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CIVIL RIGHTS PROTESTS IN TAMPA: ORAL MEMOIRS OF CONFLICT AND ACCOMMODATION

Nineteen years ago, Jim Crow's grip on racial segregation in Tampa began to loosen. A direct blow for equal opportunity was struck when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) organized demonstrations to integrate downtown lunch counter facilities in the "Cigar City." On February 29, 1960, Clarence Fort, a twenty-one-year-old barber and president of the NAACP Youth Council, led a group of about sixty students to Woolworth's where they sat-in peacefully. However, the management refused to serve them food, although the black students were free to spend their money purchasing other items in the store. The dispute was mediated by Tampa's Biracial Committee, an agency formed a year earlier by Mayor Julian Lane. The group included blacks such as Reverend A. Leon Lowry, president of the Florida NAACP and a Tampa resident, and Perry Harvey, head of the city's longshoremen's union local. Joining them were white leaders such as Cody Fowler, a well-known attorney, and Robert Thomas, a port developer. After seven months of unpublicized negotiations, the committee worked out an agreement with the black activists and the Merchants Association that successfully eliminated the "white only" eating policy at the stores. Subsequently, the committee helped to desegregate municipal facilities and movie theatres. The interviews which follow recall the struggles from two different vantage points: the protestor's and the mayor's. The conversations took place on January 16 and 29, 1978.



Clarence Fort in the early 1960s.



Cody Fowler, a member of Tampa's Biracial Committee



Reverend A. Leon Lowry, a member of Tampa's Biracial Committee.



Julian Lane, former mayor who helped desegregate local public facilities.



Woolworth's in Tampa where Clarence Fort led a sit-in demonstration in 1960.



Tampa's municipal beach which was integrated in the early 1960s.

Interview with Clarence Fort:

Q. *The first questions that I want to ask you are for background - where you were born, when, education, how you got to Tampa.*

Fort: Well, the first thing, I was born in Orange Park, which is in Alachua County, twelve miles east of Gainesville in 1938, March of '38. I attended grade school in Waldo for six years, and then I went to Hawthorne High School, which is the senior high school in Hawthorne, through 1956 when I graduated from there. Upon graduating from there I went to Orlando. I worked a year there at Morrison's Cafeteria as a waiter and from there I went to Tyler Barber and Business College in Tyler, Texas for a year. At the time I thought I wanted to be a barber; well I did want to be. There just weren't many things you could be along in there, because of the job opportunities and so forth, and my father was sick at the time so I couldn't go to a four-year institution. So, after finishing barber college, I originally planned to go to St. Petersburg where they would place you with a job - I had a job with a barber in St. Petersburg, but I had an uncle living here in Tampa. So I stopped over here for a few weeks till I could get myself together in St. Pete and find a place. So while I was here my uncle knew a guy who was cutting hair here, who had cut his hair. This man's name is Melvin Stone. He had a barber shop on 29th Street, so I took my apprenticeship under him for eighteen months and got my master's license. Then I worked under him for about, I guess three years.

Q. *This is happening in the late 1950s?*

Fort: Right, I went to school in '57 and came out in '58.

Q. *The barber shop, is it a segregated clientele - an all black clientele?*

Fort: Yeah, it's all black.

Q. *And it was in the black section of Tampa at that time.*

Fort: Right.

Q. *When did you first get involved with the NAACP and its Youth Council?*

Fort: One night my wife and I went to a meeting, now just how I got there or who invited me, I don't know. I don't remember now; I've been trying to think of it all day. But we went to a regular meeting on Central Avenue at the Central Life Insurance Company, and this meeting, I think we were the only two young people there. I wasn't married at the time, we were dating then. They talked to us about forming a Youth Council then, and that's how it all got started. I went out and spoke with some friends of mine who attended my church, and we got two or three people together and we started from there.

Q. *Do you remember who was in charge of the NAACP and asked you at the time?*

Fort: I know Robert Saunders was the field secretary at the time, but the President's name was Charles DeValt.

Q. *What year was that, do you remember?*

Fort: This was in 1959, if I'm not mistaken.

Q. *What was the role of the Youth Council, what kind of things did the Youth Council do?*

Fort: Well what we were doing then was trying to help kids and find out . . . encourage them to go to college and stuff like this. We were also talking about, even then, discrimination and the things that we couldn't do, you know. And out of this, this is how the idea came about for the sit-ins.

Q. *How many young people were in the Youth Council at that time?*

Fort: I think at that time we had about ten.

Q. *What were their ages?*

Fort: The ages ranged from, I'd say, fifteen to eighteen.

Q. *And you were about eighteen at the time?*

Fort: I was twenty-one.

Q. *You were older. Were the others in school? You were the only one who wasn't in school?*

Fort: I was the only one who wasn't in school, right. And my wife was in Junior College. Well, my date then, we got married later. She was in her sophomore year at Gibbs Community College.

Q. *And the others were high school students?*

Fort: High school students, right.

Q. *You'd have regular meetings?*

Fort: We had meetings once a week.

Q. *And they'd do what at those meetings, discussion meetings?*

Fort: Right. We discussed various things. Well, we were aware of prejudice then and segregation policies then, and we would discuss them.

Q. *How did the idea of the sit-ins here in Tampa at the lunch counters first come about?*

Fort: As a result of the one in North Carolina.

Q. *You were aware of the one in Greensboro then?*

Fort: Right. I was aware of that. The fellow I was working with, Melvin Stone, he decided one day to go down to the branch office, which is Robert Saunders, field secretary, and we told him, we said "look, they're doing it, why can't we do it in Tampa?" And at the time he said "we cannot venture out." Now it has always been NAACP policy not to go into something like this. Now they would back you up if you got into it, but they were a little afraid then, you know, said, "hey, we ain't going to be responsible for you kids to go right out." So we had a series of meetings, and after having a series of meetings I started talking so strongly about it. And the youths that we were with became so strongly involved in it that it was almost impossible then to hold it back. So after we said we were going to do it, we were really going to do it - then they said, "well we'll see what we can do, we'll back you up."

Q. *You were planning this for about a month?*

Fort: Right.

Q. *What kind of things went through your mind in the planning of this? Did you do the planning pretty much on your own in that month?*

Fort: Right, right. We did. We didn't know how we were going to come out. We didn't know this, but we mapped out our plans. What I did, I went around to the schools because we didn't have enough people. So I went and talked to the president of the student council at Middleton, a black high school, and to the president of the student council at Blake high school, two black high schools. And these two guys let me meet with their councils. I met with their student councils and told them what we were planning to do. And from that they started to recruit people. And we tried to select people who were pretty level-headed, we thought, that could go in and present themselves, represent themselves in an orderly manner. And then they in turn got with these people, and they started coming to the meetings. And that's how we built up our council. I think we got over sixty people. And we mapped out our strategy on what we would do.

Q. *Did you ever have any problem with the principals at Blake and Middleton? Did they cooperate, did they know what you were doing?*

Fort: No. I wouldn't say they did. I don't think so. I don't think they did. I just contacted the guys. I went out to the schools, and I did go by the office and ask to speak to the president of the student council. Probably, the president of the student council told the principal. I'm sure he was closer to him than I was and he probably had to do it.

Q. *Now that you've recruited the Middleton and Blake students, and having your meetings, what are your plans? What are you mapping out to do?*

Fort: Okay, we told them that we were going to go down. We set a date. We had two groups; we split the groups up. I led a group, and the other fellow with me was Melvin Stone. He wasn't the leader of a group, but he went along with the other group. Now I think I got the president of Middleton student council to lead the other group. Now we'd sit at Woolworth's, and I think we went down to W. T. Grant's if I'm not mistaken and we told them we'd sit there. Well we didn't know what to expect because we didn't know what the stores were going to do, we didn't know what the police were going to do, we didn't know what was going to happen.

Q. *You hadn't contacted the police.*

Fort: We hadn't contacted anybody at all. No one knew anything about it except these people, and they didn't know the date. In other words, I told the guy "I'll get back with you." We planned it all, but we kept the date secret right up until the last day.

Q. *Had you read, on your own, anything that Martin Luther King had written at that time or any other people in the civil rights movement that would have given you any theoretical background for what you were trying to do?*

Fort: No, no. It was spontaneous. I hadn't read anything on that at all.

Q. *The only thing you knew was that at Greensboro some students had tried it and you were going to do it here.*

Fort: Right.

Q. *Did you tell, in advance, Reverend A. Leon Lowry that you were going downtown and try to integrate?*

Fort: Rev. Lowry knew. Let me see, now, let me think for a minute, if he knew.

Q. *According to newspaper articles Rev. Lowry showed up downtown. Now I don't know if he was called up at the end or you had told him in advance because he was there.*

Fort: I'll say this. Rev. Lowry knew we were going to do it, but he didn't know when. I'll put it like this, I won't say that he knew when, but evidently they knew that we were meeting. They knew that we were planning something like this. Like I said we kept it a secret, and we didn't want anyone to know because we didn't want it to hit the papers. In fact, the papers didn't know it. They didn't know it in advance. So evidently he was standing by, because he had a series of meetings to attend as state president of the NAACP at the time, and he wouldn't leave town because he knew we were planning it.

Q. *But you had not told him specifically when you were going to do it.*

Fort: No. I didn't tell him. Robert Saunders might, have. He might have tipped him off and said, "hey, I think they're going to go down and they're going to start these sit-ins here in Tampa."

Q. *Had you been in contact at all with Francisco Rodriguez, because he was the NAACP legal counsel?*

Fort: No, I had, not. The senior branch might have contacted him. But I had not. I didn't have any dealings with him. I knew him. But I'm sure that once they knew that we were going to go down they started mapping their strategy. Yes, they did that, they mapped out strat-

egy. We talked about what would happen if we were arrested and who would put up the bail.

Q. *Whom did you talk to?*

Fort: Well, it was the president of the adult council, I think Robert Saunders, he handled most of it because he was the field secretary. This was done in his office. It was not a regular meeting of the Youth Council.

Q. *Saunders knew that you were going to go downtown?*

Fort: Well, I think he knew. He had an idea because . . . well, he had to have an idea because we had discussed the plans.

Q. *And you don't remember if Rev. Lowry was in on those ...*

Fort: He wasn't in on it, no.

Q. *So Saunders was handling it and mapping out what would happen if you got into trouble?*

Fort: Well, we were really playing it by ear, but Rodriguez, I imagine that's the reason he was down in the area too. He would act as our legal counsel, and would try to get us out on bail.

Q. *But you didn't encounter any trouble.*

Fort: No, we didn't.

Q. *What was the experience like during this?*

Fort: Well, I feel I was a little nervous, I have to admit. I guess every civil rights leader is. You're going into something you don't know what to expect, and after you have gone so far it's too late to turn around, and you're more or less pushed into it whether you want to or not. But I took the first seat, and then the others started following in and it was, well, really it wasn't bad. The first thing that happened was that they started putting signs up that the counter was closed. But it was a shaky experience, I'd say that.

Q. *Did anyone harass you in any way?*

Fort: No, not at the time, no. They closed the counter.

Q. *They closed and you sat in for about fifteen minutes and you went out, then you came back in. Now what was the purpose of that?*

Fort: Because when we left they reopened the counter. So, we had planned this. I told the kids, I said if they close it we're going to leave and when they open it we'll regroup and go back. So that's what happened. We went back when they opened the counter up. Then they roped us off, and then just closed the whole thing down.

Q. *You were in Woolworth's?*

Fort: Woolworth's, right.

Q. *And another group was in ...*

Fort: W. T. Grant's, on the other corner, that's what happened.

Q. *You left, I guess about 6:00 when the store closed.*

Fort: When it closed, right.

Q. *What was your strategy next, what were you hoping to do from that point on?*

Fort: Well we went back to the church; we were meeting at St. Paul's Church. We went back to the church, and I told two leaders that I would get back to them the next day and decide who would go from there. Now the next day . . .

Q. *Who were the two leaders, who specifically?*

Fort: Two student council leaders, because they were in control of the kids at the school.

Q. *Do you remember their names?*

Fort: Yes.

Q. *Can you tell me?*

Fort: George Edgecomb was student council leader at Middleton, I think you know he came to be a judge.

Q. *Now at that meeting at the church, did the NAACP leaders join you there? Did people like Saunders and Rev. Lowry appear there?*

Fort: Right. They all showed up there because by then it had hit the news and everything else and . . .

Q. *What were they telling you? Were they telling you the same thing or different things?*

Fort: No, it was basically the same. They didn't try to stop us. They just said, more or less, to act in an orderly manner, be yourself, and stay out of any verbal contact with members of the other race. Don't answer any questions. We had spokesmen set up to answer questions. I think I was the only one who was supposed to really speak. If anyone wanted to know anything they were supposed to get up and come to me, or send their reporters to me.

Q. *And you decided at that meeting that you would go back the next day?*

Fort: Yes, right, we would go back the next day.

Q. *And did you go back the next day?*

Fort: Right, we went back. Now as a result of this, and after it hit the papers and the TV, another group came out. You probably heard about the other group.

Q. *Joseph Dasher.*

Fort: Right. He had a group of his own.

Q. *What kind of group is this? It's not really described in the papers, because Dasher apparently had a juvenile arrest record.*

Fort: Well, we all were being discriminated against you see, and I can see Dasher's point. I guess he only wanted to help out, and that's the only way I can put it.

Q. *Where did this group come from?*

Fort: Well he got some people on his own. I guess he just went out in the street and said, "hey, let's go sit, down," you know, that's the only thing I can say.

Q. *Were they students at Middleton and Blake, do you know?*

Fort: I can't recall. I don't know if they were students or they were just out of school. Maybe just out of school, who weren't going to college.

Q. *Did you know Dasher?*

Fort: I hadn't known him before. Prior to that I had never met him. In fact, I still haven't met him. I've heard about him.

Q. *When you went in the next day, tell me what happened to you.*

Fort: The second day was the same procedure as the first day. The second day is when we had a mass meeting, if I can recall, that night. And that is when we had to map out strategy what to do about the other group. Because they weren't organized, and they had some trouble with people, and they were pushing people around.

Q. *Did your groups happen to join together at any point during the day?*

Fort: No, we didn't. We just met back at the place. We would just march back. We had signs, and we marched back to the church and met back at the church.

Q. *The people in the restaurant put the closed signs up again?*

Fort: Right, in fact they even roped it off the second day. They roped everything off - they didn't make us move - they put the ropes behind us. We sat down, and they roped the whole thing behind us. They roped the whole area off, and they said the store is closed,

the lunch counter is closed. We sat there a while until it was almost closing time and then we left.

Q. *And you went back to the mass rally at St. Paul's?*

Fort: Right.

Q. *And what happened at that mass meeting?*

Fort: Now, at this meeting we came up with the strategy of wearing signs so that our group would be recognized as the original group. In other words, I think we had blue and white cards, "NAACP Youth Council." We did this to separate ourselves from their group. If I'm not mistaken their group fizzled out - someone got to them, you know, and said "hey, if you want to get in it, come join the group." I think this is what happened. But I don't think we had any more trouble out of them.

Q. *How many are in your particular group at the height of the first two days?*

Fort: I'd say we had about fifty-five people.

Q. *And most of them are from Blake and Middleton?*

Fort: Blake and Middleton students. We might have had a few younger students from one of the junior high schools like Booker T. Washington, but the majority of them were high school students. Now at this time - this is what was so good about Tampa, we didn't have any trouble with the police department. The second day they found out about it, and they called. I was doing most of the negotiations, right out of the branch office. I'd go into Saunders' office, and the police department called to find out if we were going, so they could send police protection. And that's the key difference between the other cities and Tampa, the police protection. Now if they had done like some of the cities - take it upon themselves and just enforce the law, say "hey, you're not going to demonstrate," - but they didn't do that. They didn't let a soul get near us. The second day they went down with us, in fact they directed the traffic. And they stood behind the lunch counter, so no one else could even get there.

Q. *I want to get back to that mass meeting. Because of the trouble that the Dasher group had caused, you decided to put off further sit-ins. Is that right ?*

Fort: For the time being we did.

Q. *For the time being?*

Fort: Right, right. I think the mayor started calling around. And I don't know if he appointed this biracial committee or not then, but I know he appointed one.

Q. *He appointed it in late 1959. So it already existed.*

Fort: It already existed.

Q. *It was already there. In fact, one of the members was Rev. Lowry.*

Fort: I'd sit in on it, too.

Q. *Did you? When did you attend?*

Fort: I started attending the minute we had the sit-ins. At the next meeting I was there.

Q. *Tell me about it.*

Fort: Well, I take that back, it was the second meeting that they had. Because the first meeting, they didn't know what was going on. And they told them, they said, "look, let's invite the guy in."

Q. *Who invited you, Rev. Lowry?*

Fort: Rev. Lowry invited me so we could get to the source of the problem. You see, what had happened, this was a special meeting. They invited all of the managers, the downtown managers - I remember most of them - Colby Armstrong of the Merchants Association,

Cody Fowler of First Federal, and Robert Thomas, he's a financial man. So they invited all the managers in, and then we began to talk about what we could do to integrate the lunch counters peacefully. That was the first step. Now what happened then, they got to Rev. Lowry, and they told him "hey, if you will tell them to hold off, we will try and work something out. Let us have some meetings and see what we can do."

Q. *So you think that the biracial committee and its willingness to talk to you was a very crucial point in getting you not to pursue sit-ins for the time being?*

Fort: Right.

Q. *Now, at these meetings that you attended, once you called off your sit-ins, what were the discussions like? What were they telling you? What were you telling them?*

Fort: Well, they were telling us to give them time, and this was hard. This was hard for me because the youths had gotten stirred up then and they were ready, man. Hey, you know, kids. They saw their pictures in the papers and on TV. Well, I don't guess it really occurred to them then, what we were really doing. For the majority of them it didn't, you know. Because it had been a policy so long that we had gone along with you see. And it didn't really occur to them. But once it got started, they became enthused. So they didn't want to wait. So at that first meeting I told them that the biracial committee people were saying "let us work something out, we want to send up to North Carolina and see what they're doing." Well they started to integrate, I think North Carolina started to integrate. I don't know if it took them two weeks, or what. But they wanted to send around to different cities and get other plans and see how they were doing it, and Tampa was going to pattern themselves after that. So I told them, I said, "look, the kids they don't want to wait, they want to do it and they want to go now, and they are tired, you know." They were pressing me, because I was about to lose control of them. The kids said, "hey, we're going to go anyway." So I said it no, I'll tell you what." I said I've been sitting in on the meetings, and I think they're negotiating in good faith. And I said, "take it from me, I'll probably have something to tell you in a week or so." So I think I went to about four or five of their meetings, and I saw that the progress was coming along good enough. I was satisfied with it.

Q. *Now in these meetings, what kind of discussions are these business leaders that you talked about having? What are they telling you? What kind of pressures are they putting on the merchants, that you remember hearing? What's the kind of arguments that are going back and forth to get these people to allow you to come in and sit at the counters?*

Fort: Well they just didn't go along with it at first. And they were afraid of the money they were going to lose.

Q. *The merchants?*

Fort: Right. They were afraid of the money they were going to lose, and this was something that had just happened, it was something new to them. And they just really were at a loss. They didn't know what to do. And in the meantime I was telling them, "we're going to sit-in some more, and we're going to boycott." See, I was telling them all of this. But I guess it was a debate between the blacks and the whites there. Because there were about six blacks represented there. And they couldn't go against me, even though they were trying to hold me down. But they were telling the merchants that it had been wrong for so long, and you can integrate peacefully. The merchants really wanted to wait. Now they didn't say, "we won't do it." There wasn't a one there that said "we will never do it." But they wanted to go about it, you know, in the way that other stores had done it. And a lot

of them were chain stores, and they had to hear it from their national companies, and they figured they wanted to wait and see if someone else in their chain was doing it, and then they could follow suit on that line.

Q. *Were you telling them things like, "if you don't do this, we're going to boycott and demonstrate, and this is going to be ultimately bad for your business? This is going to be bad for the image of Tampa, too? You're going to have a Little Rock on your hands?"*

Fort: That's what I was telling them. I said, "these kids are tired, and they're going to do it." I said, "they might go tomorrow, they might go tonight. If I don't have something concrete to go back and tell them, they're ready to go tomorrow." That's what I kept telling them. But even myself I was trying to stall the kids off because they had really got on the ball then, and they were ready. There was no stopping them then.

Q. *Did you have the support of the blacks on the committee, like Blythe Andrews, Perry Harvey and Rev. Lowry?*

Fort: I had it.

Q. *What were people like Colby Armstrong and Cody Fowler and Bob Thomas saying to the merchants?*

Fort: They were trying to convince the merchants.

Q. *They were on your side?*

Fort: Right, right.

Q. *How were they trying to convince them?*

Fort: Well, they were more or less the mediators, I'll put it like that. They were, I guess, in between the two. And they were trying to get them to see what was wrong. They said, "if we can send off and get the plans and see how they're doing it in other cities, and try to initiate it here, would, you be willing to go along with it?" The store managers wouldn't give us a definite answer then, but they said, "let us read them over. And then we'll get back with our national companies or our chains, and then see what they say, and we'll meet back here and discuss it further." Now this went on for a month, or two months.

Q. *O.K. This went on, and were you under pressure as this went on?*

Fort: I was still under pressure, right.

Q. *How were you able to convince the young people?*

Fort: I just told them, "look, you'll just have to have faith in me, and it's going to come about." In the meantime we were still having mass meetings. At these mass meetings Rev. Lowry would get up, and he could reassure them what I was telling them. The people were so nice, the police department and the mayor and all, and we're trying to work it out, so why don't we go along with it. We've waited this long, and let's do it peacefully.

Q. *What about older members of the NAACP branch, and perhaps some of the parents of the Blake and Middleton students. Were you getting any trouble from them at the meetings?*

Fort: Well, they were showing up. But they all had jobs, and they were afraid for their jobs. Now the older members, they went along with it. A lot of them didn't want to be recognized. In fact one parent pulled his son off the counter there. But we had some good speakers, inspiring speeches.

Q. *Like Rev. Lowry.*

Fort: Right, right. And he told them what we were doing. And I think we more or less reassured them that we weren't going to make any trouble, any harm was going to be done, because of the way the police department handled it, and the mayor. We told them all about that, so they went along with it.

Q. *The lunch counters do get integrated in September. About the middle of September there are groups of people, men and women, who go into the counters. How was this brought about?*

Fort: Well this happened after they got the reports in about how it was going along in other cities. We didn't follow suit like they did it, but what we decided to do, the merchants said, instead of having everyone just open up the lunch counters and say, "hey, it's integrated. Everyone's welcome to come eat," we decided to let two people go to each store. We set a target date, and we decided on this date two people would go and sit at the counters. I think we had ten stores in the whole area of Tampa. Two in the morning and two in the afternoon. And we were instructed if anything happened, you see someone trying to make trouble, ask for your check, pay your check, get up and leave, whether you have eaten or not. That's how we started to work it out. We selected people. The people were more or less screened. And we tried to go along with adults. There weren't too many young people involved in this test. In fact, I don't think there were any. I was about the youngest person there. Because at the time, we had another group. The name of that group was The Young Adults for Progressive Action. James Hammond was the leader. And his group was more or less picked to do the testing, because they were older.

Q. *Older, and they were already in their professions, businessmen, teachers ...*

Fort: Right, So I did sit in. But I think I was the only one out of the whole Youth Council.

Q. *Which restaruant did you go into?*

Fort: It was Walgreens. I went in with a man. I was scheduled to go in with a man, but what happened to me, the guy didn't show up. We were scheduled for 10:00. And I waited, watched my watch, and he didn't show up. So to keep it from being a failure, I said, well, I'll go myself. So I went. I guess I sat down about ten after ten. And, you see the store managers were backing us all the way. They knew what was going to happen, but they were the only ones who knew it.

Q. *You went by yourself.*

Fort: I was by myself. Now that was a frightening experience. I was too nervous to even eat. And I sat down and I ordered, I think it was grits and eggs. It was early in the morning, with bacon, coffee, and just as I started to butter my toast, two guys came up. Two white guys came up, and they said, "look what we have here, a nigger at the lunch counter." They stood behind me, right behind me. Other people were there; two or three got up and left. But I'd say at least ten remained. So they said, "let's get him, we're not going to let him eat here. Let's get him." So at this time I called the waitress and said, "will you give me my bill and let me pay you." I never touched the food; I had started to butter my toast. So, I paid her, I got up, and I began to walk out of the store. And as I began to leave out of the store they were behind me. I walked around, and I met the manager. And he said "What's the trouble?" And I said, "they're giving me some trouble." You see I knew him because I was in a meeting with him. And he told them then, "look, we're not going to have any trouble here, we're not going to have any trouble in my store. We're going to let these people eat here, and I don't want any trouble. You give me any trouble and I'm going to call the police." So, he told me then, "Don't leave the store." So I just walked around, and they followed me all over the store. And he said, "Well, I'll call the police." So, as I was walking around the store I met this barber I was working with, Melvin Stone. So he said, "hey, what's going on?" He didn't even know what was happening, but he knows these guys are behind me. I said, "well these two guys are following me and

they're going to beat me up for sitting here." So he said, "hey, let's get out of here," and I said, "no, I can't leave - if I go outside they probably will attack me." So we walked around, and I saw two policemen walk in the door, and that's when I walked out. And the policemen grabbed them then.

Q. *So the manager had called the police.*

Fort: Right, he had called the police. And the policemen grabbed them and told them to get out of the downtown area, that they didn't want any trouble.

Q. *So this manager, like the other managers, was fully cooperative.*

Fort: Right, they were fully cooperative, right.

Q. *And from that moment on you had the opportunity to eat ...*

Fort: Oh, this went on I guess for about a week before they really opened it up. We were still testing. I think we went there at least four days like this.

Q. *Reading the news accounts, it said that the people were served generally from about 10:30 A.M. or 11:30 A.M., and then something like about 3:30 P.M. to 5:00 P.M., before, it seems to me, the heavy lunch hour and before the evening dinner. Was that part of your strategy, to avoid any contact with crowds?*

Fort: Right, that's what it was. We wanted to get in there and make it as as inconspicuous as possible what we were trying to do. Less fanfare and the least amount of people.

Q. *After about three or four days of testing, then, you were satisfied that the merchants were going to cooperate.*

Fort: Right, we were satisfied. This was all part of the plan.

Interview with Julian Lane.

Q. *My first question is your background. Where you're from, when you were born?*

Lane: I'm a native of Tampa, born in Seminole Heights, and went to public schools here and the University of Florida.

Q. *What year were you born?*

Lane: 1914.

Q. *You became mayor in 1959. Shortly thereafter, I think, only a few weeks perhaps, you appointed a biracial committee. Can you tell me what prompted your appointment of this committee?*

Lane: Well, civil rights was not an issue in the campaign but it was just starting. We were having some inquiries, you know, about swimming pools and recreational facilities and schools, and we just thought that would be the thing to do. I don't know where we got the idea. I think someone here locally, maybe Dr. Lowry or Jim Hammond suggested it, because we know that our committee was the first in the state and we think it was the first appointed in the South. Of course, it was a great big help to us in solving these problems. And they faced us, as you say, a few weeks after we went in. We often laughed about it - the first year I was in office we had two hurricanes, a flood, and integration.

Q. *You said it was a new idea. Where did it come from locally?*

Lane: I don't recall just where we got the idea offhand. I know that the black community, the leaders were very interested in getting something started along with those in the white community who were interested in our community. I think we more or less got together and said we'd better get us a biracial committee. And it would be a big help to us in meeting these problems. We knew they were coming; there was no question about it.

Q. *You mentioned before it was the right thing to do at the time, but obviously there are lots of motivations that go into a particular action. In Tampa like most other cities segregation had existed for seventy-eighty years. What makes you change or want to change by setting up this committee? Let me ask you this first: what was this committee supposed to do? What did you have in mind?*

Lane: Well, it was a group that would meet with me, you might call them, "dissidents" if you want to call them that - the black community that wanted integration. And we figured, I figured, that many heads were better than one. And as I say they were a great help to us. Now we had, I think, the best racial relations of any city in Florida, and maybe the South. We just didn't have any problems because we would work together. I know, and I might be getting ahead of myself, but for example we integrated our Ben T. Davis beach. We built it. It didn't cost us a lot of money, and I know that they came to our committee and said, "look, we're going out and integrate it." And I said, "go ahead. But I want to tell you this, if you violate the law, we'll arrest you." The Ku Klux Klan came to us, and I said, "you can go, we'll give you a permit to go out there, but if you violate the law we're going to put you in jail." And they both went out, and they went swimming, integrated, and we had no problems. We had a small crew of police stationed there and we had some in reserve.

Q. *What year was that do you remember?*

Lane: This was about '61, and, oh I could tell you some stories about some of our stuff.

Q. *Let me hear some of those.*

Lane: The problem, I guess at first was the integration of our parks and recreation facilities. I remember one day, I guess school had just let out, and we had just built a new swimming pool at Seminole Heights. It was out on Central Avenue. Then I got a call about 3:00 in the afternoon from the manager out there. He says, "the blacks are out here wanting to go swimming." I said, "well let them go." He said, "well, they'll be back!" I said, "that doesn't make any difference, they're entitled to it." And so he let them go. We never had a bit of trouble at all. And the blacks never did go back to that one. Of course, it's kind of out of the way. Now the pool built in West Tampa was in a neighborhood about half white and black in those days, and it was no problem. They went in there and we had no demonstrations. They went in there and mingled - there'd be about half black, sometimes more than half black in there with the whites. There were no problems at all. The same way in Ybor City. It was a very smooth integration all the way through. However, there were people in Tampa, in certain sections of the city that just weren't ready for it. Probably that's what defeated me in 1963. Because where I was born and raised in Seminole Heights, that section in the 1959 election gave me an overwhelming majority. Well, I lost that in 1963, and I lost the Sulphur Springs area and the Belmont Heights area, Oak Park out in the interbay; the downtown area we carried. On school integration, I remember we worked very closely with the superintendent, and we had really no demonstrations, no problems. On the lunch counters, we had oh, I guess a little objection, but nothing insofar as organized resistance. Most of the merchants worked with us fine. We also had a merchant's association downtown. They were a great help because with Maas Brothers and Wolf Brothers and the big chains, they also set up programs to integrate with the encouragement of our biracial committee. But, I think that one of the most important things during all of this integration we were going through was the news media. Now, I'm a great believer in freedom of the press. But we met down in my office with the biracial

committee, we had the publishers of the *Tribune*, which you know controlled both of the newspapers, and Channel 8, Channel 13, we had nearly all of the radio stations, and we talked this thing over and said, "hey, how about, let's just don't give any publicity to what we're doing." And we got complete agreement out of them.

Q. *Why didn't you want any publicity?*

Lane: Well we knew if we had publicity that these rednecks would show up. I think that's one of the main reasons even though with all the planning that we did, we never had any problems. Because those who were big objectors didn't know about it, so they didn't show up. I tell you, we had no problems at all until they had the riots in 1967.

Q. *If you didn't have any publicity, how did you hope to convince the general public that what you were doing was right?*

Lane: I think the general public knew that was the Christian thing to do. You couldn't discriminate.

Q. *How did you go about initially choosing the members of the biracial committee?*

Lane: We tried to get the leaders in the black community that we knew were interested and that the blacks respected. I did the same thing in the white community. People who were, you know, more or less conservative, they weren't radical, but who could see what we needed to do. And with their guidance and counsel we moved right along. I think it was the smartest thing I ever did, myself.

Q. *What was your own philosophy about race relations - after all, you lived in a segregated community all your life? And now it seems from what you're telling me you believed in integration. What were you hoping for?*

Lane: Well, I wasn't hoping for anything except a smooth integration of our community, without any demonstrations, or any fighting or rioting. I knew it was inevitable, that we had to do it, and as I say, I think it was the Christian thing to do, the right, thing to do. If I had to do it again, I'd do it again. I'd go right to it. The same way - I might speed it up a little bit.

Q. *You appointed some business men and civic leaders, both black and white to the committee. Cody Fowler, former president of the American Bar Association was a member. And your administration seems to coincide, with the beginning push, to make Tampa into a showcase city of the South. The Chamber of Commerce was earnestly striving to bring industry down here, and downtown urban renewal was beginning. Did that fit in with your view, with your image of what race relations should be like in Tampa? To put it bluntly, bad race relations, as in Little Rock, would be bad for the city economically.*

Lane: Well, we of course thought about all those things too. We knew we were trying to create a good image economically. We just felt that it was the right thing to do, and it would help us to create a good impression upon industry. You know we had teams going up north interviewing all these folks. The industrial park was already in existence, and I think we had already landed Budweiser and Schlitz, and there were a few more, but we were developing. Tampa had slowed down considerably, and we just knew we had to expand. In fact, more industry had to come in here, because Tampa is geographically located in a good position. We're kind of the hub and serve as a trading center, distribution point for this whole west coast area of Florida. It all kind of blends in together. You couldn't just say, "Well we're going to integrate," and not work on something else. Let me tell you one little thing that happened. The toilets, for example, in City Hall were separate - "White" and "Black". So, one day I told the custodian, one

afternoon late, I said "take those signs down." For six months, I don't think anybody noticed that the signs had been taken down. We had a committee come up and see us from the black community, and one of the things that they wanted to do was to take the signs down from the toilets. I said, "well those signs have been down for six months."

Q. *So you were forward looking in bringing integration to the city government ...*

Lane: (laugh) You think people are going to object, and I don't think I heard an objection.

Q. *That seems to be one of the problems, I think, that some of the merchants felt during the lunch counter episode - that if they integrated their lunch counters they would lose a lot of business. Tell me what you remember about the negotiations with the committee and yourself and the lunch counter merchants during that time.*

Lane: Well, as far as the lunch counters go, they worked with us. Now some of the smaller restaurants and lunch counters, they objected bitterly, but still we had really no big problem with them. But it was, going down and meeting with them, and saying, "look, this is how we're going to do it." And most of the time they came around. They didn't lose any business. I mean the first week or two business might have dropped off some, but I didn't hear any complaints about it. You know, the young people, they were the ones that were doing these things. They would say, "look, we're going down to these counters - we're going to try, say, Kress this morning," and so we would let the store know that they're coming and say, "now look, we don't want any trouble." And we had a special task force in our police department. Of course, they would be in the vicinity, but they aren't where they could create any scenes or anything. But if something did happen, they could take care of it. So we had, I guess, a lot of criticism from the rednecks, but we really didn't have any demonstrations.

Q. *What were some of the arguments against integrating the lunch counters ?*

Lane: Well, the main thing was they thought they'd lose business.

Q. *How did you convince them?*

Lane: We told them to just try. And I think they finally realized that they weren't going to lose business.

Q. *Do you think the fact that having a mayor involved in this issue and a biracial committee made up of prominent citizens was very persuasive?*

Lane: Yes, I think it helped. You've got to have somebody to take the leadership, to take the blame and the praise, too. We were doing that.

Q. *What about restaurants?*

Lane: I think that just kind of came along. The main thing that the blacks were interested in, of course, was the lunch counters, and we worked out those programs. The restaurants, you know, they were expensive; even in those days, there weren't many blacks that could afford them. And, I guess, just through the progress of integration the downtown restaurants accepted it.

Q. *Tell me about the movie theatres.*

Lane: We never had any real riots or anything like that - but we had problems with the owners. You know of course these theatres were all owned by the main office in Jacksonville. And we called them, and I couldn't get them to return the call. It was all over the state on this particular thing. They had, the theatres all over the state. And it was an awful job. Finally, I guess it took us a month to get the officials from the Florida State Theatres to meet with us. And we finally got them in, and I remember meeting with them. What the blacks wanted was just to be able to say, "I can go there." And the first meeting we had

with them, I remember Perry Harvey asked the manager after we got him down here, "How much does it cost for those who attend the theatre?" I'd say in those days it was about \$1.50 to \$2.00. So Perry says, "You don't need to worry about my people, they can't afford to go." And it was about the truth. We did have an organized effort by the young blacks to get in to them. And again, we told them that we wanted them to be orderly and on their best behavior, and not create any incident at all, and they did. It worked beautifully. I think they probably did go down there and demonstrate one or two times before we really got them admission. But it was all orderly, no fighting. Our special police force was in the vicinity, and of course, we had them take care of anybody, white or black, who created any disturbance.

Q. *Were you and the biracial committee in negotiation with the theatres before the picketing, or did the picketing prompt you to go into negotiations.*

Lane: It was during this picketing, you see. I think this was one reason we got them to meet with us. Dr. Lowry and myself met several times with the young blacks. We would meet with them, go over the plans, and tell them what we thought they ought to do, and give them the procedure. And they were peaceful when they'd go down, and I think that really helped getting the meeting with the officials of the theatre chains. And after we completed all these things, there was no problem there.

Q. *But you really didn't want them to do a lot of picketing?*

Lane: No, we figured if they did that then we were going to have some demonstrations and rioting and battles. And we wanted to keep away from that if possible. Which we were able to do in all phases. There were a lot of elements in there. Our committee was, of course, I think the strongest element we had, but the news media were a big help too. And it's just, all the people - the store owners and the Merchants Association - working together and cooperating.

Q. *How about the Chamber of Commerce? Were they at all active?*

Lane: They were helpful, but they stayed in the background. But it was, I think, a great spirit of cooperation between all segments of the population - business, industry and everything.

Q. *Was your overall strategy trying to avoid demonstrations, picketing, trying to do this quietly? Was that your top priority?*

Lane: That's right, that's right. We had seen what had taken place in other parts of the country.

Q. *There was one part of the country where violence took place - Jacksonville. There was a riot in 1961. There was a rivalry between Jacksonville and Tampa for this "New South" image. Why do you suppose Tampa was able to handle its problems quietly, and Jacksonville wasn't?*

Lane: Well, probably in seeing what other communities had - the problems they had run into. The mayor in Jacksonville was opposed to integration; here, I wasn't opposed to it. I just knew that we had to do it. And then we contacted the business community and the Merchants Association and the leadership in the black community. We just mapped out this plan and were hopeful that we could do it, and we were successful. And it was, I think, the great cooperation with everybody concerned. I think they realized the image it would have created if we had started having riots.