July 2006

Alton White oral history interview by Andy Huse, July 10, 2006

Alton White (Interviewee)

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Andy Huse: Okay. Well, if you want to, why don't we start with your father? And I'd like to continue and talk about your own.

Alton White: Sure. Well, my dad came here from Georgia in 1942, and immediately went into business on Central Avenue with his brother as a business partner. During that time, you know, segregation was alive and well in Tampa, as well as in the Deep South. And it took people like my father, Mr. [C. Blythe Senior] Andrews, Mr. Perry Harvey [Senior], Reverend Doctor Leon Lowry, James Hammond, and of course a few more. And what they did was make peace with the white community so that we could get things done when we needed to get things done.

Curtis Hixon was the mayor during that time. And being a man of—from—the South, he couldn't even say the word "negro." So when he come down to talk to my dad, he said, “Well, Moses, if there's anything that you need for those ‘negras,’” (laughs), “I'd be glad to help you with them.”

So Dad says, “Mayor, we've got to first teach you how to say that word.” And he said, “I don’t think I can say it, Moses.” He said, “You can say ‘knee.’” [Hickson replies] “Yeah.”

So he said, “Well that's a ‘knee’ right there, let me pat you on it.” And then he said, “‘Grow,’ and put those together,” and then he got the word. And that was funny how that came about.
Well, after that we were segregated, you know, no black ministers—we were in white
eighborhoods. Central Avenue was the main clear path for black businesses. And all the
gentlemen that I named previously to that, including Rogers Dining Room, Mr. Henry
Joyner’s Cotton Club—they were all like brothers in business together. If one ran out of a
loaf of bread, you’d come to the other restaurant and get it.

Well, something happened in 1963¹, and we had a couple of light skirmishes. We never
had a major riot like they did in Detroit and everything. And it was mainly because of
people like my father, Mr. Andrews and others that came to the forefront to stand up to
both the blacks and the whites to tell them what was right and what was wrong. Well, my
daddy always had a bunch of shotguns. He always had a bunch of guns because he said
he had more windows in his business than any other business down there. He counted
110 windows. And he was going to protect every one of those windows. And on
numerous occasions there would be something that would start a skirmish. But we tried
to keep peace. And he did it by talking to the people that were causing the problems. And
we had some pretty tough law enforcement officers during that time. And she had to talk
to the mayor to talk to the chief [of police]. Because they were ready to come down and
straighten it out with shotguns.

Well, there was a time when I was in Model Cities. That was 19—maybe the year was
sixty-eight [1968]. I'll go back and call it and you figure in a part of it.

AH: Okay.

AW: The Black Panthers came to town. And then at four—I was sick during that day. And
I was home so one of the guys called me down to the office and said, “Mr. White, we
need to you to come back down, we got a problem. These guys down there are talking
about they're from Denver, Colorado [and] they're going to start a riot.” So I went down
there, and they were talking to a little fellow that ran TCEP, which was Tampa
Concentrated Employment Program. His name was Lorenzo Brown. He was a friend of
ours. And this guy from Denver was talking pure crap to him, telling him how he was
going to—they were going to come and take over the town and (inaudible). So I didn't
say anything. I left the room and went down on Central. And my father wasn't eating at
his restaurant. He was eating at another restaurant, Rogers Dining Room. I said, “Daddy,
we got a problem. There's some Black Panthers in town and we need to stop it before it
gets out of hand.” He said, “Come over with me.”

So we went down to his restaurant and went and got his shotgun, two .38s, a (inaudible),
whatever, then jacket-up—put on a jacket. And we went on down there. And we both sat
in the back of the room. And this young guy was saying, “The problem with y’all is,
you're too soft. You're Uncle Tom's, and you don't know what to do [or] how to do things,
and we're going to show y’all how to organize.”

¹ Referring to the June 1967 riot on Central Avenue, Tampa, Florida.
So my dad says, “May I speak, sir?” And the guy says, “Yes, Pops.” He said, “No, my name is not ‘Pops.’ My name is Moses White.” He [young man] said, “Well, go ahead, Uncle Mo.”

He [Mr. White’s father] said, “Nope, it's not Uncle Mo, it's Moses White.” He [Mr. White’s father] said, “Well, let me ask you something, son. You are telling these young men and young ladies in this room that you're going to come in and straighten the city out, [and] get things on like it should be. How much money do ya'll have to do that?”

He [young man] said, “Well, what we do, we have fundraisers and we do this and do that —” And Daddy said, “Hold it.” He looked at me and said, “Alton? How much do ya'll have in Model Cities?” I said, “Four million, eighty-six thousand dollars.”

He said, “Brown? How much do y'all have in TCEP—Tampa Concentrated Employment Program?” [Brown] said, “We have two hundred-something thousand dollars.”

I said, “Daddy, we also have a grant coming in called Planned Variation for a million dollars, in addition to that.”

So he says, “Young man? Why don't we do this? Why don't we give these guys two or three months to administer their program, and see how they do? And if they don't do it right, then ya'll—we'll call for y'all to come in.” So the young guy said, “No, that's what's wrong with y'all. We've been waiting too long now. The other thing, you've got be willing to die for what you really believe in.” Daddy said, “You mean, die?” He said, “Yeah.”

He [Mr. White’s father] said, “You willing—you telling me you [are] willing to die right here and now?” He said, “Yeah.” He said “Well,” pulled his jacket up, pulled out his gun, and said, “I think I can arrange that.”

By that time, Lieutenant Brown came in from Tampa Police Department with about six other guys. And he said, “Moses, what's going on?” He said, “We got a problem, we're going to take care of it.” He [Brown] said, “Well, you need for me to come back?” He said, “Yeah, come back later on.” And the guy said, “What kind of town is this?” (laughs)

So he says—Daddy talked to him a little more. And he said, “Son, let us do it this way. And I think you can go up to another town and see if you can get that place right—we'll have this straight. And it'd be best if ya'll catch the next flight out of town, you know?” And he said, “Mr. White, we don't have the money to catch a plane.”

So we carried him down to his restaurant, we fed him, and by that time, Chief (inaudible) came up with his forces, about eight or ten cops—cops pulling in from every side. And he says, “Moses, we've come to arrest these guys.”
Daddy said, “No, they're not going to be arrested. We've got an understanding. They will catch the six o'clock flight, they're going to be leaving.” He said, “But didn't they cause some disturbance?”

He said, “No, we got it under control.” So he let him go in the room house and sleep for about two hours and took him out to the old Tampa International Airport. And my dad said, “The next you see Tampa, let it be at thirty-five thousand feet in the air.” (laughs)

AH: (laughs)

AW: There had been—there was another skirmish when he was on Main Street. Little shootouts and people lost some buildings and lost some windows. But never—only one person was killed in the total rioting time that I remember. But Mr.—we had good leadership. Dr. Lowry led the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] here, and the state representative of the NAACP was Robert Saunders. They had boycotts in the towns. All the sit-in—the Kress [S.H. Kress & Co. Department Store], Grant [W.T. Grant Department Store, or Grant’s], Walgreens [Drugstore], and they were peaceful sit-ins. And we'd sit-in and another group would come in. The times that they had led the major ones, I was in Tallahassee. And I was working with those demonstrations in Tallahassee along with Patricia Due and John Due. We were arrested twenty-three times. And it was interesting times during that time.

But we always had good leadership on both sides of the community. There was a group formed under Governor Claude Kirk, called the White Hats. And they would go walk out in the neighborhoods and kill rumors and spread the word of how and what was happening in the community. And it kept a lot of things down. Now we integrated the causeway, (inaudible), it was the causeway going over Clearwater.

AH: Yeah, the Courtney Campbell [Causeway].

AW: Courtney Campbell. And I called—the mayor during that time was Julian Lane. So I called Mr. Lane to let him know we were going swimming out there. He said, “It's no problem; why wouldn't you go out?”

I said, “Mayor, do you understand what we’re saying? I'm carrying about fifteen blacks to swim.”

He said, “Oh, that's different. I get somebody out there.” So he had some police come out. We walked in and the white people walked out. And two days later everybody was swimming together.

Anything specific you want to ask?

AH: Yeah, sure. Well, first of all, describe for us your father's restaurant. You must have spent a lot of time there growing up.
AW: I did. I—

AH: And it was called the Cozy Corner?

AW: Yes. It was—first of all, he had a total sit-down restaurant called the Palm Dinette. It was a large restaurant.

AH: Yes, okay, I recognize that name.

AW: It sat seventy-five to eighty people during that time. It was a large restaurant. And he—all the people respected my father because he always was innovative. He would always give people things if they didn't have it.

But during that time, though, our men, and our Air Force base was MacDill [Air Force Base]. It was a combination base. And soldiers would be four or five hundred deep on the weekends. They get paid on the first and the fifteenth. Well they got paid on the first, and by the ninth they'd be out of money. And they'd want to eat on credits. So Daddy developed a card, a punch card meal ticket. And it was twenty-five dollars on the meal ticket. And he went out to the base, to get the commander to let him come and sell meal tickets on the base.

AH: Okay.

AW: So the commander told him he couldn't let him come on the base, but he let him have a bench to sit outside the gate. They gave us a bench and two chairs. And we sold meal tickets to the guys. And anytime after they ran out of money, they'd have the meal ticket.

AH: Okay.

AW: It was like the first credit card that I was aware of.

AH: So was it a prepaid card then?

AW: Yeah, a prepaid card.

AH: Okay, gotcha.

AW: A prepaid card. And they loved it. Because they—all of them bought it, every one of them bought it.

AH: Now I take it these are the black soldiers, right?

AW: Yeah, black soldiers. Black soldiers and black airmen.
AH: Okay.

AW: And all these guys on Central Avenue were strong, opinionated people. They had to be, because they were in business and they showed leadership that other people hadn't come forward with. Mostly guys were from out of town. Mrs. Andrews came from Georgia long before—I think from Georgia. I know Mr. Joyner came from Lakeland. And Mr. Lee Davis had the pool room across the street. There was thriving businesses down there. All of the activities took place in the restaurants or the churches. And if they had a meeting at the church, they had a meeting at the restaurant first before they went to the church.

AH: Okay.

AW: And so these guys had a camaraderie that the Walgreens and Kress wouldn't have because they were big places. I never shall forget the Pepper Pot Grill was across the street from my daddy's place. I was ten years old. And we were open to 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning. The bars close at 2:30, then there were people who won't go out till five. So they come tell establishments. And the man at the Pepper Pot Grill ran out of bread. So he came over to my daddy's restaurant. And my daddy's in the back asleep. And he asks for two loaves of bread. I told him we didn't have any. And we had about fifteen loaves left. So when my daddy woke up, I said, “Daddy, that man from Pepper Pot Grill had a lot of nerve. He came over and asked for two loaves of bread.” He said, “You didn't give them to him? Get three loaves and carry it over there now. And come back, and lean across that sack,” and he hit me twice. (laughs)

AH: Wow.

AW: He said, “When one of them people run out, we'll borrow from each other, son. And that's the way it is.” And Mr. Joyner, my daddy had a T-model Ford. Mr. Henry Joyner had a Cadillac. And he let my daddy use it on Sundays to ride us up to Hillsborough [Avenue] and back.

AH: Nice.

AW: The family, yeah.

AH: So the Palm Dinette was the main restaurant. Did he have the Cozy Corner at the same time? Or was that later?

AW: The Cozy Corner came later.

AH: Okay.
AW: Yeah. There was a family that owned Cozy Corner before my daddy did. And there was a falling out in the family. So they sold the recipe to my daddy and daddy named that Deluxe Cozy Corner. And a nephew moved across the street and had Cozy Corner. Well, my daddy had had a niche that you know, in business he served three hot dogs for a quarter. And that—chicken breast will pay for three hot dogs, so if they buy a breast, we will be satisfied because it will pay for three hotdogs. There was nowhere in town—Grant was selling hotdogs at that time for fifty cents apiece. And so we had that going.

And everybody ran for office. Hubert Humphrey, Lyndon Baines Johnson, all those guys, they made a stop by, on Central Avenue to talk to my daddy, or talk to one of the guys—Mr. Andrews. One day, I saw a limousine parked out in front of the restaurant. And I was going for [John F.] Kennedy. And he was running against Hubert Humphrey. So I stopped right in front and asked the girl, I said, “Who is that in there?”

And she said, “Senator Humphrey.”

So I went to ease out the door, and I heard a voice: “Alton! Come here!”

I said, “Oh, my gosh, I—”

So I go over. He said, “Mr. Humphrey, this is one of those Kennedy boys.”

AH: (laughs)

AW: (laughs) He said, “I raised them to think and act like me, but they got minds of their own!”

He said, “Well, that's all right. Kennedy and them are going to run out of money in New Orleans and I'll be the candidate. So will you come over with me?” And I said yes. So I knew Kennedy wasn't going to run out of money—run out a lot of things but he wasn't going to run out of money.

But the story about Hubert Humphrey, he had a photographic memory. And I went to a conference the next month. And I was with Reverend Earl Hartman, who was a minister for Davis Island Commencement Church [Davis Island Community Church]. And we were standing out in the crowd of about fifteen to sixteen hundred people. They said, “He has a good memory. I'm going to test his memory.” So I just stood out there and he was signing books. Then he looked over the counter, over the top. He told the Secret Service man, “Get that guy.” And so I told him Reverend Hartman was with me. We got up there, he said, “Alton, how is Moses?” That's how good his memory was. One of the last persons he spoke to before he died. And he had his sister get my daddy on the phone. So before he died he wanted to talk to Moses.

There's so many stories I could tell you about him. And some of them I don't know. Because when I was with him, I saw more poor people come in and talk to him. I saw
administrators come and talk to him. People with money had problems. Some of the
guys were—during the political times didn't know when to vote, and they would come
and get their advice. And he always told him what he thought. And he was a guy that was
a working man. He worked all his life. He died too young. He died at sixty-eight. And I
saw—I gained a lot of knowledge in how to handle people with my daddy.

Because when, it was 19—early sixties [1960s], I was with the Black Power movement.
So he saw me throw up my fist one day, “Black power!” And another guy, he says,
“Come here, Alton. What is that?”

I said, “That's how we speak! Black power!”

He said, “Let me ask you something. Can you receive anything with a balled up fist?”

I said, “No, sir.”

He said, “Can you receive anything with a balled up fist?”

I said, “No, sir.”

He said, “Well, open your damn hand then.” It's the way he handled it—with his palm
open. That's the kind of guy he was.

AH: Yeah. Well, he seemed very humble too.

AW: Yeah, he was a very humble man.

AH: Then people would ask him, be, like, if I were to come and interview—and try to
interview him he wouldn't want to talk about the past.

AW: He never would tell you anything he'd done for people. He's done things for people
that I'm finding about now. And he's been dead for forty-five—forty-something years.
And that's what I try to pattern my life after. Because he said, “The more you give, the
more you receive.” And he helped so many people, politicians, poor people, people that
didn't have jobs, people that were in jail unjustifiably so.

A couple of guys came in and had their brothers come to him because they thought they
were unjustifiably in prison. And before I knew it, they were dining and cooking in our
restaurant. And my daddy had the first work release program in town! (laughs)

AH: Really, unofficially.

AW: Unofficially. Because what would happen, sheriff would be in—Sheriff [Hugh]
Culbreath and all those guys. They'd give ’em a release if they’d go down there and work
with Moses because he knows that they were going to walk the straight line, and some of them had to go report back to jail after—in the evening.

AH: Oh, I see.

AW: Yeah, so it was a work release program, but it wasn't, you know, grants and aids and stuff.

AH: Yeah. So they trusted that your father would kind of keep them straightened out as long as he was there?

AW: As long as he was there, they never walked. And they knew not to try to go nowhere because he'd find them.

AH: Yeah, he knew people.

AW: Oh, he—I was—we were talking with Gusby Jones. You don't know Gusby. Gusby used to work—he and I worked together for about seventeen years, and Belmont Heights, East Tampa, Central Avenue and West Tampa. Well, it was like—it wasn't no games, but the boys from East Tampa—the only place we could meet the West Tampa boys was on Central Avenue. That was the end of the Z zone. That was the zone with (inaudible)—

AH: Okay.

AW: —but you better not be caught in West Tampa if you were (inaudible). I told Gusby last night, I said, “Gusby, I—you know one guy that could go all over town?”

He said, “Yeah, I know who that was.”

I said, “Who was it?”

He said, “Alton White, because his daddy's name was Moses!” (laughs)

AH: (laughs)

AW: He said, “That's the only damn reason he could go!”

AH: Okay. So what were the—some of the specialties of the restaurant then? What were the kind of food that kept people coming back all the time?

AW: Well, basically we had short order cooks. We short order cooked red pork chops, fish, broiled ham, barbecued ribs, barbecued chicken, barbeque sauces, and steaks. Steaks were a good seller. And we made our own potato salad, lima beans, string beans, and we didn't cook too many peas because they say they had enough in the service and enough in the jails.
AH: Okay.

AW: So you could get enough peas before. Some of the inside stories of these guys used to tell my daddy when they first came, you know.

They didn't have money when they first opened the restaurant. So they went to work—he went to work at Schlitz Brewery as a—on the truck. My uncle went to Tip Top Bakery. Well, they worked until three o'clock, and they'd get off and then they'd go open the restaurant. And these guys were about to close one day and the (inaudible) guy who's a guy who worked for us—that's another story—(inaudible) that worked together, my daddy would have to close up because he put a note in the window for renovation.

So, Mr. Henry Joyner came down here and said, “Moses, what's this crap about renovation?”

He said, “We ran out of money, and we're going to need to stay closed a couple of—”

He said, “You can't run a business like that, boy. Once you close the business, come on, go down to the Cotton Club with me.”

So he carried me down there with him. And he said, “Stick your hand in the jar,” and it had all kind of money. And he said, “Stick your hand in there, and get what you need.”

So Daddy said, “I can't do that, Mr. Joyner.”

So he told me, he said, “Son, reach over there and get a number five”—you know, the sandwich bag was a number five bag.

AH: Okay.

AW: And I got some pretty big hands. He said, “Stick your hand in and get a couple of dips out of that, get the pennies out of there and give it to your daddy. He won't take it.” And I did, and we reopened up.

I went to Florida A&M [Agricultural & Mechanical University]. Football—played football, [had] a scholarship.

AH: Okay. What position did you play?

AW: I was fullback and corner linebacker.

AH: Okay.

AW: I asked my daddy to come to the game. He said, “Son, I can't come to a game.”
I said, “It's on the weekend.”

He said, “I got to make sure—I got five other kids that I got to feed, while you're out there, full speed playing. I tell you what I'll do. I'll buy the game from—buy one of the Florida A&M games and bring it to Tampa.”

I said, “Okay.”

So we went to practice and we practiced for about a week, and Coach [Alonzo Smith “Jake”] Gaither didn't know who I was because I was recruited by Macon Williams. So I went up to him. I said, “Are you Coach Gaither?”

He said, “Yes, son.”

I said, “My father would like for you to call him.”

He said, “Have you done something wrong?”

I said, “No.”

He said, “Do you know what it's about?”

I said, “Yeah.”

[He said] “Well, what is it?”

I said, “He wants to buy one of the games and bring it to Tampa, play one of them games in Tampa.”

He said, “Well, what is it that he do?”

I said, “Sell chicken and barbeque.”

He said, “He must sell a hell of a lot of chicken and barbeque.” (laughs) But he bought the game and brought it to Tampa.

AH: Wow.

AW: Yeah, the first time Florida A&M played here.

AH: Do you remember who you played?

AH: Sixty-five-nothing?!

AW: Yeah, but we beat all of them during that time.

AH: Yeah.

AW: There was enough of us to score fifty-five—We beat Bethune [Cookman College] that year ninety-eight-nothing.

AH: Oh, wow.

AW: These guys up here now they scored a bit so—

AH: So how did that feel? To have the game come home to Tampa?

AW: Well, I loved it, you know. I didn't know—I didn't realize how much of a problem it was going to be to buy tickets. Everybody wanted a ticket. I thought that it was very well attended.

AH: So your father was able to come to the game then?

AW: Oh, yeah. He got there.

AH: Yeah. Great. So it sounds like he fed a lot of people too. I mean there was the one article that I read about him and it seemed like—

AW: Everybody—

AH: —he must have given thousands of chickens away.

AW: He gave away thousands of baskets of food. Every Christmas, and every Thanksgiving, he would have baskets of food in front of his place. And he'd get Dr. Lowry to fly in a helicopter for the police department. And he'd fly around as Santa Claus, and he'd hand out the gifts.

AH: (laughs)

AW: And he got beaucoup of food. I mean, he did that for about eleven or twelve years.

AH: So who flew in as Santa Claus?

AW: Reverend Leon Lowry.

AH: Lowry, okay.
AW: Yeah. This is his house, by the way. This is his old house.

AH: This is Lowry's house?

AW: Dr. Lowry's old house.

AH: Wow.

AW: It's one he built—he got remarried and he built another house, and we moved in this house.

AH: Okay.

AW: Yeah. But Dr. Lowry would be Santa Claus. And I had some of those pictures but I can't find them.

AH: So he flew down in the helicopter as Santa Claus?

AW: Yes. Sat the helicopter right down on Main Street.

AH: And he had a suit on and a beard and all that?

AW: Oh, yeah, the whole thing. And he'd come in and my daddy would shake his hand and he'd give my daddy gifts, Santa the gifts. And they'd give to the kids out of the projects.

AH: So what—about what year was this? Was this in the fifties [1950s] or the sixties [1960s]?

AW: In the sixties [1960s] and seventies [1970s].

AH: Okay.

AW: Sixty [1960], seventy [1970], and probably the early eighties [1980s].

AH: Okay.

AW: Yeah, it went on for years.

AH: All right. When was it about that your father was having the trouble and you had to reach into the sack? Was that—that was earlier?

AW: That was in 19—yeah, that was in 1952.

AH: Okay.
AW: Fifty-two [1952].

AH: So after that business got going.

AW: Things got better.

AH: Yeah, okay.

AW: He learned how to do the meal card, and—

AH: Yes.

AW: And he learned how to— Well, first off he had a lot of help. The guy that owned the bar, the nightclub next to him was Mr. Watts Sanderson. And Watts Sanderson said, “Come on in, I'm going to introduce you to some people.” So he came around and introduced them to Wilson Meatpacking Company, the Davis Brothers—my daddy met the Davis Brothers. I might have met the Davis Brothers, to tell you the truth, from Winn-Dixie [Grocery Store]. They were very good friends of his. And Johnny Greco and all them guys at Kash N' Karry [Grocery Store], they were from Tampa. So he could always get deals on food and such that normally a lot of people couldn't get. And he liked it. And he went up—he went up to Columbia Bank to get a loan to open the restaurant.

I'll tell you this story, I forgot about it. He got a loan to start through (inaudible) Mobley. A good old man, he was a fine old man. And he said, “Well, son, what kind of collateral do you got?”

He said, “Well, who is she? (laughs) I don't know what you mean!”

He said, “You got to get me something to get the money out of here.”

He [Mr. White’s father] said, “I'll give you my word.”

He said, “Well, I'll tell you what. Come back in about five minutes.” And he did some checking around a little bit, and (inaudible). And he got about five thousand dollars of his salary for him. And that's the kind of guy that he is.

AH: Yeah.

AW: The guy he was. And there was a black doctor named Dr. Dark, called Dr. Carl Dark. He could read and speak Italian. And I—some of the Italian guys would challenge and read the letters. And he'd have a laugh from here across the street. Two would be pulling teeth, and two would be reading letters to him.

AH: Okay.
AW: That's the kind of guy that he was.

AH: So now while you were up there in Tallahassee at FAMU, I understand you got involved in the civil rights movement? Just last month I met Pat and John Due.

AW: You did meet them?

AH: Yes, and I interviewed them as well. And wonderful folks.

AW: Oh, yeah.

AH: So tell us a little bit about how you got involved in the movement up there. And [you] said you got arrested quite a bit. Tell us a little about that.

AW: I was playing football, and was not supposed to be doing anything like a demonstration. They told us that we couldn't do that. But I passed the church one day, and I saw them pulling a girl out of the church by her hair. And it happened to be my cousin. I said, “That's not right—and we got to fight.” So I heard that Pat and John were having a meeting that night in one of the businesses owned by the school. I went to the meeting and then I got involved. And it—I started—I carried one group one way, and they carried another group, and got arrested by the city and the county. Judge Ben Williss was the county judge. Judge [John] Rudd was the city judge. So you know there was some bad boys if I remember their name, right!

Well, Ben Willis was one of the greatest civil rights judges and lawyers in the country. He was very liberal. Judge Rudd was a pretty tough guy.

AH: Okay.

AW: But see, all of us would have had police records had not been for Kennedy. Robert Kennedy threw out all those cases. And then—a lot of the cases. But a lot of the black people didn't want us demonstrating like that you know? They said, “Y’all make these things hard for us and then y’all go home, and then we get our houses burned down.” We'd have counselors go by, talk to the people, because they were elderly and were afraid that something would happen, being in a rural area of Tallahassee, that's South Georgia. And so we'd go by and talk to them. I got a billy club thrown across my eye one day when we were down in jail. Ben Willis had let us know that they were going to read us an injunction and we were supposed to take three steps forward back. And I tried to get him to take one step forward, and I looked back and I was the only one taking a step forward. (laughs) And they clobbered me.

They arrested us, threw two hundred of us out in the fairground and didn't have no food. So the judge—Clark was the—no, Clark was the bail bondsman, Rudd was the judge, and Bill Jarris the sheriff. And they were brother-in-laws. (laughs)
AH: (laughs) Oh man!

AW: They had a clique going, so—I got to know all of them, they got to know me well, you know? At first they wouldn't lock me up with the rest of them. Because they thought I would excite them, get them to do something crazy. So one night, they called a highway patrolman. They had him out there in these fairgrounds, and they had missed it. So I asked the—they were raising hell like that, so I asked Judge Bill Judd, Junior, “Could I go out there? I think I could quiet them down.”

So he called his daddy and said, “Can Alton go out there and—?”

[Bill’s father said,] “Hell, no, he can't go out there; he's the damn reason that we got to separate with them!”

So I said—Bill took the chance and took me out there. I got in there found out they had a highway patrolman in the back. And so I talked them into giving the highway patrolman. So I asked them, I said, “They haven't had any hot food, let's make some arrangements to get food.” There's a couple of boys then they had tuberculosis, we had four blind guys in there. They was sleeping on concrete floors, no cots. So negotiated to them cots and we ended up sharing a lot of hamburgers with—150 hamburgers.

[They said], “We can't get no damn 150 hamburgers!”

I said, “Will you call three or four of the other stores, like McDonald’s or Burger King? And get them a (inaudible), pick up twenty at a time.” And Bill Judd, Junior took us around to get that. And—

AH: And this is still in Tallahassee, right?

AW: Yes.

AH: Yeah.

AW: I got locked up one night, one day. And I said, “It's a damn shame y'all got us like this.” So this—they let me out the back door at 2:30 in the morning. And some guys in the alley, they were waiting on me to beat me up. And I don't know how God let me get out of there, it was strength. But I jumped on a slop truck going up to Tallahassee to get slop. The first guy I see was my brother. They were missing me. They knew that I had gotten out, but they hadn't seen me. But I had gotten a couple of licks, and I didn't know I had gotten those licks in my face, before I was getting through the alley. So I said, “Andre, Andre!” And he said, “What you want, old drunk?” because I was slop all over. He thought I was a drunkard.

AH: Okay.
AW: Aw, man, when they found out it was me, they took me up to the FAMU hospital, put me in the hospital. And they went out raising hell. And the guy came and said—about two o'clock—about four o'clock that morning the guy said, “Man, you better go out there and get your brothers. They're fixing to start a big riot.”

AH: Okay.

AW: So I went down and we talked and I talked to them and got them to come back up to the cabin. But it was—

AH: Now where did they see you though? When you got up and you walked through the alley, caught a couple licks, and then you jumped—

AW: I immediately—I jumped up on a Monroe (inaudible) truck. I saw this truck going up the street.

AH: Okay.

AW: I didn't know what it was. I just jumped on that truck.

AH: Okay.

AW: He was going up to the cafeteria to get some slop for—

AH: Oh, so he was on the truck?

AW: No.

AH: Oh. When it stopped?

AW: When it stopped, when it stopped on campus, I jumped off.

AH: Okay, I got you.

AW: Because the guy never knew I was on his truck.

AH: Yes, yes.

AW: He never knew I was on the truck.

AH: (laughs)

AW: Yep.
AH: So how many—how many of these thugs were out there waiting for you? When you got out of jail?

AW: You know it was dark. I never knew.

AH: Okay.

AW: I never knew.

AH: Yeah.

AW: I never knew. And I realized that they were putting me in the alley [and] I was in trouble. I knocked back at the door [makes knocking sounds], and the guy said, “Yes?”

(both laugh)

AW: I said—he said, “You wanted to be out! You out! Good luck!”

AH: Oh, man.

AW: [He] slammed the door.

AH: Okay. So—

AW: How is Pat and John doing, by the way?

AH: They seem to be doing very well.

AW: Good.

AH: Yeah, they were both in good spirits, and they got a beautiful home out there.

AW: Oh, yeah, gorgeous.

AH: Yes.

AW: They're gorgeous people.

AH: Yes, they're just—they were very helpful.

AW: Oh, they were very instrumental inside the movement. They really got it going.

AH: Well, it was especially interesting because John could talk about the legal angles—

AW: He knew the legal angles.
AH: And then she could talk about on the street, and—

AW: Yes, yes.

AH: And she had a lot of memories about the tear gas—

AW: Yeah.

AH: —and still has to wear glasses.

AW: They would shoot gas at us. And there was a lot of racial slurs that were thrown at us. There was these guys—those guys who would just [say], “Hey, what you doing in the line? Your mama or daddy—” you know, “Your mama's black, and your daddy's black, what's your problem?” I say, “My mama was white, and my daddy was black.” And they'd hit me with a coat pole.

(both laugh)

AW: (makes hitting sound and laughs.) They'd call us all kinds of things. And we'd go to the theatres. Probably the funniest things that we talked about—we'd go to stand in the theatre line. I think it was funny to ask him to in the theatre. All they had to do was ask us to pay, because we didn't have no money.

AH: (laughs)

AW: We never could have gotten in there! (laughs)

AH: Okay.

AW: But we went every day.

AH: So, so these campaigns that you were a part of, they were integrated businesses, or what?

AW: Yes. There were—to eat, we'd go to a cafeteria to the—

AH: Lunch counter?

AW: To the lunch counter, and we'd go to the movies. Those were the only—our main stops.

AH: Okay.
AW: College kids—because we wanted to keep them in a safe—more where people were able to help. We had a lot of kids from Florida State [University] that would sit-in with us too.

AH: Okay.

AW: And they came up when they found out; they came on to help a lot. So—

AH: So that, did that make a difference? To have whites to sit-in with you too?

AW: They snatched us off to school and left them on the stools. (laughs)

AH: (laughs) Man, really?

AW: (laughs). They'd say, “I'm with them! I'm with them!” (makes snatching sound)

(both laugh)

AH: So you were aware then that there was a movement going on here in Tampa?

AW: Oh, yes, all over the place, all over the place.

AH: Yeah.

AW: It was all over the country.

AH: Okay.

AW: And we really—the state of Florida came out good, compared to New York and Watts and places like that.

AH: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

AW: Because a lot of guys got elected to those cities because of those riots, you know? A boy in Newark—Kenny Gibson got elected there in Newark. [Tom] Bradley got elected as mayor in L.A. A boy in Alabama, Johnny Ford, got elected in Alabama.

AH: Okay.

AW: And lot of things that took place, and the big boys came in a lot of times after things had been done. You know? They'd sit—they'd come in and get the jury.

AH: Yeah.

AW: And we stopped a couple of them—I don't want to talk about that, but—
AH: Okay.

AW: We, we stopped a couple of them because they were—a lot of it was publicity seeking after the fact, but not paying the pain. And, you know, Martin had met with the ladies on the bus. You know, he know it would have been (inaudible) in Atlanta.

AH: This is true.

AW: Yes, so— But out of those type of things come a lot of other things that are positive, because other people took the bullet.

AH: Yeah.

AW: And the guys that stayed out there on the firing line are still out there on the firing line.

Unknown Person: Excuse me

(Interruption, whispers)

AH: Okay, good to meet you too. Thank you.

AW: That's Ms. Terrell, there.

Unknown Person: Hey, how are you, my very best friend Andy?

AH: How you doing?

Unknown Person: This is Andy Huse, right?

AH: Yes.

Unknown Person: Okay. Good to see you.

AH: Good to see you!

Unknown Person: I'm on the run.

AH: Okay.

AW: But we talked, that's—see, that's how I got to be known. So when I went to the mayor's office, well the guys that were demonstrating out of Tallahassee, guys in New York, Washington. They didn't—all of them knew about us. And some of them guys got elected. Mayor Barry, Marion Barry, got elected in Washington,
AH: Oh, yeah.

AW: A boy in—(inaudible) Southern cities they had black mayors. Ohio had Lou Stokes’s brother, Carl Stokes? And so when I got in the mayor's office, I was able to call on a lot of these guys to get things done.

AH: Okay.

AW: And if you didn't know a guy, and they ask you about it, you say yes. And then you find out who he was.

AH: Yes. Now—so let's talk about your time in the mayor's office then. First of all, how did you come about to the decision to run for mayor in 1974?

AW: Well, we were running the Model Cities program. John Fernandez and Gary Smith and I were running the Model Cities program. I don’t know if you're familiar with it.

AH: Yeah, I've read the reports—

AW: Okay.

AH: —in the library, but tell—just tell us a little synopsis.

AW: Well, what happened was John left, resigned. And Gary took—the mayor [Dick Greco] appointed me as an executive director. And I was down there running that. And then one day he called us up to say he was leaving the mayor's office. So he was kind of leaving us in a bind because we had done some things to piss off a lot of city employees, because we had money and he didn't have it. So we started the early childhood program in the school system. Model Cities bought the first helicopter. Nature's Classroom, a lot of other programs.

So we, were catching—I foresaw us catching a lot of flak from other department heads. I said, “The only way to cut that flak off is [if] I run for mayor.” Well, it was funny. One of —the acting mayor was [Richard] Cheney; he was the chairman when Greco left², so he became—

AH: Right, yes—

AW: So he asked me to hire somebody. And I didn't want to. He said, “Well, you've got to hire.” No (inaudible). “I'll resign before I do that.”

² Richard Cheney was chairman of the Tampa City Council, and served as acting mayor for two months after Dick Greco left. Cheney died in office, and was replaced by Lloyd Copeland, who had succeeded him as chairman. Copeland then served as acting mayor for the remaining four months until the election.
AH: Who did they want you to hire?

AW: I don't (inaudible) to name the guy who—

AH: Okay, I understand.

AW: I called—I told you the mayor thing.

AH: Yes.

AW: That was more than a little too far there. (laughs)

AH: (laughs) Okay.

AW: And some of his nephews might come after me now.

AH: (laughs)

AW: But, I didn't want this guy. So I said, “If this is going to be the kind of administration we're going to have, where people tell us what to do, they've got the wrong guy.” So I told him I'd resign. He said he wouldn't accept my resignation. So I went down there and gave it to him.

So I went down on Central Avenue, and my daddy was sitting down there. He said, “How is everything in Model Cities?” I said, “It's going fine.” He said, “Well, what y'all going to be doing in the future?” I said, “Well, I don't know.”

He said, “What do you mean you don't know?” I said, “I just resigned.” He said, “You got another job?” (laughs) I said, “No, but I'm running for mayor.” He said, “You're doing what?!?”

I said, “I'm running for mayor. Daddy, I have more qualifications than all those guys running put together. None of them have had any city experience that I've had. I'm educated and most of them are not educated. And I think that I can do a heck of a job and I think that the community will support me if I present to them the right programs.”

And on that picture that I showed you, of our program, if you look on those things that they talked about, those are new and innovative ideas because the planning commission did all the planning for the City of Tampa. We had our own planning department, and I wanted to pull the planning commission out and have the city do its own planning department, which we eventually did. And I was also going to do the police department. I mean, put a consolidation. But I wouldn't dare put that on my campaign literature, because that wasn't a popular thing during those times.

AH: Oh, a consolidation with the county?
AW: And the city.

AH: Okay.

AW: Yes. There was no need to have two fire departments, two water departments, two planning commissions, two planning departments. And the people working in the county would have fought it like hell because there was a greenbelt—that had two cows over there and they didn't want that. But it was one of the things I wanted to do. And I knew that I could get a lot of federal—this city lost a lot of money by not electing me mayor. But at the last minute, they saw I had the black and the Latin vote. And they went and got Bob Martinez to run. He qualified at the last moment.

AH: Now this is in seventy-four [1974]?

AW: In seventy-four [1974].

AH: Okay, but I thought Bill Poe won.

AW: Bill Poe did win.

AH: Okay, so he beat Martinez, and Martinez—

AW: He beat Copeland.

AH: Yes.

AW: Copeland beat us all.

AH: Okay

AW: Copeland came in second. He was leading by six hundred-something votes. I threw my support for Bill Poe, and we won by three hundred. He carried all the black precincts.

AH: Okay.

AW: So that's why he—before he—the night I lost I was interviewed by the [Tampa] Tribune, and they said, “Who are you going to support?” I said, “Well, I've got to support Bill Poe, because his platform is so near mine, and I don't want Mr. Copeland to be the mayor.” And so the next day the Tribune had me endorse support.

So all of my people in precincts start calling me and telling me, what are we going to do? Was we going to start a campaign going? So I went up to Mr. Poe's office that—the next morning and told him that I was going to support him, and I'd be in bed with him. Well, I
never saw him again because there was no need for me to see him. I had to go out there and get the damn work done.

AH: Okay.

AW: And I guess he thought I was bullskating—that I would do whatever I did, but I—I coalesced my people together and we got out there and did a hell of a campaign in public housing, absentee ballots, and all the black precincts. A lot of just—black precincts was (inaudible) I think. And twenty-seven. So they went totally for Poe.

AH: Okay.

AW: Now, you asked me a question. Oh, so when we got in office, we fought through that salary drop. I was making more at Model Cities than I—they didn't want to pay for (inaudible) which didn't matter to me.

AH: Now what—you know, all right—why did it cause such a furor first of all?

AW: Well, he was doing something. He wanted a black to [be] administrative assistant to the mayor. (laughs)

AH: Okay. So that upset a lot of hard mind conservatives?

AW: Yes, yes. And they were scared of Bill because they came from the same part of town. Bill was a powerful business man. He didn't give a damn. He said, “I'm going to do this because—” First of all, he would have been in a hell of a void coming from that side of town with some of the thoughts that he had. I liberalized a lot of thoughts that he had.

AH: I see.

AW: And anytime anything came up that was in the Hispanic or black community, I was able to go out there and talk to them because I knew them. And I was able to stop a lot of things which—the things that I stopped that he doesn't even know about today. He asked me about something one day about three years ago [and] it's been thirty-four years since then. I told him I did it. He said, “Well, I thought I told you to do that.” I said, “You did. But I didn't do that.” (laughs)

AH: Okay.

AW: Because I knew it was going to be a problem. But he didn't understand it.

AH: Yes.

AW: I was able to get things done in a peaceful-like manner. I wasn't bullheaded, believe it or not. I got along with everybody. I was an athlete. I was used to working with people,
and athletes are like that. Now, there's a difference between a tennis player and a football player. There's a difference between a golf player and a basketball player, because when you're out there golfing, you're playing by yourself.

AH: Yeah.

AW: I used to tell Sandy Freedman that all the time. She was a tennis player.

AH: Okay.

AW: Used to making hard-nosed decisions by herself.

AH: Yeah.

AW: And sometimes she'd need a little counseling or a little coaching on the sideline there—

AH: Absolutely.

AW: —to help you get through it.

AH: Yeah. So did you have any exposure to the urban renewal program? Was that under your—?

AW: Was it my jurisdiction?

AH: Yes.

AW: As long as I was in office of Model Cities. See, we had all the federal programs.

AH: I see.

AW: All of them were under us.

AH: Okay.

AW: At that time. The first renewal project, urban renewal project [was] the Holiday Inn and the library.

AH: Okay.

AW: Yes. And see, also I was put on the board of the trustees for Hillsborough Community College. I wanted a college in Ybor City. They didn't want a college in Ybor City. Well, I was able to deliver a renewal program during that time. And we just needed
eight acres. So Floyd Christian\(^3\) was the superintendent of the—state superintendent—and he had a guy named Lee Henderson—I got Parkinson's [Disease], but I remember all this stuff, okay?

AH: Oh yeah, no you've got a nice little memory.

AW: Lee Henderson didn't—well, Bill Graham, the president of Congress, told me he did not going—he did not want to be president of Omega College.

AH: Okay.

AW: I said, “You won't be. Don't worry. You won't be here.” So I called and got a friend to talk to Claude Kirk so that I could get on the board. And they did that.

Claude Kirk called me up, then I lost his office one day and he says, “Alton, I'm thinking about pulling you to the community college board. I'd like for you to switch your registration from Democrat to Republican.”

I said, “Mr. Governor, I was born black and a Democrat, and I'm going to die black and a Democrat.”

He said, “I knew you wouldn't be able to do that shit.”

AH: (laughs)

AW: [Kirk said,] “You're on the board.”

AH: (laughs) Why did they want you to change your party affiliation?

AW: It's like—all these guys do that!

AH: Yeah.

AW: They appoint the people that—of your same kind. So that you can say that, “I took the party name.”

AH: I see.

AW: So when I got there I called (inaudible) with John (inaudible) and he wanted it bad, too. So you know, we got coffee. They tried us—to put us in jail for some violation of the Sunshine Law\(^4\). We didn't know what [the] Sunshine Law was. We walked—I walked in

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\(^3\) Commissioner of Education from 1965 to 1973

\(^4\) Florida’s Government-in-the-Sunshine Law, enacted in 1967, states that all meetings of any state, county, or municipal agency or authority shall be open to the public, and that the minutes from said meetings shall be available for public inspection. The incident described here occurred in 1969.
Alvarez's restaurant and two of the (inaudible) were there having lunch. I was over there eating a Cuban sandwich by myself and they called me over to the table. We sat down and ate together, and somebody ran to the press, said that we were violating the Sunshine Law. So I go home and I'm eating dinner at night, and on Channel 13, Hugh Smith says Alton White, John Guyton, and another guy will probably be indicted for violation of the Sunshine Law.

So before I could pick up the phone to call, Daddy called me and said, “Alton, we've got to get these (inaudible) off right away,” because he called us and said we were in violation of [the] Sunshine Law. And he don't know what the hell that is either. But he knows that we need to get together to talk about it. So they got down there and we talked —none of us had discussed a damn thing about the community college, because we would go in the morning and meet at one o'clock, two o'clock. And I didn't have nothing—we didn't have nothing to talk about secretly.

But the fight for Ybor City was a tough fight, because they didn't want it down, and certain people didn't want it down there. And they tried to ruin it by taking—burning people out. Well, we increased—they wanted eight acres, and we gave them eight. Then they wanted ten, [and] we gave them ten. We kept moving until it got to the point that they needed forty acres. And they moved a lot of people out of Ybor City, which—I wanted to encompass a little community within that. That's one of the reasons I wanted to put it in Ybor City, so the people from College Hill homes, Ponce de Leon [housing units], could walk to college and work down there, and work the Alvarez Cleaners, and then go take classes. Just like Miami, where it's inter-twined with——

These guys are tough. They're tough. But we got petitions together, and I got the votes. That’s all I needed.

AH: Yeah.

AW: And I told Mr. Graham, “You don't have to worry about being the president of a black college. We're voting your ass off today!” And we voted him out of there.

AH: Okay, so as a board member, you voted?


AH: Okay. So, so looking back— Let me see, you— All right, after you were aide to the mayor, what did you do after that?

AW: Executive Director of Public Housing.

5 Dick Elston, a former mayor of Plant City.
AH: Okay. And so what were some of the big issues then? What year was that about? That you were appointed?

AW: Eighty—eighty-seven [1987].

AH: Okay.

AW: Well, it wasn't no controversy, but I started one.

AH: Oh, yeah?

AW: Yes. What I did—I started buying properties in white communities. I bought about eighteen units on MacDill [Avenue]; I bought fifteen units on Azeele [Street], I bought 350 units out there on Gandy [Boulevard]. I bought—those were the main three. You know where Colonnade [Restaurant] is?

AH: Yes.

AW: You seen the projects behind that? You don't even know their public housing.

AH: No, I wasn't aware.

AW: I could take you right down Plantation on Azeele—they thought I was going to put slums in there. But I took two hundred pounds of crap out of the rooms when we bought them. I bought them at a steal. If I had been crooked, I would have bought those units and kept them for myself, because we bought them at fifteen thousand dollars back then.

AH: Wow.

AW: Those units [are] surrounded by eighty-five dollar units or more now. But I'm proud of what I did. I got rid of all the particle-boards out of public housing. I pissed off a lot of people by getting some of the gas stoves out and putting electrical in—because some people had been dying from asphyxiation. Because they'd take the gas heater loose during the summer and put it in the closet. Instead of letting us put it back on the pipes and hooking it up, they'd go out, fix it, and they'd—the asphyxiation, they'd die from asphyxiation.

So I got more units bought than any other director. And I put a maintenance program from guys—a bunch of guys that weren't managed well. I got a—hired a guy out of public housing, out of the public school system named Henry Bowden. Got him to take training from Sears Maintenance Program. And we put all those guys under serious (inaudible). So if you had to fix a compressor, you couldn't go out on College Hill Apartment 102 and stay all day. A compressor takes thirty minutes to fix! Then you call in and get it fixed.
But they had poor working conditions. They didn't have proper shoes, equipment. I bought all new equipment, shoes, uniforms, eye goggles, bought new trucks [and] put water on the trucks. And just about every Friday I had a barbeque with them. And that's what I did. And a lot of people didn't like it. I did what my daddy and them did. I hired ex-cons. And I told them—when I went down there they were losing sixth and seventh and fifth graders every quarter. But I pulled them in the room. I said, “Look. Probably someone in this room is one of the greatest crimes there's ever been in Tampa.” I said, “But if it's a stove missing or a refrigerator missing, we're going to find out who it is and they're going to be gone. And I'm going to put your ass in jail.” I don't think I lost a refrigerator or stove during that time. And the guys loved me. And we got along well.

Doing the right thing a lot of times—doing what you think is right might not be right, but I thought it was time for the public housing to lose its image. Then I had to put some Section 8—do you know what Section 8 is?

AH: Yes, it's—well, it's especially low-priced homes?

AW: Well, it's a rental program—

AH: Okay.

AW: —that, you know, 25 percent of them are upscale apartments can have Section 8 on. So I used some in Davis Islands. I put twenty-five, thirty people in Davis Islands—they didn't even know they were Section 8 people.

So, (inaudible) gave me hell for doing that. He said, “Well, you put Section 8 people on —”

I said, “Let me ask you—I get four people in four apartments and you tell me which one is Section 8.” He couldn't do it. Couldn’t do it.

And they can't tell me today that those units are public housing units that I bought through their program. I'd like for you to drive by them one day—

*Side 1 ends; side 2 begins*

AW: —been good to us. We've had less problems in both cities this size. And the guys like Moses, Joyner, Rogers, (inaudible), Lee Davis, good, good people.

AH: One question I have though is too is after the riots of 1967. I read in an article that your father fed—

AW: Fed the police out the front door and the rioters out the back.

AH: Rioters out the back?
AW: Out the back.

AH: Okay.

AW: He called Mr. [Cesar] Gonzmart at the Columbia Restaurant and says, “I got a problem.” He [Mr. Gonzmart] said, “What's the problem?” He said, “I'm going to feed the police and the rioters.” He [Mr. Gonzmart] said, “Good luck!” (laughs)

He said, “I'm going to send a cab over there to pick up twenty-five bags of rice and chicken, and I'm going to feed them barbeque.” And Mr. Gonzmart— So we had—

AH: Okay, so this is Mr. Gonzmart?

AW: Yes, Cesar Gonzmart.

AH: Okay.

AW: So Daddy and Gonzmart would come on such— (laughs)

AH: (laughs)

AW: Daddy sent a cab over there to get him. And then they—the police, the rioters ate the same thing. One was going out the front door; one was going out the back door.

AH: Okay. Now how else besides, besides that—how did your father try to restore calm? Because I know he's kind of a major player. A lot of people have mentioned him.

AW: Okay. I'm going to tell you a couple of stories. You might have to cut them off the tape, okay?

AH: You want me to turn it off?

AW: Turn it off and we'll decide if you want to do it.

AH: Okay.

Pause in recording

AH: All right, so tell us about the store then.

AW: When Dick Greco, my daddy, Gusby Jones and I think some—there was another person standing in front of my daddy's place—and a little kid about nine years old—

AH: This was during the riots, right?
AW: Yes, during the riots.

AH: Okay.

AW: Bullets popping everywhere. And the kid ran out and said, asked Greco, said, “Are you the mayor?” He [Greco] said yes. He said, “Y’all better get that shit straight by Tuesday!” And he ran back into the projects. He came back out again and he said, “Are you sure you're the mayor?” And he [Greco] said, “Yes, son, I'm the mayor!” And he said, “Well, y’all better have that shit straight by Tuesday.”

So he ran back in there again, and when he came back my daddy grabbed him and said, “Son, what shit are you talking about?” He said, “I don't know, but y'all better have that shit straight by Tuesday!”

(both laugh)

AH: So, but what—besides the feeding of the people, I mean, what do you think your father would say to people? What else would he do?

AW: Oh, they had all kind of rumors going out. A baby was killed on Twenty-Second Street, and my daddy would find out who was saying it and send for them, whoever it was.

AH: Okay.

AW: The baby was killed. Now the police went out and fired in a house and shot thirty-two rounds at a house, and a guy ran into these people's house. And there was a baby on the couch. And the bullets went all around the baby, didn't hit the baby.

It was a guy down the avenue talking about, “Damn shame, they killed that baby.” And so Daddy called and said, “What baby [are] you talking about?” He said, “The baby on Twenty-Second Street.”

He [Mr. White’s father] said, “That baby wasn't killed! Get in the car.” And we put him in the car with a detective and my daddy, and they went out there and talked to the family. And they let him come back and straighten that rumor out, because he shouldn't have started some other crap.

AH: Yeah.

AW: And it was always rumor control. And Daddy was always feeding guys so that he could talk to them. They'd say, “Hey, Mr. White!” [He'd say] “Come on in, have a sandwich, son! What's happening out there on the street?” And they'd tell him, and he had that kind of camaraderie with them.
Now, there was a couple of policeman—Saladino and another guy. They were going to kill them. They were plotting to kill two cops in the back. And somebody told Daddy about it. So Daddy found Saladino and told them not to go over in that alley that night. And they waited a little—they flushed the guys the next days that were talking about doing it. And I don't know what happened to them. But Saladino always told that story about how Daddy saved him. And the police were appreciative of everybody that was—because they didn't want to be out there on the line themselves. Because those bullets flying—there's no names on those bullets, and they'd be flying all over the place, glass flying. But you know, my daddy never lost a window.

AH: That's what I hear.

AW: He never lost a window. But he said, “I damn nearly got (inaudible) with a shotgun.”

AH: Yeah, I hear he even went so far as to dare people to—

AW: Well, they knew Daddy. He would say—he would tell the police that they didn't have to protect his business because he'd dare any of them to try and shoot a window out of his place. And they knew better.

AH: Now, a lot of other black businesses were harmed.

AW: Oh, sure, yes.

AH: Yeah. So you just—you based that, you know, that difference, just because [of] your father's connections to the community and his willingness to protect his property?

AW: Yes. Yes.

AH: Okay.

AW: There was one time my daddy went to Georgia and there was a problem and they cleared Central Avenue. They had all the people leave their businesses. Well, I was there, I was in high school. And they had stopped, stomp troopers—they had (inaudible) three B's and they came out. And they [said], “Stop! Clear this building! Clear this building!”

I said, “I can't leave this!”

They said, “We're clearing all buildings.”

I said, “Nope. Y’all are going to have to shoot me. Because when my daddy gets back here, he's got to find me dead in here, or I better be here.”

AH: Okay.
AW: So one of the policemen was named Mr. Romeo Cole. He said, “Let him go, because he's definitely right. He better be found dead.”

AH: So why did they have to clear the buildings?

AW: They wanted peace on the avenue. They didn't want anybody on there.

AH: Oh.

AW: It was like a martial law.

AH: Yes, I see.

AW: But they cleared everybody. And the next day everybody came back to their businesses. Because they, they'd block off the streets and got it quiet down there. And then they knew when to come back. Police sure would help it. And during that time, Chief [Neil] Brown was the chief—I think it was Brown. He was a very good guy. And his word was his bond. If he told a man he was going to do something, then you took him by his word on that.

AH: All right, well let's see, let's sort of—maybe we'll start wrapping things up a bit. Do you have any memories of any stories, things that happened in the restaurant? Anything funny, unusual? You know, any particular scenes you remember?

AW: Well there's a lot of things I can remember. Ray Charles used to be down on Central, I remember that.

AH: Yes.

AW: And his band used to practice in my daddy's restaurant, in the back bar of the restaurant. And he would always give you money but he'd want you to give it back in singles. He liked singles because he liked to count. And I don't know for what reason he did. But my daddy would always say, “Keep one dollar back for me.” And Ray would feel all the money and say, “Boy, you damn sure Moses White's son. Give me back that!”

(both laugh)

AH: So they always do that as a joke?

AW: Yes.

AH: Yeah. That's—
AW: And the guys used to try to take advantage of me, because they knew my dad said, “If any money's missing out of that register, you made a mistake and it's coming out of your salary!” Well, I wasn't on no damn salary anyway. So the guys, the slicksters, would wait till you get real busy and then run in, “Little White! Give me two tens for a five!” You know—

AH: Yeah.

AW: —that kind of stuff. We had some characters. I was down there—we used to have the Cyrus Green Show. You ever heard of that?

AH: I've heard that name, yes.

AW: It was like a minstrel show. And it played on the avenue. Well those guys didn't make enough money.

AH: Now this is a radio show then?

AW: No, no, no, it was a carnival, like a carnival act.

AH: Oh, I see.

AW: It was a one-night stand.

AH: Okay.

AW: They might come in [and] stay three nights and have the carnival. They'd have a comedian, band, dancers—

AH: Now where would this be at the Blue Room or the (inaudible)?

AW: No, it'd be on the street. It'd be on a breaker lot, and they'd put a tent up, a big tent.

AH: Okay.

AW: Well, Moses would always go down there and hire the people that worked there because they didn't make enough money. And there was a comedian, told some jokes. And I was peeling and cutting shrimp. And we'd peel the shrimp and cut the bowel out of the back of it, and I cut them in half and messed up fifty pounds of shrimp.

AH: Oh, no!

AW: And my daddy would always—never would spank you at the place.

AH: Yeah.
AW: He'd tell you to go home and he'd get you tomorrow.

AH: Okay

AW: (laughs) So I went through a whole fifty pounds of shrimp that I screwed up, and then had to sell them half price. There were a lot of characters there. You know the tanks? I don't know if you heard the story about one—somebody beat one of the soldiers up one time?

AH: Yes, what was that? Tell me about that.

AW: What happened [was] this soldier was going with a girl that went to college on Central (inaudible). Two or three of the guys caught him out there one night and beat him up. Well they went to MacDill and got a tank! (laughs) and came down on Central and my granddaddy was missing. And everybody ran, you know—big—it was a MP [military police] and a city cop walking the beat. Well that guy threw the flame when he got on the corner of (inaudible) and Central, just to scare everybody and come down—

AH: Was it a flame-thrower tank?

AW: Yes, a flame-thrower tank! (laughs)

AH: Oh, my.

AW: So, got everything calm. And about an hour and a half [later], we were missing my grandfather. And I said, “Where in the hell is Granddaddy?” And Granddaddy was in the freezer.

AH: Oh, hiding?

AW: Yes! He was so scared that he nearly froze to death in there!

AH: (laughs)

AW: We—my granddaddy was six-foot-three, straight hair. He was from Virginia. He looked just like a white man. All of his people were like that. They had straight hair. Mom had hair down to her knees. So, he would always ride behind the bus driver. Well, we had to ride in the back of the bus. So what we would do is—he was the cashier for my daddy's restaurant. So he'd get on the bus on Tenth Avenue and Seventh—Tenth Avenue and Seventeenth Street, and we'd walk all the way down there so we could get on the bus and sit with him. And inevitably, the bus driver would stop the bus [and say], “Hey, boy! Get to the back of the bus!” He'd say, “If you don't go on and drive this bus, I'll shoot both of your toes off! This is my grandson!” And we'd have a lot of fun with that.
AH: Okay.

AW: And then the guys would always ask and say, “Why does your daddy have a white cashier?” We have— It was— I had a good clean life. And I had a strong father. I worked all my life. When I played football at Middleton High School, the game would be over at ten o'clock. I'd go down to get in the shower, and work until two-thirty in the morning. During the week, I worked eleven-thirty, caught the eleven-thirty bus. I'd go from school to the restaurant. I'd catch the eleven-thirty bus going back, the last bus going to Belmont Heights. And I asked my coach to talk to my daddy about that. I said, “It's kind of tough on me.”

AH: So you—now, this is when you played football—

AW: In high school.

AH: Oh, Middleton, okay. Yeah.

AW: I asked him, Coach Brown, to go talk to my daddy. And they were all scared of my daddy. He said, “That's good discipline.” (laughs) I'd be so damned tired I wouldn't know what to do! Because sometimes, I'd have a test the next day and I'd have to study.

AH: Yeah.

AW: And I'd leave eleven-thirty, and I didn't feel like doing it. But I did it. I never saw a movie on a Saturday. I never saw a Western movie on a Saturday, because that's when I had to be down there at the restaurant.

AH: What were your duties in the restaurant?

AW: Cooking and doing everything.

AH: Okay.

AW: I was a master chef cook, and by twelve years old short order.

AH: Okay.

AW: I could cook anything short order. And he trained me on the register, he trained me how to count stuff.

There was a guy—I don't know if I should tell this story or not, because—we called him Tampa James. And Tampa James was always telling me, “Your daddy don't pay me enough.”

So I told Daddy. I said, “Daddy, why don't you pay Tampa James more money?”
He said, “If you go to school, come in, go to work, tend to your business, I'll run this business.”

I said okay. The next day I said, “Daddy, why don't you pay Tampa James—” (laughs)

So he had a rooming house right behind the restaurant. And he had a bathing room that he kept on the side where he could sit in that room and watch the back door of the restaurant. And this guy Tampa James would wrap meat up and put it in a clean—my daddy never wanted a clean garbage can, he wanted a dirty garbage can. He—a clean garbage can, he'd wrap around pork, pork chops, fish—he'd put them in that can so that he could come back and get them later on that day.

Because Daddy had me laying across the bed with him, watching the place at one o'clock. He said, “That's why I don't pay him anymore. I deduct that from his salary. I put every damn piece of pork chop, every hot dog, every bun—” (laughs)

AH: (laughs) So, did he ever know about that?

AW: What?

AH: Did Tampa James—he never, he never knew?

AW: Never did.

AH: Okay.

AW: Never told him.

AH: (laughs)

AW: My daddy—in the early days, when he got back, the joke was [that] all of, you know, all of those guys went to school on the G.I. Bill. And the school that my daddy went to was Don Thompson, which was about seven blocks from the restaurant. So the guys come and said, “Boy, I heard you taking—you're going to school?” He said yes. He said, “What are you taking?”

He said, “I'm an artist.”

He said, “Yeah? I didn't know you could draw.”

He said, “I draw that check on the first to the fifteenth every month!”

AH: (laughs)
AW: There was one story—you know, politics was hell at the time of the old days.

AH: Oh, yeah.

AW: And they bought politicians, bought more votes than everything. It was—it was scandals. Shooting scandals on the scene. And we had some clubs that collected money and supported candidates, too. I don't know if you ever heard about any of those.

AH: I don't know.

AW: Well, there was a certain guy that was going to lose the election. And he came down on Central Avenue and discussed it with my daddy. So two days later, there were two clovers in the jailhouse, that I was carrying pork chops, chicken, ham, sausages and that until after the election. (laughs)

AH: Now what? Now I didn't fully understand. What did you do with the pork chops and the meat?

AW: I'd feed the prisoners that were locked up down there for two days until after the election. They didn't want them on the street.

AH: Oh, I see.

AW: So they knew who to go pick up. But they ate well and slept well. (laughs)

AH: Okay, I guess so! So, I guess—is there anything else [that] we haven't covered? I really—there's, it seems like it would take days to really do justice to your life, but you know—

AW: Well, a lot of things I've just went for granted. And I hear stories about, like I told you about my father. I hoped that some of these stories would be told by me because we helped people from our heart. Never asked for anything in return, and I appreciate the—being blessed with a father like that because I was a father to a lot of the athletes that I went to Florida A&M [with]. They didn't have parents. Guys like Bob Hayes and those guys—they used to look up to me because I was from (inaudible) and tried to show leadership. And my daddy was a business man with a big heart. He set up—when he went up [when I] played the Florida A&M game, he found out a lot of things that weren't going right with the money. And so he got Jake Gaither, a businessman, Mr. Knowles, to straighten out their problems so there would never be a problem.

There were some pretty rough situations with poor, poor families that got helped because of Moses. A lot of city employees used to come down to my dad for money. My daddy went to Dick Greco and said, “Why don't you give these Christmas bonuses to the employees? Give it to city cops and you all work out something for Christmas bonus.” And that's how the Christmas bonus program started. It was him.
He had an eighth grade education, other than his G.I. Bill, which you know that was nothing. Which is why he had—he said he had a master's degree in people. And he did. And it's kind of, it's probably more people can tell you more stories outside of the Avenue, than I can tell you inside.

AH: Yeah.

AW: Because he helped them and I don't know nothing about it. Never knew anything about it. When they named the street after him, I said [that] he would have said, “What's this all about?” And he would have.

AH: Yeah.

AW: Because he's—that was not his thing, to seek glory.

AH: I guess I just have two other, you know, areas to ask about. One could you tell us anything about your mother?

AW: My mother was the back of all of my daddy.

AH: Okay.

AW: She was very soft-spoken.

AH: What was her name?

AW: Lucille.

AH: Okay.

AW: Very soft-spoken, very supportive, and she would tell Daddy anything that we did wrong. She'd try to appeal to our pride. He'd appeal to our hide!

AH: (laughs)

AW: And she was a schoolteacher in her early days.

AH: Okay.

AW: She'd finished Edward Waters [College] during that time. It was a junior college. She was a very Christian lady. I never heard my mother swear one time. And she tried to keep the family together because Daddy was gone a lot. Because he was—he was into his business.
He had cataract surgery and after he got out of the hospital, he said, “Carry me down to the restaurant; give me a chair,” pointed in the direction of the cash register.

I said, “Daddy, you can't see it.”

He said, “Yeah, but they don't know that.” That's how he was.

AH: Oh, yeah.

AW: And my mother just—just a sweetheart.

AH: Yeah.

AW: She was. When she was sick, we put her—she got—my sister took care of her [for] five or six years and became a burden on my sister. So we tried to find a home to put her in, which most people don't want you to keep them in a home. We found a home in Temple Terrace, brand new. This gentleman had come down, and opened it. It was immaculate, and in good health, had a beauty parlor in it and everything.

So my sister—my baby sister came to say, “Alton, we're killing our other sister. We've got to put her in a home.” And my brothers and everybody was against it.

So I said, “Let me go talk to Mom, my sister and I,” and told her what she was going to do.

She said, “I don't think I like that.”

I said, “I tell you what we'll do. Go out there for a week. I'll arrange for a week. And if you don't like it you'll leave.”

So she went out there. The third day, she said, “Alton, you got a gun?”

I said, “What do you need for a gun, Mama?”

She said, “If anybody come out here and try to take me out of here, I'll shoot them!”

AH: Wow.

AW: She fell in love with them. They fell in love with her. When she died, some six or seven years later, the cardiologist that took care of her at University Hospital—I don't remember his name, but my sister found him to tell him. He said, “I've seen—I've been in business thirty-seven years. I've seen—that woman must be a special woman, because y'all have treated her with the utmost care and caring about that we've seen in the twenty-four hours we've had somebody.” Everybody that worked in that place—they closed up
that day, other than the social worker that carried two busloads of people on a trip, all came to her bedside when she died and to her funeral.

AH: Wow.

AW: So that's, that's the kind of lady she was.

AH: Okay. And then the last thing I wanted to mention was the Revived Moses White & Sons Barbeque in Ybor City. How did that come about? And then I've heard people make remarks that they, that they felt like it was run out of Ybor City. So I just, I wanted to ask how that came about and what was your involvement? And then what did you think about it moving?

AW: Well, it was not properly capitalized from the beginning.

AH: Okay.

AW: My brother had been in prison. And he opened the place. He called—he wanted to put one of those corner barbeque things on the side. And he got a guy to make him a pit, one of those barrels. And my sister called me and said, “What a great idea! It's going to be across the street from Carmine's.”

I said, “That's bullshit. I ain't going to let that happen. Give me a couple of days, tell that boy not to go back out there where that guy is. I'll call him and tell him to quit.”

I got in my car, rode down to Ybor City, saw the "for sale" or "for rent" sign in the first stall. You saw the building that says, (inaudible)? It belonged to Joe (inaudible). He had a realtor handling it who was his friend, and my friend, Anthony—[corrects himself] Andrew Arena. I said, “Andrew, what is that stall?”

He said, “It's a pizza stall. The guy is going to leave all the furniture, the stove and everything in there.” I said, “I want to put a barbeque pit in there.” He said, “I don't know if you can; it—” I said, “I'll consider it. Let me do this.”

So I called my friend Henry Ballon, who ran my maintenance program for the city—housing thing. Got him to build a pit. I got all the permits done, put some cash in there. It was going fine. Then, the rent was high—well, I got him a year and a half free rent. Then the rent, there wasn't enough business coming to support the rent. He needed more space. So we—a guy had moved out next door, so we cut a hole through there, and made it larger. The business was doing fine. Then Greco built that damn—

AH: Centro [Ybor]?

AW: Centro. That was the beginning of the downfall.
AH: Okay.

AW: All the parking down there, convenience, and the rent was steep, too steep to support that. Well, if it had been my daddy, he'd probably still would have had it, because he would have swallowed somebody else to do that. If I was in good health, I could have done it. But the type of attitude that my brother had was not a hard working attitude. He's kind of light-headed. And he likes good times. (laughs) He was a kid. If he'd have been there every day, it might have gone. But it was a tough time with the rent. And that Centro—

AH: Centro Ybor, yes.

AW: —it closed down. Right next to it—what was the name of it? (inaudible)? Or (inaudible)? It's a big dance room, Hugo's or something.

AH: Okay.

AW: And he was a big supporter of Greco. He was pissed when Greco did that, I remember that.

AH: Yeah.

AW: But that, that killed both of those businesses.

AH: Okay.

AW: Killed both of them.

AH: All right. Well, once again, I don't think we can do justice in a single afternoon, but I do—

AW: No, but you'll hear some more things—you might want verification on them. I won't lie about it. If I don't know about it, I don't know about it.

AH: Yeah.

AW: And there's probably a lot of things that I've forgotten about. But you're just—I just don't remember.

AH: Yes. Well, you know, you've got a wonderful memory, and I do thank you for sharing it with us today.

AW: Yes, sure.
AH: And you know, on behalf of the University of South Florida Library, I want to thank you for participating today. I learned a lot.

AW: Sure.

AH: So I do appreciate it.

*End of interview*