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Clarence Fort oral history interview by Andrew Huse, June 1, 2006

Clarence Fort (Interviewee)

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Andrew Huse: Welcome back to the USF [University of South Florida] Oral History Program. It is June 2006, and I'm sitting here with Clarence Fort. He was a leader in the civil rights movement here in Tampa, he was the head of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] Youth Council, but that's a story best told by Mr. Fort and not myself. Thank you for being with us.

Clarence Fort: Thank you, Andy; it's a pleasure to be here.

AH: Let's just start with, I guess, your origins. Where were you born and raised? And tell us just a little bit about your parents.

CF: Well, I was born in 1938, believe it or not, in Alachua County, [in] a small rural town just east of Gainesville, Florida where [U.S. Route] 301 connects with [State Road] 26. My dad had a place there, a little country farm, about twenty acres. I was raised there and went to school there.

AH: Okay. And then, so tell us after your schooling and stuff, how did you get down to Tampa?

CF: Well, actually, after finishing high school, I went down to Orlando. There was no money for college at that time, there were no grants and loans and those things that youth and youngsters have today. So I went down to Orlando. I had a sister living there. I lived with my sister and worked a year at a drug store and (inaudible) pharmacy delivering prescription drugs on a bicycle. I saved up enough money to send myself to barber college. The barber college, of course in 1957—out in (inaudible), Texas. So from there

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1 Orange Heights is the name of the community.
they placed me in Tampa. There was a job placement in Tampa, so I got a job in Tampa, and I started working in a barber shop there, so that's how I got to Tampa.

AH: Okay. So tell us about your first exposure to the civil rights movement, the first time that you were aware that there was a movement going on. And you may want to add as well before that, your first incidence of realizing that there was such a thing as Jim Crow in the South.

CF: Well, I always realized it, but it was just a way of life. No one was doing anything about it. What happened—the young man that I cut hair with, he was a member of the NAACP. So, he talked with me about going to a meeting one evening. And actually, the Youth Council was not really active at that time.

AH: What, about, year was this?

CF: This was in 1958.

AH: Okay.

CF: I actually came to Tampa in 1958. So, I started at that time at the Youth Council and start recruiting youngsters to be in the Youth Council. In the meantime, later on, we started looking at pins and things. A doctor came and some of the things that you were doing. So, we began to realize at that time that things were just not equal.

AH: Okay.

CF: So we were trying to find some ways to do something about it.

AH: Okay. So when you went and joined the NAACP, and—at what point did you get involved with the Youth Council? Were you asked? Were you recruited? Or was this something you saw there was a need, was it a bit of both? You know, how did you come to have stewardship there?

CF: Well, I saw it was a need. It was something that I wanted to get involved in. After studying history and civics and things like that in high school, and I began to realize, hey, we're just not equal. I could see where we had used books; some of my high school text books had six and seven names in them before we got them. Never had a new book. Never rode on a new school bus. So I wanted to help out and do some things to help change the situation.

AH: Okay. And how—now, the youth was not always one of the NAACP's main, I guess, vehicles for demonstrations. What was your understanding as to how the youth became more involved in direct action?

CF: Well, actually the—if you know the history of the NAACP, they did not promote demonstrations or things of that nature. Now, if you happened to get in trouble, they
would come to your rescue. But they did not go out and promote that, so actually it was just an arm for something for young people to do. And I think what they were really doing was grooming us to become adult members. But there really wasn't too much at that time. Now we did have—

(phone rings)

AH: It's okay. Yeah.

CF: Can you—

AH: Go ahead and turn it off.

CF: I meant to cut—

_pause in recording_

AH: Okay, so where were we?

CF: About the NAACP.

AH: Yeah, the Youth Council. Okay. All right, so it sounds like before your involvement, it was kind of just an introductory way, kind of a youth group to get them into the main NAACP.

CF: Yes, that's basically what it was. We really wasn't doing that much. There was not a movement around the country wherein they were having demonstrations and wait-ins and sit-ins. Not until 1960. And that's when we really became involved.

AH: Yes. So let's talk about that. In 1960, of course, a pivotal year for the civil rights movement. Now Greensboro [North Carolina] was kind of the, the beginning as far as I understand it. Was that your perception at the time?

CF: That was the spark plug. When those students sat down at the lunch counter there, then it started around the country. Especially in the South; there were no need for it, of course, in the North. When those youngsters did that and—I went to the senior branch and told them, “Listen, why don’t we do that in Tampa? We still have the same problems.”

AH: Now, who would be the leadership at the branch that you were—?

CF: At that time, that was the Robert Saunders. Robert Saunders was a field secretary for the NAACP for the state of Florida.

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2 Referring to sit-ins held at the Woolworth’s Department Store lunch counter on February 1, 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina.
AH: Okay.

CF: So, I went to his office and told him, “Why don’t we do that in Tampa?” And he kind of shied away from it because it was something that they didn't get involved in. They could not promote demonstrations of that sort. So, I sort of took it upon myself at that time.

AH: Okay. Now, let's get a little bit of background, some context, then, about some of the main players in the area. Let's start with Saunders since he was already brought up. Just tell us a little bit about maybe about when you first met him—you know, just some of your impressions of Robert Saunders.

CF: Robert was a great guy. Of course, he had a difficult job, because it wasn't popular to do what he was doing at that time, and especially when it's centered around integration. And people was against it, but he was a very courageous man. That's all I can say, he was very courageous, yes.

AH: Well, especially picking up the pieces after Harry T. Moore—

CF: Absolutely, yes.

AH: —was so tragically killed.

CF: After the bombing.

AH: And then another person kind of, you know, hovering over all this, too, was the Reverend [A. Leon] Lowry. Tell us about some of your impressions of him as well.

CF: Reverend Lowry was a statesman. Very articulate. Had one of the largest black denominations, churches in Tampa. He was [NAACP] state president at the time. I had a chance to go out to a state NAACP meeting, a conference for Reverend Lowry that was held in Pensacola. And that's the way he conducted business. And that conference really inspired me to do even more. Especially when I learned that he was Dr. [Martin Luther] King's professor up in Morehouse College in Atlanta. So, he really had a lasting effect upon me and he inspired me to do more.

AH: Now, when are you—you talked about him running that meeting in Pensacola. What was it? Is there anything specific you can give us, to give people who weren't alive then, you know, a little taste of what he was like? His whole demeanor—what was it about him running that meeting that inspired you?

CF: Well, the way he conducted it and a whole list of words—the things that he said on equal treatment in schools and parks and swimming—as far as the beaches were concerned—and things of that nature, and the fact that we needed to move from second class citizenship to regular citizenship. Those type things and words of encouragement is what really inspired me to try to do more about it.
AH: Okay. So when was that Pensacola meeting? Do you remember when that was?

CF: I don't remember the exact date, but—

AH: Was it before the sit-ins?

CF: Before the sit-ins, right.

AH: Okay.

CF: Definitely.

AH: So, now getting back to the Youth Council—well, actually, was there anyone I missed? Was there any other kind of luminaries in the area that helped to inspire you or any, any peers that, you know, you would single out for attention?

CF: Well, actually, I don't know if you remember the Little Rock Eleven, Daisy Bates’s deal where she came down and made her speech in Tampa—

AH: This is Daisy—

CF: Daisy Bates from Little Rock, Arkansas. She was the one who spearheaded the—I guess we could say the school board or whatever they are—in Little Rock, Arkansas, when the federal government had to step in under the Eisenhower administration and integrate the schools. So she made an inspiring speech, as well as attorney Francisco Rodriguez [Junior]. He was an excellent orator. And he also talked about the difficulties that he faced as an attorney, an African American attorney, and how things needed to change in the city of Tampa. So they were the ones who really, I guess, more or less kicked off my career as far as civil rights.

AH: Okay. And let's go back to Rodriguez for a moment. I'm fascinated by the—I guess the relationship between law, you know, the foot soldiers in the civil rights movement who were actually going out and doing the demonstrations. Could you tell us a little bit about that relationship? I mean, obviously you knew there was someone in the background who was willing to help you out if you got—landed yourself in jail or you know, got in some other kind of legal trouble. Is there anything else you can tell us about that relationship and maybe any words that Rodriguez offered to you about it?

CF: Well, what we did, we had—once the civil rights battle really got strong in the Tampa Bay area, we had, if not a weekly meeting, we had at least biweekly meetings. And the two speakers would be Reverend Lowry and Francisco Rodriguez. And Francisco Rodriguez, as far as I'm concerned, does not get the credit he deserved, because he was

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1 Daisy Bates was president of the Arkansas NAACP and an advisor to the Little Rock Nine, the nine African American students who integrated Little Rock Central High School. Bates gave speeches in Tampa and other Florida cities during the summer of 1959.
really another spark plug. And we knew that younger folks—that he had our backs as far as anything that went wrong and if we were arrested. Very inspiring. He took on a lot of profile cases. In fact, he was the attorney that handled all civil rights matters, discrimination matters. He was a person who got it done. In fact, at the time—there were only two African American attorneys in the city of Tampa. And of course he was the leading one. He went all over the state defending defendants.

AH: Okay. So, then we'll go back to the Youth Council now. And upon you taking the leadership of the Youth Council, tell us about some of your immediate responsibilities. I mean, were—when you took control of the Youth Council, was this in fifty-eight [1958], or—?

CF: Back in fifty-eight [1958].

AH: Okay.

CF: Late fifty-eight [1958]. We didn't actually do that much. We had some interaction with a group down in Palma Ceia [Tampa neighborhood]. There was a Baptist church there and we met with some of the kids, the white people down there. And we sat down and talked about some ways that we could bring about harmony among the races. But I think we met several times with them, but we really never got it off the ground, up and running. And it was only after the demonstrations that things began to change in the city of Tampa.

AH: So when did you first hear about the sit-ins in Greensboro?

CF: Well, it was on the news, television, newspapers—it was something new, very dramatic. And it just spread like wildfire all over the South. We came in, actually February twenty-ninth that same year, and got things rolling, too.

AH: So I think it was less than a month after, because the original ones, I believe, were in early February?

CF: Yes, less than a month.

AH: Yes.

CF: Pretty difficult to do. Pretty difficult to pull off, because the senior branch really did not—I mean, could not get involved. So I just took it upon myself and said, “We're going to do it.”

AH: Okay.

CF: And Bob Saunders, he was with the movement, but he could only do so much as field secretary. They couldn't come out and say, “We are organizing a sit-in demonstration.” They couldn't do that.
AH: Okay.

CF: Now, I could do it because I was a young barber. I was self-employed. Everybody else who was involved that was an adult and that was working on other jobs would lose their jobs. So that's how—why I was very into it.

AH: Okay. You know, and it seems like after World War II, you know, so many African Americans came back from the service thinking there was going to be a new day. That the "two victory," you know, campaign, and there was going to be a victory at home over Jim Crow. And of course that was—it must have been incredibly frustrating for the generation before you to see that stuff stay in place. And it seemed like with Greensboro, it kind of took the lid off the youth, as there is a role that we can play here, you know? Because obviously that frustration must have been transmitted to, to you know, your generation from your forebearers.

CF: Really, what happened—it really opened our eyes. And any youngster in the South to begin to realize what was taking place. Out of all years I went to segregated schools, you know. I never went to an integrated school during college. Out of all of those years, and it, it really came to a full front. Out of all the years of shopping at a restaurant, five-and-ten, ten-cent store, and having to buy hot dogs and hamburgers and stand up and eat them at the end of the counter. Well, all that began to play in your mind and say, “Wait a minute, something's wrong with this system. Are we citizens? Or are we not?” So, it began to play into your mind. And then I think that's what really made it rapidly spread so fast.

AH: Okay. So you know, you talked about, it is less than a month between Greensboro and your first, or your—you know, the kind of announcement of the campaign. What were some of the things that you had to do to prepare for that campaign?

CF: Well, what I actually did to get it up and rolling, I had to go to the high school. There were two African American high schools, Middleton High School on the east side of town, and Blake High School on the west side of town. And actually, I couldn't let it be known I was on campus. I think the principal at the Middleton knew it, and he just told me, “Young man, I don't know you're here,” because he certainly would have lost his job if [he] had permitted that to happen. So what I did, I found out the president of their NA—not the NAACP, but their student government, their student government president. I met with their president and he allowed me to come back and meet with their student council. Same thing at Howard W. Blake [High School].

AH: Okay.

CF: And we were—we sat down and talked about it, and our plan. And he recruited some students. So we had a mass meeting, and talked a little more about it. But we didn’t give any dates because we didn't want the press or the students to go back and tell what was going on. So that's how we got it organized.
AH: Okay. So what was the reception? When you talked to young folks, were they
generally willing to get involved? Did it take a little education? And what were the kind
of things you told them as far as—you know, what was the commitment to nonviolence at
the time? I mean, were you committed to nonviolence? What was the, I guess, the gist of
the—

CF: Well, we had to just watch—constrain the youngsters, because we didn't want any
violence. It was pretty difficult. They were ready to go. They were ready to go. They
wanted to do something different. They got a chance to see the news media, what was
happening at that time in other parts of the country. And Tampa certainly was not the
second city; there was a lot of cities that started before us. Then they saw what happened
in Tallahassee. It was just a whole different scenario in the Tallahassee area.

AH: Yeah, tell us just—paraphrase what happened there.

CF: Well, in Tallahassee the police department took it upon themselves to stop the
demonstrators. [That] did not happen in Tampa. Just the reverse. I think they had dogs,
they had water hoses, but they mostly had students from Florida A&M [Agricultural &
Mechanical University]. They were not high school students like we had here in Tampa.
Now, our biggest problem in Tampa was the parents of the students. They were our
biggest problems. They were working, they were afraid [if] their bosses saw their kids on
television, that they would get fired or in the papers. And we actually had a couple of
parents pull their kids off the stools because they didn't want to lose their jobs. But yeah,
Tallahassee was very much different than—we had a different mindset in Tampa.

AH: Yeah.

CF: We had good leadership in Tampa from the mayor down. And the mayor actually
controlled the police department and the police chief, so we didn't have any problems.

AH: Okay. Well, I found an early reference to three African American teens going into
Woolworth’s [Department Store]. This was in February and this was not, as far as I know,
an NAACP function. But they went in and tried to get served. Just sounded like a
spontaneous thing. And there was a Ms. Johnson behind the counter [who] refused to
serve them. And they said, you know, “We'll be back.” And whether or not it was those
three teens who actually made it back or whether or not it was, you know, the Youth
Council.

CF: But it was certainly not our Youth Council.

AH: Yes.

CF: They did have another group, and I don't know if that's the group you're referring to.

AH: No, that's the Dasher group.

AH: The other group, yeah. We'll get back to that. But so— All right, you got some recruits set up. About how many students have your recruited?

CF: We started out with about forty-five kids.

AH: Okay.

CF: Forty-five kids. And then it began to grow as word got out. And more came up over. In fact, we started out with Blake and Middleton, then some kids joined us from Booker T. Washington Junior High School. They started coming down. So it really was spontaneous and it just caught on fire.

AH: Okay. So how did you pick your first targets for sit-ins, then?

CF: Well, Woolworth's, I think, was the most popular store at the time. There were others that—W. T. Grant, J.J. Newberry's. But Woolworth's was our target. So, that was the first store that we [did the] sit-in. And then we ventured out to the W.T. Grant our second time around. But I think more African Americans shopped at Woolworth's at the time.

AH: Okay.

CF: You got to realize there were no malls, no shopping centers, none of those places at that time, so that's where we did our shopping.

AH: Well, and it's kind of an American institution that's taken for granted today that you can shop and dine.

CF: Yes.

AH: And to have one without the other isn’t quite the same. So—

CF: Not the same.

AH: So, Woolworth’s was your first target. What was the day of the first demonstrations? Was it—?


AH: Twenty-ninth, okay. And there were several groups, as I understand it, that went out?

CF: There was only group.
AH: Okay, just one group?

CF: One group that day.

AH: Okay, and you were in that group?

CF: I was the leader of the group.

AH: Okay. And as I understand it, you were the spokesman as well.

CF: I was the spokesman, took the first seat.

AH: Okay. And it—

CF: And they filled in around me.

AH: Yes. And of course, that makes a lot of sense because once you have more than one person representing a group, then it becomes difficult to get your message across.

CF: Well, I was actually—it was three adults downtown.

AH: Okay.

CF: I was the one leading the group, and I was twenty-one years old. But the others were Reverend Lowry—he was in the area—and Francisco Rodriguez. And they were down here for moral and legal support in the event that we were arrested.

AH: Okay. Now, you mentioned the mayor, Julian Lane and, you know, his good leadership in this case. The city and the law enforcement, they didn't have any idea what was coming, right?

CF: Not the first.

AH: Okay, not the first time.

CF: No.

AH: Okay. So, just describe to us then what happened at the Woolworth’s that first day.

CF: When we walked in they were serving regular customers and we sort of sat in between a couple. They immediately closed the counter. Put up a "closed" sign on the counter, and cut the lights out. And of course all the white patrons, they got up and left. Evidently they knew what was going on, or to say, “Well, it finally hit Tampa.” So, we sit there for about thirty minutes. And after that, after they closed the counter and cut the lights off, we went back outside—
AH: Okay.

CF: —and kind of milled around. And then they opened the counter again, and we went back.

AH: Yeah.

CF: And of course at that time, they closed it again. And kept it closed. It was nearing five, five-thirty. And I think they closed at six o'clock.

AH: Okay.

CF: Not like it is now, you know, stores stay open until nine, of course.

AH: Yeah.

CF: But that's what happened. So the police did show up, but they didn't bother us, sort of just stood behind us. They didn't bother us, though. Though some news reporters were there.

AH: Okay.

CF: And I actually have a picture of the first interview. They had to interview me outside the restaurant.

AH: Okay.

CF: That, that first day.

AH: Great. So after the first day, then, did you have a meeting afterwards to kind of assess what happened?

CF: Yes, we, we had several meetings. We had the kids meet at a church and—

AH: Which church was this?

CF: That was St. Paul Community Church, which is on Harrison Street. We went back there and assessed the situation and told them that we would get back with them to let them know when we would go down again. But we did go down the next day. We went for about three or four days in a row. And at that time, the mayor already had a committee.

AH: Yes, the Biracial Committee?

CF: The Biracial Committee. And that's when they got Reverend Lowry, Bob Saunders,
and said, “Let's sit down and talk about it.” So, I was invited to the meeting, to that meeting.

AH: Okay. So, what kind of discussions took place then that day?

CF: Well, they were trying to tell us to call off the demonstrations. They wanted to have time to work it out.

AH: Now was this the Biracial Committee then?

CF: Biracial Committee, but they also invited the merchants in—of those stores.

AH: Oh, okay.

CF: They invited them in to participate in the meeting. So, they were saying that they had to get back with their national chain and see what was happening in other parts of the country, if they were beginning to integrate anyplace, and see if they couldn’t use that model there. But at the time, they had not.

AH: Okay. So I guess the leadership—were you all surprised, you know, at the kind of soft approach that was taking place? And that there wasn't some kind of a crack down or violence, or—?

CF: Yes, I definitely thought I would be put in jail.

AH: Okay.

CF: (laughs) I really didn't know what to expect, but I knew it was time to make a move. But Tampa, I think, surprised everybody. The mayor actually called Bob Saunders and the police department would call Bob Saunders and ask if we was having a demonstration. And they actually came to the church and escorted us downtown. They didn't let anyone get near us. And there are some pictures of them actually standing behind the counter, behind us, making sure no one got near us.

AH: Okay.

CF: So it was just, ah, good relations at the time in Tampa. All except integrating, of course.

AH: Well, I mean, you must have seen in the media as well, the images of the white kids, you know, pouring the milkshakes on people's heads, and throwing food on people. And of course, a lot of these demonstrators were prepared for this kind of behavior.

CF: Yes.

AH: And I assume that you all were, too.
CF: Yes.

AH: But it didn't happen, at least not to the extent that it did [elsewhere]. Now for the second day of demonstrations then, we did have this second group materialize. Tell us a little bit about the second day and the sit-ins that day and this new group.

CF: Well, the new group, I think they went to [the] Greyhound Bus Station and a couple other places. They were trying to help. I'm sure they were trying to help. But they got into confrontations with some of the patrons in the store. So we had to regroup. What we did, we called a mass meeting and we went back and made name tags that spelled out NAACP Youth Council. And we had little flags, American flags, to designate our group. In other words, we were trying to let them know that we were not a part of that group, because NAACP was a peaceful organization. So the young man that led that group, I don't know whether he had a criminal record or what his record was.

AH: The newspaper said he did.

CF: Yes, yes. And they was an older group. Their group was a little older.

AH: I see.

CF: I don't even know if they had any high school students at all in their group. But they had young adults, like, in that group. So we had to separate ourselves from them.

AH: Okay. You know, and there was an incident where, I guess the Dasher group tried to rush into Morrison's [Cafeteria] and that didn't work out. And of course, I guess it was the Greyhound Station—there was a scuffle of some sort—

CF: Right.

AH: Between two kids, or maybe, you know, not kids, according to you. You know, and it seemed like the newspapers were really quick to point out Dasher's criminal record and then also one of the quotes from the *Tampa Daily Times* said, “Lunch counter mixing falters, move losing ground here.”

CF: (laughs)

AH: And after a day and half of demonstrations, they're already saying that it's a lost cause.

CF: Well, actually what happened, I think we began to negotiate.

AH: Okay.

CF: We got word from the mayor. “Let us work on it; let us work it out.” It wasn't that we
was losing ground. The kids would have still been going if we hadn't inter—them, because they were ready to go.

AH: Sure.

CF: Like I said, we did incur some problems, a couple of the parents pulling the kids off the lunch counter. But we had no problem getting kids.

AH: You know, the end of the second day of demonstrations—I wanted to see if this jars any memories for you—but was the first sign of—kind of a racial backlash. There was a six-foot tall burning cross—

CF: Yes.

AH: Near the [Eugene] Holtsinger Bridge, which, of course, could be seen from Blake High. So this was ostensibly, you know, a warning to—

CF: Scare tactic.

AH: Yes, to the high school students. Then, a gunman shot into Lowry's home.

CF: Yes.

AH: Kind of a drive-by shooting and missed he and his wife by just a few feet. When you first heard this news, what were your impressions, and when did you hear it, the next morning?

CF: I heard about it. I think someone called me and told me about it. I was still cutting hair at the time, so the barbershop was a meeting place. And you could really hear anything you wanted in a barbershop. Because people came in to get haircuts and they talked about it: pros and cons, whether it was good idea or a bad idea. A lot of African Americans wasn't for it, wasn't for the movement.

AH: Okay.

CF: A lot of them was not for it, just like—

AH: Now, when you say.

CF: Anything you have—

AH: Yes. And when you say “for the movement,” do you mean the movement as a whole, or the demonstrations in particular, or—?

CF: Well, some of it was—I will say as a whole. Because I think they feared their jobs. And they were like some of the people that told us, “Just wait.” And my thing was, “How
long? How long do we wait?” I mean, you know we were already behind the North, so how long do we wait? So, that was the urgency of it. That we shouldn't wait any longer. And I think if you read anything—any of the letters from Dr. King, that's what he often faced when they told him, “Cool off, settle down, and we'll do it.” “But when?” That was his thing. “When?”

AH: Okay.

CF: And we can no—I read a lot of books and writings by Dr. King, as much as I could by him.

AH: Okay.

CF: Great man.

AH: Absolutely. So do they give you any pause hearing about this, these scare tactics? Was it something you expected?

CF: Yes.

AH: Okay.

CF: Yes. It didn't faze me. I had to say, “I'm in it for the long haul.” And I didn't back down until I was told to back down. And only then, when I went to their meetings in the Biracial Committee and I told them then, “If you guys don't give me something positive, we'll be back out there again.” And I let them know, “I don't know how long I can control the group—”

AH: Yes.

CF: “—as far as being nonviolent.”

AH: Yes, and, well, that—I do want to get to that, but we do have one—there was a third day of demonstrations, and I just want to get your feedback on that. You know that after—that second night, you know, not only was there the burning cross and drive-by shooting, but LeRoy Collins came out and talked about how much he hated demonstrations of this kind. Now, as far as Florida governors go, Collins was probably more moderate than others. But what were your impressions of LeRoy Collins at that time?

CF: Well, he—let me say this. He turned out to be a great governor, because I think that was just the way of the South. And I think he was doing what he had to do and saying what he had to say for his political career. However, it did hurt him a lot because of his stand. I think that he was—he would be one of the keynote speakers at the National Democratic Convention after that. I believe he had come on television. And he did. I don't know if he retracted those first statements, but he did say, “It was wrong to take
money in one parts of the store and then not serve in other parts.” Now he said that. But it did hurt his career. He didn't move too far beyond that. I think beyond being recognized at the National Democratic Convention where he was one of the speakers. But we all felt it though.

AH: Sure.

CF: I think he was one of the greatest governors we had.

AH: Well, and when you look at other governors around the South at the time that we had.

CF: Yes, yes. Oh, my goodness.

AH: The old—

CF: Standing in doorways and schoolways—

AH: Are not pretty, yeah.

CF: Yes, it wasn't pretty.

AH: So, then there was a third day of demonstrations. And this Dasher's group by this time kind of—was just following the Youth Council around from place to place.

CF: Yes, yes.

AH: And they were—they had little—I hear they had little armbands or signs that said, “We are too's,” meaning, “We're Americans too.”

CF: Yes.

AH: And that third day, how would you characterize that third day? I mean, the second one was a little shaky, but—

CF: Well, at that time we had the support of the police department and the mayor. And they really didn’t want to see anything happen to Tampa on the racial lines. You got to also realize it was coming up to the Easter holiday and the merchants were concerned. That's why we were able to be so strong at that time, because African Americans spent a lot of money downtown and they did all of their Easter shopping in the downtown area, and the merchants didn't want to lose money. So, that's why we sort of cooled it down and gave them an opportunity to work on it.

AH: Well, and at that time—I don't know if it's still true today, but at the time Easter was second only to Christmas—
CF: That's it.

AH: —as far as spending in stores.

CH: That's it.

AH: So on that third day, you did make a statement to the press. I'm just going to read it, read part of it to you, and you can comment if there's anything else to say. When you said, “If the different parents would register and vote, we wouldn't have to protest, because they could put someone in office who would do something about the rights of Negros.” You also said, “We also feel that if we spend money in other parts of the store, we should be able to spend it in lunch counters and be able to sit and eat.”

CF: Right.

AH: Anything else to add to that?

CF: Well, I feel that way today!

AH: Yeah.

CF: You know, and that was certainly—but we didn't have the opportunity then like we have now. For one thing, Florida didn't have a poll tax then, like some of the states had to keep them from registering to vote. But there are a lot of things could be done differently, even today.

AH: Okay.

CF: Electing your own people. It's amazing how things turned out, but we're still not there.

AH: Absolutely.

CF: Minds and hearts of people are going to have to change.

AH: So, that was the last day of direct demonstrations before the actual integration took place. And let's describe, for the viewers, I guess, this waiting period. Several months went by. And it must have been difficult for you. And I'd like to hear about some of your interactions between some of the members of the Youth Council as far as them maybe wanting to go out there again and demonstrate. How did you get them to restrain themselves a little bit?

CF: Well, I was called everything from a sell-out to Uncle Tom. They thought I had sold out to the system, but they kept me abreast of what was happening, the Biracial Committee. And we realized that—well, I did—we had to have time to let them work it
out, especially since we didn't experience the problems of some other cities and the bouts that took place. So, I would just tell them at the meeting that we had the—they had to trust me. If I started it, there was no way I was going to sell out and back down. And I did know that the committee was fine and the efforts that they were making towards integrating. I thought that would be a better focus, so that's how we more or less handled it.

AH: Okay. So what were your impressions of what was going on behind the scenes of the Biracial Committee? I mean, what were some of the reasons that store owners were backing off from integration right away? And what were some of the reasons that were given—what were some of the incentives, I guess, to the youth?

CF: Well, they didn't want to lose business. In other words, once they integrated they wanted to make sure that everyone integrated. In other words, it wouldn't do Woolworth’s any good to integrate. They felt all of the other people would just go to Grant’s or some of the other stores. So, they wanted to do it all at one time, and they were waiting to get some models from other cities who had began to integrate at the time. So they was constantly calling their national offices and finding out what was happening and what should they do. And I realized that. We wanted to do it peacefully; we didn't want to have bad luck. And we certainly didn't want to do any more harm to the mayor, which he suffered a great loss also.

AH: Yeah, and you know we described some of the players within the NAACP, but tell us a few words about Julian Lane. You know, he seems like really a—I don't know if you could pick a better person at the time to be the mayor. And of course he did pay a price. But tell us a little bit about your impressions of Mr. Lane.

CF: Great guy. Had a heart. He realized, I guess, like LeRoy Collins, that it was wrong. He certainly didn’t want Tampa to get more than the national spotlight, I felt, because of it happening in his city. And very receptive, very receptive. I really feel bad what happened to him, because he lost the next election for being too liberal, or too moderate, because of that. I guess it more or less ended his political career.

AH: Yeah.

CF: You know, but those are just sacrifices that we make when you stand up for what's right.

AH: So I guess it was between early March, and then it was September that the integration actually took place. Is there anything else that we should cover in that interim period there? Just if there's anything that we missed as far as that, that kind of waiting period.

CF: There was really not much going on. It was more or less a wait-out, or wait and see. We continued to have regular meetings but we didn't really get involved as to what was going on anymore than what we were told. We had assurance from Reverend Lowry, who
was still around, and Bob Saunders telling us that they were trying to work it out. And they began to integrate other cities, and we felt that it was just a matter of time before it would come to Tampa.

AH: Okay. What were some of the other cities that came before Tampa? Do you remember any of them?

CF: I don't remember all of them. I know places like Charlotte—I think Miami might have come before Tampa. Tallahassee took a while, I think. They were the last ones from them. And Jacksonville, but they began to integrate all over the South.

AH: Okay. All right, so then you participated in the first day of integrated dining—

CF: Yes!

AH: Here in Tampa. And they—it sounded like you had a little more of an unnerving experience than some of the other people.

CF: Yes, yes.

AH: First of all, describe to us the method. I guess there was two groups that went—two couples that went to each restaurant. Tell us about the method first and then we'll get to your personal role.

CF: Well, every store that had a lunch counter in the city of Tampa, we had two people to go. We had two times, set times, ten AM and two PM. And the reason for that, it was their slow time. So in other words, we didn't want to go in the busy time because we wanted to call as less fanfare as possible. So my situation was at ten AM.

AH: Wait, one more thing, before we get to that. I wanted to ask about—first of all, you know, there was probably several reasons, but why lunch counters? I've heard one reason was that because most African Americans could only afford to eat at lunch counters rather than, like, a full-fledged restaurant. And then—

CF: I didn't hear that, but go ahead.

AH: Okay. That was one of Mayor Lane's reasons he gave in an interview.

CF: Okay, okay.

AH: I'm not sure if that clicks with you or not or you think that was something thought up from the outside. What do you think about that?

CF: Well, he probably was right. Because the people that I was using—and that's what was funny, the kids that I was using didn't have money to buy a hamburger anyway. And
that shows you how the system plays out. But if they had said, “Come on, we're going to
serve you guys,” we wouldn’t have had any money.

AH: Yeah.

CF: I actually—when we really started to integrate with the kids, we had to give the kids
money to buy food.

AH: Sure.

CF: So, yeah, actually—and he might have been right. I didn't really know that was the
reason, but I think the reason is because we earmarked, and we targeted the lunch
counters. In fact, we had a lot of trouble when they tried to sit in restaurants like the
Morrison's Cafeteria. Even half the sit-ins did not come around, you know.

AH: Yeah.

CF: And I understand several of them might have been arrested at the Morrison's. In fact,
the young lady that followed me went over to Tim's. She was allowed to stay if I'm not
mistaken at a Morrison's on Hillsborough [Avenue].

AH: Okay.

CF: But no, they were much harder to integrate than the lunch counters.

AH: Well, with the lunch counters, too, you already had—you were already being served
at every place else but the lunch counter.

CF: Well, actually, we spent money there.

AH: Yes.

CF: We spent money there. In other words, you'd go and spend a thousand dollars buying,
and just go right to lunch counters. But a sit-down restaurant, you really had nothing to
fall back on and say, “Well, I spent my money here so you need to let me eat.”

AH: Yeah.

CF: So that could be the reason.

AH: Okay.

CF: I'm sure that's probably (inaudible) in the beginning.

AH: Sure. And of course your Woolworth’s and your Grant’s and your (inaudible) are
chains—
CF: Yes.

AH: So they have a lot more business to lose.

CF: National chains!

AH: Yeah.

CF: And I'll never forget one of the signs where [what] we had was, “Shut down the national chain.” Because, I mean, they were doing business, you know, all over the country. And they were integrating! So why should the South suffer? So we brought that to the forefront.

AH: Okay. So now you were talking about ten a.m. and your own experience.

CF: Yes.

AH: Tell us what happened.

CF: You know, it's really historical because the person that was supposed to meet me was a Tuskegee (inaudible).

AH: Oh.

CF: Yes! Mr. Bowlan. Henry Bowlan was supposed to meet me, and he was late. And I'm looking at my watch and it said ten AM. And I didn't want it to be a bust. So I sit down anyway. And the minute I sit down and order— we order a certain meal; everybody ordered the same thing, eggs, bacon, coffee. And we were told, “If you have any trouble, call a waitress, pay for the bill, and get up and leave.”

So, as I sit down, and they brought my food, and I think I was putting butter on my toast, two guys walked up behind me and said, “Look what we have here, this nigger. And we're not going to let him eat here.” So, at that particular time, I called the waitress over. I was too nervous to eat anyway. (laughs) So, I call the waitress over and told her to bring my check. And she did, and I paid for it and I got up to leave. And as I was leaving, he followed me around the store.

So the same young man that I was cutting hair with at his shop, he walked in the door. He came down to see how it was going. But before he got there, there was an African American female [who] saw what was happening. She said, “Look, why don't you just walk with me? Maybe they won't attack you while I'm walking with you.” So, when he walked in and she recognized that I knew him, she said, “Well, there's another man here, I'll just leave, I think you'll be okay.”

So he immediately said, “Well, let's get out of the store.”
I said, “No, we can't do that because I think if we leave they will probably attack us.” So the store manager saw what was going on. And he approached them and told them he wasn't going to have any trouble in his store. And he told them if they didn’t leave, he would call the police. And he did call the police. So as the police walked in the door, we walked out. And they, of course, talked with the gentlemen. I don't know what they did about—I don't think they were arrested. They just stopped them from—one of them spit over his shoulder at me as we walked out.

AH: Okay.

CF: Yeah.

AH: So that was—

CF: Unnerving!

AH: That was the end of the, the first—

CF: The first day for me yes.

AH: First day, okay. But you didn't actually get to eat any food.

CF: No, not that day.

AH: Yeah, okay.

CF: But it went fine everywhere else. They had no problem, nothing. That was the only incident.

AH: Okay. So, it seemed like the sending couples—

CF: Yes.

AH: —was a good tactic to use.

CF: Yes. And they were professional people. The majority of them were professional people. We didn't use any students—

AH: Oh, I see, okay.

CF: —on those first demonstrations, mostly adults.

AH: Yeah.

CF: Right.
AH: In one of the accounts I read was C. Blythe Andrews from the *Florida Sentinel Bulletin*. He described his experience differently.

CF: Yes.

AH: It sounded nothing like yours.

CF: No, no—they had no problems.

AH: Yeah, there was no threats or anything. So there was—I believe there was eighteen stores that participated in that first day?

CF: Yes.

AH: So, you know, you started to mention kind of the integration campaign at restaurants afterwards. What was the next step? Did the Youth Council of the NAACP then start to think about restaurants as a whole? Or did they stop—

CF: Theaters.

AH: Theaters was the next thing?

CF: Theaters. Theaters was the next target. I participated in several of those. It's pretty comical. The Tampa Theatre downtown was our first target.

AH: Okay.

CF: On Franklin [Street]. And we went up to the counter each, you had to go to the counter. And the ticket sales person had to tell each person, “Because of our policies, I cannot sell you a ticket.” And then another one would step in. And she did that, I don't know, about twenty, twenty-five times. She gave up and left.

AH: Okay.

CF: She left. I don't—I think she called a manager and said, “I’m out of here, I'm not doing this.” So I moved off the scene before the theaters were integrated.

AH: Okay.

CF: Gwen Timms replaced me. Some mysterious reason: I got drafted by the military, and I left Tampa.

AH: Now this was in what year?

CF: This was in 1960.
AH: Wow.

CF: The demonstrations started in February—February twenty-ninth, since 1960. I received a letter from the military in that November—

AH: Oh.

CF: —that I was being drafted into the services.

AH: Well—

CF: They sort of moved me out of the way.

AH: Yeah, it didn't seem like a high—you know, a time that they really needed people. Of course Vietnam [War] hadn't even [started] up yet, so.

CF: I know.

AH: Yeah.

CF: But I eventually got married that same year.

AH: Okay.

CF: Yeah, December thirty-first [1960].

AH: Did you, did you meet your wife through the—?

CF: Yes. Well, I knew her before.

AH: Okay.

CF: In fact, I—one of the reasons I came to Tampa also, I met her. But she was also in the demonstrations. She was a student at Gibbs Junior College [in St. Petersburg] at the time. And we got married that December.

AH: Okay. So she—

CF: We dated for a couple of years.

AH: Okay. And she participated in the lunch counter sit-ins too, then?

CF: Yes.

AH: Okay.
CF: In fact, she was in the council, also, along with myself.

AH: Okay.

CF: She started back in 1958. Yeah.

AH: Okay. So that must have been a real bonding experience for you, too.

CF: Yes, we talk about it now.

AH: So what, what branch of the service were you drafted into?

CF: What happened, when I got my letter—I don't know if you remember a James Hammond; you might have read about him.

AH: Yes.

CF: Because he had a group also called the Young Adults for Progressive Action. They was actually the ones who started picketing the supermarkets, his group, which was a young professional group. Well, he was a lieutenant in the [United States] Army Reserve. And I immediately called him and I said, “Man, they're getting rid of me! They're drafting me into the military!”

He said, “Well, come out here and let's talk it over. Maybe I can get you in the Reserve.” And he did. So I joined the Reserves. So I did six months active duty, and actually got married December thirty-first and left for boot camp January twenty-first, twenty-one days later.

AH: Okay.

CF: After marrying my new bride. So I served six months active duty and five-and-a-half years in the Reserves. And got out in nineteen-sixty—

AH: Okay. So that was relatively painless, rather than doing what? Your alternative would have been three years, or—?

CF: It would have been two.

AH: Two years.

CF: At that time, when you were drafted you did two years.

AH: Two years, okay.
CF: I would have stayed longer in the Reserve, but it was just too much discrimination, even in that—even in war. Even though they had integrated the armed forces, it was the mindset of people—

AH: Yeah.

CF: —who hadn't changed. And it was all in the South, so, you know.

AH: Okay. So, after that six months you came back to Tampa, then?

CF: Came back to Tampa. And then I concentrated on being a married man.

AH: Yeah.

CF: And I still kept my membership in the NAACP. And I went to meetings with the adult branch.

AH: Okay.

CF: But as far as my participation in any other things, I sort of took a back seat to it.

AH: Okay. So—and then just to follow up, lastly on, you know, integration of restaurants, to kind of continue the theme with the lunch counters. You said there was a lot of trouble getting private restaurants to integrate then.

CF: Yes.

AH: From what you understood, and there were arrests and things like this?

CF: Yes.

AH: And I guess even here, just down the street from the university [USF] there was a University Restaurant. And there was an incident where they wouldn't serve a student here. And so I guess there was a lot of white students and African Americans as well, picketed the restaurant. So, as far as I know that's the only incident where it was a majority of whites who were actually doing the picketing.

CF: Right. Well what happened, I think the reason the movement I guess was so successful is because of the white students. They began to—and if you read documents all over the South, a lot of Northern students came down, were sympathizers. And they began to help the movement. So it really helped a lot.

AH: Okay.

CF: (inaudible).
AH: Well is there anything that we missed? I know, you know, this—anything you have
to add in the years after? I know that we mainly concentrated on—

CF: Well, one of the things that happened is the sit-in demonstrations was really the
catalyst for everything that happened in Tampa. As a result of that Biracial Committee, as
a result of integration of lunch counters, the gentleman I was working with, Melvin
Stone, we went to Bob Saunders. At the time, they were having their own strike. The
Tampa Transit Bus Company was on strike. And I told Bob, “Bob, why don't I draft a
letter, and let's send it to the bus company and let them know we're going to boycott the
buses when they come off strike.” We did that. And they sent us a letter back and told us
to send them four qualified drivers that they could hire. And they did hire two of those
guys within six weeks. So that's how the bus company began to integrate.

The next thing that happened from that sit-in demonstration, General Telephone
Company—what happened, a merchant’s association got together and they started a class.
A two-week class to train people how to answer telephones, how to be secretaries. I was
the only male in that class out of fifteen women. I took the class, and out of that they
hired four telephone operators. This all happened back in 1960. So it began to kick off the
integration. James Hammond, who, after picketing stores—they began to hire cashiers
and people working back in the meat department, produce department. So it really started
Tampa on the way to integration. And it all started from the sit-ins.

AH: Yeah, well, that's, that's the interesting part, is that's the—really beginning of the
snowball effect.

CF: Right.

AH: Well, do you have anything to add? Okay. Yeah we've got about five minutes left.
And the—usually I like to ask people, first of all, what's the best and the hardest times?
For you, just in your life in general, what was the best time that you can remember?

CF: Now. Right now.

AH: That's a great answer.

CF: Yeah, you know it. I think it makes you a stronger person. The best time for me is
now. And I was—I always cared a lot about family. And I think at that time, it brought
families closer together. Sad to say, it's not like that today. I see a lot of waste. We're in—
now education is so important. And I think it's been spiraled away [and] wasted. Of all
the opportunities we've had—have now, to see it, [that] it's going to waste, that hurts me.
(inaudible) over there (inaudible) causes that. That's bad in a way, in a sense. I was
certainly blessed. My family, my kids are blessed. But as a result of that, I started a
program in our church called Saving Our Children.

AH: Okay.
CF: It started about twenty-two years ago. Very successful. Every Saturday. But we teach life skills, skills that they don't get at home [or] in school.

AH: Okay. Actually, could we switch tapes? I have a few other questions I'd like to ask so, and I to want to get—

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins

AH: All right, so we were just talking about Saving Our Children. Which church is this at today?

CF: It's New Mount Zion Baptist Church, 2511 East Columbus Drive, which is in the Ybor City area.

AH: Okay. And you said they—it meets every Saturday?

CF: We meet every Saturday. Now, we're off for the summer—we take two months off for the summer. But every Saturday from nine-thirty to twelve noon, we teach life skills, and we start out with vocabulary. What happened [is] we found out the kids were doing poorly on their FCAT [Florida’s Comprehensive Assessment Test] tests and different tests they take, so we start out with the vocabulary section. And then we teach life skills, things that is not taught at home and not at school, things that—like carpentry, automotive, to sentence structure. We do speech therapy. We have programs in basic sewing, how to make speeches, fun with math—these types of programs we do. We do that for ten months out of the year.

AH: Well, what's the age range for them?

CF: They're from six to high school. Six through twelfth grade.

AH: Oh, okay, great. And I guess that's one of the other things I want to ask you about. I mean where—for a lot of folks I think the, I think the civil rights movement is something that ended in the 1960s. But I—for a lot of people who were involved in the movement, it seems like it never really ended, and that the emphasis just changes. And it sounds like it's something similar that's happened with you. That you know, you're finding another way to, to build up the community. And how do you feel about that? The movement, and the idea? I mean, is it dead? Is it still with us? What are your thoughts?

CF: Well, it went from sit-ins to—it's more economical now. Economical, political. There's still a lot of problems in the job market. African Americans are not, I feel, being represented even though the city is trying, and the county is trying by setting aside so many jobs or contracts for different minorities. But I—they still have problems.

One of the problems [is], I do defensive driver training for a company out of Philadelphia. You know I fly around the country. It reminds me, I was in Chicago a month ago. And as I was checking in, I was with one of my white counterparts, white
friends. He was at another agent, a salesperson. And they asked me for my driver's license—I had a company credit card, which is, you know, a major credit card's (inaudible) name, with my name on it, their name on it—and said to me to show my driver's license.

I said, “Why? You have my profile, which is, you know, in your computer, everything about me.”

“Well, we need it for your protection.”

I said, “Well, what about the other guy? They didn't ask him. So, are you in need of his protection?”

And so, she just said, “Well, we—it's something we do.” But I refused to do it. I felt that was another point of discrimination.

So, we still see it. I see it at grocery stores, when I go shopping. There was a time a couple years ago, where I wrote a check and the young lady got the bad check list. And my check I wrote—I was behind another lady; she wrote a check twice as much as mine [and] they never bothered her. But when I wrote my check, she pulled out the bad check list. And that's the time for education when that happens. So, I kind of educated her—

AH: Okay.

CF: —to let her know that. We don't do that, unless you're going to ask it of everybody. But it's sad that that still happens.

AH: Sure.

CF: Like I said, it's a mindset.

AH: Yeah, and a lot of people make the argument that reasons went from being right out in the open to kind of being folded into the society.

CF: Yes.

AH: Let me see. One of the other things I wanted to ask you about was, you know, one of the—maybe one of the other consequences of integration was that it kind of hurt the black business community.

CF: Yes.

AH: And you had less consumers who had to go into these black business. And of course, black businesses usually didn't have the funds available and things like that to make the same upgrades that the white businesses were doing. What are your thoughts on that, and how did you see that playing out? The Central Avenue business community, of course, in
Tampa, was [a] very strong black business community. And by the time of the sit-ins, it really had seen much better days. What are some of your thoughts on that?

CF: Well, you know it—integration helped and hurt.

AH: Okay.

CF: It hurt economically. We did have our own businesses. And a lot of people will tell me about that. They'd say, “Well, you made it worse.” Well, people need to realize, need to understand it wasn't that we were eating there just to be in a white restaurant or integrated. It's the fact that as a citizen you should have that right. To go anywhere you want to, to live where you want to live or eat where you want to eat. So it wasn’t that theirs were nicer, it was just the fact that, don't deny me that right. And I have to let them know that.

But yes, it did hurt. They just couldn't compete. It's just like a mom-'n'-pop grocery store can't compete with a Wal-Mart. They come in and they almost close down. So that's what happened there. And if you want, that's a parallel. If you look at it in that sense as to what happened. When people had the opportunity to go downtown, we did that.

AH: Sure.

CF: If you were out at a mall shopping, well, you're not going to leave there and then come back into the African American community restaurant and eat. And I'm sure that stunned everybody. Even if you had a favorite restaurant you probably wouldn’t do that. So it did hurt. It did hurt in that sense.

AH: Yeah. Well, and there was a lot of other factors at play, it seems, too. And that to blame it on integration is pretty small-minded, because downtown had seen better days by the end of the 1960s.

CF: Sure.

AH: Ybor City was falling apart.

CF: Sure.

AH: You know, urban renewal happened there by the 1960s, so it would be difficult to make that case. One of the other things that I wanted to ask you about and just get your thoughts on is, there was some bad riots in 1967—

CF: Yes.

AH: And throughout the late sixties, there was riots in a lot of African American communities. But sixty-seven [1967], it was sparked by the shooting of a young black man by police officers and was killed. You know, what were your thoughts when you saw
this news coming across the screen? And how did you hear about it, once again? And then, I do want to talk about the doors of integration opening for you. But with the 1967 riots, how did that—I don't know—what did you think about that when it was happening?

CF: I was just getting back, actually, finishing my military obligation. But just another form of it, I—the only thing I can say is probably racism. I don't think a white kid would have been shot in the back. In fact, I'm almost sure he wouldn't have. I was in law enforcement for twenty years. I went from there to the [Hillsborough County] Sheriff's Office, actually. Not directly from there, but I retired in 2001 from [the] Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office.

AH: Okay.

CF: And I was in law enforcement. And the attitudes of—it depends on the person. And I think that we had cultural diversity classes, we had everything. But until the person realizes that all people are just people. And I think it's the ignorance that boards the mindset that causes these problems, not knowing a person. I go to church in an African American church, considered not one of the best neighborhoods in town. But I'm not afraid because I'm African American. In fact, I had one of my coworkers—I live out in Progress Village, which is, if you know the history of Progress Village, about forty-six years old, African American. Now it's integrated. But one of my coworkers said, “Well, Fort, do you live in a black community?” And I said, “Well, I'm black.” It was then he didn't realize—I guess he thought I had gotten above that and I should move out.

AH: Yeah, go to Tampa Palms [subdivision] or something.

CF: Yeah right, absolutely.

AH: (laughs)

CF: That's it, I'm fine.

AH: Yeah.

CF: So it's that mindset, I think, and I have friends also on the other side who won't shop at certain stores. It's sad. It's sad when you look at that. But, yeah, I've had some great opportunities.

AH: Yeah, and tell us about that. How did you transition from your military experience into law enforcement?

CF: Well, actually, it was a while after that. I went from military experience—I think my first major job that paid any worthwhile money was General Cable Corporation. It was a cable company that made cable for the telephone companies. And very good paying job—it was a union job. And being a union job, they really couldn't discriminate like other
jobs because you had a set pay scale. So everybody got the same scale. So, that was my first kick off. At the barbershop, I didn't have the business I wanted with the young families, and I didn't want to just rely on just cutting hair because it really wasn't much of a future in it. So, I had to get a job and start looking at return.

So, I worked there several years, and then I went from there, believe it or not, back to Tampa Transit on the same bus line. My reasons for going there—I went over to the national Trailways Bus System and tried to get hired as a driver there. And they told me, “Well, you have no big bus experience or big trucks. And you need to have that experience.” So, that's when I went over to Tampa Transit. And so daily, I went by the bus station seven times before they gave me an application.

AH: Wow.

CF: They came up with—all they had was one other African American working out of Atlanta. They had no African Americans in the South at all driving the Trailways. So I went to Greyhound and Trailways. And they told me the only thing I could do would be a baggage handler or a giant. And I said, “No, I want to be a ticket sales person or a bus driver.” And you wouldn’t believe that—actually Greyhound measured me with my shoes off to see how tall I was. So I said “Well, I've never seen anybody drive a bus with no shoes on.” So then they told me I could leave.

But I went by Trailways seven times and they told me, for all of the seven times, I needed some experience. So, I went to Tampa Transit, and drove a bus for eleven months and then went back to Trailways and said, “Well, I have that experience.” And they eventually hired me about six months later. And I was the first African American in Florida to drive for Trailways. That was an experience I—I don't think we have enough time to talk about that. (laughs)

AH: (laughs) Well, maybe that will be another—a whole other.

CF: That's another experience. (laughs) You don't have enough time.

AH: You mean, the just—and when you talk about that, is the reactions of people when they got on the bus?

CF: Yes. Everything, from the trainers to the bus drivers themselves.

AH: Okay.

CF: I would walk in the driver's lounge and they would get up and walk out.

AH: Really?

CF: I had the whole lounge by myself. And when I experience those things today I just smile and shrug it off and say, “This is nothing new. I've been there before.” So—
AH: Yeah.

CF: I guess I'm a warrior of that movement. Made some great things happen.

AH: Yeah. Well, could you just give us a little highlight, as long as we're here?

CF: Yeah. Well, actually with the Trailways thing, I had to go to Miami for my friend. And at that time they would not hire you unless you were twenty-five years old, and had to be married, of course, because, you know, you're handling people all over the country with a bus. So the trainer that they had selected was myself and four white trainees. And I got yelled at every day. Looked like I was the only one being yelled at. I didn't think I was going to make it. So about the third—we had to do that for three weeks. The whole program was seven weeks long.

And the trainer called me outside and said, “I have to say—I know you think I'm picking on you because you're African American. But I'm trying to get you used to what you're going to face when you get on the road.” And then I realized that. He said, “Because you're going to be the only African American driver we have. And they're going to look at you from the time they get on that bus until the time they get off.” And he was right. And I mean I was—I was in the (inaudible), I was in (inaudible). And they had to make sure they had the right person. But I think the point that really stood out was the fact that they interviewed me for eight hours. Eight hours for the job.

AH: Wow.

CF: [They] interviewed my wife for four hours. We had to go to Miami for the interview. And they had me in a room. And every scenario you could think of. “What will happen if they call you nigger? What happens if they spit at you? What would you do? How would you react?” They was trying to make sure they had the right person to put out there. And [it] came out okay. The training phase of it showed all the trainers how you got on the bus. And once you started to train on the road of the seven-week program, you had an introductory letter that you gave the driver that you're going to ride with. Now, they try to screen these guys to the best of their ability. Pick the best ones. This one particular driver, I gave him my slip, he took it, balled it up and threw it on the dash of the bus.

AH: (sneezes) Excuse me.

CF: Never said a word to me. We had to ride from Tampa to Lake City, and what you have to do is learn the routes, how to get into like Brooksville and (inaudible) and (inaudible) and Gainesville—how to get into all these stations. So, you had to take notes. And he was actually supposed to let me drive, and critique my course announcement and all of these things. He threw it [the letter] on the dash and never said a word all the way to Lake City. Well, when we got to Lake City, I didn't know a soul. Got his bag off the bus and left. Here I stand, no—don’t know anybody. And I had to catch a bus back that night at midnight coming back to Tampa, coming out of New York.
So it was an African American cab driver—I didn't have my uniforms yet, but I had the blue shirt, the tie, the pants. And they recognized—he said, “Are you a bus driver?” I said, “Well, I'm training.” And yeah, they all were glad because this is something new. So this cab driver knew a place where I could go get a rental. And on my way back, while I was parked in back of the bus station, an African American police officer came back and saw me, and picked me up, carried me to the station and waited there until the bus came, with me. But that was just one of the experiences. But the same guy, about five years later—I had to room with him, because they—the company—provided rooms in the hotel.

AH: Yes.

CF: And there were double beds, and I had to room with him. And to show you how much things had changed—he got up and made breakfast for us.

AH: Really.

CF: So that's a plus.

AH: Oh, man.

CF: But it's all over the country. I have—I guess it changes. Another highlight, I went to Selma, Alabama, of all places. I had a tour. Some boy scouts. And I stayed in an African American motel, and just to see the people react—it was like a parade when they saw me! They had never seen an African American bus driver for Trailways. Kind of like a celebrity, you know, movie star.

AH: Yeah.

CF: Like that. But those are the good points, so it made it all worth it. The downside was some cities, I pulled up and they wouldn't ride the bus. Refused to get on.

AH: It makes sense that it was such a reaction in a place like Selma, Alabama, too, that it —

CF: Yes!

AH: —real history. With—

CF: Yes, yes. it was.

AH: —the movement and everything. You know what—one of the interesting things about your career and your career as a civil rights leader is that you've done it solo. You know?

CF: Yes.
AH: I mean, from that morning at ten AM, throughout your entire bus career, you did it alone. And then so how did you get into the Sheriff’s Department?

CF: Well, actually what happened, Trailways—every three years a union job (inaudible), we knew we were going on strike every three years. And I went—I was with them for thirteen years. And the last time we had a strike, I had to leave Tampa. And over—everybody with less than fourteen years seniority had to leave Tampa, because when we came off strike, the company cut the routes out. In other words we had twenty-two scheduled, [and] they'd come in through Tampa, twenty-two schedules. After the strike they cut it down to eight schedules. So everybody with less than fourteen years seniority had to leave Tampa. So, I worked out of Orlando for three months. But the reason I could hold the Orlando board was [that] the guy was out sick. And I knew when he came back I was going to get bumped down the line, and that's what happened.

So, I started looking around for a place to go, because I had two kids in college, and I didn't want to be away from home that much, because I was going to only have one day off working out of Miami. And by the time I got to Tampa it would be time to go back. So, I changed careers at forty-three years old. Took a fourteen thousand dollar pay cut with two kids in college. So, I started looking around to find a job that I could be at home. I could have gone with the local bus company, a charter outfit. But then, I had thought about law enforcement. I said when they were laying everybody else off, law enforcement was going to be hiring. So I got involved with the Sheriff's Office and started out in the detention department, went from there to a road deputy, from there to a detective, from there to community relations crime prevention. And I closed out my career as a community relations coordinator.

AH: Okay.

CF: For the Sheriff's Office.

AH: So [did] your background in the movement and everything, and having to deal with race relations before help with your community relations?

CF: Absolutely.

AH: Yeah?

CF: Absolutely. In fact, I was the liaison between the Sheriff’s Office and the community.

AH: Okay.

CF: Yes. And put out a lot of fires people don't know about.

AH: I bet.
CF: Yeah, a lot of fires.

AH: So—

CF: Worked directly with the NAACP, and that was one thing that the sheriff allowed for me to do. So I was directly responsible to him and the majors at the Sheriff’s Office.

AH: Well, it's interesting that your career kind of came full circle, then, in some ways.

CF: Yeah.

AH: And went right back to where you were at before in some ways.

CF: Yes.

AH: But kind of on the other side of the fence to some extent—and here you're working with the NAACP—from the police side.

CF: Yes, yes. I made a difference. I like to think I made a difference with some of the things that I earmarked was law enforcement. People look at it in a negative light. I think I was that light that helped change some attitudes, especially in the African American community, speaking with groups and youngsters about law enforcement. And one of the things that I did was to make sure that our African American deputies actually ate at African American restaurants once or twice a week so that they could see us in the area. You know, help change some of these attitudes. So—but it made a big difference. I was a warrants detective for seven years. All I did was make sure that our African American deputies actually ate at African American restaurants once or twice a week so that they could see us in the area. You know, help change some of these attitudes. So—but it made a big difference. I was a warrants detective for seven years. All I did was make arrests. And I—my area was in the African American community. But never mistreated anyone and I—I think it helped. In the long run they began to see a different light of law enforcement.

AH: Okay. Well, I guess—usually at the end of an interview I ask, is there anything that you would pass on to later generations if someone was listening to this in twenty or thirty or fifty years from now? What would you tell them? Younger people, maybe?

CF: Well, they actually—when I look at it, they don't believe it happened. When you tell them about we couldn't get to lunch counters, they don't believe it. They say, “God, you guys are really stupid,” because of the things that they have now. And even my own kids say, “Dad, why did y'all let them do that?” And I say, “Well, because it was the time that you did. It was the time frame.” But it has an effect. It has an effect on future generations, because we did suffer those type things and that.

But to tell them forty years from now the things that we went through and the opportunities that they had, that they shouldn't take it for granted. Education, I think, is the key to all of our problems. There is no better, you do that. And I don't think that enough is being done in that realm, in that sense of education. My wife was a school teacher for thirty-two years, and they get less pay than anybody and they train doctors,
lawyers and CEOs. And so I think that's one of those things I would say. Just make sure you keep the record playing.

AH: Well, and finally, it was something that you'd be able to speak to I think. How do you view race relations in Tampa today? As compared with, let's say, 1960?

CF: Oh, I'd say it's good. It's good. I think we have a great mayor [Pam Iorio]. I see her doing some things that—not that the others haven't been great, which I think they have. I think she's really trying to do some things to bring the races closer together. She's trying to help all communities. And I like that. I think we have good relationships. Tampa's not bad as a lot of cities, trust me.

AH: Yeah.

CF: But I've seen some that progress—like, Orlando's very progressive. But, like, I think it all boils down to education, preparing yourself. You've got to be in the ball game in order to hit—get a hit.

AH: Absolutely.

CF: Can't be in the dugout, so I think that's—you know.

AH: Well, Mr. Fort, thank you so much for coming in and seeing us today. I know it was fruitful for me, and I hope for the Oral History Program as well.

CF: Glad I could come.

AH: Thanks again.

CF: Hope you can use some of it.

_End of interview_