered the best layperson in the Northwest.

Well, she's got a family herself that would be worth me talking to her.

Sure. I'll tell you a little about my activity now if you want.

I was educated in the old Jefferson School. That was a grade school. Prior to that, I went to a four room school called the Laurel School on Laurel and Lyndale. When I finished the third grade, I'd graduated from that school. Then I went to the Jefferson School and finished the eighth grade. Then I went to Minneapolis Central High School and I finished there. After I graduated from Central High School, I entered the College of Pharmacy at the University of Minnesota. Three years later, I graduated as a Bachelor of Pharmacy. I had to stay there an extra year, because they wouldn't give me a degree from professional school because I was twenty-one.

I had two brothers. Miles Oliver Cannon was the brother next to me. He also took pharmacy. He graduated in 1916, three years later than I did. My younger brother, Jay Homer Cannon, was at the University of Minnesota. He was in the Student Army Training Corps. At the age of seventeen, he was going to quit and come in the army with me, because I was the older brother. I had a hard time making him go back to school. So he went back to the University of Minnesota, and I believe he was three years in the college apartment. He was the drum major of the university band. When they found he was a Negro—he was tall, over six feet, with fiery red hair. When some of them found he was a Negro, then they determined that they were going to get him out of that position. There was a Negro student on the campus who came from back east. My mother got him a job at one of the so-called white fraternity houses. In a few weeks time, they, believing he was white, took him in the fraternity. So he used to hear the discussion at the dinner table about how they were going to pick up and get rid of my brother Homer as the drum major, and he would quietly tell Homer how to protect himself until Homer held it until the end of the semester. He was the drum major in 1919. He led the victory memorial parade and the Declaration Day parade in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

He was quite a character, and he used to entertain fellas in the Men's Union sometimes playing piano. There was kind of a music department over there named Carlyle-Scott. Carlyle-Scott yielded to some of the pressure, and they organized two bands and offered my brother the second band for the second year. He did the right thing. He declined. Later on, why, he transferred schools. He became a lawyer, and he practiced in Minneapolis up until about 1943. His health
began to fail, and he came out here. I thought maybe you might be interested in that, because at that time, there was a good deal of prejudice at the University of Minnesota, much as we think there wasn't. Even in the various athletic endeavors, they had a hard time.

They had one man who was named—they called him Bob Marshall. Robert Marshall was his name. He became the right end, the first Negro in all of Minnesota football team. He was a substitute. When the regular right end was injured, Marshall was sent in as a substitute, a pinch-hitter. He sent up the touchdown that resulted in that famous Michigan-Minnesota game where the score was tied six to six. There was a lot of feeling and bad will among the players on both sides. Marshall became a regular member of the team. But the Michigan coach had brought his own drinking water so his men wouldn't run any risk, and they forgot and left the jug in the armory. They wrote back for that jug. Oscar Munson was the janitor at the Minnesota Armory. The Minnesota authorities wrote back Michigan and told them that when they came back and beat Minnesota, they could have the jug. That's the way it started. From that time on, different schools had different trophies. Iowa had a pig, and some of the others had different trophies, but that's the way that started, see.

When Marshall was playing the last game of his career in Chicago—the University of Chicago had a strong football team then. It was getting dark. Earlier in the game, Eckersall, who was looked upon as the greatest all-time, all-American quarterback, had a clear field, and Marshall ran diagonally across the field and with one hand grabbed Eckersall and prevented him from making a touchdown. Later on—now, I'm telling you this because Marshall told me himself—later on, it began to snow, and the field was slushy and muddy and wet. It was getting dark, and it was just a few minutes before the end of the game, and people were even streaming on the field when the quarterback, who was Jewish—his name was “Sig” Harris. He called for field goal. Marshall went back and kicked a field goal. It was then Minnesota four, Chicago nothing. There was no school at Minnesota that following Monday. Marshall was quite a well-known, famous player. He never got the honors that were due him until several years ago. They presented it to his widow. Now, when I went to university--

**ST:** How about in high school? Like at Central High in Minneapolis? Did you run into any discrimination there?

**RC:** Well, very subtle forms of it. Sometimes on the part of students. You know, human nature's the same up here as it is anywhere else. But I didn't wear my feelings on my coat sleeve, and I seem to have gotten along in life pretty well everywhere. If anybody stepped on my toes, I just made them get off. I resented what was directed toward me, but I didn't do things just to provoke other folks. But I have been confronted in many ways with prejudice. I have been in race riots. I know the violence that can take place, and I have seen so much that I hate to think about it.

After I got my degree in pharmacy, I waited until my brother next to me had his degree. I canvassed over half of the drug stores in Minneapolis for a job and couldn't get one because of my color. The state board required two years working in a drug store where prescriptions are compounded daily as practical experience. You could push a broom or wash the windows, but if you were there for two years, you could take the state exam. There was a black man that had a drug store in Minneapolis. His name was George W. Nelson. He and his wife figured that I was
at a disadvantage, and I had to work for them. My father got me the job, because he knew him. I worked ten hours and a quarter a day. One hour off for lunch. I had to come back after six o'clock and work until eight. I had a half of each Sunday—the afternoon one Sunday, the morning the other. If I was minute late, I got called on the carpet. I had a very unpleasant experience with them, and I only stayed with them four months, and I quit. They said I couldn't get a job anywhere else.

But you know, one evening I dropped in a drug store at Thirty-Eighth and Fourth Avenue South. There was a German named Schulte who had a store there. I just dropped in for a visit. I didn't apply for a job or anything. It didn't occur to me. So he sent word via salesman that I had visited him, and he was impressed and if I would return. He hired me as a relief pharmacist. Some of the black folks in the neighborhood came by and saw me through the window. They stopped, they came back and looked again, and you know, one of them came in and bought a stamp. Going to see if I was actually clerking there. Another came in at the soda fountain. The old-time drug stores had soda fountains. He asked for a glass of water. It was all amusing, see.

Then there was an elderly white doctor who had gone bankrupt in Bethel, Minnesota and moved his stock into Minneapolis at 3202 Chicago Avenue, there was a little store building, and he lived next door. So I got a job with him. The deal my father made, he says, “It isn't a matter of money. It's more experience.” So I had a job downtown where I could wait table. Once every week, on Mondays I believe it was, I worked that afternoon at the Swedish-American Post, which was published by Turnblad. It was called the Svenska Amerikanska Posten, and it went all over the world. I got that work down in his pressroom. I then had plenty of time to work without pay, free, for nothing, in the little drugstore of Dr. E.W. Young, who was a graduate of the old medical school that Hamline University had. You know, Hamline used to have a medical school. It was merged with the University of Minnesota. The medical students, most of them, went down to Marquette University and finished, because they didn't want a degree from a dead school. So I worked for him for a year, and then he sold out to a classmate of his. His classmate was a man who came to this country from Tipperary, over near Tipperary, Ireland. He liked his whiskey. He was sort of a don't-give-a-darn fella, you know. I always suspected that he used something besides whiskey, and I was a little bit apprehensive. One morning I came, and the store had burned down, partially. Then he wanted me to salvage it and buy it out from him. I wouldn't do it, so I got fired.

Now, when I got my two years' experience, I quit and went to work waiting table and doing odd jobs until my brother Miles had finished. Then we opened a drug store of our own at 1400 Plymouth Avenue, Minneapolis. That was on the North Side. There were only two colored families in the neighborhood, and the white ones were going to run us out. I remember one night—whew—we slept in the store all night. We stayed in that store. People would come in. They'd look at us. “Well, we thought colored men were going to open a store here.” I says, “We're colored.” I thought to myself, “I wonder how you can satisfy some of them.” Some of them, if you're jet black, they don't like you. If you're very fair, they don't like you. So I told them, I said, “Now, all you have to do is to just go along and you find that we're just the same as anybody else.” And in due time, we had one of the biggest prescription businesses on that street. We stayed there fourteen years. I was able to have my brother Miles work under my supervision. I signed his papers so he could take the examination. By that time, my brother Homer had passed
the examination and got in the post office working nights to pay his way through his school. We
told him to quit the post office and come and clerk in our store, which he did. So we were
helping each other. You know, when World War I broke out, I tried four times to get into the
military.

**ST:** You had the store set up before the war, then?

**RC:** Yes.

**ST:** Okay.

**RC:** Our store was set up in October 1916. There was a former member of the pharmacy faculty
who didn't look like a Negro. He was actually afraid to open up because of racism. He came out
and saw what we had done, and he went over on Twenty-Sixth and Johnson Street, Northeast
Minneapolis, bought a lot, built a building, and opened up a first class pharmacy. His name was
James Louis Titus.

When the World War I broke out, I couldn't dispose of the store in time to go to the first officer's
training school they had for Negro candidates for officers in Fort De Moines. I tried four times to
get in the military. They didn't seem to want them for anything except stevedore, quartermaster,
and labor battalion. I wouldn't go in that kind of an outfit. On the fourth time around, I got in the
combat unit field. I went to Camp Dodge. I had a hard time with the last doctor that examined
me, too. He says, “You really want to go?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Well, I'll certify you, but
they'll reject you when you get to Camp Dodge.” All I wanted to do was get to camp. I go down
there. I looked up the medical infirmary, which was in a tent. They had a depot brigade in a corn
field there, they were so crowded. They weren't in the barracks. I went over there and introduced
myself and made friends with some of the medics. Found out I knew some of them and their
relatives and all. I got temporary fillings put in my teeth, and I got a lot of other nice things done.

When it came time to pass the overseas examination, I passed it. Then I had an opportunity to go
to officers' school or to go overseas. I says, “I'll go overseas.” So I sailed with a regiment. I,
previous to that, had had, I believe in childhood, rheumatic fever, which damaged one of my
heart valves. I took care of myself and took things in stride, and I passed that examination. When
I got to France, I wondered many times if I hadn't done something foolish, because it sure was
rough. I was overseas about a year. I came back with the regiment.

**ST:** Any war experiences that stand out in your mind?

**RC:** Work experiences?

**ST:** War experiences.

**RC:** War experiences. Well, I tell you, I didn't really get right into the thick of the battle, but my
greatest fears were race riots that started after the armistice was signed. I was in some of them.
The southern white soldiers, you see, were friendly up in the trenches. They get along with the
Old Scratch if necessary, see. But after it was over, then they started on us. Of course, in a race
riot, you see, the bullets are coming from every direction. Up there on the firing lines, it was only one direction. So we had to fight our way pretty near everywhere we went. A lot of times you'd go in a cafe, and all the white soldiers would get up and go on out. Frenchmen say, “There are more of them than there are of you. I have no prejudice, but I have to make money.” You know, we went into the YMCA, where they had this side for colored troops, this side for white troops. We had to tear those kinds of signs down.

The only treatment that I got that was commensurate with my dignity and my manhood and my self-respect, I got from the Catholics—Knights of Columbus they had over there. I got a driver who was white, and there's a little side car. He had to drive me around wherever I wanted to go. These little signal telephones down on the ground—I’d pick it up, and he was stationed a half mile down. He'd come and pick me up, and then I'd transact the business with the regiment, you know. One day he asked me—I thought he was ill-tempered at first, but he wasn't. He asked me one day if I was not in too much of a hurry, if I would let him stop at the Knights of Columbus. I said yes. He got off of the motorcycle. He said, “Will you come in with me?” So I did. I went in there, and he introduced me. And I received the finest treatment and reception. They loaded me down with a lot of nice things and invited me to return. See, I traveled all over France.

**ST:** What were you, exactly? What was your job?

**RC:** At times I was acting in the capacity of a second lieutenant. But my rating was regimental supply sergeant, which was far more comfortable, because I didn't have to buy my clothes and pay all my expenses and all like that. We got along pretty well after the armistice was signed except for racial troubles. Some of the establishments where they'd go in, where they served meals and drinks and things like that, some of the southern white soldiers would cause the proprietors to discriminate. Now, there was a camp—I think it was [unclear]. They had about 20,000 troops. There were two companies of engineers, white, from Texas. Some of our men went down in one of the places of refreshment and were behaving themselves. There was one of the Texas engineers, he looked around and saw them. He says, “There'll be no niggers in here.” And they run ’em out.

So the little company clerk was given the story by these men when they returned. They thought they were going to have trouble, so they might as well start the trouble. So he said they all asked for ammunition which had been taken up. He just underneath his bunk took and pulled out a case of ammunition and dumped it on the floor, opened the door, and he walked out. Well, these soldiers walked in and helped themselves. And that night they restored order in the camp. The colonel of the camp, commanding officer, was white. He was from the South. He would parlay over the fence with our men and wanted them to lay down their arms, and they wouldn't do it until finally he had to issue an order permitting our men to go into these places of refreshment and allowing them to go into the YMCA to write their letters and all like that. They couldn't even go in the YMCA.

**ST:** So you were there in the camp when all this was happening?

**RC:** I was a few miles from there when this happened. I was in the riot at Montoire, which was taken place on our way to the boat to come back home.
ST: I never heard of that.

RC: Well, all our letters were censored. You didn't get that in the newspapers. Of course, the Wilson administration was in power, and the Wilsons, you know, were dead set against our people. There's no two ways about that.

ST: Could you tell a little about that?

RC: About the Wilson administration?

ST: Well, that riot that you were in.

RC: Well, at Montoire, which is a few miles from the seacoast, we were getting ready to go from Montoire down to the port of embarkation. Some of the white marine detachment heard it. They had nice little tents rigged up, and they had electric lights, wires, strung in them. It was more or less of a permanent camp, you know. It had probably been going a couple years. They had board floors and little heating stoves, and they were quite comfortable. When they heard that black troops were coming in there, they had to get out… You see, as one troop comes into a place, the troop ahead of it moves forward until—they move them down to port of embarkation by steps, you might say. So he called out his company and ordered “fix bayonets,” and they slit those tents all up just to shreds. They fastened those electric light wires to the little heating stoves so when our men would come in to make a little fire, they'd get a shock and knock them over, because the current is strong over there in Europe, you know. It isn't like the alternating current we have here. It went along like that for a day or so. I understand they found—

[End of Part 1]

RC: Those Marines got punished, but not until we had slept outdoors on the ground all night, armed, you know. I want to tell you, too, that when black soldiers get excited, they aren't the easiest group of people in the world to handle, either, see? I had to counsel them, and those fellas that I had under me, I had to caution them. I tried to counsel them to patience. Not until they were jumped on, actually. But they were so angry having been over there and suffered nothing but discrimination every day, all day, all night, that it was just something that—they had reached a breaking point, see? There are a lot of things that we could say about the service over there. We were very glad when we got out of it.

Coming back, we came back on a little boat that had plied the Great Lakes. It was called the Scanton. It was so short, it bobbed up and down like this all the way, and we all got seasick. But we were coming home, and a wireless—they didn't have the communications like they have now. They had the wireless, you know, that Marconi had discovered. They got an inquiry from back in the States from the War Department about our soldiers and where they were from. They told them Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, and so on. They re-routed that ship, which was supposed to land in, I think it was Norfolk, Virginia. They re-routed it and sent us to New York. They put us up in Camp Mills, New Jersey. Then from there, we worked to Camp Sherman, Ohio, and then to
Camp Grant, Illinois. When we got to Camp Grant, of course, a lot of the men had been discharged. We were winding up the business of the regiment.

As we came into the Illinois central station in Chicago, I had two German rifles slung over my shoulders. It was souvenirs. We came up Michigan Boulevard, and a black doorman in front of one of those plush hotels hollered at us. He yelled and hollered and came across the street, and I wondered what was the matter with him. He says, “That's the way I like to see you fellas come back here.” I thought he was patriotic, you know, going to do something nice for us. It never occurred to me what he meant. We walked down Michigan until we got to the Illinois central station so we could take the train to Camp Grant. All the white people in the waiting room immediately got up and went over to the other side and just glared at us. The Chicago riot was in progress, and we didn't know it.

ST: Oh, good God.

RC: We didn't know it until we tried to get passes from Grant to come back to Chicago, and they told us then why we couldn't come. That was one of the worst race riots that the United States ever had.

Well, after I came back to Minneapolis and was discharged, I went back to work the drug store. It was quiet. I had a little time getting adjusted, you know. My younger brother told me of a new law school that was opening up at Saint Thomas College. That's in Saint Paul.

ST: Mitchell?

RC: The College of Saint Thomas. It's down on East River Road, around there.

ST: Was that the Mitchell Law School, then?

RC: No. Mitchell Law School used to be the Saint Paul College of Law.

ST: Oh, okay.

RC: He suggested that I go back and take law. So I went over to Saint Thomas College. I saw Reverend Foley, who was registrar, I believe. I matriculated at the College of Saint Thomas, and I took one third of the work in one year. You can't do that now. I was elected secretary treasurer of the class at Saint Thomas College Law School in my absence. I wasn't at the meeting where they had the election. I dropped out four years. I finished law at the Minnesota College of Law in Minneapolis. That's now a part of the William Mitchell. It's consolidated with it. My brother Homer invited me to come in his office, and I started practicing with him in the Palace Building, which was on the corner of Fourth Street and Nicollet Avenue. Maurice L. Rothschild occupied the first three floors. I practiced law in that building until I retired and came out here.

Now, as far as my civic activities were concerned, I of course was a member of the American Legion. Stafford King and Sumner McKnight, they were trying to get the black veterans to organize a post. At first, the American Legion wouldn't give you a post. They'd make you be a
sub-post of a white post. But when their regulations or their law was changed, then they wanted us to have a post. I didn't think much of a post like that. I thought it was a Jim Crow post at first. When they met out on Fourth Avenue South near Franklin Avenue that Sunday afternoon, Stafford King, who later became the state treasurer of Minnesota, and Sumner McKnight, who was a prominent businessman in Minneapolis, they were explaining to us the benefits that would accrue to us if we would join the legion. You see, the legion wanted numbers.

So I got up in the meeting and asked him what the legion would do for me. He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Well, Saul Butler down there at—I believe it was in New Orleans—they discriminated against him in a track meet. And a black veteran returned from overseas and was down in Georgia, and they pulled the uniform off of him and handled him roughly.” I says, “Now, if something like that should happen to me, is my post going to do anything about it?” Well, they said they couldn’t do much about that. I said, “Well, I think I’ll think this thing over. I won’t join.” Later on, I became a charter member of the post. It’s still, I guess, it’s hanging up in the headquarters there at Fifth Avenue and Twenty-Ninth Street now.

But our posted legion did some nice things. We had an auxiliary. The women’s auxiliary, of course, did a forget-me-not day sale. They had our ladies go out and sell forget-me-nots on the street corners, you know, and raise money for the veterans. Then the Powers Department Store wouldn’t honor the luncheon tickets that they gave members of the whole fifth district auxiliary. When ours went in there, they turned them down, and they referred them to a little old grease joint down on Washington Avenue. So my post took that up. I was glad I was in the post, because we took up—Oscar Youngdahl, who was the brother of Governor Luther Youngdahl, told us, when he was commander of the fifth district, any problems arise, come to him. He’d help us. Went to him, and the big shots in the fifth district told him what to do. And he didn’t do a thing. Said he couldn’t do anything. So we went to the fifth district, protested. We were defeated. Joseph Jennings and I were the ones who carried on the fight.

Finally, when the state convention met in Duluth, there was a Jewish candidate for state commander. He was a publisher of one of the daily papers in Duluth. His first name was Abe. I remember that, but I can’t recall his last name. But he would run against Oscar Youngdahl. So Lester Badger, who had been a classmate of mine in Central High School, Lester Badger, tried to persuade our delegates to vote for Youngdahl, because Baker Post was the first on the roll call when it came time to vote. The psychological effect of Baker Post voting against Youngdahl was something to reckon with. Our delegates, they couldn’t budge it. Abe Kaplan. That was his name. When the roll call commenced, they said, “Baker Post.” Our delegates rose, and Baker Post cast two votes for Abe Kaplan for commander. For a few minutes, the air was full of cushions, and they were yelling and hollering, you know. It went on down the list, and Kaplan defeated Youngdahl. Youngdahl never forgot those things, see? He tried to ride about, but as far as we were concerned, he had damaged himself personally.

Now, his brother Luther was smoother. He went around and preached in all the Negro pulpits in the various churches, you know. And he’s always talking about sin and vice, and all that kind of stuff, see? Well, Youngdahl thought he was going to do something nice for the Negro race, so when the war broke out, World War II, he appointed me on the draft board. And he appointed Wigginton, who was in the architect’s office of Saint Paul. He used to design the ice palaces,
when they had the winter carnival, Wiggington. The story of Wiggington is something you ought to get, too. I'll tell you before you leave.

I sat down. After I had cooled off, I addressed a letter to Youngdahl. I declined the appointment to serve on the draft board. It caused a whole lot of comment in Minneapolis. The Negro newspaper called—*The Spokesman*. Newman was the editor. He died. He says, “Well, I guess you’re going to be pretty busy from now on.” I says, “Why do you say that?” He says, “Well, you’re on the draft board, aren’t you?” I said, “No.” He says, “Did you decline it?” I said, “Yes.” “Have you got a copy of the letter?” “Yes.” He’d like to have it. So he published a copy of the whole letter—it’s about this long—on his front page. It went over to the University of Minnesota. The *Minnesota Daily* called up the *Minneapolis Star*. “Have you seen *The Spokesman*?” “No, we get it. What’s in it?” And they hunted around and got it. They reprinted the whole article that *The Spokesman* carried and even accompanied it with my picture. I didn’t even know they had a picture of me and don’t know when it was taken. Wiggington didn’t decline. It resulted, finally, in Youngdahl issuing an executive order integrating Negroes into the Minnesota National Guard that they had been refused prior to that time.

To show you how much comment it caused, my father saw it in the newspaper out here. I went in a restaurant in Minneapolis for lunch, and the waitress recognized me, either from my picture or she knew who I was. She brought an extension telephone over to the table. It was the Associated Press down in Dayton, Ohio. “Are you Mr. Cannon?” I said, “Yes.” “Did you refuse the appointment with the draft board in Minnesota?” I said, “Yes.” “Would you take it again if the governor offered it to you?” I said, “No, I’m the same man now as I was then.” I let it go at that. So a lot of things happened in Minneapolis that I was involved in. I ought to mention several of them here, because if you’re getting something for the historical records, why, it’d give you some idea.

Now, in the early years of Minneapolis, as far as Negroes were concerned, they were always in small numbers. When I was a little boy, it was probably between 1,800 and 2,000. When they got up around 2,500, a Negro doctor came into Minneapolis to locate. Dr. Robert S. Brown. He drove a horse and buggy. He lived on Twenty-Ninth Street on Portland Avenue. Before the railroad trackers were depressed, you know, they went across the street. He was such a novelty. He was a large, portly-built man with a heavy mustache. Nice-looking. Very dignified. He came there with money. He had this horse and buggy. Very few people had an automobile at that time. I think he had the first automobile that any Negro had in Minneapolis. The saying used to go around among Negroes in Minneapolis that they got sick on purpose just so they could have a doctor of their own race. He was such a novelty. His grandson is practicing back there now.

Well, we had two or three Negro lawyers at various times. There was one lawyer that you ought to know about. His name was Jay Frank Wheaton.

ST: Yeah, I’ve heard of him.

RC: He was a member of the Minnesota State Legislature, and you can find out the year by going to the secretary of state’s office and ask to see where the legislative manuals are filed. Now, it was somewhere, I think, between… It must have been somewhere between 1898 and
1904 or '05, in through there. The legislative manual, you know, is a blue-covered book. You can recognize it. Now, Wheaton finished law, and his partner was white. His partner's name was Kerr, K-E-double-R. He later became a judge of the Hennepin County District Court. Wheaton was a tall, heavy-set, well-appearing man. He was very dark, and he had very finely chiseled features. He would have thought he was probably from some of the foreign countries in North Africa. Wheaton was actually handsome.

He wanted to get into politics. He couldn't get any appointment because he was black. He tried it. So when the Republican caucus was held in the old exposition building in Minneapolis, which was located then at where the end of the Third Avenue Bridge is now—it was a large auditorium built in the gaslight days. Wheaton went to the caucus. That's what they called it. It was actually a district convention. William R. Morris, a Negro lawyer, and Mr. Jasper Gibbs, who was senior deacon at Bethesda Church and others, they were all supporting Morris and thought maybe Morris could make it in the legislature. At the proper time, Wheaton gained the floor. And he got up and made one of these old time, spread-eagle, oratorical speeches, you know. He just carried them by storm. And he was nominated by acclamation. In those days, before the direct primary, if you got on the ticket and the ticket was successful, the ticket carried all of them in. Wheaton got on the ticket. After this convention was over, white people were standing around on the sidewalk. “Who was the man, this Negro, nominated? He sure did make a fine speech,” and all that kind of talk. They said, “But we don't know who's nominating. We've never met the man.” Wheaton had nominated himself, see? Then different politicians and leaders in the party came around to see Wheaton. If he'd withdraw, they promised him to appoint him to this, that and the other. Wheaton was just stubborn, and he wouldn't withdraw. The Republicans couldn't afford to lose the election, so he got voted in on that ticket, and he's the first black man that ever sat in the Minnesota Legislature, and that's how he got in. Now, Wheaton didn't like to be refused in public places of accommodation. So one of the first things that he did when he got in the legislature, he got through a measure prohibiting discrimination against people because of their race in places of public accommodation and all like that. That took care of discrimination in restaurants, hotels, saloons and cafes. In those days, you know, the saloon was a big item. There was three, four on every block downtown. So that is the only civil rights law that the Negroes had for years and years, almost up until the time of World War II.

One of my classmates—he was the second ranking student in the class—called me up about it one day. A Negro employee of a big garage. When quitting time came, all the white employees invited him to go with him to a tavern. They all ordered beer. All of them were served, but he wasn't. So he came down to see me. I found the owner and the address and so on of the establishment, and I addressed a letter to him and told him to come into my office and make some arrangements for a settlement, otherwise a civil action for damages would be instituted against him. The next day, this bartender and manager came up to the office to see me. Now, the reason I'm telling you this is to show you how Negroes were regarded in some instances. He says, “Such an incident never occurred in our establishment. We never refused anyone because he was a Negro. We like Negroes. Why, we even have a Negro haul our garbage.” Look, the conversation was over then as far as I was concerned. They went to a lawyer, and he happened to be a classmate of mine. Said, “Say, Cannon, where do you find that civil rights statute?” Now, he was the second ranking student in the class and didn't know about it and couldn't find it. So I said, “Wait a minute, I'll give you the citation.” So I gave him the citation. About an hour later,
he called me on the telephone, and he said they'd settled. And I made the terms of settlement on
the condition that there'd be no further discrimination there. Negroes were carrying cases into the
court.

ST: What year was this?

RC: That was in the early fifties, maybe around—no, it was in the late forties. Negroes were
eyery once in a while instituting an action in the municipal court, and sometimes it was a jury
case, sometimes it was a court case. They seldom won a verdict, but when they did, it was
usually for an amount like ten dollars. The court would write an opinion and say it's enough to
punish the offender and not enough to encourage lawsuits. That's the attitude that the courts had, see?

I noticed that there were… I got reports that there were groups of white veterans after World
War I canvassing the downtown businesses and industries, “Just discharge your Negroes and
give these white returned veterans who are unemployed.” We kept hearing so much of that, and
some of them were losing their jobs. So I got on a train and went down to Chicago, and I talked
to Dr. M.O. Bousfield, who was a medical officer of the Liberty Life Insurance Company, and he
took me over to see T. Arnold Hill, who was the executive secretary of the Chicago Urban
League and also the western district organizer of the National Urban League. I explained the
situation to him, and he loaded me down with literature. I came back to Minneapolis, and while I
was studying that, I got notice of a meeting to be held at the old Douglas Club on Fourth Avenue
South between Eighteenth and Nineteenth Street.

ST: Where was this, roughly? What year?

RC: That was about, oh, around 1924 or '25 to the best of my recollection. I went out to this
meeting, and Dr. George Edmund Haines, who was connected with Fisk University, was making
a survey for the Federal Council of Churches to determine whether or not some organization to
deal with this employment situation should come into Minneapolis. There were others there who
were favoring the formation of the Urban League. Mrs. Robbins Gilman was the executive
director of the Woman's Cooperative Alliance, which was one of the most powerful
organizations of its kind in the Northwest at that time, the Woman's Cooperative Alliance. The
man that had assumed the temporary chairmanship wasn't exactly acceptable to her and her
organization. So she summoned me to her office and wanted to know if I would serve as a
permanent chairman if I was elected. So I thought it over, and I told her I would. So I became
permanent chairman of the interim committee that brought the Minneapolis Urban League into
existence. We decided that we wanted an urban league.

Night after night, I, with some of the others, had to address various meetings of white and
colored people to try and convince them the necessity of having an urban league in Minneapolis.
You know, you're getting to some meetings, and when they'd find out what it was about, I could
see white people consulting their watches, and they had a previous engagement, and that was it.
But we didn't lose heart. Mrs. Gilman would—because of her contacts and so on—she was
white, of course, you know. All the members of the alliance were white except two or three
members, one of which was my mother. She was able to put us in contact and make
appointments for us with the business and professional people among whites. Finally we got the momentum started, and we carried on two rallies in Saint Peter's African Methodist Church and Bethesda Baptist Church to raise a little money. Money was scarce in those days, you know. A man could buy an old suit of clothes for fifteen dollars, and streetcar fare was only a nickel. You could rent a good house for twenty dollars and twenty-five dollars a month. So you know how hard it was to live in those days, and we had a hard time raising money.

There were five of us that had a little inside committee, and we contracted with Abram L. Harris, who had just received his master's degree for the work he had done in the field of labor among the miners in West Virginia. The urban national office recommended him. We hired him at salary of $3,000 a year and $2,000 office expenses for himself and his stenographer and all like that. We didn't even have $1,000 in cash. Each of us would have been personally liable, you see, at least for that $5,000 for one year, anyway. We petitioned the Minneapolis Community Fund. It was called the Community Chest Fund at that time. It was the outgrowth of the old Tea Kettle that they formed in World War I. They were very cool. Then we began hearing of white businessmen who don’t want your league in here because they don’t want the Negro population increased. We finally got a hearing before the Budget and Distribution Committee in the Manufacturer's Club on Sixth Street just across the alley of Minneapolis Athletic Club. Mrs. Gilman called us together and briefed us after we assembled in the lobby. There was Rabbi Minda, who just recently passed away a few weeks ago. He's Jewish. And there was Reverend Samuel, Reverend Dear, Mr. Lowell Jepson, who was president of the Minneapolis school board. Jepson was also an ex-member of the state legislature, and he was the head of the Winkley Artificial Limb Company up on Plymouth and Fourteenth Avenue North, which was a great big establishment.

[End of Part 2]
Negro men in this town who wear fine clothes and drive big cars. They don't work. They have money to spend.” I said, “Now, perhaps somebody told them, when they applied, some white employer told them he didn't want to help to increase the Negro population. He wouldn't give them employment. Once they're here, they're going to stay here. Every time there's a lynching or a burning or an outrage in the South, eventually some of the overflow finds its way into Minneapolis.” I said, “They're going to stay here, because they would rather be in ice cold Minnesota with all its winters and snow and ice than a millionaire down in Alabama where their lives are property or anything else that they consider sacred is safe.” I said, “Now, if you want to give these young men and young women employment, make good citizens out of them. If you don't, why, they leave here, and you suffer, and we suffer too. Whenever you compel a Negro to live by his wits—have plenty of money and the luxuries of life—and do no work, you white people suffer and not the Negroes.” In other words, they're promoting vice.

So we came out with a budget of five thousand dollars, which was a lot of money in those days. Three thousand dollars of it was for the salary of the executive secretary, Mr. Abram L. Harris, and two thousand dollars for office expenses and stenographer. So the Urban League started on its work in an inside office in the rear of the old transportation building which was on Second Avenue South and Fourth Street. It was a one room office, the only facility that we were able to get. And that's where the Minneapolis Urban League started. Today, I understand it has a staff of forty and five offices in Minneapolis and budget of nearly two hundred thousand dollars.

Now, so much for the Urban League, except for this comment. We had to convert not only the white people in the right channel of thinking to get the Urban League established, but we had to convert the Negroes too, because there was so much apathy, so much suspicion, so much inertia among Negroes. We had to overcome and conquer that and almost whip them in shape before we could get their support. Then when they saw what it was and saw that it was going to do something, some of the so-called pseudo-leaders among the black folks, and those that were looking for prominence, were aggressive enough to try to get positions on the Urban League board. I served as the vice president of the Urban League board for six years. I figure that I made a substantial contribution to the development of Minneapolis in the efforts that I expended.

Later on, I became interested in Phyllis Wheatley House. It had an all-white board with a paternalistic attitude. They were doing a good work for Negroes in Minneapolis, but of course Negroes wanted to have some say about their own welfare. Finally, Dr. Dudley D. Brown, who's the father of the present Dr. Brown in Minneapolis, he got on the board, and he proposed my name for membership, and in due time I became a member of the board. We worked hard, and we had fine cooperation with some of the leading white leaders in Minneapolis. Mrs. James Page, who was in the state legislature, was the head of the Women's Christian Association. She took the lead along with Mrs. Frasier and several others and had Phyllis Wheatley established.

It first started in the old building, the Talmud Torah, which a Jewish school had occupied. Later, a nice, new brick building was built up in that area. It had gymnastic facilities, recreational facilities of various kinds, athletic teams, musical, literary programs—it had everything that contributed to the uplift and the moral integrity of young men and young women. It served that community well. For a number of years, it was the center of social activities for Negroes, because a lot of their fairs that they gave, they would engage the hall and other facilities of
Phyllis Wheatley House where they denied other facilities. I later became president of the board of Phyllis Wheatley House. I served, I believe, three terms as the president of the board of Phyllis Wheatley House. It was during my administration that 103 acres of land bordering on Oak Lake, about thirty miles out toward Minnetonka, was given to Phyllis Wheatley for a summer camp. The lady who gave the land to Phyllis Wheatley, her late father had been a member of the Minnesota State Supreme Court. Her name was Catherine Parsons. It was her father that was on the Minnesota State Supreme Court at one time. He was a justice.

After I had served on the Phyllis Wheatley board, I began to slow down, so to speak, because I had so many things in the fire. One day, Mr. William Seabron, who was the industrial secretary of the Minneapolis Urban League, came to my office about the 1940s, maybe the middle of the forties. He said there had been a survey made of Minneapolis by a team headed by Dr. Charles Johnson, who was president of Fisk University, at the insistence of Hubert Humphrey, who was mayor of Minneapolis. That team had their recommendations that were invited in the survey. On the strength of that, he formed the Mayor's Council on Human Relations. That began to take up a number of the problems affecting not only races but minorities and people whose national origin was impeding their progress in the community. So Hubert Humphrey got through the city council an ordinance creating the Minneapolis Fair Employment Practice Commission, which we called the FEPC. That is the first FEPC on the municipal level in the United States. There were five commissioners. Mr. Seabron came to my office and asked me for my profile. He said they're going to appoint a commission, and he wanted me to be considered. I said, “I am not familiar enough with it now to give you a decision.” He says, “You can give me your profile.” I says, “I'll do that. Here it is.” He said, “I'm going to submit it to Humphrey.” There were a number of so-called leading Negroes who had heard about this, and they were after the position. Some thought it was a salaried job, I guess, and some others wanted the prominence. So Humphrey went through a stack of these profiles. He told Seabron, he says, “This is the one I want,” and it was mine. So I due time, I got a notice from Humphrey appointing me to the commission before I even knew Humphrey. I thought, “He has that much confidence in me.” I served twelve years on it, until I got ready to retire and come out here in 1959 to California.

I was amazed at the problems that came to the attention of the Minneapolis Fair Employment Practice Commission. People who were discriminated against because of their religion. Protestants discriminated against Catholics, Catholics discriminated against Protestants, and Lutherans discriminated against Catholics. I found that the Lutherans were terribly prejudiced, and I never knew that before. I found that people from countries like Finland and Poland and Romania were discriminated against because of the national origin. Then some of them were discriminated against on account of their race. Some of them they wouldn't hire because they were women, and others they wouldn't hire because they were men. There was every form of discrimination.

And then we got on the Yellow Taxicab. It took us over a year to find out who owned the Yellow Cab Company, because this holding company owns the Minneapolis Cab Company, and that holding company's owned by somebody in Chicago, and that one is owned by someone in New York. It went along like that, for example. So we ordered a public hearing, and the cab company came in with one of these big-time lawyers. And they fought that public hearing, because they didn't want that notoriety, because so many Negroes were using the taxicabs. Most all those
North Side Negroes, you know, especially the railroad men, they were using cabs right along. They'd use a cab to drive two or three blocks. They didn't have any autos, you know. So it was hurting their business. They claimed a Negro cab driver was too much of a risk. They said that if he had a white lady for a passenger, it's hard to tell what would happen. He might insult her or assault her or something like that. We tried to find out if any of them had had that experience with white drivers, but they couldn't show anything like that. Finally, Granger of the Urban League interrupted our proceeding and stepped in and made some kind of arrangement—we heard—with the Yellow Cab Company, because the next thing we knew, they had one or two black cab drivers. But they were limited to driving a cab in daytime. Couldn't drive a white woman at night, see? You know, we were disgusted, because right when we thought we was making some progress and the Minneapolis Fair Employment Practice Commission had received a lot of favorable attention…

I was invited by the National Bar Association to come down to Nashville, Tennessee when they met to explain it, because it was new law. One of the leading attorneys of Chicago wanted me to furnish him with information and briefs. There's a beautiful discussion in the *Minnesota Law Review* by the late Judge Waite on it which shows that it's a valid exercise of the police power under the general welfare of the United States Constitution. Incidentally, in 1923 I had an hour of leave Nashville for a little something I said down there. I went down there, I think it was twelve, fifteen years later, and addressed the National Bar Association right in Nashville.

I've had so many experiences confront me that were based on some kind of racial discrimination. When my college fraternity met down in Atlanta and Georgia in 1928, we were sitting up in the Herndon Building on Auburn Avenue, and the Ku Klux Klan paraded on Sunday to let these uppity, educated doctors know where their place was, see? We'd just sit up in the window and laugh at them. When we went to a party that the teachers in Tuskegee were giving for us—Tuskegee’s forty miles away—they had three busloads. The red mud down there caused the bus to get mired in mud. One bus blew a tire. Then we all had to double up and get in two buses. The other two buses sank down in that red, sticky, glue-like mud. So we looked across the road, and there was two little black men plowing with a couple of mules. Persuaded them to unhitch the mules and attach them to the front end of the bus. Then, after we did that, the men all got out, and the ladies stayed in the bus. Then they hollered, “Go, mule!” There was a little white man who owned the mules. He was the farmer there, and these men are working for him. He looked at all of us, and we were dressed up, and he became angry. He says, “If you holler at those mules again, I'll have them unhitched.” “Whose mules are they?” He says, “They're my mules.” So everything was silent. It was dark then, and you know, it was damp and cold and in the wintertime. Muddy and wet. So some fella couldn't help it. This man, I pointed out, was the mayor of Cincinnati, see? He and some others, I think, said something, and he ordered the mules unhitched. And these two little black men were so submissive. They were scared to death, you know. So two men walked back two or three miles to the station and asked the station agent to flag the train down. He wouldn't do it when he found they were black. So there we were out in the wilderness, the ladies in all their party clothes and everything and slippers, and here we were, shivering.

So Sidney Williams, who later became the Urban League secretary in Chicago and several others got out and gathered a lot of sticks and twigs and trash and brush and old newspapers they'd been
reading in the bus and built a big pile of it on the railroad track. In the meantime, the train stops, and the conductor goes in for orders. He overheard a conversation and said he would stop this train if they could explain to him where. They were unable to give him anything very definite, so we just waited. When we saw the headlights of this fire playing on the sky, see, as it got closer, we lit this bonfire, and the train had stopped for fire. And then we all got on, and they wouldn't let us anywhere except the baggage car. This was the car next to the baggage car, and the front end of it, white men use it to smoke in. In a part of the back end, the news butcher had all his candy and peanuts and newspapers and magazines in there. So most of us had to stand up nearly forty miles into Tuskegee. The girls too, you see. That's the kind of a condition we had to put up with, you know, in the South. All hotel accommodations were out.

Now, when they built the Radisson Hotel, I was in high school. Central High School, Minneapolis. The Radisson Hotel, they had an essay contest to name the hotel. They won this contest to tell about Radisson. He was one of the early French explorers. Alfred Malland, who later became with the Pillsbury Flour Company and was their representative over in London, he won the prize, and the Radisson was named the Radisson Hotel. The Commercial Club, which is now the Athletic Club, had the three top floors. In the summer vacation, I got a job as a busboy in the dining room. I had to go way back to the help’s elevator…

**ST:** This was when you were at the U?

**RC:** At the university. I had to fuss with the elevator man to get up there. For the least infraction of any rules or regulations, why, you got fired. They had a manager up there from Georgia. It was a terrible discipline. The manager of the Radisson Hotel, when that hotel opened, was from Georgia. They had a big company there called the Pence Automobile Company. It supplied Buick cars for the whole northwest. He was one of the wealthy men in Minneapolis, and he had a black chauffeur named Jason Clayburn. He later became a Baptist minister before he died. Jason Clayburn was Pence's chauffeur. Pence sent him up to the Radisson Hotel on an errand to deliver a message of some kind, a letter or something. When he got in the lobby, he hadn't got all the way through the lobby. This manager from Georgia hollered at him. He says, “Hey, what in the hell are you doing in here? Don't you know down where I come from, they make the niggers climb trees for the white folks. What are you doing in this lobby? You get the hell on out of here.” So Clayburn—he's a heavy, portly man with small eyes, you know, and when he gets angry or when he hears something humorous, his eyes seem to kind of close. He's got a funny expression. So Clayburn looked around in astonishment. At first, he didn't know the man was hollering at him. So this fella walked up to him, and Clayburn knocked him down on the floor. Knocked him cold. Then he turned around and went out, and he told Pence what he'd done. In a little while, a policeman came up to Pence and says, “You got a black man chauffeur here, so and so and so and so?” “Yes.” “Well, I'm going to arrest him. I've come to take him.” Pence says, “You got a warrant?” The officer said no. He says, “You get the hell on out of here.” Pence took it up with Mayor Nye, see? Clayburn didn't have to do anything further.

John Ellison was the deputy sheriff, see, in Hennepin County. He had papers to serve. He came from the courthouse up to the Radisson. They weren't going to let him serve the papers, because he had to take the elevator. You know, we were discriminated against at the Radisson. The only way that Negroes got served in a lot of those places were because management was unable to
identify them as Negroes. It might interest you to know that Negroes who could pass for white began to join white organizations. They'd get in their lodges, they'd get in the churches, and it is said—and I believe this is true—that some of them joined the Ku Klux Klan down east. Prior to that time, the Catholics and Jews didn't know that the Klan was against them until these Negroes reported it to newspapers.

ST: So they'd get in to report and get information?

RC: Yeah. I remember down in Cleveland, there was a Negro doctor and a Negro undertaker. They bought homes in a new addition. Right away, they were going to run them out. The undertaker looked like a white man. The doctor didn't. They had indignation meetings. They held a big meeting there one night, the white people did, and they were going to run them all out of the neighborhood, see? And they were going to use violence if necessary. This was in Cleveland, Ohio, which was looked upon as the freest city, racially, in the whole state of Ohio at that time. Now, this Negro undertaker that looked like a white man, he got up, and he says, “Well, I'm Mr. Wills. I'm the one that bought one of those homes over there,” so and so and so and so. “Oh, you are, are you?” Look at, the anger started right then, and they were getting ready to handle Wills when another Negro that hadn't been noticed in the audience—he was a minister. His name was Harold Kingsley. He died out here recently. Reverend Harold Kingsley looked like a white man. He's from Alabama. He got up and walked up the front and he says, “Just a minute.” He said, “I'm a minister.” And he calmed the whole audience down and shamed them into better behavior, you know. To this day, they don't know that Kingsley was a black man, see?

You know, we had so many things to contend with. Right in Minnesota, the discrimination in some of the places there was horse-high, hog-tight, and bull-strung. That's the best way I know how to explain it. If a light-skinned Negro would walk along the street, why, he had the hostility of white people, and he also had that of some of the black folks, see? You were in between, see? Now, you know, a favorite question would be a white fella along the street would look at you and he'd see you weren't jet black. “Is your mother white?” Just like that, see?

Now, one of the leading doctors in Minneapolis… I was waiting table at the old University Club in the Badger Building, which is now part of the Radisson Hotel building. He was told that I was going to university and getting an education. Called me over to his table. Now, he was a good man. He didn't mean anything by the questions he asked. Old Dr. Kimble. He said, “Son, you're pretty bright.” He says, “Is your mother white?” I said, “No.” I said, “My folks are colored three generations back.” I said, “I got a great-grandfather that was born in Dublin, Ireland.” And I said, “My father's father was Jew.” I said, “He was a German Jew.” He says, “What do you intend to do?” I says, “Well, if I ever get qualified, I want to open a drugstore.” So he talked to me another time. He had a habit of asking the same question two or three weeks apart, you know. So he asked me, “Son, is your mother white?” I said, “No.” He says, “Now, before you ever start a drugstore, you come see me.” I knew what that meant, because I knew what he had done for others. He was going to help start me in business, but I was so independent to this day that I wouldn't accept anything from anyone. But after we got established, he used to send us prescriptions. So one day, he was going down the elevator. I had helped him on with his coat. I said, “You know, doctor, sometimes I wish I was jet black. Black as a pot.” He says, “Why?” I said, “I don't know, but someday I might amount to something, and you and your people would
say it was because of the white blood in me.” I says, “My black blood is smart too.” So we went along in that vein, and I always took things in stride. I didn't hold anything against anybody, but I always thought there was a better day to come.

Now, in earlier years, the first Negroes in Minneapolis after the Civil War, most of them were doing job work in menial occupations, you know. There were several of them that had drays, a horse and light wagon, and they'd haul for different people. They'd cut wood from the sawmills. A lot of them went to whitewashing. My father had an uncle who had a contract to whitewash all the buildings over at the University of Minnesota when they had little framed buildings over there. Whitewashing was looked upon as a Negro's trade, see, just like all the scissors-grinders had to be Italians, you know, like that. Then a lot of them worked as coachmen for the wealthy white people in the middle part of the city and up in Lowry Hill and Kenwood. They were also the yardmen. Some of them had domestics in the kitchen. A lot of them... Colonel John T. West came and built the West Hotel on Hennepin, which was one of the landmarks that they tore down. Of course, they had all Negro waiters there. The head waiter was an Italian. All the rest of them were Negroes, even the captains. For years and years, the West Hotel and the Ryan Hotel had colored waiters, too. Then when the waiters came, those who had been barbers, they were in one class, and the waiters were in another. There was rivalry and competition between the two. The barbers had the sway of things socially, because the barbers waiting on people of substance, a little of their culture rubbed off on them. They were conversant with the topics of the day. They had nice manners. They were affable. They made good money.

[End of Part 3]

RC: ...of Minneapolis were run by Negroes, up and down Hennepin Avenue. A lot of white people thought that a white person wouldn't do as a good a job. For a while, they had a monopoly of the business. The white barbers formed associations and unions, and they put in nice tile floors, and they had modern equipment. The Negro barbers weren't as progressive. They kept their kerosene lamps and their old plush chairs and everything. They didn't keep up to date, so they got kind of pushed out into the background. In the meantime, the waiters came up—the West Hotel, the Rogers, the Andrews, and all those hotels, and they had lots of time off during the day and early in the evening. They made good money, and they always went well-dressed. They superseded the barbers socially, see? Now and then, a man would engage in a business or practice or profession, and of course he was at the top of the list, then. We didn't have very many.

In the meantime, Negroes began to stir. They began to wake up. They wanted city jobs. There had been one Negro who was a captain in the fire department. His name was John Cheatum. Then my father had a cousin named James R. Cannon. He was the mailman for the old T.M. Roberts Supply Company, which is on Nicollet near Eighth Street across the street from where Dayton is now, which would have been like Sears & Roebuck or Montgomery Ward, but it failed. He got on the fire department, and he was a tall, dark brown-skinned man, a little over six feet with a heavy, black mustache. He was a rather imposing figure in his uniform. Of course, that called the attention of all the Negroes. Finally, Chief Canterbury got to be the chief of the Minneapolis Fire Department, and he caused a new firehouse to be built down on Hiawatha. It was going toward Minnehaha. They had a brand new building. He hired all Negro firemen
except, I believe, the headman was white. You know, most all that area was Scandinavian. Then the protests started coming in. They said it wouldn't be safe for a white woman to walk the streets down there after dark, and they did all kinds of things, but Canterbury wouldn't budge. So that firehouse stayed there for a number of years. I don't know whether it's there now or not, but I don't think they've got many firemen now, because one of the attorneys for the Legal Aid Society wrote me several years ago. They were taking the issue into federal court, and I think they were successful with the briefs and information that I gave him. So a few of them got on the police force.

ST: What period was this, sort of? Twenties?

RC: That was between about 1906 and 1920. Now, the Negroes had two or three or four policemen on at various times, see? They had one or two Negro detectives. In fact, the chief of police Brunskill is supposed to have been trained by a Negro detective. Brunskill was one of the best detectives that they had, and they say that Charlie Hamilton trained him. We had a Negro who went in business with man from England named Boucock. This Negro's name was Saunders, Solomon Saunders. He used to be head of the carpet department of the New England Furniture Company. Finally, he went in business for himself. He had a riding stable, and the stable was on Dupont Avenue South near Twenty-Ninth Street. Along the bridal paths of Lake Harriet and Calhoun and all in the afternoon, you'd always see him with a class of white ladies that he was teaching how to ride horseback, you know. Saunders was a very religious, and he died a number of years ago.

Then we had other Negroes who were outstanding. In the early years, long before 1900, the biggest flour mill there, the machinery was all installed and set up under the supervision of a Negro wheelwright named Wright. I don't know his first name, but they brought him up to set up all that machinery. We had an agent for the Encyclopedia Britannica named Beale who lived out near Fifty-Fourth and Nicollet. It's now Rustic Lodge. He used to answer all these articles on racial matters in the Minneapolis Journal. It was the Journal before the Star got it. He was the agent for the Encyclopedia Britannica. He came from Boston. He was a well-educated man, and he had a truck farm out there that he lived on. Over near Como in Saint Paul, there was another man named Crosby. He had a little truck farm, and when he died, he left a small sum of money to the University of Minnesota. I don't think it's hardly large enough to call a scholarship, but it was for the use and aid of Negro students, and it's still over there. I think you find it in the catalog.

Now, coming back, I suppose you want to know a little about myself. I was one of the charter members of a new chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, which was founded in April 6, 1912. It was proposed to students at the University of Minnesota. There were ten of us. This man, Parker, that you mentioned was one of the charter members. It flourished, and I began to attend the national conventions. Eventually, I became the national vice president. When it came time for them to establish a journal, I became the first editor of the journal called the Sphinx. It's now quite a magazine. It's published in Chicago in our national headquarters. I was the first editor. Then I resigned because I wanted to get established in life.
A few years later, I resumed my connections with the national conventions, and they elected me what they called a regional vice president, Midwestern vice president. I visited the chapters. I had an urgent request to come to the University of Kansas. I went down there to see what the difficulty was. It was discrimination against Negro students. So the president of the chapter attempted to make an appointment so I could see the chancellor. He tried several times and was unsuccessful. The last time, the chancellor, he says, he'll be glad to meet you. He'll come in the hall and shake hands with you and greet you. I said, “Well, as far as I'm concerned, Alpha Phi Alpha doesn't transact its business in the hall.” I said, “I'm going to get in his inner office. That's where I'll transact my business.” So he got a little apprehensive, because the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] had been pretty active down in the state of Kansas at that time. Of course, I had made a survey of schools in Kansas too, you know. I have found that the terms set out in the will of the people who left that ground for university purposes had a provision in there against racial discrimination. So armed with that, I went on in, and I saw the chancellor. He tried to throw me off balance at first. He told me that he was of Quaker stock, and they came from South Carolina. They didn't believe in slavery, and they freed their slaves first, voluntarily. I knew then what I was up against, see? So before the discussion was over, we had pointed out discrimination in some of the classrooms and in the cafeteria. He said, “We got a lot of white students from the South, and they object to so many Negro students here.” Come to find out, out of about three thousand students, there were less than two hundred of them that were black. He asked me, he said, “In the cafeteria, we could have little signs, reserved tables,” he says, “but they say that's discrimination. What do you think about it?” I says, “I think so too.” I said, “Now, I'll tell you something. I have no authority to speak for the entire Negro student body, but the problem of every Alpha man on this campus is the problem of every Negro student here. We demand—we want the same rights, privileges and respect that every other student is entitled to receive.” When I left there, they could eat anywhere over the cafeteria.

You know, when the men of Alpha Phi Alpha found out that one of their officers would stand up for them like that, the following convention in Columbus, Ohio, they elected me the national president. Then I was the head of the most powerful body of Negro men of college grade in the world. I went to Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. You know, Ohio State's in Columbus. The trustees there had passed a ruling which would eliminate all students coming from states where if they graduated from high school, they couldn't enter the state universities, see? That was going to eliminate all the Negro students that were coming to Athens, Ohio to go to Ohio University because they were drawing mostly from West Virginia to Kentucky. That Lawrence T. Young, who was a nephew of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, was one of the students there at that time. So when I went down there, they had a small chapter of fifteen. I think that ruling in one year's time reduced the number to about six. The student pastor took their part, and they fired him, and then it was a national issue. National magazines and Dr. W.E.B. Dubois, who was then the editor-in-chief of The Crisis of the NAACP, he just begged for the opportunity to get in there, see? Then we elected Perry Jackson, a lawyer of Cleveland, Ohio, to the state legislature, and we requested Jackson to go there and oppose the budget of that school. I thought you hit them in the pocketbook, and that tells more. Of course, we knew Perry Jackson couldn't do that, but he focused attention on it, and eventually that problem was solved satisfactorily. So those are some of the things that we did.
Now, you see, the Alpha Phi Alpha at that time had so many of the leaders of the Negroes in America. Captains of industry, the heads of banks, insurance companies, business and professional people, see? When they found out that they had somebody who wouldn't hesitate to go to front for them, they kept me in that office four terms, until I just had to quit. Then they separated the educational program from the office of the presidency, and one of the founders of the organization nominated me for that. So I become director of educational activities of Alpha Phi Alpha, and it took four years to organize it in thirty-six states and the District of Columbia. We had a nine-point, four-year program. We published helpful literature for young men and young women. We held meetings all over the country, you know, in various areas, encouraging them to go to high school, go to college. We didn't expect everyone to become a college man or woman, but we did want them to continue in the pursuit of education until they reached that point where they'd fit into the scheme of life with the greatest usefulness. Then we had accomplished something.

Even the electric streetcars in Washington, DC, had great, big banners on the front end of them as they passed down the streets, prejudiced as Washington was, you know? At that time, everything was separated in Washington. A Negro couldn't go in first class restrooms down there. He couldn't go anywhere. He couldn't even get a decent seat in the theater unless he'd go upstairs in the gallery. Washington was far more prejudiced at that time than it was down in the southland, in the bowels of the South. We just figured that if young men and young women make the best of their opportunity educational-wise, eventually intelligence is going to solve most everything, see? We advocated a peaceful way of going about everything that we possibly could. We finally got the endorsement in writing of Calvin Coolidge, of Herbert Hoover, who hated Negroes. We got the active—I have a letter upstairs signed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, when he was governor of New York, recommending our program. When I went out to Northwestern University to an interracial meeting called by the dean of the School of Theology, he heard of this program and he wanted to know what it was. Zelma Watson, who later on played in “Cabin in the Sky,” and Bishop F.D. Jordan, who is retired now, and Gordon Simpson of the Saint Louis Urban League, we were all there. They wanted to hear from each one of us. When I explained our program, the dean said, “If that works so well for your people, I think you ought to extend it to all people,” which we did.

Thurgood Marshall, you know, on the United States Supreme Court, when he was an undergraduate, he was one of the young radicals in the convention I had to contend with. When I couldn't get his committee to report, I put a lot of young men on that committee so they'd get the experience. I went there, we were ready to close the convention, couldn't get him to report. I went up, and I asked the committee, I says, “What's the trouble here?” He said, “We want scholarships.” I says, “I do too. I'm presiding. If you do it this way, it'll go through.” He looked at me as much as to say, “Who in the hell do you think you are?” Look at, he did it. The result was when his committee brought in their report, they authorized their first ten scholarships.

Now, today, we have an educational foundation. We have over somewhere around a half million dollars spot cash in deposit in various Negro savings and loan associations and banks over the country to help them out a little bit. We have a special project that the fraternity started in Channelwood, which is just outside of Akron, Ohio. They have a housing project—a village—eleven and a half million dollars, 453 units. And they got another one near Saint Louis, see?
They have now an educational foundation. Last January, they had me come to Chicago—pay all my expenses and everything else, you know—to come down there at the installation of the newly elected officers, the newly elected general president. While I was there, I had to sit in on a workshop of the educational foundation, because I started that. My recommendation was that these Negro men and women and their businesses and professions are gaining their livelihood off of other Negro men and women. Therefore, they've got to give something back to the race. I says, “You got to begin to help yourself.” I said, “We have got to establish a foundation within this organization. You have an investment in every Negro citizen in the United States. The United States has got an investment in each one of them. You must enhance the value of your investment. And the way to do it is to create this foundation to improve the Negro status, health-wise. Now, there are three diseases that are afflicting our people more than they are lots of other people. Cardiac ailments, hypertension, and sickle cell anemia. If you establish a foundation for research, eventually, when other foundations see you're trying to help yourself, you're going to get help from them. You're going to get help from the public. You're going to get help from sources you can't realize now.” And I says, “We got to establish a research foundation that will eventually become a fountain source of information in this country. Now, I say you can do it. Old Dr. Mayo drove a horse and buggy from Illinois and came into Rochester, Minnesota, and they had a tornado.” And I said, “There were two Catholic nuns that helped him when he couldn't look after all his patients. And he told them if they'd build a hospital, he'd send his patients there.” I said, “That's the way the world-famous Mayo Clinic started.” I said, “You tell me you can't do anything?” I said, “You've got the creative brains here, and they're far in excess of the twenty-five million Negroes in this country, because there's so many that can't be identified by their looks and their personal appearance.” I said, “Now, you can do all of those things.”

It took them by surprise at first, but they agreed with me. I said, “Now, I'm eighty-five years old, and I'm not going to be around here forever. But I'm going to be here long enough to see that you can do that.” And that's one of the reasons I'm here in Chicago today. A lot other things that I have recommended, they have done it. I hope they do that. I don't know whether they will or not. But I have done a lot of other things in my lifetime. I said to my mother one time, “I feel like a failure.” She says, “Why?” I said, “Well, I'm single. I don't have any family.” She said, “You get that out of your head. Look at all these young men and young women that you got educated all over the country. That's your job.” So I don't have any regrets. I have contributed money when I was practicing law. Some of them didn't have money, and they were being imposed on. I took the case without any thought or rumination at all. My brother was the same way. When the Mortgage Moratorium Act came in, we held two meetings, one at Hallie Q. Brown, one at Phyllis Wheatley House, telling them what they could do to save the property. We said, “We're not doing this for business, because we've got all we can handle.” But as luck would have it, so many of them did come to us.

There was one old widow lady that this real estate sharper, who used to come to our home and take dinner. She had her home over near Powderhorn Park. You know where that is? Beautiful location. Said he didn't want her to pay the mortgage up, he wanted the property. Her husband had been found dead on his car on the railroad. He's a sleeping car porter. He had a thousand dollars when he left home. He was going to pay off the rest of the mortgage. They found him dead, couldn't find the money. The little insurance, the undertaker got that. This man says, “You
pay me that insurance, I can put him in a box,” and so and so and so. She said he was too good a husband for that. We went to court with her three times. We got her property back for her and got her in it. Then she got in some other debt troubles. She says, “How much do I owe you and Homer?” I said, “If you were in good circumstances, a case like this would be worth $1,500 or $2,000.” Fees were cheap then, you know. I says, “If you ever find a hundred dollars, why, come up and we'll call it square.” I never expected a penny from her, but I didn't want to hurt her feelings and make her think she's charity. Four months later, a little before Christmas, the door opened. She came in with five dollars. She thought Homer and I wanted some Christmas money. I gave her a receipt, all like that. It took her a little over eleven years—washed, ironed, scrubbed and everything else. She's around eighty, and she came in. She paid the last three or four dollars, and then she died. A thing like that renewed confidence in humanity. A lot of the Negro lawyers, they wouldn't bother with people like that. We found them jobs, see? We helped them out during the Depression, see? We helped everyone that came to us except one, and she had to go in a mental institution.

My father and mother were people of good ideas. They were Christian people. They were substantial. They told us boys, “Never work to accumulate a whole lot of money like a million dollars. Have everything you want in life, but don't be extravagant. Get all the necessities and as many luxuries as you can, but help other people too.” And that's exactly what we did. My father—my mother never had to work. He always took care of her. My father was the messenger for the Pittsburgh Coal Company, which is the largest soft coal combine in the world. I don't know if it's still in existence now in Minnesota, but he held that job fifty-one years and seven months. He collected the cash daily from the yards and offices in Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Midway, and Merriam Park. He worked four hours every day and brought in all that cash, those cold winter nights, you know. He was only held up once and never short a penny in his accounts. We had good, wholesome training, and my mother and father built character into the three of us. They said that was more important than material things in life. I can see it now. We had a very beautiful life altogether.

People now, even my clients today—I retired in 1959. My clients still call me on the phone. One called me here the other day. I had to go back when they burned the mortgage on the church, free from debt, because I helped them get the church. They were having a hard time getting the lots on which to build. I was in their secret orders. I was a thirty-third degree Mason and was deputy of the the Scottish Rite for Minnesota, South Dakota, and Winnipeg. I held a number of other offices. I was on the Committee on Public Education. I of course told you about Phyllis Wheatley House affiliations.

**ST:** How important were the lodges?

**RC:** Well, they were very important. They filled a social need that the Negro had. At the close of the Civil War, the Negro had his church. He was anchored to the church. That's about all he had. Some of them didn't even have a name. Now, if I were put to the test, I couldn't tell you where the name Cannon came from. My great-grandfather couldn't. You know, as they were sold back and forth, the name would change to that of the master. The lodges enabled them to get together to have communication. They're all based on religious tenets. It gave them some activity and a little bit of social status. The Negro, you know, was at that time impressed with regalia and
ceremony. He hadn't had any before. The majority of them had flocked into the cities because they were tired of farm life. If they had gone on the land in the Middle West and Northwest, it'd have been different. But they flocked into the cities. Of course, if it hadn't been for a man like Booker T. Washington, who was the pioneer in industrial education—he was really the savior of the race throughout the whole South, because he taught them industry, thrift, morality, and religion. Tuskegee was a peculiar institution. If you ever get the chance to visit there, I want you to visit there and talk to some of the older ones who can tell you the why and the wherefore.

Now, the lodges played a very important part. They're still very strong. I still belong, but I seldom get out to a meeting. I still affiliate with Alpha Phi Alpha. They've got a graduate chapter out here, you know. I affiliate with another one. There's one that very few people know about, white or black. It's called Sigma Pi Phi. It's referred to as Boule. Boule is Greek for circle, you know. That is a small organization compared to these others. Its membership is restricted to persons who have become outstanding in their communities.

[End of Part 4]

**RC:** I wasn't a radical politically, but I was when the questions of sociology and economics came into play. I claim that if the Savings and Loan Association had a lot of black depositors, I ought to see a black man behind the counter somewhere there instead of pushing a broom out in front. It's respectable to push the broom and they're entitled to that too, but I felt that they were also entitled to something commensurate with their ability. In that way, some of our young people could find opportunities. Otherwise, what's the use of getting an education if you can't use it? I did a lot of things to encourage young men and young women to have a little initiative and try to get into this and get into that and help a lot of them get jobs. Henry Thomas of Hallie Q. Brown house in Saint Paul, I helped him get the job as head resident of Phyllis Wheatley House. Now, whether he'd admit it or not, I don't know, but I helped Henry Thomas a whole lot. My brother and I were quite interested in matters of that kind. My mother was quite active too. In fact, Mrs. Gilman had thought of her as being head of the Phyllis Wheatley House at one time. My mother declined. Mrs. Gibbs, the dean's mother-in-law, she declined also. They brought a head resident in from somewhere down east or south.

We believed that the people we had as ministers, social workers, business, and professional people should become conscious of the fact that a lot of our people were suffering, and we should try to help them as we went along. I said help everybody, white included, because I said when you help white, you're helping yourself, see? In our drugstore there, we had two young men. Both of them were white. There were only two Negro families in the whole neighborhood, see? One of them is Vernon Rose. He lives in 1074 West Montana. That's up above Lake Como in Saint Paul. He used to run errands for us in the drugstore before he got to where he could wait on trains. We said, “We're going to help you through the university.” At first he wanted to be a dentist. He had an accident and lost a hand. We said, “You can't be a dentist now. We'll get you into law school.” Got him the books and got him registered and everything in the law school. During the winter vacation, he decided he was going to take a little extra employment at the Deluxe Check Printing in Midway. So he got over there, and he got interested in it. He called me one night, and he asked me if I'd show him how to print and develop pictures. I said yes. After supper, we went in the kitchen and rigged up a ruby light. I showed him how. I saw he was
fascinated. I thought, “Well, this is just a kid's fascination.” He built on that. I didn't see him for about twelve years. One day I met him in Minneapolis downtown with his wife. I says, “What are you doing now?” He says, “I'm the head of the lithographic department at Deluxe Check Printing in Saint Paul.” These checks, you know, that you have in your checkbook, they print all of those. He says, “You got me started in that.” He says, “I owe it all to you.” Well, I felt so happy because he's in the money now, see? He's got another home down in Florida. He spends all his winters in Florida. I got a letter from him the other day.

Now, I'll show you the value of integration. These people are talking about integration. The politicians are using it for a football. If a politician in this district thinks it's a popular thing for him to say, he'll be for it. If he moved to another district and it was popular to be against it, he'd do just that, too. Integration… When I entered Central High School in Minneapolis, there were only a handful of black students. All the rest were white. We got along. They used to treat us all alike. Even in some of the classrooms, they'd try to seat you together and all. However, I started in September 1906 at Central High School. I had a classmate named Clarence Peterson who lived on Fifth Avenue South and Thirty-Ninth Street, Minneapolis. It took four years to go through high school. The class of 1910 graduated on the ninth day of June 1910. Clarence Peterson and I were still in that class as classmates. Got a letter from him the other day congratulating me on my birthday. He got acquainted with me. He found I wasn't poison. I was like anyone else. He valued the friendship. He got to be head of a big insurance business in Minneapolis. But he always kept in touch with me. I got a letter from him a few days ago. He says his sight is failing, and he's awful glad to get a letter from me. His wife reads the letters for him. He says, “You're the only living one of that class now that I know of.” And I keep in touch with him, see?

You know, I seem to have a faculty of surviving folks. Now, Rabbi Minda and I were the two surviving members of the interim committee that brought the Urban League into existence. He passed away a few days ago. I'm the only one left, I guess. When I was in Minneapolis, the Newman or the Spokesman, the different Negro papers and all—and sometimes some of the white newspapers—would call me and ask me about somebody that lived way back yonder or something that I knew about. I was always glad that I was able to tell them. Now, I don't know of anything else that I can tell you about, unless I go upstairs and get my profile. I could…

**ST:** How about the NAACP?

**RC:** That was established in Minneapolis somewhere between 1910 and 1912. I think it was 1911. You mean the Minneapolis branch?

**ST:** Right.

**RC:** Among the charter members was B.S. Smith. Brown Sylvester Smith. He was an ex-assistant county attorney from Wyandotte County, Kansas. He lived across the street from us. Louis C. Valet, who's dead now, he was at the university when I was. And Gale P. Hillyer, who became a lawyer in Minneapolis. Those three men and George Gamble, who later moved to Chicago, they are the only ones that I can remember as being charter members or movers of the branch.
ST: Were you involved in it too?

RC: Now and then, you know. I was sort of an intermittent member. This year I'd belong, and next year I'd belong, and maybe I'd skip a year or so. We had a habit always to contribute to that and subscribing to the *Crisis*. But you see, when I was getting through school and getting a start in life, I had to count my pennies, and I couldn't belong to everything that I would like to.

But that local branch of the NAACP went over to the committee hearing in the Minnesota Legislature in, I believe it was, 1911. There was a representative in the legislature named Nemitz of Minneapolis. He introduced a bill to prohibit the marriage of white and black. They went over there, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the local branch in Minneapolis, went over there. B.S. Smith and Hillyer and Valet and I think one or two others, and they fought against it. Not because they were espousing intermarriage but to protect the virtue of the black woman. You see, if a white man would wrong a white girl, he would have to marry her or support the child. If a white man wronged a black woman, nothing done about it at all. The thing was one-sided and unjust the whole way through, and they defeated that. They defeated it. The man that defeated it mostly was B.S. Smith, because he was from the University of Michigan, I think he was in the class with Clarence Darrow. They were classmates. Of course, they defeated that bill, and that was quite an accomplishment in those days, you know, because it was a very difficult matter at that time for a Negro to rent a house or buy a piece of property on a good, clean environment. The white real estate men would say, “Why don't you buy a home? You're always coming around here wanting to rent.” Then when they started to buy, they started to keep them out of the neighborhoods, see? You know, up until World War II, it was quite difficult for Negroes to buy in many a little county.

Now, Francis of Saint Paul, that got to be minister in Liberia, Africa, he bought over in that Juliet addition when it was new. He got in a home over there, and they was going to run him out. I went over there one night and sat up part of the night with him, see? When I got in there, there were guns across the table, and there was an old regular army Indian fighter that had been out, I think, in Montana. He worked in the post office after he got out of the military. He was sitting there, and they had a rifle there. I thought, “Now, ain't this a pain in a democratic form of government?” Now, I'll tell you another instance. This is a little humorous, you want to hear it?

ST: Sure.

RC: On Forty-Sixth Street and Columbus Avenue, Minneapolis, there was a small, white bungalow. There was a black man who was a laborer in the post office named Arthur Lee. L-double-E. He belonged to the veterans' organizations. Respectable fella, he and his wife. They finally got a few hundred dollars together and made a down payment on this home. There weren't any other Negroes that lived around there nearby. So the white neighbors were going to run them out. They threw black paint on the house. It was a white house. Threw black paint on it. They threw garbage all over the front porch. They began calling Mrs. Lee when he was at work and harassing her over the telephone and got the woman all upset and hysterical.

So there was a Negro named Martin Brown. He had a filling station on Eleventh and Marquette—a quarter of a block, a parking lot and filling station. Building there now. Martin was
a man, oh, he was awful touchy about race matters, see. Said we have to do something about it. He'd just come back from—he was a book salesman at one time in Oklahoma, and he had a yellow automobile that he used to haul his books around in. He drove out there with that car. Well, the color of the car disclosed his whereabouts wherever he went in Minneapolis. He got back and forth.

So one night when the American Legion post, Baker Post #291, was meeting at Phyllis Wheatley House before it had a headquarters, Earl Faccett, who's a retired post office truck driver, telephoned and he said, “Don't adjourn the meeting until I get there.” So he got there all out of breath. He said, “They're storming Lee's home.” He says there's a mob been out there tonight. He says they're just harassing them to death. He says, “I think we should do something about it.” So we all piled into cars, and I thought I'd better go along with these men because they're angry. We got out there to Lee's home, and after we had identified ourselves, we were admitted. There was one man sitting in the dark front room—big picture window, you know—with a rifle across his knees. Two or three others were in there armed. The white people across the streets were all up, their houses were lighted, watching Lee's home. When they saw all of us coming up there, they didn't know what was going to take place.

So Brown took it upon himself. He says, “You got any guns here?” He ran his hand under the upholstery chairs, and there were revolvers and guns and things hidden around, because Lee was scared to death, and he was going to defend himself. So I took them all aside, and I said, “Now, I'm going to tell you fellas something. What you can do, and what you can't do. Now, this is Lee's home. This home is his castle. Lee can defend it in any way that he finds necessary. But you can't do it. Now, the best thing you fellas can do is to calm down and not be excited.” I said, “Tomorrow morning, why, we can go down to the courthouse, and we can take some steps in a lawful manner.” But I said, “Don't do anything rash.” Well, about two o'clock that morning, everything seemed quieted down, so we left. I thought, “It'll die down in a day or two.”

Well, Martin went down to the chief of police—his name was Meehan—and told him if he couldn't preserve order, he had a lot of WWI veterans on the North Side. He'd go round them up. He says, “They can preserve order.” And Meehan pleaded with him. He says, “Don't do anything like that.” So Martin came up to me, and he said, “Mrs. Lee just got an anonymous phone call. There's going to be a mob about six thousand people tonight, and they're going to storm this home.” I said, “Give the police a chance.” “I'm not going to do that. The police don't do anything.” I says, “Well, you stay out of it.” “Well, I'm the commander of the post, and I can do this.” I said, “No, you can't, Martin.” He said, “Well, I'm going up north. I'm going to get the fellas together.” I said, “Wait a minute. Come back here.” I said, “Martin, I've traveled a lot. I can tell you some things that I know are true, and I can tell you some things from my own experience.” I said, “Now, I think this was down in Tennessee. They'd arrested a Negro and they was getting ready to lynch him. A little town. They had him in the jail, which is second floor of the courthouse. Down South, you know, it's a public square, and they've got an equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee or some southern general, and the courthouse is on that square, and the jail is on second floor. And this Negro is in the jail, and he was looking through the bars on the people that were collecting on the lawn down below.” I said, “Now, Martin, there's a little factory in that town. When the whistle blew for noontime on the factory, they were aiming to let everybody off in the afternoon. They was going to have a big holiday. Going to lynch this Negro. I don't know
what he had done.” But I said, “You know, while this mob was forming, all of a sudden the fire department came down the main street of the city. People saw a chance to probably seeing a good fire first and then the lynching afterward, see? The mob began going down there in the direction the engines were going. When they got back toward the end of the street, the firemen couldn't find any fire. People began wondering all around, you know. When they got back to the courthouse and the jail, the prisoner had been spirited away by the sheriff to some other town, a location unknown. You know, that's because somebody was cool-headed and used their head.” He says, “Oh, I never thought of that.” I said, “Well now, just be calm. You don't need to do anything. We got a good police force here.”

That night, a mob of five or six thousand people did come from all over Minneapolis. The newspapers, you know, they whipped it up. They came there, and they were milling, and it wouldn't have taken very much to have started something. All of a sudden, way in the distance, they heard a siren. Pretty soon the fire department came, way out there in the suburbs. They even had the water tower and the hooking ladder. I don't know what kind of alarm was turned in, but they had it. The engines pushed in the crowd, and people began falling back, you know, and letting them through. The firemen were pulling the hose out, and when they turn around, they couldn't see any fire, see? So finally the crowd got good-natured and began to boo the firemen and make fun of them. And when the apparatus drove away, the crowd dispersed. I thought, “Martin Brown did that.”

Two or three days later, I went down to his filling station. He wanted to put some gas in. I said, “I didn't come in for gas.” I said, “I didn't think when I told you that story that you were going to put the thing into effect here in Minnesota.” He says, “What do you mean?” I said, “You know damn well you called that fire department.” He didn't know a thing about it. Because it's ninety days in the workhouse, see? To this day—Martin just died a short time ago—to the day of his death, he denied that he called that fire department. But I know he did it, see? How did it happen there at that particular time?

One of the officials of the Pillsbury Flour Company had offered their Minnetonka home to Lee if he'd move out there temporarily until he could get something else. I saw Lee downtown. I made up a story. I said, “Lee, the boys are all talking about you. But I'm your friend, you know. I told them it wasn't so.” He says, “Well, what are they saying?” I said, “They said you getting ready to run. I told them you wouldn't run.” I said, “Now Lee, if you run away from that place after you bought it, they say that's the same day they're going to run you out of Minneapolis, because they're going to buy homes, and they don't want to have to run either.” He says, “I'm going to stay.” So he stayed about two and a half years until he couldn't make his payments. He defaulted, and he lost it. But now, that whole neighborhood is entirely black.

So you see how Minneapolis was thirty-five or forty years ago, and you see the changes that have taken place. Now, when I was back there last time, everything was open to me, see? In the practice of law, judges are supposed to be fair. But I crossed one of two of them on the bench who wasn't a bit fair. Now, I didn't go back in the judges' chambers and make a deal with him. I figured I'll take a case if it's got merit. If it hasn't, I don't want it. I tried my cases out in courtroom. I had good luck. I started to practice law with my brother Homer, who was a much
better lawyer than I ever could be. I practiced twenty-eight years in Minneapolis. He didn't like probate work. It wasn't exciting enough. I took over all the probate work.

ST: What's probate work?

RC: When a person dies and leaves an estate.

ST: Oh, right.

RC: After a time, I developed a lot of probate practice along with my other practice. One morning, I received in my mail that Marquette National Bank had appointed me as attorney for an estate. You know, the Marquette Bank in Minneapolis, one of the largest banking systems there. They were calling the calendar probate. A lot of those white lawyers who were—I was the only black lawyer—they couldn't figure it out, some of them, how I got to represent the trust department of Marquette National Bank in the probate case. The trust officer, he got on the stand. I qualified him and went on to it.

Just to show you the thinking of some of the people there, one day I was waiting for a case to be called in probate. I thought, “Well, I'm going up to municipal court and kill a little time, fifteen, twenty minutes.” Some very comical things used to take place there. You'd never see it on a stage, but it was actual fact in there sometimes. So while I was sitting there, I noticed a white lawyer was studying me. He was sitting aside of me. He was looking at how I was dressed and everything else. Finally he says, “Cannon?” He knew my name. I didn't know him. I'd never seen him before. He says, “Cannon, how do you find business?” I says, “Oh, pretty good.” He says, “How many colored people in Minneapolis?” I said, “I don't know. Some say eight thousand, some say nine, some say ten thousand.” He says, “Well, you must have a pretty good thing.” I said, “How do you figure?” He said, “Well, all those colored people.” I said, “Well, I'll tell you, Negroes are just like anybody else. They go to the lawyer that they think can do the most good.” I said, “Now, it so happens that there's about six Negro lawyers here. Now you divide eight or ten thousand by six. In addition to that, a large part of my practice is white. And pretty near all my brother's practice is white, because they think he's a white man.” He says, “It is?” I said, “Yes.” Then there was a long silence. Pretty soon, he says, “Well, Cannon, how do you get your business?” I said, “Well, I just go downtown to the office in the morning and unlock the door, go in, sit down, pretty soon somebody comes in.” I know he thought “that nigger's lying,” see? Because here he probably belonged to the Athletic Club, the Minneapolis Club, and a whole lot of fraternal organizations and all in an effort to get business, and here's this little dark-skinned man sitting upside of him got more practice than he's got.

You had all those things to contend with. They couldn't figure it out. Lots of times, things were put in your way, you see? It's different now, I'm sure. But when I started to practice, the big-time white criminal lawyers would say, “I can do more for you than a lawyer of your own race. He can't do anything. You know, the jury's all white. I'll take your case.” Example—a Negro got up for narcotics, federal court. He's only one count, which was conviction not to exceed five years. He got one of the big-time lawyers. Lawyer visited him in jail, said, “How much money you got?” He had around $2,000, savings account. “You lay me down $1,800, and I'll free you on probation.” About three weeks later, he came up, he says, “Well, I was going over your case and
everything. I think I'll have to throw you on the mercy of the court. I'll do the best I can for you.”
Federal court's tough, you know. He got his five years, see?

So then his next best friend came up to my office. He says so-and-so wants to see you down in
the jail. I says, “What for?” He says, “Well, he got in trouble with narcotic laws.” I said, “Well,
what's the result?” He said, “Well, he got five years.” I said, “Well, what can I do about it?” He
said, “Well, he thought maybe you could get him a new trial or maybe you could appeal it or
something.” I said, “Well, who did he have for his lawyer?” And he told me. I said, “What did he
do for his lawyer?” He says, “Well, he paid him $1,800. He thinks he got a raw deal.” I said,
“Well, you go back to jail and tell him I could have got him that much time for nothing.” You
had things like that to contend with, see? But all in all, I enjoyed my law practice there. I wasn't a
criminal lawyer and didn't claim to know much about it. I only had four criminal cases before a
jury in twenty-eight years, and I didn't want any more, because three of them were acquittals and
one was a dismissal.

ST: Did you do any civil rights sorts of cases?

RC: I had some cases involving civil rights, but they were settled before they got to the appellate
court. I had been admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court, and I’ve appeared
down there. I was admitted to the federal courts in Minnesota all over the state, municipal courts.
I had a nice civil practice. Worked about eight months of the year if you figure out the time,
because I did a lot of traveling on business and then some pleasure. I had a very interesting time
of it. I have received offers politically and declined them. I never was much of a job man, see?

[End of the interview]