



Interview with Charles Austin Gratton

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Birmingham (Ala.)

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Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University

Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life
in the Jim Crow South

Interview
with
CHARLES GRATTON
[DOB 7/16/32]

Birmingham, AL
June 22, 1994
Tywana Whorley,

Interviewer

Whorley: What is your name, sir?

Gratton: My name is Charles Gratton.

Whorley: Where were you born?

Gratton: I was born July 16, 1932, Birmingham, Alabama.

Whorley: Where did you live?

Gratton: I was born and raised in Norwood. That's a neighborhood just about eight miles out of downtown Birmingham.

Whorley: Was it a predominantly black neighborhood?

Gratton: Well, actually, it was a white neighborhood, and we were on the back side of the white neighborhood.

Whorley: Can you describe it?

Gratton: Yes. Norwood was the upper-middle class white neighborhood, and like all neighborhoods back in the thirties and forties, they had black people living on the outer edge of the white neighborhoods, so that's where I was born and raised.

Whorley: How was the area that you lived in compared to the white area?

Gratton: It was typical practically of all black neighborhoods. We had an old saying that goes, you can tell where the white neighborhood ends and the black neighborhood begins, because usually that's where the pavement run out. No paved roads, no sidewalks, all dirt roads. So basically that's the way I grew up in Birmingham.

Whorley: Did you have streetlights?

Gratton: No streetlights. As a matter of fact, it was in the probably the forties before we even had electric lights. We

used lamps. You know what a lamp is? Okay. Somewhere near the forties we were able to get electricity. We had to walk something like a block and a half to pick up our mail. We didn't even get mail delivered to our doors. And that was typical in all black neighborhoods. It was more just like a rural route when it came down to us.

But right at the edge of the black neighborhood and the white neighborhood, the whites would get their mail delivered to their door. But they had one particular area with just a rural mailbox, and the postman would just come by and put all your mail in those boxes and you had to go a block and a half to collect your mail.

Whorley: Do you remember the house that you lived in?

Gratton: Yes. It's still standing now, but it had been remodeled. The old original house was torn down back in '59. My mother and father lived there until they passed, and my brother, I guess about four years before my mother passed my brother had the old house torn down and built my mother a new house. But that particular site is still there.

Whorley: Can you describe the house.

Gratton: Yes. It was, again, typical of black family homes.

It had a shed-type front porch on it and wooden steps. Come up to the porch, you would enter into the house into a bedroom, and then it was another room to the left as you enter that we used for a bedroom and living room combined. There was a little small dining area and a kitchen with a wood stove in it, and that was it.

Whorley: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Gratton: Yes. Well, there were seven boys and three girls. One boy is deceased. They all weren't born in that particular house. Myself and two other brothers were born in this particular house. The rest of my family was born in that vicinity, Norwood vicinity.

Whorley: Where are you in the ten?

Gratton: I am the tenth.

Whorley: Oh, you're the baby.

Gratton: Yes.

Whorley: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents.

Gratton: Yes. My father's name was Joe Gratton. My mother's name was Charlotte Gratton. They migrated here out of Montgomery, Alabama. Down in Montgomery it was more or less just farming. My father came to Birmingham. I'm not sure what year, but he done mostly public work, foundry, pipe shops, until his health started getting bad on him, and then he more or less resorted to farming and gardening. He had hogs, cows, chickens, all this right on the back side of Norwood over there. He did that up until his death. He died in 1948.

Whorley: What did your mom do?

Gratton: She had a full-time job raising ten children, just a housewife. She passed in 1968.

Whorley: You said that your father grew a garden. Did the kids help out?

Gratton: Yes. I guess that was one advantage of having so many children. They could help out with the farming chores, and that's basically what we done, just helped Dad out. He had a pretty good plot of land over there in Norwood, and he would raise corn, sweet potatoes, peanuts, had a nice-sized garden in the back, like I say, hogs, cows, chickens, and he done very well.

Whorley: Was that typical of the neighborhood?

Gratton: No. That particular section was real scattered. It wasn't a lot of blacks. I guess total you could say maybe seven or eight families lived on the back side of Norwood.

Whorley: Did they own, in terms of--

Gratton: No, we were renting. But later on in '46, my daddy started buying, with the help of his sons that had went to Chicago and they were doing very well, so they, in turn, helped him buy the place back in '46. He was able to buy the house we were living in and twelve additional lots with \$1,800. I know that doesn't sound like much now, but back in the forties that was a lot of money. And like I say, my brothers, his sons, they helped him by sending money back to help pay for it.

Whorley: Do you remember your grandparents?

Gratton: No. I don't know anything about my grandparents, no more than what I was told by my parents and my sisters and brothers.

Whorley: What did they tell you about them?

Gratton: Well, my granddaddy, Jack Gratton, I understand, I don't know exactly if he were born in Atmore, Alabama, which is about pretty close to 100 miles outside of Montgomery, south. He had quite a bit of land in Atmore, and they were mostly farming. It was all farming land. I really don't know what actually happened with all the land that he had in Atmore, but for some reason my daddy, he decided he would come to Birmingham, and this is where he got his start, here in Birmingham.

Whorley: I don't know if you remember, but when he came to Birmingham, what did he start off doing?

Gratton: I think he was working with the railroad, and I don't know if it was Southern Railroad or what the name of it. He kept that job for a while, and then he left it and went to a steel foundry called American Ready back in those days. He worked there for several years, and then he went to American Cast Iron Pipe Company, known as ACIPCO. He worked there for years. The last job I remember, the public work that he did, was with a foundry called Cubas and Galsley [phonetic], and they were doing more or less what we called back then in World War II was a defense plant. They were making shell casings for these big cannons and all that they were shooting in the army.

Basically, that was about it. From that, he went back to the farming over in Norwood.

Whorley: Where did the kids go to school at?

Gratton: I went to school at Hudson Elementary School in Cottageville [phonetic], and that was approximately six miles from where I lived, and yet there were a white school a block and a half from where I lived that I couldn't go. I had to walk every day, five days a week, those six miles to school and back, from Cottageville back to Norwood. It wasn't any buses. We had to walk. Rain, sleet, or shine, we went to school.

Whorley: Did you have your siblings with you? Did you all walk together?

Gratton: There were maybe two or three kids that had to make this journey going to school each day.

Whorley: Where did you go to high school?

Gratton: I went to H. Parker High School after finishing Hudson Elementary. That was in--I'm not sure of the year, but by the time I graduated from Hudson, we were riding the bus from Norwood downtown, get a transfer, and go to Smithfield to Parker

High School.

Whorley: Did you have to pay for the bus or was it students?

Gratton: They had what was known, you could go to the Alabama Power Company, which was in charge of the buses at that time, streetcars, and through the school they would issue what they called a coupon book. You would have passes. By the way, car fare at that time was 7 cents, and instead of paying the 7 cents, you could get that book of coupons for like 3 cents, half price, for schoolchildren, and they would last probably a month. This is the way we had to go to school.

Whorley: Could all the children afford to pay to ride the buses?

Gratton: As far as I know. I've known of any problem, but I guess if they did, I guess the schools would make some type of arrangement. If a parent was unable to afford those coupon books, I suppose that the school and the electric company worked out some type of agreement.

Whorley: How was it going to Parker High?

Gratton: Oh, it was nice. But still, like I described about

Hudson School and Norwood Elementary School, there also was a school that the bus had to pass by an all-white school in Norwood. That was Philip High School. We had to pass that and go probably another three miles to Smithfield in order to get to Parker High School. Of course, in later years during the transition and right now, Norwood is, I'd say, 99 percent all black, so naturally the elementary school, Norwood Elementary School, is black. The same thing with Philip High School that I had to pass by. It's now I guess 99 1/2 percent black, if not 100 percent.

This is the change that have taken place since the sixties, when school desegregation and all that came out. But the strange part about it, it really didn't solve the problem totally, because when these schools started integrating, then you had what is known as the "white flight." White people started leaving the city. They went to the suburbs to be at better schools. In turn, the schools that they left had a downward trend. Even now, the better schools are located out in the suburbs. What was the better class of schools here then for whites have really declined.

Whorley: How was it going to Parker?

Gratton: It was nice. It was one of the better schools for blacks in the entire city. They had a school by the name of

Ulma [phonetic] High School. It only went to the tenth grade, I believe. You went two years to Ulma. The students that were living on the south side of the city, they went two years to Ulma and then they were transferred to Parker.

Parker was the school--it always has been the top school for blacks back in the thirties and forties and fifties. Then somewhere during the late fifties or early sixties they started building new schools for blacks in different communities. Like now, for instance, they have a high school in Cottageville where I went to the elementary school. They still have Hudson High School, but they have Carver High School out there, too. They have Fairfield High, they have Ensly High. So now it's just been spread out. Back in those days, there were just the one high school, other than Fairfield. Fairfield had a high school, but it really wasn't up to par with Parker. Parker was the top high school in the city of Birmingham.

Whorley: In terms of the classrooms, were they all crowded?

Gratton: Not really. They were comfortable. We didn't have to bring in extra seats in any class. It was on the average. It was pretty much standard.

Whorley: Did they have a uniform?

Gratton: At that time they did. The boys were required to wear khaki pants, and the girls wore blue and white, blue skirts and white blouses.

Whorley: Could everyone afford that?

Gratton: Yes, they did. It's a strange thing that, when you come up the hard way, you have a tendency of finding out how to do certain things. As far as the boys were concerned, we would go to the army surplus store and buy the khaki pants, you know, the soldier's uniform, and you could get them at a discount price.

By being in uniform, basically all you would have to do was keep them clean, and it wasn't a matter of being in style or out of style, because everybody was in the same thing. I don't know how the girls fared. I guess some of their mothers were talented enough to sew and they bought this blue material and made the blue skirts and all. Actually, it was more economical than it is now, because that material and what we were wearing, it wasn't expensive. But now you have children with these designer jeans and the \$150 sneakers and all this kind of stuff.

So it really wasn't a burden. I think it was the best way to go back in those days.

Whorley: Did they give you a reason why they had the dress

code?

Gratton: Yeah. Well, that was the reason why, for fear that some of the parents were better off and could dress their kid better than others, and then this kid that couldn't afford expensive clothes or better-looking clothes, it would have a bad affect on them. So if you put them all in uniform, regardless of what your standard was as far as income-wise, we all looked the same. So that eliminated that problem.

Whorley: I guess there were kids coming from different backgrounds.

Gratton: Right. Because like I was telling you a minute ago, Parker High School was the central school, so basically everybody had to go there. I don't care how well off a black family was, it didn't qualify them to go to a white school. He had to go to the black school. So if the family was a little financially better of, naturally they could afford to dress their kids better. But the uniform took into play, it just negated that kind of thing.

Whorley: How were the teachers?

Gratton: Pardon?

Whorley: The teachers you had.

Gratton: How were they?

Whorley: In terms of, I guess, teaching the students.

Gratton: I think the teachers were very efficient. That's about the best--you know. It's almost like a person saying that, "Mama, she cooked the best biscuits. Nothing in the world like Mama's cooking." That was simply because I hadn't had nothing else but Mama's cooking. So when you ask me about the teachers, I would have to say, because they knew more than I did. And asked were some teachers better, I didn't know anything about it. So basically, I think I got a fair education.

Whorley: How would you describe your family's economics? Were they in terms of middle class?

Gratton: Mine, I would say they were just barely above the poverty line, just barely. We had to really make out with a lot of things, especially being a large family, too. Me being the tenth child, naturally I got a lot of hand-me-downs.

My daddy, he was very industrially--he had a lot of get-up

about him and he knew how to do a lot of things. For instance, he would buy us shoes. I know this might sound new to you, but the name of those shoes, we called them Broganes [phonetic]. I don't know if you ever heard tell of that. But when we'd wear those out, he would half sole them shoes hisself. He'd go up in Norwood in some of those alleys and find some automobile tires that the white people had thrown away, and he'd bring them back home and cut out soles for our shoes. He had a little old gadget there he called a shoe lass, and he would cut that sole out and nail it to those shoes, and they would last you a lifetime. You would wear that automobile tire. So this is the kind of thing that we came up in.

Whorley: Did they ever talk about the Depression?

Gratton: You know, I was born right at the verge of the Depression back in '32. I think the Depression was '29 up to about '30, '31. So I don't have a lot of memory about the Depression, but I do know that my sisters and brothers, they nicknamed me as being "the Red Cross baby." They had what they called the Red Cross that was helping take care of families, large families that were in need. They would issue food stamps, something similar to what they have now. The families could go to this central place and get certain types of foods, like flour, meal, canned meats, and this kind of stuff. That's about

as much as I can remember about the Depression.

Whorley: In terms of, I guess, when you were in need, how were your parents able to keep the family together in terms of like morale or whatever?

Gratton: Say it again, because I may be losing you.

Whorley: I'm sorry. Was it a close family?

Gratton: Yes, very close. My father was the deacon at the church, and we were raised up going to Sunday school and church every Sunday, and we'd always have prayer in the home. Most of the time, whenever possible we would all eat together, have family meals together. At that time, there wasn't any television or radio, so we would all sit around the fireplace and basically the discussion was just about the Bible. That's the way we were brought up.

Whorley: Do you all do anything for fun as a whole family?

Gratton: Yeah. We played with each other and made our own toys. We would make wagons and skateboards and go swimming in the creek. By the time we got through doing all of the chores around the house, it wasn't a whole lot of time left for

playing.

Whorley: Did you all ever travel to downtown?

Gratton: Probably, maybe once a month, and that was a walking experience. We had to walk from Norwood downtown.

Whorley: How long would that take?

Gratton: Not too long. We could walk there in about twenty minutes, taking shortcuts. The closest grocery store was at least a mile, mile and a half, and that was another walking trip for the weekly groceries. We'd go and help bring groceries back, and that consist of maybe a 50-pound sack of flour, meal, and lard to cook with, just basic things, because by we having this mini-sized farm and big garden, we raised most of the things that we needed to eat. So we done very well. We never had to go hungry.

Whorley: Were there families in the area that wasn't as in terms of well off?

Gratton: Yeah, there were, and my daddy was generous enough to share some of the things he had with the other families. It was a lot different then than they are now. People seemed to really

care about one another. If he didn't have something, neighbors would gladly chip in to help. That's something I would like to see today, people being more concerned about their fellow man.

Whorley: The store that you traveled to to get your weekly groceries, was that white-owned?

Gratton: Oh, yes. That was in the middle of Norwood on 12th Avenue. As a matter of fact, we didn't have any black grocery stores, black grocery store owners. The only thing that we had then was just little small operations, like mom-and-pop and a lot of those operations out of a portion of their home.

The story that's almost go untold about 4th Avenue here, which is known and had been known down through the years as the black business district of the city of Birmingham, during the heydays of the late thirties and early forties you couldn't hardly pass out there on the street for black people. This was the only place they had to come shop. They could go in the front door and come in restaurants and have a seat, didn't have to go in the back side of somebody handing what they ordered from a little hand-out window.

But the saddest part of this story is, although there was a lot of traffic and black shoppers up and down 4th Avenue, the business itself was owned by whites still, and they just had blacks working in there as waitress. Sometimes you would find a

black person on the cash register, but the whites were sitting somewhere close by to watch over the operation.

Now, this was the heydays of 4th Avenue that were known as the black business district, simply because this was the only place that blacks could come and go in the front door. Eating establishments were set up specifically for blacks. It was the only place that they had for a movie theater. I think we had two or three at the time. No other place in the entire city could you go, not unless you went to a back door and went up to the balcony. Even some of the big department stores downtown you couldn't sit at the lunch counter. They had a hand-out place. They wanted your money, but they didn't want to give you the service. There was a section where they could just hand it to you and you could get it and keep going. But to go in a restaurant and sit down and order your food, this was the only place you could do it, 4th Avenue.

Whorley: When did you first become aware of the fact that there was these conditions, or actually, segregation?

Gratton: Actually, when I got old enough to know myself, to really know I existed. I mean, I was born into this thing and raised in it. I can remember very close in my mind, when my mother would have the occasion to send me to this grocery store I told you about that was approximately a mile away, which was

the only grocery store in Norwood, she would give me instructions before I'd leave home and tell me, "Son, now you go on up to this store and get this or that for me. If you pass any white people on your way, you get off the sidewalk. Give them the sidewalk. You move over. Don't challenge white people." And so I was just brought up in that environment.

They also had a park. It was about a block from where I was born and raised and where I lived, and it was known as the white people's park. They had a tennis court there and nice park trees, and blacks wasn't allowed in that park. I mean, we just couldn't go there. You know, it's just one of those things.

Coupled with the school thing. Like I say, some days that I would be sick, and I could hear the schoolchildren playing during their lunch hour down at Norwood Elementary School, which was all white, and that's what really stuck in my mind. I'd say, "It's a shame that I have to walk so far to school every day." When I'd hear those schoolchildren playing, I'd say, "Here I am a block and a half from the elementary school, and I've got to walk six or seven miles to school every day."

Even now, I can almost hear those kids, those white kids down at this elementary school playing and the noise and laughing and playing, and I'm at home sick, because I guess basically most of it might have been from the exposure of walking those six and seven miles to school every day. Whether

it was raining or not, I had to go. So those are some of the memories that I have of my childhood growing up over at Norwood.

Whorley: Did you ever ask your parents why things were as they were?

Gratton: I don't know if I ever just specifically came out and asked that question, but it was one of those things where you had been programmed all along, ever since I guess maybe you got old enough to know right from wrong and this kind of thing, to challenge white people just was the wrong thing to do. You know, you just automatically grow up inferior, and you had the feeling that white people were better than you. It just really wasn't any question asked then about why. I mean, that was white people things. That was a white people school, and I just didn't feel that I had any right to go there. It basically never entered my mind.

It's not strange for me. I mean, most blacks in the South felt that way, until the late fifties and sixties, when Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] come along with his philosophy, and it started giving black people some hope that the way we were being treated wasn't right and this thing can change, and just some hope that we were waiting on. The way it affected me is, whenever I would hear Dr. King talk, it seemed like he was touching me from the inside. He could touch your feeling from

the inside, things that you would want to say but you just didn't know how, things that were right and wrong but you kept it inside of you because you didn't know how to express it. So he was really a great leader and a great man, and I think he done a wonderful job in what he done for our people as a whole.

Whorley: When you finished high school, what did you do?

Gratton: I worked for Coca-Cola Bottling Company for about six years.

Whorley: In Birmingham?

Gratton: Yes, Birmingham Coca-Cola Bottling Company. I got married at the age of seventeen, had my first child at eighteen. Then I left the Coca-Cola Company and went to American Cast Iron Pipe Company, known as ACIPCO, and I stayed there twenty years. I retired on disability in 1980, but in 1959 I went into business for myself, Green Acres Cafe, and I was doing two things, working at ACIPCO and operating the Green Acres Cafe. I did them both until 1980, and came off on disability from ACIPCO and I was able to put full time into what I'm doing now.

Whorley: How was it working for Coca-Cola back then?

Gratton: Typical of all jobs issued out to black people. You always done the hardest and the dirtiest work for less pay. I had the opportunity for a while during my tenure with Coca-Cola to work on what they called a route truck, and that's the truck that delivers Coca-Cola, the drink, the pop, to the different stores.

My job was, after the salesman come in and take the order, he'd come back and tell me how many cases of pop to bring in the store. So I had to pull them off the truck, load them on a dolly or hand truck, take them in the store. The first thing I would have to do when we'd reach a store is go in and start separating the empty bottles, get all Coca-Cola products. I would tell the white salesman how many empties he had, and, in turn, they would get those many full cases to replace.

So that was the job, the helper on the truck. That's what I was at that time, helper on the pop truck. The helpers done all the work, and the white driver, he just went in and wrote the ticket up and collected the money, stood around drinking a Coke while the helper was doing all the work, no help for him at all. He was making maybe five times over what his helper was making.

Whorley: Do you remember how much you were making?

Gratton: I was making? Yes, \$26.50 a week.

Whorley: I've heard that Coca-Cola was a white man's drink.

Gratton: Well, that was the say-so. Do you know the rationale why it was called that?

Whorley: No.

Gratton: Okay. That was because it was a small drink. It only had, what, six ounces or eight ounces. That wasn't enough for a black person. He wanted the twelve-ounce drink. Same price, but you get more drink. So Coca-Cola was more or less a pleasure-type drink for white people that really wasn't hungry nor thirsty. They just did it for, you know, just entertainment.

I heard one of the helpers on the truck, and the strange thing about that, Coca-Cola had a policy that, when the driver and the helper were out on trucks and going into these stores, with your own money you wasn't allowed to buy another product. You had to drink a Coca-Cola. If you went in a store on your job and you was hot and thirsty and wanted a cold drink, you couldn't buy a Royal Crown Cola, or RC as we called it, or a Town Hall. You had to drink a Coca-Cola or the salesman on the truck would report you and probably get you fired.

That was way back then, but recently we had a similar

situation somewhere not too far from here that Coca-Cola actually fired one of their helpers for drinking a Pepsi Cola, I believe. They made a big issue out of it. When they fired him, Pepsi Cola said, "Send him on over here. We'll hire him," and made a publicity thing out of it.

Back to your other question about Coca-Cola being called a white person's drink. Well, basically that was it. It just wasn't enough for your money. We were buying it to fill us up, when white people were buying it just for pleasure. They wouldn't even drink all of their little six-ounce or maybe eight-ounce, whatever it was. But the twelve-ounce wasn't enough for us. This was part of our survival. This was pleasure for white people.

So that's the rationale behind Coca-Cola is a white man's drink, and all the other big drinks, we used to call the bigger drinks, bellywashers, you know, that would actually fill you up.

You could buy you what we called a decker cinnamon roll and a twelve-ounce drink and that was your lunch. You know, you were full. That is the reason that Coca-Cola was labeled as being a white man drink and this kind of thing.

Whorley: Do you remember the year that you got married?

Gratton: 1949.

Whorley: When you went to work for the steel company, what did you do there?

Gratton: Basically, I was a pipe grinder.

Whorley: What is that?

Gratton: You had this eighteen-foot mold that they pour this hot metal in. It's maybe 17,000, maybe 18,000 degrees Fahrenheit in order to melt this metal. They line this mold with sand and they put it on some rollers that spins, and they pour this hot melt into it and that forms the pipe. Well, after it cooled down and they pull this pipe out of this mold that's been lined with the sand, some of the sand would stick to the outside of the pipe. We had hand grinders, with the grinding wheel on one end, electrical outfit, and we had to grind this sand off the outside of those. It wasn't a whole lot, but it was some. See, the pipe had to be clean. Then they would take it and dip it in hot tar to coat it, paint it, put the numbers on it, and it was ready to be shipped.

I did that for about six years. Then I was transferred out of that unit into the steel foundry, and instead of grinding the outside, I was grinding the inside. I was operating what they called an OD grinder. See, that same process of cleaning the outside, the inside, you wouldn't have sand on it, but it would

have what they called a flux in it, where they throw this flux up in it while it's still hot and that would help make the inside smooth. So I worked on that particular job for about another seven, eight years, and then I was moved up to overhead crane operator, and I stayed in that capacity until I came off on disability.

Whorley: Do you remember how much you made?

Gratton: Yeah. I think I started off at ACIPCO back in 1956, and I started off making \$1.25 an hour, and that was a long way from \$26.50 a week. Constantly we got raises, and when I retired from ACIPCO on disability, I was making pretty close to \$9.00 an hour.

Whorley: Did you belong to a union?

Gratton: No, no union. It was a fairly good company to work for, because by not being unionized, we never was really bothered with layoff or strikes. The company was fairly decent. We had our own medical program whereas to go to the doctor, and your medicine didn't cost you anything.

Along with that, we were on I guess you might call it an incentive program, where every three months, depending on how much profit the company made, they would, in turn, pay us a

bonus, and the bonus would be determined by, the percentage they paid us would be determined how much profit did the company make. So that was real nice. It helped a lot of people above and beyond their regular salary. Most times, the average worker would probably come out with an extra \$400, \$500, maybe \$600 every three months in bonus, so it was real good.

Whorley: So in terms of treating the black males that worked there, it was okay.

Gratton: Well, when you compare to how black males were being treated in other industries, plants, similar to what we were doing, I would say that we probably had the best treatment, because basically it was all the same. Even the ones that had unions, about all they got above what we were getting out of ACIPCO was they had to pay union dues and we didn't.

Companies now and like back then, they pretty much control the unions. The representative that's supposed to be representing the man from the union, they would meet with the top executives of the company and they'd cut deals. It's just so much they was going to give you, whether you had a union or not, because they had the representative in their pocket. They'd pay him so much under the table, and he'd be in negotiating, he'd come back out and tell you, "Well, this is the best we can get. You're all going to have to accept this."

Whorley: When you went to go get your job for the steel company, how did you get it?

Gratton: Well, just went to the employment office and filled out an application. Word spreads around when certain places are hiring, and at this particular time I heard that they were doing hiring out at ACIPCO. So I went out and put my application in, and in a couple of days they called me and told me to come out for my physical, and another day or two I went to work.

Whorley: Where did you live in Birmingham?

Gratton: I still lived in Norwood.

Whorley: Do you own your house or do you rent?

Gratton: When I first got married, I stayed in the family home with my mother for about four or five years. After getting this job out at ACIPCO, if we back up you'll remember I told you my father bought the house and thirteen lots. Well, before he passed he had this property separated. The brothers that were able to send money back and help him pay for it, they had their investment in it, so some of those got three lots, some got two, this kind of thing.

But I got one, because I was the baby. So on that lot that was mine, I think it was about in '57, somewhere along there, it didn't take me too long, but I built me a house on that lot. So I never actually paid rent in my life for a home. I stayed in the home house until I was able to build mine.

Whorley: Did you build it yourself?

Gratton: Partially. I had found me an old carpenter that knew how to frame and advise me what to do, and he more or less just told me how to do certain things, and I pretty much built the house myself.

Whorley: Was it a two bedroom, three bedroom?

Gratton: It was a two bedroom. It's a real nice house. It's still there now. Of course, we've had some additions put on it. I'm not living there. I live out at the other side of Irondale [phonetic] now. I've been out there about twenty years. I had me a home built out there. But this particular house, it was the house of Norwood at that time. It was brick, two bedrooms, bath, kitchen, dining room, and living room, real nice house.

Now it has three bedrooms to it. Like I say, I don't live there. Back in '67, I suppose, somewhere in there, my wife and I divorced. I gave her the house, and she stayed in it for

several years. Then she moved out, and I have it rented out now. It's a rental property now.

Whorley: One question I want to ask you is about business, when you started this--

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Whorley: I notice in the pictures up there that this was named something else before Green Acres. Can you tell me the name?

Gratton: Yeah. To go back, when I first went into business was in 1957-58. That was on 16th Street and 6th Avenue North. It was right across from 16th Street Baptist Church, diagonally across the street from where the Civil Rights Institute, on the northeast corner. There's a parking lot there now. A big two-story building, and that's where I first went in business. I stayed there for three years, and I really didn't make any money, but I got a lot of experience.

By not making any money, I had to close down. I stayed out of business then about a year, and a place came available here on 4th Avenue, and I located over there in '63, opened up in '63, the same name, doing the same thing. Like I said, I got a lot of experience those first three years I was on 16th Street, so the minute I opened my doors here on 4th Avenue, I started

making money, not a whole lot, but I wasn't going in the hole and I could see a return.

I stayed there in that location across the street. The federal courthouse is there on that particular spot now. I stayed there until 1970, and that's when the building was condemned, and they actually were tearing the building down while I was still in there trying to operate. It was a big decision to make whether to just close down or try to relocate in the 4th Avenue area, and my thinking was this. I had established a fairly good business, and I felt like a lot of my customers were depending on me for the product I was selling.

I started looking around, and I found a place two doors down from where I am now. It was vacant. It was condemned also, but a black person owned the building. So I talked to him about it, and he said, "Yeah, I'll rent it to you." I had to go and do all the renovations, inside renovations, and all the remodeling, plumbing, everything, and I stayed there until 1990.

The city of Birmingham at that time, under the leadership of Dr. [Richard] Arrington, Mayor Arrington, this 4th Avenue had always been--and these are words that he told me himself. He always had a special interest in 4th Avenue, simply because it always had been known as the black business district and he would like to see it stay alive. So through the help of an agency that he formed--it's still in existence--known as Urban Impact. I think Leon Hill [phonetic] works for them know, who

referred you to me. Their job was to help revitalize 4th Avenue.

Along with that, he helped put in effect a program known as the Land Bank Program, and how that operates is this. Through the agency of Urban Impact, they would identify a site that a black merchant was interested in. Then the city would buy that property and, in turn, sell it back to this merchant at a low-cost interest rate, the same price that they paid for it, but a low-cost interest rate. They would negotiate with you and make it as reasonable as possible so you could survive. I've known cases where they deferred interest for maybe a year and a half.

You just paid the principal back, no interest. I've known of cases where they would give you a real, real low interest rate, something like 2 percent or 3 percent, for maybe the first two years, and then after that it'd go up to 4 percent and max out at 6. So the city really played a big part in helping redevelop 4th Avenue.

Maybe what I left out was that, in '63, when the big riot was, all of this was demolished, you know, fire bombed, and this was done by black people. Like I told you, remember now, this ties back in, that although it was a black business district, white people actually was operating the business. So during the riots, blacks in Birmingham and downtown, they knew that these businesses was white-owned, so they just came by and threw firebombs, bust out windows. All of these white operators down

here, they just closed up and left, so 4th Avenue was just left in a ghost town. It seemed like a battlefield, a war zone had been through here.

It was just a few blacks then started coming in and trying to put it back together, and with the aid from the city, we were able to get this back on track. So now 90, 99 percent of everything in the 4th Avenue area, from 18th Street down to 16th Street, is black-owned, black-owned, black-operated. So that's the big difference. You don't have the crowd that we once had.

Being close to the Civil Rights Institute has been a boost in the arm, because we get a lot of tourists and we get some of that business up here. The Jazz Hall of Fame has reopened. That has helped some.

With the improvement that the merchants and the city have done to the area, people feel more safer and comfortable in coming back to this area shopping. The black merchants in this area, we have a nice percentage of white customers. You take lunch hour. It'll start maybe the next hour. I'll have call-ins from Alabama Power, South Central Bell, the banks, and a lot of these will be white people. They'll come in and pick up the order. That's during the day. We have quite a few whites who trade with us at night. It's all because of the effort that we put together to try to destroy the negative image that was projected on 4th Avenue. Some was true. Some had some validity to it, but not all of it. The merchants ourselves, we've done a

lot. By banding together, we have what is known as the 4th Avenue Merchants Association and the board president. We meet once a month and discuss things in the area and what are affecting us. If we have any problems, we discuss that, and ideas for improving on situations. Things are looking real bright.

Whorley: Back then, did it bother blacks that, even though this was a place they could come, that it was white-owned?

Gratton: Not really. It was a very few that were concerned and very few that actually knew what was going on. They were so elated over the fact that they could come in the front door, and in some places they could see a black person on the cash register, and that just tripped them out. It was almost like saying they were in hog heaven. They wasn't looking any farther than what they could see, and they thought this was the utmost.

This was the height that anybody would want, just to be able to work in a place like this or being able to come in the front door. It was really just that--that's just the way most of us thought.

Whorley: Do you remember any racial incidents that took place in Birmingham?

Gratton: Racial incidents how?

Whorley: In Birmingham between whites and blacks that took place.

Gratton: Yeah. Well, I remember all of the racial incidents that went on back in the sixties, '59, during the struggle. It actually started in Montgomery with the bus boycott, and that was under the leadership of Dr. King.

We had a movement here, also, by the name of Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Reverend Fred Shuttleworth was over this one. I think they have a statue of him. I was very active in the Christian Movement. His house was bombed once. He was in it, his family. They made another attempt to bomb the church, but that bomb was found in time and it didn't do a lot of damage to the church. But after his home was bombed, I took an active part in being one of the guards at night. We had to guard his house every night, and I had a shift one night a week being a guard to keep that from happening again.

Prior to that, we had the Freedom Riders come in one Sunday morning. If I'm thinking clearly, I believe it was on a Easter Sunday morning down at the bus terminal that we had on 19th Street, about two blocks up, called the Trailway Bus Station. When they arrived at the Trailway Bus Station, the Ku Klux Klan

was waiting on them. When they got off of that bus, the police department had been notified to stay away, that the Klan was going to take care of it, and they beat those black people something terrible. I mean, some that were on the bus and some that wasn't even on the bus, they just--and after they beat them as long as they wanted to, then the police came in and arrested them and carried them to jail.

This incident took place way before the main struggle started here in the city of Birmingham. Of course, Reverend Shuttleworth, he was beaten, his wife was stabbed, trying to enroll his daughter up at Philip High School, the same high school I told you about I had to pass on the bus. He was jailed many times for sitting in the front of the bus. We had to ride in the back, whites in the front. Reverend Shuttleworth challenged that, and he was put in jail many times for that.

The biggest turning point of all was in '63, when Dr. King came here and attempted to march uptown to integrate the lunch counters. A commissioner by the name Eugene "Bull" Connor, he was determined that he wasn't going to let blacks cross Killen [phonetic] Park to come up in town to integrate the lunch counters. This was when the fire hoses and the police dogs and all that took place out in the park. As much strength and force that they had, it still didn't stop a lot of--at this particular time, a lot of the school kids had took part in it, and with all that force the police department had, a lot of the children

still broke through and made it uptown to the lunch counters.

After that, Governor George Wallace, he sent his state troopers up here for reinforcement, and they circled the whole entire park, standing there with their bayonets on their shoulders, and they were determined that incident wouldn't happen again, wouldn't anybody escape through. They had a mass arrest that particular night. They arrested so many schoolchildren, until they ran out of space in jail and they took them out to Fair Park [phonetic] and booking them in out there at the Fair Park, holding them inside a fence.

Shortly after that, I guess the next incident was the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, when those young girls lost their lives. That was basically the turning point in making things better in the city.

Whorley: In the sixties when you heard about the bus boycott, did you think things would probably change now?

Gratton: No, I didn't. All I'd ever known all of my life was segregation, and as far as I was concerned, it would always be. But I had hope that it would be different, but I didn't know how it could be going about to get it changed, because it just seemed like you were up against the impossible.

And along came Dr. King with the vision, and he just could see far enough to know what it would take. Not trying to

discredit him, but I think a lot of other blacks probably knew what it took, but they wasn't willing to pay the price. Dr. King knew that somebody was going to lose their life, there was going to be a lot of bloodshed, and which in most transitions, that's what always takes place. Freedom is not cheap. By him knowing that, he was willing to pay that ultimate price, which eventually cost him his life. There's probably other leaders that probably could have done the same thing, but they wasn't willing to take that risk and pay the price.

I didn't have any hope. Everything Dr. King was doing, like I say, it was a tension thing from the inside. It had my prayers and all that it would work, but actually knowing that it would, step by step, you just continued to think that this was impossible to do. But it just worked out gradually.

Whorley: Do you remember a place called Dynamite Hill?

Gratton: Yes, that was in Smithfield. That's where Dr. Shoals [phonetic] was living. They bombed over there constantly. Number one, is because that was the upper-class section of the city of Birmingham for blacks. This was about four blocks from Parker High School, but you had your teachers, your doctors, and your lawyers, the higher upper-class of blacks, had real nice homes over there. The nicer homes in the city was there in Smithfield, known as Dynamite Hill.

When the blacks started talking about integrating and all this kind of stuff, equal employment and all that, the only retaliation that the white people--see, the Klan was causing the most problem. They are of a violent nature. They believe in hanging and lynching and this kind of thing, bombing. To retaliate or to scare you or shock blacks--and see, Dr. Shoals was instrumental in handling lawsuits. At that time there wasn't but probably three black attorneys in the city, and he was one of the civil right lawyers. So they figured if they can scare him off or kill him, then they won't have no lawyer to represent them. So that's why they bombed over there so much. They were trying to kill out the leaders, scare them or run them off or whatever they could do, and they had constant bombings over there. So that's why it was known as Dynamite Hill.

Whorley: Did a lot of people move out, do you remember?

Gratton: I don't think so. I don't recall. Dr. Shoal's house is still there. He stayed in the same house. He was bombed and attempted to be bombed many times. One of the strangest things about this whole struggle, I guess we had been in it so long and a lot of us had been under so much pressure, until we felt like that it really couldn't get any worse, it had to get better. And with the kind of philosophy that Dr. King had, we just decided we didn't have too much lose.

Whorley: When his house was bombed, did he just rebuild it every time?

Gratton: It actually wasn't completely destroyed. The dynamite they were using would probably blow out most of his windows and maybe destroy maybe a wall or two, knock a hole in the wall. They wasn't in a position where they could get enough dynamite in one section to actually blow up the whole house, because if they had, they would have killed him. Some of those times when the house was dynamited, he was in there.

The same thing with Reverend Shuttleworth's house. Now, his house was a little bit differently constructed than Dr. Shoal's. They were able to get this dynamite over Reverend Shuttleworth's house between his house and the church, and I guess when they threw it or placed it, some of it did kind of go under the house and this house was destroyed. It was a miracle Reverend Shuttleworth got out of there alive without being injured any more than he was. That dynamite, it might have been more and it was put in a better place to do damage.

During all the bombing attempts in Smithfield at Dynamite Hill, most of those houses were so constructed that they would really have to almost take enough time to try to get that dynamite underneath the house to do enough damage. They weren't close enough together. Even if they put enough out beside a

wall, by the houses being spaced like they were, a lot of that force would go that way because it didn't have anything to hold it together, you know, to do a lot of damage. But they made a lot of attempts over there.

Whorley: You said there was a church. What was the name of the church?

Gratton: Reverend Shuttleworth's church? Bethel Baptist Church. That's in Cottageville.

Whorley: This is the last question I wanted to ask you. Do you see any, I guess comparing what you lived through during the forties and fifties, any changes now, that you would like to see now, or some things that you wished had stayed the same?

Gratton: Well, I would like to see our people as a whole start facing reality and try to look to the future rather than being satisfied with the accomplishments that we've already made. The downside, I should say, of a little progress, we have a tendency of being satisfied with just part of the pie rather than going for the whole thing.

Now, my philosophy is this, and I've said it many times to different people that I've talked to. It's good in a sense, but, you know, we've got to get that long-range view. Most

people, most of our people, blacks I should say, they stress education, which education is good. But the bottom line, they more or less put emphasis in the wrong place. For example, they'll tell the children, "I want you to go to school. I want you to get a good education, where you can come out and get you a good job."

You know, they missed the point. I mean, go to school, get you a good education, come out of school and try to own the job, not go looking for somebody to give you a job. Learn some trade in school, get in some kind of profession, and you go to own the job, not to be hired at the job. You see, it's a lot of difference in standing in a pay line waiting on a paycheck and sitting behind a desk where you own the business. See, you're issuing out the paychecks.

That's what we tell our people, and they're geared to that, go and get these jobs, get this education. They're going to come out to be specialists in repairing computers and technicians and all this kind of thing. Well, it's all right maybe to go and get a job for a continuous climb, but don't be satisfied at being that. If you go in there and learn how to work on that computer, learn how to make it, and from that set you up a shop and start selling computers and hire some of your own people to work and service the computer, come up the same way.

But see, we get on these jobs, and when we do start doing

\$25,000, \$30,000, \$35,000 a year working on somebody's job, you know, we got it made, but when you should be shooting for what that \$25,000 or \$35,000-a-year job, the knowledge that you acquire in making money for somebody else, say, "Well, I can do this for myself."

But I think it ends there when we, as parents, when we tell our children to go to school and get a good education where you can come out and get a good job. Once they get that good job, that's the end of it, and I think that's where we're settling right now. Of course, what I just described may be at the higher level, but you can back it on down and come down below. The better some of us have done, the more satisfied we become, and say, "You know, I'm doing well. I can pay my bills. I can do this," and they don't want to go any further. This is what I see integration and equal job opportunities and all this have done for us. It has helped us to a point, but then it's hurting us too, because we're satisfied.

Excuse me. Let me see who this is. [Tape recorder turned off.]

I think I was about finished with what I was telling you.

Whorley: Just one more thing. Back then, was there any businesses on 4th Avenue that were black-owned?

Gratton: About three.

Whorley: Do you remember the name of them?

Gratton: The Magic City Barber Shop. Of course, it's been black as far as I know, and this was probably back in the fifties, early fifties. I can't go beyond that. I was too young to know. That was one. Nelson Brothers Cafe, and what else? There probably was another one, but I know those two, and that's about all that comes to my mind right now.

Whorley: I'm trying to figure out, back then how was it that they were able to have their own business? I'm sure they had to go to the city to advise them.

Gratton: No. I just showed you how a few blacks think or look to the future. There were many more that probably could have done the same thing, but that wasn't our train of thinking. As long as we were working for somebody else and operating a business for someone else and getting maybe a little bit of money above what the average person would get, black person would get, we were satisfied.

But these particular people that I'm talking about, like the man that somehow, and I don't know how he managed to do it, at one point somebody, somewhere was operating this for a white man, but this guy was thinking far enough ahead and was able to

negotiate a deal with this white man and buy him out, get him to sell it to him. Well, it goes back again to like I was telling you about the land and the house that my daddy bought over in Norwood. He wasn't financially in no shape to do it, but he took a chance. He wanted it, and he took that first step of negotiating with the people, the white people that owned this land, and a deal was worked out. He just had faith that some day, some how he would pay for it, and he came to pay it.

It's not enough for us that had that kind of vision and had that kind of faith. It's not an unusual thing. I mean, this happens every day. It's just like people go and purchase a car.

They get the down payment. They don't know whether they're going to actually pay for the car or not, but they have enough faith to go and put their down payment down and take it on a monthly thing; and if they pay for it long enough, one day they'll own the car.

But cars are not important. If we would use that same kind of theory on tangible things that meant something, leave the cars alone, because when you drive that car off the lot, you've done lost value on it already. You couldn't go around the block and come back and get the same price that you paid for it. But when it comes down to land and going in businesses, if we would use that same principle doing that, then it would be more blacks in business and it would be more blacks doing better, it would be more blacks able to help other blacks.

But we don't think that way. So that's why it's just a few of us. We put our priorities in the wrong place, and we've got a system that encourages that. You can go and buy a car much easier than you can go and buy a house. If you go to buy a house, then you've got to have all kind of qualifications. The one thing you need to buy a car is the down payment, mostly. So the system is geared up to make us think a certain way, and it's just going to take somebody with a little bit more vision above the average in order to succeed.

Things have not changed a whole lot. They've changed more or less in the way things were presented. But the bottom line is still there. In other words, there was a saying that goes that the Ku Klux Klan have pulled off his robe and put on a three-piece suit now. What I mean by that, instead of having a robe and a cone on coming out to lynch you, he took that off and threw it away. He's got the three-piece suit on, but he's sitting president of the bank, loan officer in the bank, so they're lynching you that way now, economically and financially. It's still there.

Whorley: Did Mr. Gaston [phonetic] serve as a role model for a lot of blacks?

Gratton: Yes. Mr. Gaston, he's done a wonderful job when you consider where he came from and how he had to make it. He faced

some of the same oppositions that I just described, but he had that stamina to stay on in there. Although he's successful and a multimillionaire and all that kind of stuff, it didn't come easy for him, either. I mean, he had to deal with the same type problems that I previously described with you, but he had that determination and willpower and he believed in himself and what he was doing. And that's just about what it takes for any person to be successful in whatever they do. They've got to believe in themselves first and they've got to believe in what they're doing. Along with that, if you stick with it, it will eventually work.

Whorley: I just want to get on record, what was the name of this place before, I see on the pictures up there?

Gratton: It was the Silver Sands.

Whorley: Was that similar to what Green Acres is?

Gratton: No, no. It's altogether different. The Silver Slipper, I'm sorry. The Silver Slipper. They more or less were serving dinner-type foods, what some describe as soul food, and it was at a reasonable price, real cheap. My thing is more or less fast food, something similar to Church's Chicken [phonetic] or McDonald's or things of that nature. I just have a little

service counter there for them to stand and eat if they want to, but mine primarily is just take-out.

Whorley: That was also white-owned?

Gratton: Yeah. Black-operated, white-owned.

Whorley: Thank you.

[End of Interview]

[transcribed by TechniType]