Interview with Matthew Branch Polk

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Transcript of an Interview about Life in the Jim Crow South
New Iberia (La.)

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1. Kate Ellis: Would you state your name and when you were born and where you were born.

2. Matthew Polk: My name is Matthew Polk. I was born in the city of New Iberia, a small community called Brooklyn on the 21st day of May 1912.

3. KE: Can you tell me about the community that you grew up in?

4. MP: I grew up in a small community called Brooklyn the son of Reverend Branch Polk and Mary Mitchell Polk. That community was very small. We had a circa population probably of about four hundred at the time. There we provided certain accommodations for people. My father worked in the rice field at that time and then at Conrad's Mill. After awhile he went into the ministry and then also an insurance agency which I propelled at the first sight. My mother was quite aggressive. She worked as a salesman and also we had a small grocery store at that time. I received my early education at a school that we had, Hall Institute. I went there for the total educational experience of my elementary and high school years. For that period of time I achieved and went on to the site of Leland College in Baker,
Louisiana on the outskirts of Baton Rouge and at the end of Scotlandville. Then I matriculated and became a member of the faculty of our institution here which was Iberia Parish Training School. At that level from there I had an opportunity to teach and then I was promoted to the principal of Jeanerette Colored Elementary School. I worked with five teachers and myself for a number of years and the school grew by years until we accomplished and got it to the high school. We generated that facility to get all of the accommodations and specifications that was needed to obtain a high school for the children of that community.

5. KE: Would you tell me the name of that school again?

6. MP: Jeanerette Colored Elementary School. That's where we begun. And we engaged in that school from Jeanerette Colored Elementary School to Jeanerette Colored Junior High School, Jeanerette Colored High School. And after the years in 1949 the name changed to Frances M. Booley High School when we went to a new site. There I worked in that community for thirty-three and one half years in that engagement. We continued to progress. The students there attained certain possibilities and height and they have had an opportunity to go into various fields. We have them from the Pacific to the Atlantic and elsewhere across the nation working in different fields.

7. KE: The students who graduated?
8. MP: Graduated there in previous years. We'd keep in touch with them and every 
moment of existence. The year of 1992 we had a school reunion and they came from all 
parts. At that particular time I was unable to attend it but I understand that there were quite a 
few, more than a thousand present. And we have engaged in similar activities for classes 
during various periods of our years. (Recorder turned off.)

9. My childhood experiences, my grandmother came for me I'm told at the age of six months. 
The community in which they lived is a farm on a plantation that was owned first by the 
Walletts and the Kluins. After John Wallett died it was owned by brother, ( ) Wallett. That 
host of experience there was quite prolific. The engagement on the plantation, you had quite 
a number of Negro workers who at one time had been property owners and therefore been 
slave owners. Through some means or other when the high water came in 1912 and the land 
was lost, taken from them really, they had to suffer under the quills of working for the 
plantation owner. Worked there a long time and education was nil for the children. The 
engagement, no school. The closest school about I was told was about five or six miles. And 
during the harvesting time or the time before harvesting the children had to leave school to 
go to work. However, I was told at that time there was also an older teacher, teacher's were 
teaching for ten cents a day and in an old farmhouse that one of the Negro men had by the 
name of Mr. Cross. When it engaged and he owed eighty-five dollars, he had eighty-five 
acres of land and this land was taken from him. And all of the engagements of the large farm 
owners who were around who could not meet their bills had to sign an X and liquidate or 
give their property over to the farm owners. A lot of them at that time moved away. They
were moving from plantation to plantation to better their conditions. Some of them left. They started going to plantations within the parish and others outside of the parish. Where now you have ( ) Mall and all of that area and they continued to go from parish to parish, city to city and to other states. I acclaim most of them have engaged in the field of education. The children who one time their parents were slaves and their parents had to work for these farmers have become the teachers of some of the children of their former masters or slave owners. And they have engaged technically in all other aspects. The churches were small, revered and the ministers at that time were purely spiritual, limited in the forms of education. The closest organizations that were built for them were possibly the benevolent organizations which gave an opportunity for Negroes to be buried. At that time a funeral costs sixty-five dollars. Now understand they had to put the person on a cooling board after being dead, put a saucer on chest and let the people come by and contribute whatever they had to bury that person. It was pretty hard for most of them. An organization that was organized by my father and members of that community called the True Friends Benevolent Society which is being liquidated this year, disorganized, provided one of the first little buildings for school there in the year of 1923. That school existed in the little village of Loreauville. The other existing schools were set aside, little one room buildings that were afforded by persons who lived off the plantation, possibly a distance of five and ten miles away. So it was very hard. In between the spectrum you did have on the plantation, on the road to plantations, white schools at different areas where the children could attend school. One was on the road to Caroline, the other was in the ( ) area. And then you came to the schools here. The Negro schools were operated in certain little churches along the road and
benevolent halls where one or two teachers grew. In the latter years they began to prosper and provide buildings for persons where they would be able to attend school. In the city of New Iberia we had Hall Institute and Douglas Institute at the time and from the outgrowth of those two institutions went into the public school with is Iberia Parish Training School and which later became as the period grew into the Jonas Henderson High School. Since integration the schools have been not disorganized but the names have been changed from the names that they were named after the Negro principals and other supervisors that were here in this community. They've gone back to the names of streets and what have you.

There's only one remaining sector in the city of Iberia that I understand is still here and that's the stadium that was set aside by my first superintendent, Mr. Lloyd G. Polar. And that's the only thing that's left to be identified educationally. (Recorder turned off.)

10. KE: I have a bunch of questions. The first is the Iberia Parish public school it became did you say the John B. Henderson?

11. MP: No, the high school was named Jonas Henderson High School.

12. KE: Now that would be Mr. J.B., that's his father?

13. MP: That's his father. That was our principal.

14. KE: Am I right that Mr. J.B. Henderson is a friend of yours?
15. MP: We've been about seventy-two years together.

16. KE: Jonas B. Henderson was your friend, Mr. J.B. Henderson's father?

17. MP: That's right.

18. KE: And he was the principal of this high school?


20. KE: I have lots and lots of questions. Maybe it's no particular order. Can you tell me more about, I heard a little bit about the Hall Institute yesterday from Mrs. Manuel. Just that some people boarded there. They came from other towns and they boarded there. Can you tell me more about the institute and who it served and who went there? They came from all over?

21. MP: Yes. Hall Institute was granted to the Negro public I guess under the auspices of the last part Union ( ) Street Missionary Baptist Association. That's when Professor Henderson became engaged in directing that institute.

22. KE: That was in the 1920's?
23. MP: Yes, 1920's. We had students from all over. It was the only high school between New Orleans and Beaumont I understand. We had students from all areas and I'm sure people will tell you we had boarding students, girls and boys. The building was one frame building three story high. The brick building was a three story building. In the frame building we had the development of the diner where students ate. Second floor living quarters for the principal and his wife and some of the students and the members of the faculty. We also had a music room up there. To the left from the track we had two classrooms below on the first floor. Then we called it a kitchen and a pantry at the bottom floor of that particular building. We engaged at that time the brick building had an office, an auditorium, classrooms. The second floor for the boarding boys, second and third floors. After awhile a laundry was built in the rear of the building. The large ( ) at the school was between the Southern Pacific Railroad and at that time the Missouri Pacific with Providence Street on the right and Iberia on the left engaged with the home, whole house possibly during slavery time was the serving quarters that had been transferred into kind of storeroom. Principal was very much engaged in flowers, raising chickens, things like that and his horse for transportation.

24. KE: Can I ask you a question? As you go along I'm just going to clarify things. All of that what you just described where the faculty would have a principal and his wife, students who were from outside the area, the cafeteria, the music, the classrooms, all were housed in a three story building?
25. MP: Two buildings, the brick building and the frame.

26. KE: Okay, was the frame the one that you said you think might have been old slave quarters?

27. MP: The building that was like a little living quarters on the outside had been the home for possibly the workers at that day in time.

28. KE: That was sort of converted to you said a storage?

29. MP: A storage room.

30. KE: I just am amazed that there was so much that was housed in that. Can you tell me about the teachers and just sort of what you remember about the sort of things that they taught you?

31. MP: Yes, the teachers that we had there were quite dynamic, fine and seemed to have been interested in the students. I know pay was very limited but the curriculum was fine. It was the only school at that time that was not pressured into going along with the state and providing persons for certain academic procedures, becoming cooks, persons to work on the train and what have you. I understand one time when the state department seemed to have
talked to our principal just about teaching the children simple agriculture and things like that, he refused to have it that way. We had a dual set here where in the public school system had the dual education as it grew where the curriculum was provided and mandated by the state for Negroes as separate as they were. My experiences was when I became principal we had to utilize a lot of time the old books that possibly had been used for a few years. And I don't know if it was any knowledge of the superintendent those are things that were handled. Our schools were poorly equipped at that time. The school that I entered in at the time that I got in there was just a little five room school with a small auditorium that was provided for the whole facility. We grew from that school to utilizing the various four halls in the community. In that community we added two teachers to each hall to get the faculty needed. We had to have our exercises in the churches and the theater that was provided by the man by the name of Mr. L.C. ( ) of Jeanerette. We also utilized that facility to raise money, projects for our school. In the wintertime we had coal, stoves that only used coal and wood. In the wintertime when we'd run out of coal that was provided by the school board we had to go to a little place called Albania and cut wood and bring that in to keep the children warm. When the camps were being disregarded around Camp Claiborne the school board bought a few to complete and start what we called a lunchroom. With that development we were able to take care of the children. A few of those facilities they brought them and placed them on our campus and we generated. In early years our children were only provided with water from a cistern. So we had to have our students and under the direction of the industrial arts teacher who was serving the two schools, Mr. Falk, we had to run water from Sycamore Street to our school and attach plumbing features in order that we would have water on the
campus. The facilities or privies were outdoor privies and when it rained, well, that covered the stench of the whole campus. The campus was very much inadequate but over the years we had to try to mandate and raise money to equip and qualify the different departments which were very meager until we were given sometimes some of the things that were possibly provided from the use of other schools.

32. KE: Just one quick clarification, when you were just talking about the period of time when you came in as a teacher and worked with others to constantly sort of improve the facilities, was that in the 1930's?

33. MP: It started in the 1930's and through the 1940's.

34. KE: What year did you become a teacher?

35. MP: I started out in the session of 1935-1936.

36. KE: I just like to put these in sort of a chronological order. Can you tell me more about the benevolent organizations like the True Friends Benevolent Society. Now you said that your father started that?

37. MP: He was the president.
38. KE: And that started in?


40. KE: And this was in New Iberia?

41. MP: That's in Loreauville.

42. KE: Okay Loreauville. So will you tell me more about how it started and about the organization and who it served?

43. MP: I'm going to try to bring in all of them. Those are the starting point for the black folks in Iberia Parish. Seemingly that every church after that had an organization and that was to provide medicine and the doctors and burials for persons and to assist those who were sick. Now our organization I think through this period, it came from 1923 and we're disorganizing this year. And I think that's a period of almost sixty-some years. So we had them here and the Catholics had them in Loreauville that were headed by different persons and almost in every community. At that time we must have had about fifty benevolent societies in the parish, in this parish, Iberia Parish.

44. KE: This was the one founded by your father, was it one of the first ones?
45. MP: It was one of the early ones. We had a true friend that we named ours after, was a true friend in New Iberia. And the Catholics had one, St. Joseph, and that named that after an individual. We had various names, Morningstar and all kinds of names as far as that's concerned. Then we grew into fraternities; Oddfellows, Masons and Knights of ( ) and Coats of Corinthians and Wives and all of those particular persons. Most of these organizations now are disbanded. They've gone down according to the calamities of the times. Only the Masons and the Knights of Peter Claver I think they are the only organizations of Iberia Parish that still exist. We may have one or two besides, one organization in Olivia and a couple in Jeanerette but they're constantly going down. The young people do not see the need as once was thought and was related to help the people in our community that made it very hard. They've forgotten the things that really brought their parents over the shotty roads of time. Now within that fixture the organizations, the prices, what we called at that time the prices they paid, not a donation but as a little fee to take care of that obligation. The costs of doctors and medicine and hospitalization has risen so great until the common person could not afford them. Now we have entered a new day, the medical day, where at one time to go to the community of Loreauville, a doctor would go there for two dollars and the office visit sometimes in New Iberia was fifty cents and sometimes a dollar. And pulling a tooth at that time came from fifty cents to a dollar and two dollars. Now they start at ninety-five dollars. You see it's a hard infringement upon the persons, even the persons who have maintained local or better salary. That's one part of the justification where the hospitals well, undeniably now they are high and they are above the cost of what the average person can afford. Therefore, we seem to have a lot of suffering and
experiences that would be somewhat detrimental to the average person, the day laborer in our community. I don't know just what the fixation would be. We have a lot of people now who engage in ideas disregarding the ( ) plan and it's just one ( ) thing. Hospitalization now costs you about a thousand dollars a day when you get into them and most persons can't afford it. I worked for an insurance company at the time that my father and I worked for. Most of our black insurance companies had gone out of existence in the state. Some of them had been bought by other companies. Atlanta and Universal purchased some of them. Now as it is there's a fear in going into, taking part of the larger insurances such as Aetna, Equitable and some of the others now exist. But terrifically it has been a meager and a hard, a terrible experience for the Negro persons in this section. Coming onto businesses that we have, we have not had any stayable Negro businesses as grocery stores and whatnot. In earlier years we had a small grocery store and there are about two others in the city. One who had the better grocery store was a man by the name of Mr. Ernest Joseph. Well, after years past he moved to Chicago with his family and I understand they have been very productive there. Persons left the south, well Louisiana this particular part to the west and to the east and a lot of them, I have heard from a lot of them they have succeeded very well.

46. KE: How did your father start this benevolent society?

47. MP: By getting the people organized. I think the fee then was twenty-five cents a month. People came in and they started on the plantation, in an old house on the plantation and then they moved into a church. And after a year or so they bought the place on ( ) Street
and the property costs at that time I think fifty or a hundred dollars on ( ) Street. They built the hall and had that hall to be developed into a school, a society hall and a school to serve the people. And that was the beginning. And I'm sure that the congregations in the various churches and in the community, they did the same thing. It was just where men sought to do something for their people. And that's about the thing that I seem to think suffered more.

Probably they took care of their needs to the best of their ability. After the monthly fee they also would have a little burial tax, some that were engaged in earlier years from twenty-five cents to fifty cents and as time grew to one dollar. But they could not keep up with that.

Burial purposes started at sixty-five dollars and now they're two and three thousand dollars.

48. KE: Can you tell me as far as, I mean you're describing a lot about the way that blacks organized the schools, societies, finding whatever it took to provide services to one another. So it sounds like there was always somewhere that a black person could go if they needed help and the community did it's best to try to help. Does that sound right?

49. MP: Yes, they did their best.

50. KE: Can you tell me about, a bit more about the stores that were owned, the stores or the services that were owned by blacks in the earlier times?

51. MP: Those stores were very small because of purchases that they could not afford the better prices that we had. They carried such staple items, the things that were needed and
necessary for the community. That time you only had two things possibly in cans, sardines and tomatoes. So from that on all of the other staple foods were carried in blocks in a bin where you had to serve persons from. You have today millions of products on the market, the shelves were very limited and finances were poor. The interest from those finances and income were very limited. Credit was a terrible thing because most of the people were earning fifty cents a day and could not meet their payments for the food that they had to eat. The white man was able to carry the credit a little better and then really my experiences were they strove to pay their indebtedness to the white man before paid the Negro. And when insurances prevailed that seemed to be the same thing. As an insurance agent I encountered where I would be asked to come back on certain days but they always saw that the white man received his payment from insurances, the agent when he came to the home.

52. KE: Why is that?

53. MP: It might have been just a peculiar fear that was imposed upon them from the slave bond purposes.

54. KE: Right, you don't want to owe something to the white man.

55. MP: Yeah. So those are things that were like because at that particular time the demands were so if a fellah worked on a plantation and he owed something at the end of the year he could be kept for the following year. He wouldn't be free to leave unless that demand
was met unless he left and ran away at night or anytime or took his family away unknowing to the boss. And those were the things that happened. As far as I understand before my time I was told that when the political organization that my father told me and they planned the first riot that they had between the Republicans and the Democrats is the little community of Loreauville and it was because of politicians, those who demanded that they wanted the votes for the Republicans or votes for the Democrats. And that started a stigma. Coming up to the political issues in the early years before we were able to vote that was a terrible period. In the year of 1934 a few of voted. We were from Leland College. It was opened under Huey Long all over the state where Negroes were given privileges to vote. That's the time they stated that everybody ( ). We registered several of us in the city hall in Baton Rouge in 1934. But before the performance of our activities of engaging in voting that was in the year of 1954. It took twenty years to come along with that particular thing. A lot of persons who were registered and the like were reprimanded for doing so at certain instances. They could not come out and voice their sentiments. I remember one time in my asking my register of voters about it he said it's coming but don't rush it. So it came and when I went in and they called in 1954 my card was already there. I was fifteenth in line and his son put it on the table, Polk there it is. We had an organization in the state of Louisiana, Louisiana Colored Teachers Organization and they did much under our committee which had seventeen persons in the executive department under the direction of our leader and president at the time and executive director, J.K. Hanes who took a big part in trying to educate our persons. Along with that we had the help of Thurgood Marshall and the New Orleans lawyer, Mr. A.P. Turo and the other boy who worked with him, a young man who came out. So that gave us
sufficient evidence to go out and try to do the best that we could in registering and pertuating and trying to get the vote established in Louisiana. Those members of the Masonic order under and who cooperated very much John G. Lewis who is our chief captain in the state or director. He was ably assisted by members of the National Association for Advancement of Colored People. So that spread had come. But even with that we've had a lot of trouble, a lot of men who had to meet the challenge and a lot of them who really were disregarded as human beings for such an intervention. It has been an experience that sometimes could have been settled just as human rights. There were times when court experiences were as such in that time you seem to have, there was little justice rendered in the courts as far as communication between the two races. Whatever was given handed down to you had to just be as it was. Some incidents were almost unbearable.

56. KE: Can you think of some?

57. MP: Yes, my experience was that at one time a young Negro girl was raped by a white fellah and in that deliberation they proved in the court that that girl had no business on the street that time of night. We've had others to happen here in New Iberia. In 1944 we had a little trouble here where all of the, well there seem to have been professional engagement because of disturbances that were arisen in the community. We had a few doctors here, Negro doctors, dentists and leaders. That was just prior or during World War II. Provisions had been provided through the federal government for building establishments to train men to meet the demands of that war. Well, the provisions there for Negroes thrown into
Roberson Street a small outlay where formally it was a grist mill and a place for taking care of horse shoes and the teachers just to teach them welding. The provisions for training built on another campus for white boys which gave them a lot of advantages. After that part it became somewhat as a trend. The Negroes who were beaten, rushed upon and taken out of town. There was first the leader, he was at that time the director and started the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People...

58. KE: His name was?

59. MP: Leo Hardy. He was caught up on the street, beaten, rushed out of town. Then it started to going around to invade different others. Another was a Dr. Williams we had. That happened to him. First Dr. Pearson. However, ( ) had about fifty-three I understand and one of the teachers is to fault. That's about as far as that particular time with the engagement that they were forced to get what they thought at that time I think the leading professional Negroes out of the community who seemed to have engaged ( ). But by the time that happened and the Negroes had gotten prepared they thought and they were invited to come in they ceased. That was under the sheriff at that particular time who headed the group I understand.

60. KE: I'm sorry, I'm not sure what you're saying.

61. MP: The group that headed the, it wasn't a Ku Klux Klan tactic but it was similar to
that. A racist group to destroy the Negro leaders in the community.

62. KE: Do you know who was in that? Was the sheriff a part of that?

63. MP: Yes, the sheriff in New Iberia led the group I understand ( ).

64. KE: Were these men friends of yours who were run out of town?

65. MP: Yes, they were friends and leaders of ours in New Iberia. They were doctors and leaders who helped to build the community. They seem to have been successful going from one end of things to building the community up. They seemed to have thought that that was an intrusion upon the white man's leadership seemingly to me. It was a fact that those things really apprehended our success.

66. Since that time it had been impossible for us to get Negro doctors to come back to the community to serve.

67. KE: They wouldn't come back?

68. MP: No. We have lots to finish but during those years we had Dr. Davis who came and he worked and then a lady doctor came and several came to work for awhile but they got discouraged and left right out. A lady doctor came and she had some trouble with them and she left and she has been away and cut off awhile.
I've heard a little bit about that incident in 1944 like it really scarred the black community as it was intended to do by the whites who carried it out. How did you respond at the time?

At that particular time I think I was supposed to be one of the two of the number two. My father was sick and Dr. Dorsey was the fellah who attended him. At the time he was leaving and he came by to tell us goodbye. And my father died during that period on May 21, 1944. It was alleged that a few more were to go but at that time it had subsided and some of the folks had kind of organized for whatever would come. They would die under the circumstances.

You mean they organized to...?

Decided to protect themselves. So that's the kind of people. Many other incidents happened where Negroes were shot, killed and what have you. It was kind of rough. Certain things and the motives of moving up. Therefore, to get the chance of the education and prove we had to kind of go out and get it and to seek to do the things, people. I remember that when school buses were given to whites, provided for whites, a long time Negroes had to walk these miles to the schools that they had to attend. I transported the teachers and then the students after I became principal starting from one, my cousin here in New Iberia and picking them up. I bought an old bus and transported the teachers and left them at their legal
destiny where they taught at the little churches along the road and what have you and to the other schools in the parish. And started the children from the Olivia area through the Little Woods area and Hubbardville and took them to school. And from that many of the students have graduated and many have retired, have gone on to various colleges and they've assessed themselves as men and women. When the time came for buses it was a long time after that buses were provided for Negro children. If they were to receive an education they had to go to the school, first, second or third grade, right in that community. (End of Tape 1 - Side A)

73. Tape 1 - Side B

74. KE: You bought a bus, you as a principal. What year did you become principal?

75. MP: In the session of 1937-1938.

76. KE: So you became a principal almost right after you became a teacher?

77. MP: Yes.

78. KE: Would you tell me again the name of the school at the time that you became principal?
79. MP: Jeanerette Colored Elementary School.

80. KE: When did you buy the bus?

81. MP: I bought the bus in the year, I provided first an old truck like bus that was almost out of existence. In that bus we had sides of a tapering cloth like to protect the rain from the students. One of the men who owned it before was a student I taught from Loreauville at Iberia Parish Training School and he sold me that bus for fifty dollars. So I kept it going with the little experience I had and picked them up and then after that I bought the Loreauville bus, Loreauville High School bus, from the principal there, Mr. Freeman. He sold that bus to me for five hundred dollars. It took me three years to pay. And so I engaged in transferring the students. The bus served for taking the children to school, taking the persons from here to the rural churches. My church is in Loreauville, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, the family church, folk's church. And taking the people of Iberia Parish to different associations and possibly teachers to, when I first got into it, took them to reorganize Louisiana Colored Education Association which has grown from that to what is now the LAE, of Louisiana, Louisiana Association of Educators. One of my students became the first president of that association. It was so good to him until he stayed and he's the ( ). His name is Lawrence ( ).

82. KE: So the year that you bought the bus, was that in the early 1940's?
83. MP: Yes, it was just maybe in the beginning of the 1940's.

84. KE: I think that's incredible that you did that.

85. MP: Well, the persons were suffering. You passed along the highway the people on the plantations were getting fifty cents a day, seventy-five cents a day and their children could not go to school. I think it was just out of humanitarian concept to get them going.

86. KE: You would pick up the students on the plantation?

87. MP: On the plantations all the way through. One started me from here, my little first cousin, she wanted to finish at that school and she finished. My school area at that time covered, there were no school buses from a place we call Sorrell, Jeanerette Sorrell, Four Corners, St. Mary Parish and what we call the Grand Mary area and part of the Olivia area. After they received buses they started breaking the district down and sending most of them to New Iberia. That's the history of our group.

88. KE: And when they were sending them to New Iberia there was a ( ).

89. MP: No, at that time you started with the New Iberia High School which is the new school way on the end. At that time we built a good number of schools at the point of integration. (Recorder turned off.)
This is Kate Ellis back with Mr. Matthew Polk. It's now July 26 and we're here for the second part of the interview and we're going to start by filling out the family history form. Would you just state your name Mr. Polk?

Matthew Branch Polk.

So Mr. Polk, what's your middle name?

Branch.

And you were born on May 21, 1912. In New Iberia?

New Iberia.

Which is Iberia County.

Parish. French.

And your principle occupation has been school principal?

Yes, education high school principal.
For a written document how would you like your name to appear?

Just as it is.

So Matthew Branch Polk?

That's right.

Okay, your wife's full name, first, middle, last.

Edith Bijou Polk.

Is her maiden name Bijou?

Yes.

And her date of birth?

August 5, 1917.

So you've got a birthday coming up soon.
111. Edith Polk: Yes, seventy-seven.

112. KE: Where were you born? In New Iberia, right?

113. EP: Right here in this house.

114. KE: So you were born in the house?

115. EP: You know they didn't have hospitals.

116. KE: You had a mid-wife?

117. EP: Mid-wife and then they had to get a doctor for me. Dr. King was my doctor.

118. KE: Were there complications, is that why they had to get a doctor?


120. KE: And your occupations have been?

121. EP: I've been a nurse, a licensed practical nurse. And then I went back to school and
got my master's and I taught school for thirty years.

122.K: What did you teach?

123.E: First grade. That's my life.

124.K: Mr. Polk, what was your mother's full name?


126.K: So her maiden name was Mitchell.

127.M: That's right.

128.K: What does the "Z" stand for?

129.M: Zowie.

130.K: And do you know her date of birth?

132. KE: And when did she pass?

133. MP: 1975.

134. KE: And where was she born?

135. MP: The community of Loreauville.

136. KE: Which is still Iberia Parish?

137. MP: Iberia Parish.

138. KE: And her occupation?


140. KE: Your father, was he a preacher?

141. MP: He became a minister, yes, Reverend Branch Polk.

142. KE: He was a minister - did he have another occupation?
First he was a laborer first, farm laborer, then an insurance man and a minister.

He started out as a farm laborer?

That's right.

Now did he, pardon me if I ask you this before because I don't remember if I did. Did he own his own land or was he a sharecropper?

The family owned property at first but then they worked on the plantation, plantation worker.

Which plantation did they work on?

Caroline plantation, Loreauville, Louisiana. Back of Loreauville where you were the other day owned by the Kluins and Walletts.

So your father's full name was?

Branch Polk.

Did he have a middle name?
153.MP: No.

154.KE: And his date of birth?

155.MP: I'll have to get that.

156.KE: So when you go to gather a family reunion it sounds like it's a major production.

157.MP: It is, started out about twelve years ago getting it together. It's a major production. We do have listings of our committees. We have from the generations down, from the great grandfathers and all down. It's quite a problem to get together you know. I'm working on one now on my mother's side. That's a problem to get people to be receptive and to answer notes and what have you. Those are big problems. You're working with people of different categories and it's kind of tough.

158.KE: Different categories?

159.MP: I mean educational factors where they're concerned. Some can and some can't. And then some just leave, that's all. It's kind of rough. I've tried to do that to the best of my ability.
160. KE: It seems like it's really important to you to keep your family together, you're extended family and to have as much information about.

161. MP: Yes, my father, he used to try to do that. He wasn't you know a very scholarly person at that time but he maintained interested in keeping records of all of those who came along because at Christmas time we always met on the plantation at my grandmother's house.

162. KE: At which plantation?

163. MP: Caroline plantation, the main stay after they had lost there home and there was a place we called the Lodge. That's where all the Polks were first settled after they came from the Carolinas and Tennessee.

164. KE: The Lodge itself is on the plantation?

165. MP: That's a separate plantation that was owned by various members of the family and possibly ex-slave groups and land grant situation. Time came and working without money and not in a position to get money, they lost their place and then they had to go to the plantation.

166. KE: To the Caroline plantation?
167.MP: To work for the boss, yeah.

168.KE: Was the Lodge in Loreauville?

169.MP: It's in the area of Loreauville just about five miles from Caroline plantation. It's just a section they call the Lodge because all the Polks who lived there were of the minority group. They owned land, they were farmers and like I said the other day when the high water came and they lost their homes and their production was low and finances so they had to go somewhere where they could make a living, a method of survival. And that was tough because they had to leave there and try to go to other areas. That's when my father started and he came, started moving away from the plantation because he told me at one time, his father had twelve boys, they worked in the swamps and everywhere to maintain their livelihood and when the end of the year came they settled with the boss. He'd just tell him that he owed a hundred dollars for each boy, twelve hundred dollars a year. So he was the first one to leave and migrate away from the place.

170.KE: Now migrate away from the?

171.MP: Caroline and he started working his way to New Iberia. That's where, my mother was from Loreauville but they met and they married there in Brooklyn.

172.KE: Brooklyn which is that little section of New Iberia which you were born in which
is across the bayou?

173.MP: That's right, across the bayou, yeah.

174.KE: Now just to get the sense of the time of this, your father left the Caroline plantation around what year?

175.MP: It must have been sometime around 1911 I guess.

176.KE: And worked his way to New Iberia?

177.MP: Yes, on different farms as he came. He used to tell me about that.

178.KE: Just basically trying to work so that he wouldn't be put into debt?

179.MP: That's right. He became independent on his own and after that as he established himself. They maintained the family church and the organizations that he was interested in his community and his people and he went back and there was an old man by the name of, we called him Breneau. He was about the only fellah out there who could read a little and served as a local minister and kind of leader with the people.

180.KE: In Loreauville?
181.MP: Un-huh and he became interested in my father and had him to be president of various organizations until ( ) and then my father organized one to maintain. This particular thing, the True Friend Benevolent Association that I told you about.

182.KE: When you say he got your father to be the president of various organizations, what kind of organizations?

183.MP: They were benevolent societies to help take care of people. They grew out of the church. The first one was the Old Union Benevolent Society. After there became a little rumor that they could not get along so he established the one called the True Friend Benevolent Society. That was in 1923 and we're dissolving it this year, 1994.

184.KE: Why is it dissolving?

185.MP: The membership grew small and was not able to take care of itself. Time and conditions change because of financial reasons. At that time the doctors could go and take care of the people. We had doctors who would go all the way to Loreauville for two dollars and would come to the office a dollar an office call. Medicine was cheap and the monthly dues as we called it was low and the people did not increase the financial payments to meet the demands of the present day society. So medicine and the visits for doctors, the price of medicine, became too high. Therefore we acknowledged that we could not take care of it.
186. KE: And now people pay into insurance.

187. MP: Yes, some to insurance policies. Well, that too is kind of out of whack with most people, the local people, because they don't have enough money. Negro began as an insurance agent for awhile, my father and myself after that. The premiums were low and the ( ) from the premiums were not high. When persons had premiums as low as twenty-five cents a quarter we call it and some had additional means, programs, insurance companies starting with life programs with three pennies, three cents and we went on up to fifty cents. The money from that there wasn't much on the policies. So when we began to get with the other insurance agencies they split up and made it a bit solid as it is now. But as that has grown the premiums on these present day insurances have grown faster than persons are able to take care of them. Therefore you don't have too much security with people who are establishing insurance companies now. The school board and others offer very fine reasons for which you can be accepted and that's the best premiums I think that are payable. In other words, if a person doesn't have a fair income he can't sustain beneficial insurance. The social security system came in and that provided a lot of help for people. In the early years before the Roosevelt times people did not have social security. People were working for I remember fifty cents a day and seventy-five cents. When they worked for a dollar a day that was pretty good money. So we had to cut rice with the sickle for three dollars and a half an acre and an acre of rice would take man about a week to cut an acre of rice. We used to cut rice in groups and split the money. Working a cane field was approximately fifty cents a ton
and that was by hand.

188. KE: Fifty cents a ton?

189. MP: Yes, fifty cents a ton as you see those canes out there. It was pretty rough.

Cotton picking in this area too was pretty good long years ago but cotton has outdated itself here. Corn, vegetables and what have you and most of these things have gone to other areas of the country. Sugar cane has become possibly the most valuable crop here and rice in sections.

190. KE: Rice, still here?

191. MP: Yeah, we still have some rice here. The oldest rice mill I think in the United States is one that my father and the fellahs worked in. It was built in 1912. That's Conrad, CONRECO yes.

192. KE: So your father worked there?

193. MP: Twenty-one years. He worked there twenty one years. He served as water tender and was a mill service man for getting the rice together, cording it and what have you.

194. KE: Now was that after he left Caroline plantation?
Oh yes, all of that was when he came to New Iberia. He first worked with persons on different little farms. I remember the Trotter place that he told me he worked on and then he went into this. That was an old man we feared to believe he was at one time I think they came from the Netherlands and many settlers were in that area. As you see, all the growth of this city going on your way to Loreauville soon as you got out onto ( ) Avenue leaving out all the way that was a rice field, all the way from where the population is so heavy.

You said the name of which avenue?

( ). Did you all go out that way to Loreauville?

Maybe we did. And that was?

All the area from there to ( ) Street where ( ) Hospital is, the present hospital, was a rice field.

And that was in the?

In the 1920's and 1930's, the end of the first bridge that you go across New Iberia to the second bridge up on what we would call the extension of Jefferson Street across the
bayou where is now the Oasis, that was a plantation.

202.KE: The Oasis was?

203.MP: All of that where that place is, that was a plantation.

204.KE: And that was a rice plantation?

205.MP: No, that was a sugar cane plantation owned by the Indests at first. After that the mayor, Mayor Allen, Allen Day, Joe Day's father owned it and it came into possession of the Day family. That's how they began building so many bridges in New Iberia. We started with one. The ( ) Inlet we have now bridges, we have from here to Olivia five bridges. The city has grown tremendously.

206.KE: That was from Mayor Allen?

207.MP: Well, he started out and the other mayors completed it. Just as Huey Long started out we had no bridges in Louisiana. You crossed Mississippi River in all places by ferries. That's the only way you could get to New Orleans and ( ) City and Baton Rouge. We had ferries. When Huey Long came upon the program he first built the bridge in New Orleans and then in Baton Rouge. Since that time we have a good number of them in Louisiana.
208. KE: What did you think of Huey Long?

209. MP: I thought he was a great man. He was a great man. Served at times, that's when we began to register in 1934 under his administration. I had the privilege when he came to New Iberia on a Sunday I was in town at the time and he spoke at the gymnasium, Bahon Gymnasium, which was the high school. And no Negro before that time had had a chance other than work around there, had an opportunity to go in that gymnasium. I remember clearly that day when he came to New Iberia. He parked his wagon and his cars on Main Street by the old courthouse which was a beautiful thing, monumental, somewhat like St. Martinsville and he walked over to the place and when folks followed him there he invited them to come in and I happened to have been in the crowd. He came to the door and told all of us to come in because the gymnasium was for all people and that's when he construed the idea of every man a king. And I know the cities, they were angry with him. He lived longer than I thought he would have the way the people were because he was trying to enforce a rule where there would be a bit of equity and a bit of better financial reasons for people. And when he was governor the taxes were not so high and the automobile licenses were three dollars. He built the bridges and built the state capitol and the highways and still had money. But now the taxes are high and the automobile license and everything else is so high and we can't maintain anything in the state. So it's something to look at I think to see just where the management and the people of Louisiana hated him for that reason. But I've seen since their reluctance, they miss him. They miss his contribution to Louisiana and the way he did it.
210. KE: You mean the whites miss it?

211. MP: The people, white and everyone. I remember when they announced, they had no television, it was the radio and when they announced that he was shot Louisiana was in sorrow. I doubt there were very many people who didn't shed a tear. He had done so much for them, so much, bringing them out of darkness and providing things for people. It was rough. The idea I think he became hated because he said every man a king. He had a song by that nature. I had a chance to pass by his home many times out in Jonesboro where he lived, a little wooden white house, he and his brother Earl and the rest of the family. So education began to expand at that time. When we were in school we had to buy our books. I've never had an opportunity to have a free book. Had to buy our books. There were three places here in New Iberia that sold books; the Estorde Drugstore, the Khans Drugstore and the Taylors Drugstore. And if you weren't able to buy books at that time you received no education. That started out but when he came along on the scene he maintained that everybody was provided, books were given to persons. Now regardless there were some of them that were unfairly distributed. The books as I observed in my principalship years, the Negroes got the worn out books first and then after that we had to do a little clamoring and start getting the use of the free books and the new books because the situation was terrible. Sometimes you'd get a good worn out book, sometimes the pages all scratched up and the like and the name of the person in them. That's what was distributed to most of the Negro schools. And that enhanced to keep the curriculum back and it was pretty hard to keep up. But the persons who were I'd say interested in their children and could afford a book bought
them during my day and time. That was very serious. And I guess that's the reason many persons during that day and time did not get a chance to maintain or get an education.

212. KE: Was that in the 1930's and 1940's?

213. MP: In the 1920's and 1930's coming up. Books and facilities and the like, fees. Those who attended the private school, the school that my mother attended, that was a private school.

214. KE: Which was that?

215. MP: It was the Daisy Mamie Roberson School, Daisy Roberson and Mamie Roberson. They were teachers and they had a private school and I guess their school operated by students about five cents a day for students.

216. KE: And that was your mother's?

217. MP: Yeah, she had an opportunity to go through that school to the seventh grade, the seventh grade at that time.

218. KE: That was in?

220.KE: How long was that school open?

221.MP: Well, I guess it must have been, possibly I don't know how long but it closed somewhere in the 1920's.

222.KE: That's not the school that then became the ( )?

223.MP: No, that's just in the home. That was in a home.

224.KE: The Roberson School was in a home?

225.MP: That's right.


227.KE: Your father's aunt went to that school?

228.EP: Had the school.

229.KE: Oh, had the school. I'll have to get that part of it.
230. MP: You'll get that when you get to her.

231. KE: I can see how well these two histories are going to come together. Let me go back to a number of things that you have said so far. When Mr. Long came to town it sounds like that was a really significant event.

232. MP: Very much so.

233. KE: What kind of repercussions were there say among whites? That must have created quite a ripple.

234. MP: I don't know how much was created after he left but only the poor white folk and Negroes attended that meeting in the gymnasium that time, in the Bayon Gymnasium. I used to keep up with the officials of the community, policemen and sheriffs and whatnot. I didn't see any of them there at that time. So that means that nobody really was interested in his coming to town. His program was too highly proposed for people, seemingly on the line of benefitting and making life real for human beings. So I don't think they would concur with that at the time.

235. KE: So they just stayed away from the meeting?
236. MP: That's it, yes. There were no calamities, no fights or anything. It was just as is -
the kingfish was in town. That's what it was.

237. KE: Another question I'd like to ask you, you mentioned a little while ago that for a
long time there wasn't anything like social security or anything like that for the poor people,
for the workers. Do you remember what it was like?

238. MP: During that time? We didn't have it.

239. KE: Actually when social security and that sort of thing started.

240. MP: It came in during the Roosevelt administration. Before that time everybody was
on his own regardless to whatever the situation was. And it happened in the era of social
security, a lot of people who did not get it before Roosevelt times and a lot of men who lived
after that, they were placed on social security and some were able before their passing to
benefit from it. Many were old people, you know, day laborers and what have you. You had
no protection other than what you could afford yourself before social security. No
protection. So when you had nothing to eat or when anything happened you were just there.
That's one of the things that was. There were times that when the banks were low persons
were given tokens by which they would be able to buy food with. Tokens would serve as
incentives for money. That's the type of distribution for compensation to persons. In some
levels where men worked even in the school system they were given scripts to go to the
different stores because of financial difficulty where they could get things until the money would be able to come in. Many of the stores subsided in that way, tokens and scripts.

241. KE: Scripts?

242. MP: That's a note saying that you worked for this person so long and you're able to let him have this and charge it to the boss and when he got that they would pay. The tokens were after the high water and a little before that persons were given tokens to make purchases from the store. And that is just like what you call now they give you food stamps. They were metallic substance. Those periods caused you to do much in involving situations to get what you really needed. They were used at clothing stores, grocery stores and what have you and some of the drugstores when needed.

243. KE: So they were given to people by their employers?

244. MP: By their employers, yes. They couldn't afford to pay them.

245. KE: The employers couldn't?

246. MP: See before the FDIC came in, the federal deposit for protection of banks, banks were very low, most of them.
247.KE: I see, so the banks ran out of money and so therefore the employers would get the money some place and pay the employees.

248.MP: The First Bank in Loreauville, it dried out and because of some reasons in Jeanerette the bank had to close and there was no money for awhile. Then they renewed them and in Jeanerette the FDIC had come in to protect, the insurance company you know, the Federal Deposit Insurance Company. I think that was made possible under the Roosevelt administration. The one in Loreauville did not open again until two or three years ago. The banks reestablished in the community of Loreauville. Now we have branch banks from New Iberia. We have the New Iberia bank and we also have the which was the Old State Bank now it's Premier. So those two banks are branches from here there. They have branched out. Even the First State National was Jeanerette. Now you have the Iberia Bank, the Savings & Loan, the Sugarland Bank and Premier and all of them established in that area.

249.KE: What did you think of Roosevelt?

250.MP: I thought he was an exceptional president although he had polio. He was an exceptional president. Very exceptional and Mrs. Roosevelt, we could hear her through radio but she was a grand person. We read about her in the newspaper. She was a great person. She seemed to have helped the president in many decisions. At that time there was established the CC camps and that was where they took not delinquent but boys without jobs of age and took them to these camps providing them with an education, a work system
throughout building a better Louisiana. Many of the boys from there where I taught moved in these sections and were able to go on. From there they went to the Army when World War II came on and from the CC camps they were trained to go into the Army and many of them left and they went to different parts of the country and they did well. Many survived. Some came back home. Some came back home and completed their education and began to work. That was very creative in that system.

251.KE: So that's really how it helped?

252.MP: Yes. Then you had another system, the ERA and two other systems and the WPA, Work Progress Administration system, to develop the cities to put men to work. They worked the projects that were given. I remember that in this community they paved many streets and outlined sewage plans and what have you and developed areas that gave a lot of the men work. The WPA, Work Progress Administration. All of those agencies were very helpful to people.

253.KE: So you really felt the effects of those programs in this community?

254.MP: Very much so.

255.KE: You saw young men that you had taught perhaps go off and develop into productive citizens.
256.MP: Very much so.

257.KE: You saw streets paved here, sewer systems developed here.

258.MP: Very much so. I remember the time the Main Street that you possibly rode on was brick and the trolley system you had there. When ( ) Avenue was paved most of the streets were dust, the side streets. And the sidewalks were out of wood. Many of the areas, for drainage systems you had no sewer at the time and you had large ditches. So there are many things to remember and think about. And the systems which, at least the homes had no sanitation, most of them. Most of the homes possibly were heated by wood and coal. You had coal services and the schools and what have you were heated that way. That was before the use of gas and electricity came into our communities, the appliances and what have you. Those were the things that were made available.

259.KE: Around that time?

260.MP: Un-huh. So we have had a great turning point for all of these issues. It has meant I think quite a bit to us.

261.KE: A great turning point you mean around World War II?
262.MP: Yes, moving on. I was about for World War I too.

263.KE: Let's see you were born in 1912. Do you remember very much from World War I?

264.MP: Well, I wasn't too quite. I rambled a lot. I was able to go when the soldiers left in 1918 to see them leave because my four uncles and friends, they slept at home to go to people from the country, many of them. And I remember when the band led the soldiers down Main Street. Had the, we called it the firehouse but there was a big whistle that would blow for all occasions and you had a band that led the soldiers down in World War I. I think I told you before that that station, the people were there to see their sons, daughters and friends off. And they had about, to my understanding, about eighteen cars separated whites and blacks, front and back portions and they were crowded. They were going to different camps and I remember my uncles and whatnot during the time after they went to certain camps my mother, I would pick pecans and she would made candy to send to them.

265.KE: To send them wherever they were?

266.MP: Un-huh. And one of my uncles when he came back from the Army he brought things from France, little suits and whatnot that they had to ... (End of Tape 1 - Side B).

267.Tape 2 - Side A
268. KE: You said that your uncle brought things back.

269. MP: Yes, little suits and leggings and what have you that I was able to display, put on my head, little baby caps and whatnot. And some of the song books that they had in the Army.

270. KE: He brought those back?

271. MP: He brought those to me. I guess that was the idea of the first war. It was kind of tough.

272. KE: What do you mean?

273. MP: Tough for them. A lot of the boys who left did not have much of an education. But I guess after they went to the Army they saw the need and a lot of them came back and tried to do what they could. Many of them left this section, ( ) and went to other sections.

274. KE: Which other sections?

275. MP: Texas, California and what have you, Philadelphia and the like to better establish themselves because the treatment, I guess they saw it was more civil in these other areas than
it was here.

276.KE: You are talking about black people?

277.MP: Yes. I remember the time when they came back, some of them they were told at times by some persons they would have their Army suits on on Main Street and they'd tell them it was time to take them off.

278.KE: And this was after World War I?

279.MP: World War I. And the war was serious but I think it gave the men an opportunity to see just what it was because as I understood from some of the soldiers they entered certain countries and the American soldiers tried to disregard the Negro soldiers, the white American soldiers, and as far as fraternizing among themselves, the people of the European or French areas. And I was told by fellahs who worked with me that same thing happened after World War II, students of mine who had gone. And they were told by the people of other countries not to pay any attention to these people because I guess they looked at them in a demeaning condition or way because of color or whatnot not being able to protect themselves. So those are issues that confronted the black American soldier. I never had an opportunity to be a soldier because when they started out my job became so that it was important and then I was trying to make my contribution to the Army. I was called by the superintendent two days to go to the Bayon Gymnasium to help register, get the fellahs off because of the inability of
many people to understand them, a little Creole French and what have you and many folks could not understand them.

280. KE: You were almost like a translator for these soldiers.

281. MP: Yes, people who were being registered. I worked right with them in that time.

(Recorder turned off.) The high water of 1927 I think it was, the water rising and the bursting of the levy, Mississippi Levy, and a place we called Maganza, the Maganza Levy. That's a I think is an adjacent parish somewhere on the other side of St. Andrew Parish and that water came in hurling throughout the parishes the same as it did come from the ( ) northern area of Iberia Parish through the bayou St. Mary by the ( ) came through. It was mystical because when it hit New Iberia and the people were warned to start moving and serving as refugee camps were being placed for them, to move from the country area, Loreauville and what have you to the highlands here in New Iberia and to Cabe, Louisiana, and to go where they would establish camps for them. Water came in and devastated New Iberia at that time. There won't too much up in here but Brooklyn and across Main Street to stand by and see where they started out we had moved across for protection but it never took the spot where we lived. It came to the ( ) and the ( ) Hospital and most of the homes in Brooklyn on the bayou side were almost covered up to about possibly four or five feet were left out of the home. That showed the water level there and ( ) Hospital and that came down to the foot of Henry Street where we lived because after a few days we would go across the bayou. One of the swampers had his big boat and after about four days we were able to go
out across the bayou and go see how the places looked. Some of the persons didn't leave, they stayed and there were escape places in their home on tops of roofs where they thought they would be safe and many of the homes were damaged along the line. When that water came into our community standing near the bridge to see it come in the little end of the bayou as such, coming so rapidly that animals, small houses and what have you came down with the rushing of the water. They even took railroad steel irons to try to weight it down and it came in such a terrific manner it was hardly possible for them to open the bridge. So many animals and little houses were stopped there. On each side of the bayou where the little farms were and the like, animals there, took everything with it, with the raging water. So when we were able to go back to our homes the bridge could not be used because it had been broken by the drainage of water. And after some time there was built what we call a pontoon bridge and that was at the foot of the street that hits Weeks Street. Pontoon bridge where you came across the bayou and wood linings and to hold a rope as you came for protection. That was the way of survival to come there then across the bayou. It was terrific, it was terrible. People were moved from their farms, their homes to high points in Cabe and tents were furnished. Then something like we see now is going on in various countries to people. A set up was made where they took care of what they call at that time rationed food. They cooked and served them there and the like. And after the high water the government had to subsidize the people with food, staple food just as you have now for social security and the stamps. People got rations so much for persons in the family, the basic foods. And we had stations here where they would register at the courthouse and go to these places and receive the food that was needed for them. It was a long time before some of the farmers could go back to
their places and get places really established and workable as they should. So that threw a hardship I believe on the poor people, a very terrible hardship. From that on they had somewhat an unproductive movement.

282.KE: I'm sorry.

283.MP: From there on for awhile they had an unproductive movement. Hard to get started. Farmers had to get in debt along with the federal government to give them a little assistance. That meant much in developing the area.

284.KE: What I'm wondering about is during that period after the flood and assistance was offered to people who were devastated by it, did you see differences in the way that whites and African Americans were assisted? Did African Americans end up suffering more because of this?

285.MP: I believe so in many ways because they didn't perish but some of the churches were very fine and they offered assistance to abilities, ministers, priests and what have you. Their social organizations I'd say, the benevolent, did what they could. But at a hardship it was hard seemingly. If you were any underdog and you were caught in that position you were just an underdog. It was hard for you to rise until you get a foothold. Some reestablished themselves and some did not. After the high water really a lot of persons went to other areas, they left.
286. KE: They left the area?

287. MP: Left this his area. Therefore I think that's the reason for a number of people who's parents were homeowners, farm owners, they left to do better. Some didn't come back.

288. KE: You're saying African Americans left at that time?

289. MP: Yes, many of them to go elsewhere where labor was provided.

290. KE: They could find other work?

291. MP: Other work. Had a group left from here and there's a place called Botamy. That's in Texas. They left, swampers and whatnot but they were able to come home twice a month, something like that. They worked there in the swamps and took part. The others went to the other areas like Lake Charles and Port Arthur and Beaumont where the oil company was coming quite fine and giving work to them.

292. KE: So Beaumont, Texas had an oil company?

293. MP: Yes, they have them now, Gulf, what have you. Beaumont, Port Arthur and Houston, large companies.
294. KE: I ask that because Michelle and I have noticed that a number of people talk about people who've gone to Beaumont, Texas. It seems to be a connection between New Iberia and Beaumont, Texas, all of Texas.

295. MP: From Lake Charles on and across at West Lake you have one of the largest plants in this part of the state.

296. KE: Largest plants?

297. MP: Oil plants and plants for taking care of the nature of different things, different products from the oil products. It's very huge. You all didn't get a chance to pass through that did you? Lake Charles.

298. KE: No.

299. MP: As you go through there when you cross the river there is the, West Lake they call it, you have a large development of plants, oil and what have you.

300. KE: So that's where a lot of black people went to find work in Texas?

301. MP: That's in Louisiana. A lot of my relatives are there too. A lot of them went to
Port Arthur. They settled Port Arthur and in Beaumont and in Houston. So I see from that many of them were able to educate their children and to do much for themselves. They changed from farm work, sending them to school, a lot of them going in different professions and what have you in these establishments. They seem to have done well.

302.KE: And this was in the 1930's and 1940's?

303.MP: Yeah, after the high water and some before the high water that left. Some of the older men left before the high water. I have a lot of cousins who left before.

304.KE: Your cousins you say?

305.MP: Cousins yes and the like.

306.KE: Speaking of that, again what you are describing is a really interesting period between the 1920's and the 1940's it sounds like when there were a lot of changes it sounds like in the community brought about by World War I and the high water and then, you really haven't mentioned specifically the Depression years or Hoover times.

307.MP: Hoover times were tough, under President Hoover it was tough. The Depression, when you say the Depression it was a depression. People almost hardly existed. That's during the time too when the tokens and the scripts were given and survival. The industries
as far as they had the sugar cane and things sold very cheaply on the market. Therefore, payments for the products that were produced were very limited. One time I realized that a crate of okra which is a very large thing, persons would work hard to get a crate of okra or seven or eight crates of okra and possibly get three dollars a crate. A crate of okra was much larger than this.

308.KE: Than your television?

309.MP: Yes. To get a days work out of seven or eight crates of okra the whole family had to work from morning before day until five or six o'clock in the evening one day to deliver it. My experience with that, I tried to sell okra from my farm. I had to get the okra up, pay the men and sell it at seven cents a pound and that didn't mean anything. So the men in the factory, they were making the money because they would send men to really place this okra across the seas and pay them fine salaries to go and in other places the agents and while the men in the field would suffer. If you had to pay people to pick this okra and you get seven cents a pound for it you had some work and that means a hundred pounds of okra would kind of fill this thing up and it would be kind of rough. You had to pay them. Most times you'd have to get with them and at least five cents a pound to get the men to work for you, those you couldn't get to work by the day. That was pretty hard productive thing. I tried it on a small scale myself and that was long after World War II during the Korean conflict.

310.KE: That you tried to, say it again?
311. MP: Yes, tried to operate a little vegetable farm in Loreauville right next to where you all were Sunday. That's one of our places there.

312. KE: This is while you were a school principal?

313. MP: Yes.

314. KE: In Jeanerette?

315. MP: Yes. It didn't do too well.

316. KE: But you were trying to get extra income?

317. MP: Well, that's what it was but we got none raising swine and a few things, vegetables, and cattle and all of that. Didn't get nowhere. So it was just hard, I'm telling you, unless you were able to maintain it and be there yourself at all times. That's about the only thing that could be done. You heard much on the Hoover administration?

318. KE: Have I?

319. MP: Un-huh.
320. KE: No, not so much. Tell me as much as you can.

321. MP: Well, I don't know too much about it but I know that the times were hard because it was talked about quite a bit among our people, quite a bit. It was a time of, as I said, financial difficulty for the people.

322. KE: Again, the kind of thing I'm interested in in that period is how African Americans might have experienced it differently than whites. I mean, it just seems that things in general would be harder for African Americans at almost any given period. I'm interested in what you remember about that.

323. MP: I remember the plantation homes quite a bit. I went to a good number of them and a good number of people lived in them. So in some of the homes that were placed or made or built somewhat structured almost like barns. You had wooden windows made with heavy lumber and sometimes fair covering. Sometimes you could look out of the house and see the moon. In some of the houses when the rain came they had to place tubs and things in certain spots. It was just somewhat unbearable in some areas.

324. KE: These were homes on the plantation?

325. MP: On the plantation that the bosses owned those homes. Very little care sometimes
would be given to them. And when the fellahs would come to labor from other sections, in other words around Opelousas or St. Landry Parish and other parishes when their crops would play out, when they had the cotton or corn would play out they would come to the area to make what we called grinding during the winter months. When they came there was established a little one room in the yard of the bossman or the owner and possibly a bed and little small, it's not a stove, it's something like a coal and wood heater that in the wintertime they could survive warm by and maybe a few things. The food that was given to them was prepared by the persons in the owner's kitchen and they would have to get their food from the man who they worked for and eat that food in the little, we called it a shack.

326. KE: The shack that they lived in?

327. MP: Yes, little shack.

328. KE: It sounds like slave times.

329. MP: Well, it wasn't slave but it wasn't much better. It wasn't much better because fellahs would come and when a fellah would work and he would possibly not have money after the lay buying system, they called it lay buying - see when the crops are planted there comes a time when they lay by them, let them rest to just grow. They didn't go out to cut wood or to pick moss or things like that. They had no money coming in and if the boss supplied them money and if they had another place that they could go to, they could not leave
that farm before they could pay the boss back. And that was to me a type of slavery. And some of them who, well some people I knew they couldn't read too well, they would go to the commissary and they just made marks for what they got. Still at the end of the year they would be out. At the end of the year they would still come up short although they knew what they had gotten on credit, they'd come out short.

330.KE: So even if they couldn't really read or do numbers they had enough of a system, even a written system, to know?

331.MP: Just what they were indebted for. But even that sometimes was much higher than they proposed. And if they worked sharecropping it was always higher when they would come to the end than what they proposed. Some knew what they had done and what they had made. And I think after a year's work I understood they ought to have came out. If a man came out with four or five hundred dollars he did well and he became possibly the property, in other words, not written but of his boss and he couldn't leave. Many of them had to, in other words, like the underground railroad, run away at night to go to other places, to make that escape. I know a good many. It was rough. I had a truck at the time and I had to do some hauling myself sometimes.

332.KE: You mean to help people leave?

333.MP: Yes relatives to certain places. It was kind of tough.
You'd go and pick them up in their shack?

In their shacks and try to bring them on to other places where they would possibly do a little something to kind of get on their feet.

Where would you take them?

Well, to other areas where they would go to other bosses. Some come from distant areas and bring them back where they would try to start out anew. It was rough. And that was also when they had completed their indebtedness to their boss. Sometimes they would hold them and didn't never want them to leave.

Sometimes they?

Hold onto them and would not want them to leave.

The bosses wouldn't?

Yeah. They're down.

Was this the same truck you also used to pick up students?
343.MP: No, that was a little truck I used to use for hauling rice and everything else around the community. I used that at the beginning to, the church you went to Sunday, that church was about, a little wooden church about twenty-four by thirty-six. Twenty-four feet wide and thirty-six feet long and the lighting was by lamps with reflectors. If you had anything at night you had reflectors. So that's how this thing was done. The school where I became principal of before a system developed in high school year we gave a drama there and that was by reflectors on the wall. So if you didn't have it in the daytime you were out at night with the reflectors.

344.KE: You improvised a lot as far as using whatever you had to make do.

345.MP: Make do, that's right. Had to do a lot of that. Had to do it to get where we were going.

346.KE: Going back to the form or family history - oh wait, you don't have any brothers or sisters, it's just you.

347.MP: All alone.

348.KE: So I need to list the places that you have lived. You've lived in Iberia Parish all your life.
That's right, Iberia Parish.

And actually in New Iberia.

New Iberia, yes.

Now I need your education history, the names of each school that you attended, when you attended.

Hall Institute in New Iberia that was about from 1920 to 1932. Leland College.

Where is Leland College?

It was at Baker, Louisiana, 1932-1935. I took my degree in 1936 but I finished in 1935, mid-session of 1935. B.S. in science.

And when you graduated from Hall Institute that was a high school?

High school. I did my elementary and secondary education there, primary, elementary and secondary. Then I did an establishment for administration in 1939 at Southern University in Baton Rouge.
358. KE: That was one year you said?

359. MP: We did that on a summer and winter session.

360. KE: What was it called again?

361. MP: It was administration.

362. KE: Was there a certificate involved in that?

363. MP: Yes.

364. KE: You got a certificate in administration?

365. MP: That's right. And Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas. Completed my master's in education, M.E.D., 1956. And every listing you wish, worked with the Louisiana Colored Teacher's Association which is our organization in Louisiana. Do you have room for that?

366. KE: Yes, that actually comes up in a minute when I'm going to ask you about organizations and stuff like that. First I need to get your work history which is the most
important jobs that you've had. Start from now and go back. I guess it doesn't matter, either way.

367.MP: I'll start from back and come up.

368.KE: Okay, sounds good.

369.MP: Worked as a young salesman for Saymons. That's a order that sold liniments and different things, toiletries at that time before the drugstores took them. Then after that I worked, we had a little grocery store.

370.KE: Saymons, was that in New Iberia?

371.MP: No, the products came from Illinois mail order.

372.KE: And around what time period was that?

373.MP: That was during the 1920's.

374.KE: You did that while you were in school?

375.MP: Yes. We had a small grocery store and I worked there.
A clerk?

We owned the store.

I could say salesman.

Well, that's what it is, everything. Salesman and everything else.

It was your parent's store?

Yes.

Did they have a name for it?

Just Polk's Grocery Store, that's all.

Where was that located?

Across from Brooklyn, 242 Hortense Street.

There was one thing I wanted to ask you about but I'll let you - I want to know
about Hopkins Street and if that was considered sort of the main street for African Americans.

387.MP: It wasn't the main street but it was the most publicized street for having the generation of good times.

388.KE: You're talking bars and cafes, is that what you mean?

389.MP: Things like that.

390.KE: Not cafes but bars and clubs?

391.MP: Yes.

392.KE: I looked in the 1940 city directory at the library and of course at that time it would indicate whenever a colored person lived at a certain address or had a store. I noticed on Hopkins Street that there were a number of I guess black owned businesses.

393.MP: Well, if I can get through this in just a second I'll go through some of them. The first Afro-American drugstore was on Main Street. It was owned by Dr. C.A. Pemilton, the pharmacist. And the attending doctor there was a Dr. Welks.
And that was a drugstore?

Un-huh. The second movement of that drugstore was on the corner of St. Peter and the extension of Jefferson. There in that particular area at the time Dr. Pemilton, Dr. Alex Henderson was the dentist and Dr. Welks was the physician.

What time period was that?

That was about in the 1920's and 1930's coming up in the 1940's. And he moved across on Hopkins Street.

Dr. Henderson?

Dr. Pemilton, the drugstore owner moved on Hopkins Street. There the doctor that worked with him was Dr. E.L. Dorsey, the first one.

Dr. E.L. Dorsey joined him?

Yes. And then after that we had a lady doctor. I've forgotten her name right now, I'll get to it. Then Dr. G.W. Diggs. There was a man from Lafayette. ( ).

You said after Dr. Diggs?
403.MP: ( ). I can't think of the name of the lady doctor.

404.EP: Dr. Chatters.

405.MP: Dr. Chatters, yeah.

406.KE: Dr. Chatters, that was the lady doctor?

407.MP: Lady doctor. We had other doctors in town too. Dr. Williams was during that time. Dr. Pearson was a dentist on Hopkins Street. And we had Dr. Scogins, A.C. Scogins. We had others who came to town. Let's see, there was a dentist there at Cooper's Drugstore on Hopkins. I've forgotten the name of the doctor who worked with him, the pharmacist at the time. Those are not all. Dr. Aennis was a dentist here. And a Dr. Garrett, a home boy.

408.KE: You're talking about doctors from the 1920's and 1930's and then the 1940's and 1950's?

409.MP: And on up until now. Dr. Davis is still here.

410.KE: The doctors that you just most recently mentioned were from the 1940's and 1950's?
411.MP: Yes. Before that I told you the other day I think we had this interruption in the city. A good number of them, they left and the others came in to try to do a little something.

412.EP: It was hard to get African-Americans here after they ran those doctors out.

413.KE: Mr. Polk, it sounds like you're mincing words when you say that they left.

414.MP: They ran them out of town. They were beaten and what have you and they were strewn away. And as I said the other day, that came about about this provision for World War I trainees, the knowledge that was given about the school that was provided for whites and the one for Negroes, just possibly questioned. And I guess it wasn't the Ku Klux Klan but it just motivated things among the officials of the community. It made it kind of rough. We have a lot of boys from here now who have finished in the field of medicine but they don't come back, don't come back home.

415.EP: Dr. Davis had four of his children doctors ( ).

416.KE: That's interesting because somebody that I interviewed a few days ago was saying something very similar. He said that a lot of people that were raised here who become doctors, Ph.D.s and they leave. They don't come back.
417. MP: Well there are two things about it now. I guess the fast healing of financial benefits in other areas and the stigma that this left on the community. Because now we are just beginning to have black lawyers in the community. Most of them who have come back have been students from this area, students here. And they are doing well, lady lawyers and men lawyers. We have one who served as a D.A. He has become one of the district judges already. And that has done pretty good to have a couple of persons, men who take care of the, let's see who we call them - a boy, Lawrence Olivia, he's an accomplished tax controller now. So we have a few who have come back into the field and a C.P.A. I don't know the intervention of anything, it's being changed a little. But the fellahs who come just have to have the courage to stick with it and to do whatever they can. It's still a tough situation that we're undergoing in some areas.

418. KE: Mrs. Polk and I began to talk about that a little bit a few minutes ago. I can't quite figure out what the situation is between whites and African-Americans in this community and how, you know, just given, you know, some of the real brutal acts that have taken place. I mean that whites have perpetuated.

419. MP: Well, as I see it it's all a dominate factor to me that the fellah who is the upper hand, there's always a tendency to try to keep the other fellah down financially, economically and every way, shape or form. In other words, if he can bribe you out of what you have that's alright. If he can manipulate you to an extent to get you to be ( ) enough to do the things that he wants you to do it's alright. But when one is outspoken and does the best to define
himself or declare himself as to what he believes, you become a target in the community. And sometimes you'll have some to bend to it and some won't. As I see it on the agenda now, the present young black Americans don't bend.

420. KE: They don't bend to that kind of manipulation or oppression?

421. MP: No and it makes it a little difficult to control them you know. So you need fairness to do what you have to do and to accomplish to me seemingly what you have to accomplish. When you're neglected of the opportunities, deprived of those opportunities, there are things that would really throw you back.

422. (End of Tape 2 - Side A)

423. Tape 2 - Side B

424. KE: What are you saying, what about schools?

425. MP: Well, we've explained, talked about schools and how they've grown and the like. You have problems in the schools still. There's one big issue now. A student of mine who is principal of the high school from where I left that community. Well, he's accused to not being to respond to some of the monetary issues, not handling things properly. They're demeaning him and he has to accept right now a teaching position. I'm sure if you've been in New Iberia long enough maybe you've read about the things that Mr. David Hill has been
going home.

426. KE: And that's in Jeanerette?

427. MP: Yes, Jeanerette Senior High. We do have some members on the school board and we're hoping of getting more. We do have some ( ) bosses. In Jeanerette you have the Men's in the Counsel or Assembly. I think you have three blacks to two whites. The mayor is white. We did have one man, he passed, he tried two consecutive times for the mayor ( ) but he lost out. The first time by two hundred and a few votes and the last time by a hundred and forty-nine votes. He wasn't from here originally but he married a girl from Jeanerette. He established business, he worked for Southern University as an agent in America and across the seas, a purchasing agent for Southern. And he had a business in New Orleans and he came back here to live and he brought his family. His wife was originally from here. He lost out by a very small margin. I believe a lot of people who voted, they were bought out. So that's one of the things that you have to undertake quite a bit. They're working with certain beer parties and hamburger things and get them to meet. A lot of promises and nothing behind it to sell their vote. But I guess it's a kind of misunderstood thing. We're hoping that it will become normally stronger. Even now we have in Jeanerette the Concerned group. One of my students who is a minister there is challenging them because of the killing of a Negro boy and they have an organization called Concern. Now he is being subpoenaed now because of the situation that was that caused the chief of police who shot the boy to give up his job and now he's suing them.
428.KE: The chief of police is suing them?

429.MP: Yes, suing Concern and the leader, Reverend Arthur Lee Jones because he thought that a lot of trouble to the people in that area, the businesses and whatnot, he was just organized and they boycotted a lot of the businesses because the people seemed to have supported it. They're pursing that as an avenue of retaliation. He is rather. I don't know how far he's going to get with it but it seems according to what the paper said that that caused him to lose his job although I understand that he was coming from his brother or somebody, a mother's funeral at the time when that went out and he went to support the other officer on duty which seemed to have been out the line of his jurisdiction. He gave a command to the boy and said the boy didn't react, had a knife or something, and he shot him. That has caused a stigma in the parish, ill feeling and what have you. But I guess they're going to unite their efforts and going to continue. They always fought for what they thought was right and I'm hopeful they're going to continue. Because one time down there it was almost, parish of Jeanerette was almost like slavery.

430.KE: I'm sorry.

431.MP: One time it was almost like slavery down in that area, yes. The farming area had big plantation called ( ) Albania. Owned by the ( ) but it was Albania's plantation and that's where most of the persons worked. That had been since slavery time. And the
plantation down by the mansion is still there.

432. KE: The mansion is still there?

433. MP: Still there in St. Mary's Parish just across the line on the main road going down.

434. KE: Just across the line from Iberia?

435. MP: Iberia Parish going down, just across St. Peter's Street going to Franklin.

436. KE: St. Peter's is the last street in Jeanerette?

437. MP: That's right.

438. KE: See what I've learned in a week?

439. EP: (Speaking too low to understand.)

440. MP: They had no schools on the borderline for the children there and no means of transportation. A lot of them walked from Sorrell to a place we call Julian Hill. They came from Grand Mary and St. Peter's and ( ) and all the area. Most of these children, many became ministers, doctors and principals. We have some of the best farmers in that area,
students farmers ( ), well all of Grand Mary, ( ), Olivia's and all of that group ( ) and what
have you. And then across the line at St. Mary's Parish we do have some of the boys there
who are large farmers. They provost so they're well to do farmers.

441.KE: And these are people who came out of your school?

442.MP: The boys that come out of school. However, some of their fathers were farmers
before them but they are acquiring a greater area now. Some of them are working,
neighbordhood boys, brothers and sisters together as much as two thousand acres of land. One
of the brothers go all the way up to ( ) and that's about fifty miles down from Jeanerette.
They're big time farmers. They're doing well.

443.KE: So you must be proud of the number of people who've really succeeded.

444.MP: Yes, I'm glad that they're doing well.

445.EP: So many of them write him at Christmas and all that kind of thing. You made me
what I am and I just want to thank you again. It's rewarding ( ) their children to know that,
very rewarding.

446.MP: I've appreciated working with and for them. As for parents they've done a nice
job. Nice teachers, real genuine and the like. ( ) to serve as my own visiting teacher and
everything else. Get them out of the field because I wanted them to know they couldn't accomplishing anything and stay away from school. It wasn't a matter of just promoting them because they worked. It was a matter of getting what they...

447. KE: I'm sorry, what did you say?

448. MP: Not promoting them because they worked but allowing the system to master the things in the books. Get them out in the field. Let the people know they can't - because the boss said stay in the field you couldn't stay there. That's right.

449. KE: You'd have to tell them that no matter what the boss says the kids get to go to school?

450. MP: When I came up they made it their business to get away.

451. KE: They made it their business?

452. MP: To drop their hoes and go home. And then they started coming to school regular.

453. KE: In other words if they saw you they knew that they had to get to school?

454. MP: Oh, yeah. That's one of the impressive things to keep them reminded and keep
the parents informed. We couldn't give them an education and keep them on the streets and keep them out of school. Many of them, they've done well.

455.KE: Sounds like really one of your life's missions throughout this century has been to get kids into school.

456.MP: That's what it's been from the family on up, from my own family on up because it's such a deserving thing for them. As long as they stayed in darkness that was it.

457.KE: They could be used by ( ).

458.MP: That's right.

459.KE: ( ) if I can say that.

460.MP: Yes, it's alright. They could be used. Many of them who did not take advantage of it they're still being used because they think the the only direction in which they can go, that's which the white man tell them. But they've gotten old now and they're set in their ways so it's nothing that I can do about it or think about it. That's what you think, that's what you believe, that's what you do, that's your business. That's what I've settled within my mind today.
461. KE: I'm not sure and I don't know how much you want to talk about this, but I'm not sure what you mean. I get the sense you're referring to something.

462. MP: I'm referring to those who would not take advantage of the system of education. I had an opportunity to supervise an adult education program in 1938 and offered a lot of them to come who could not read to take part and try to learn and they wouldn't. So that wasn't anything for me to worry about.

463. KE: They would not come?

464. MP: No. They didn't know and they didn't care to know so I didn't care to worry too much especially as far as that was concerned. But after you've tried to get an individual to do what is possible - I always felt after reading the story of Booker T. Washington and the other fellah that they had to go to school, walk five miles at night. My father said they had to walk five and six miles to go to school. That any fellah up in the 1920's and 1930's, if he wanted to go to school with the opportunities that were afforded them with the adult educational programs, they could do it and a lot have done it. When I mastered that program we had eleven hundred and a few in our system and there were only thirteen in the white school. So the white coach who became superintendent and I worked together. The superintendent appointed us to go together and work the different areas and we worked all over the parish.

465. KE: To get people into?
To get people to go to night school, adult education.

And this was in?

1938.

And you worked with a white man on that?

Yeah, he was a coach then and he became superintendent and he's gone and I'm still here. We were kind of buddies. So that happened, his life went out early.

Do you feel that - I don't know how I want to ask this question - do you feel that at a different time in life you would have been made superintendent if it were not for racial politics?

That came up once I was told by the superintendent's son and one of the board members said he's colored.

So your name did come up?

That's what I was told.
475. KE: By the superintendent's?

476. MP: Son told me about it.

477. KE: And they said he's colored?

478. MP: Yeah. The superintendent's son was the controlling office secretary to his daddy.

479. KE: And you were friends?

480. MP: Yeah, we grew up on the same side of the bayou. The superintendent lived a few houses from me.

481. KE: Oh really, in Brooklyn?

482. MP: Yeah he lived on ( ) and I lived in Hortense.

483. KE: Was your neighborhood that you grew up in in Brooklyn, was it mixed?

484. MP: Yeah. I knew everybody in the white community and I guess all of them knew me because I served as a little agent and my people would bring vegetables and things to
them and I liked to use the buggy and I'd go around selling them to the people. It was a lot of fun but they needed the finances. Such things as the vegetables that are needed now and sometimes they didn't have chickens and things in the store, they bought and sold those. And I went around in the buggy to sell that for them.

485.KE: So you provided the white community sometimes with those?

486.MP: Yeah, white and blacks. They knew when I was coming because they'd come out to meet me. It was just a compensatory act to help them if I could.

487.KE: Did you ever have little white friends?

488.MP: Oh yeah, we all came up together. We got along nicely. They didn't run over me, I didn't run over them. We were independent in our group structure. What I said I meant and what they said I'm sure they meant.

489.KE: What do you mean by that?

490.MP: If I made a decision, whatever I said, that was it. That's all. Never had too much problem. Never had to run or nothing like that. But if you did me something I run after you too.
491. KE: They didn't mess with you too much?

492. MP: No. We were nice to each other.

493. KE: In that period, certainly one of the things that's talked about a lot during the Jim Crow period is the amount of violence that black men in particular had to experience or at least worry about and that would be at the hands of the police or it could be at the hands of groups like the KKK. If it wasn't the KKK it was some other group.

494. MP: They had a little of that and they had certain names for them at the time. Some of them I used to be able to recall. I can't do it too much now. They would go out and try to work in groups to defy. If a Negro would react they'd whip him or something like that but some reacted and they fought back. Some of them were brave enough in the little villages if you struck them you'd have a battle on hand. Jeanerette was one of the areas. I remember that ( ) but if you ever fooled with a fellah on Main Street and you happened to hit him or something you had to fight. You didn't run.

495. KE: What do you mean?

496. MP: Well, sometimes fellahs patted their feet and they made you think you had to run and a lot of them wouldn't run. Because on Saturday evening after work they'd go to the various stores and stand up on the street talking and go on like that. A long time ago if you
were on the street sometimes the white fellahs come and push you in the ditch, you know, push you off the sidewalk. When they started standing up for themselves and resisting that they became respected. As long as they took it and went on they would always try to get a group to try to come on them. There are two in the old folk's home now who did not run, they just stood the resistance, they fought back. And that gentled a lot of situations.

497.KE: It did what?

498.MP: Gentled, made it better.

499.KE: When African-Americans actually really?

500.MP: Started defending themselves.

501.KE: That actually made it better?

502.MP: Yeah. I guess all of that is in the course of life.

503.KE: You know many people I've talked to say that Jim Crow never ended, it just has taken on a new meaning, new form. Would you agree with that?

504.MP: Well, yeah since the days of integration it has taken on new form. If you have an
understanding about it the ( ) of it is it's just on a higher psychological order to remind you in some incidences that you're still a Negro. That's what it is. That you're still a Negro. And if you fall for it it's something but those persons who try to strengthen themselves, make themselves independent, they're respected. And the greatest issue and I hope that they would be able to stand by it is to register and vote, have a choice in selection. Choice of job although you're a citizen the people who possibly do the mandating and running of the other group. This thing that's causing quite a bit of turmoil in Louisiana and in America they're redistricting because of numbers. They're redistricting. That's causing a lot of trouble. If you redistrict and put the population where it could be they really don't want you to have some of the jobs. So therefore it's rough.

505 KE: It's still rough?

506 MP: It's still rough, yeah, it's still rough. And I think right now that issue, the judges are trying to throw out up in this fourth district that it's ( ) and I understood, I didn't get a chance to hear the ( ) but one of the men in Congress caused the redistrict and they're trying to get him to lose his job. I don't know which one it is. But you have organized similarly but it's the black caucus because you have a few representatives now and that's rough, it's kind of rough. So you're trying to gain your path in citizenship but that's slowly coming in reality and integration is a tough thing in some instances because most of us in this parish are a mixed group.
KE: Are a mixed group?

MP: Yes.

KE: What do you mean by that?

MP: I mean that my great grandmother, great grandfather was a Spaniard. My great grandmother was an Indian. And my grandmother married a Negro, an African-American. So some of us, some of them were so light they just went on to other areas.

KE: So they passed as white?

MP: Yeah, they went on to other areas and they passed as white and they're still white. They come back sometimes but their children never came.

KE: They come back but they won't bring their children?

MP: No.

KE: Because they don't want their children to know that you're African-American?

MP: Well no, the humiliation in the community at that time when that happened,
everything happened. And that's practically all over Louisiana.

517.KE: A lot of mixing?

518.MP: Yeah, a lot of mixing.

519.EP: ( ) when they were slaves. The only ( ) people ( ) was the white man and the black woman.

520.MP: Well, it's ( ). They did what they wanted. This thing of inter-marriage now is causing quite a sensation but this can't be stopped. It could be but I just went to one of the weddings of one of my student's son Saturday. He married a white girl. A cousin of mine, his friend married a white girl. However, that's normal in these various parishes. That's going fast now.

521.KE: That's happening more often?

522.MP: Oh, yeah.

523.KE: What about that area of Grand Mary?

524.MP: When a man came to sell me rings one time in my school he was surprised. He
was from New York. He came to sell class rings. He looked at some of the children who had green eyes and he asked me were we integrated. He said he didn't know. I said no we're not integrated, we're amalgamated. So that was the mixture. And that's about the size Grand Mary was or is. But now they are mixing terribly and they knew nothing but farming and things but now their children are expanding. They're going into medicine, lawyers and teachers.

525.EP: They're beginning to marry blacks darker.

526.KE: They're marrying darker now?

527.MP: Very much so.

528.EP: Used to a dark man ( ) color couldn't get anything.

529.KE: Really? They wouldn't have a dark person even in the neighborhood?
530.EP: But now ( ) beautiful homes and they're living really like a person ( ).

531.MP: They're affording the things that they can afford in life.

532.KE: The people in Grand Mary?
533.MP: Yes. They built a large place there, they call it the ( ). It's one of the largest entertainment sections in this area for blacks. And now a lot of whites go there to have entertainment too. It's on the highway going towards New Orleans.

534.KE: So now darker skinned blacks can go but there was a time when they couldn't?

535.MP: When they oppressed them. I think I remember the first graduate I had from out there his father had a club. The night we brought all the seniors and juniors in my old bus out there and the girls told me it wasn't them that felt that way but the older parents. I remember that night when they gave the entertainment for my students and those who were graduating from out there, all the males stood outside looking in. They wouldn't go in and they just stood looking.

536.KE: You mean the dark people couldn't go in?

537.MP: No, it was the fathers and friends of the persons, they wouldn't come in.

538.KE: The light skinned fathers?

539.MP: Yeah.

540.KE: Because they were scandalized by having these...?
541.MP: I think that caused the situation of a lot of the family inter-marriages.

542.KE: What did?

543.MP: Trying to keep themselves separate.

544.KE: Oh, of families marrying each other.

545.EP: (Speaking too low to understand.) They have all of these ill formed children because of marrying your family, your ( ) family.

546.KE: And that was all to keep everybody light skinned?

547.MP: Yes.

548.KE: What was the name of that club that you took them to?

549.MP: That was the Siguesce Club at the time. That was ( ) Club.

550.KE: Well, I want to ask you more on this and then maybe I should wrap this up because we've been talking a long time. You were telling me about your job and we had
stopped at the salesman for your family's store. That period when you were a salesman for your parent's grocery store, was that also the 1920's?

551.MP: 1920's and 1930's, about fourteen years. Then after that then I started working for the Eagle's Life Insurance.

552.KE: And you were an agent?

553.MP: I was an agent under Mr. Vavvasseur from St. Martinville.

554.KE: I'm sorry what was that?

555.MP: Vavvasseur, the name of the superintendent.

556.KE: Of the insurance?

557.MP: Yeah, he was the area superintendent.

558.KE: Now where was the insurance company?

559.MP: Well it covered the parish, St. Martin Parish and a part of Iberia and I worked for him. After that the company, they offered me a position in the People's Life Insurance. I
succeeded a gentleman that was retiring, a Mr. Alexander. I worked debit and after other men retired brought my father into the field and debit was given to him here for the People's Insurance Company.

560.KE: Was this in the 1930's?

561.MP: Coming up to the 1940's.

562.KE: The 1930's and the 1940's?

563.MP: Yeah and I worked long after that after my father's passing in 1944.

564.KE: So you did that while you were also a school principal?

565.MP: That's right. I did that in the evenings and it was small but after it grew my father, his debits increased and we'd worked them together, the same company. We worked from a small place called Ashton, Louisiana and worked Jeanerette, Loreauville, Grand Mary, ( ), all the way up through St. Martin. Had St. Martinville, St. Martin Parish up to ( ) and then part of Lafayette and Landry Plantation.

566.KE: And then?
The president of People's wanted me and the superintendent to leave school and to
go into the insurance field altogether. My father ( ) not to stop going. He did what he could
and then I went on completing my work in the college. When I'd sometimes come back I'd
do it again in the summer. When I started out just before I got my assignment in the job I
continued. I worked my community in the evenings to make a step higher with that
company. And therefore that's what I kind of had to do because my salary then was seventy
dollars a month.

As a principal?

Yes. Well, I was the second highest paid fellah. I was the assistant principal here
at the time. The principal was getting seventy-five and I got seventy dollars and that was the
highest paid salaries because most of the teachers started at twenty-eight fifty to fifty dollars
and that was it.

So as far as what I should write down as your first job with the schools, you were
a teachers for one year?

Almost two years beginning the mid-session of 1935-1936.

Now what school was that?
Iberia Parish Training School. That was just one year above the high school where when the students finished from that school they were given certificates to go out and teach. Therefore you can see why the salaries were so low because Mr. Henderson and I in the second generation were the first ones to come back to this community with degrees. Then Mr. Augustus and the other men followed after that. We did have a few who came out, they were much older than we are. Mr. Elliston Green and Mrs. Agland. They achieved their bachelor's degree along the line through extension services. But one of the Lilly's and the Roberson's and they were sisters and there were very few others. And that's how my teachers started out, all of my teachers started out and I took them to the first associational meeting because I was made district president after my second year, visiting the association. I took care of that congressional district. I worked in that for thirteen years.

You were the district president?

Third congressional district president of the Black Louisiana Association. That comprised the parishes from...

Black Louisiana Association...

Colored Teacher's Association, that's what we called it at that time. The we renamed it Louisiana Educational Association.
KE: You were the district president?

MP: Yeah, president of the third congressional district, that's what we called it. We had ( ) and Louisiana and each vice-president was made president of that district. We had to go out and try and build it. Therefore, we had our claim came in that worked for better schools, petitioned the state and what have you to seek better schools and facilities for Negro children. That led up to integration. A.P. Turo and the other fellah right in New Orleans, Thurgood Marshall was ( ). They worked with us.

KE: They worked with you to integrate the schools?

MP: To seek for better education. But when he took the case we saw that you could not have separate and equal. It had to be equal. You couldn't be separate. And that led to integration.

KE: Now just to get back to the employment history, you started out as a teacher at Iberia Parish Training School.

MP: Yeah, science teacher.

KE: And then you became a principal.
585.MP: The principal yes, I served under him as assistant principal for awhile.

586.KE: You were at Iberia Parish Training School from 1935...

587.MP: 1935 to 1936. The end of 1937 started out and the superintendent saw that I should go to Jeanerette because the principal there wanted a change, Chester Smith.

588.KE: Were you ever a principal at Iberia Parish Training School?

589.MP: No, I served only as an assistant for him the session of 1935-1936, the last part of 1937 going to 1938 they moved me to Jeanerette to become principal.

590.KE: And the name of the school at Jeanerette was?

591.MP: Jeanerette Colored Elementary. Everything was colored all the way through. So we moved it up from the Jeanerette Colored Elementary to the Jeanerette Colored Junior High to the Jeanerette Colored High. We ended up with the Booley High School. I'll show you the picture of the man who was one of the former principals there.

592.KE: And you were with the school from 1938?

594. KE: So you retired in 1970?


596. KE: Did you retire in 1970?

597. MP: Yeah, you could say that. That's what it was. See we started with the integration process in 1969 and they broke my school up from a high school to one of these elementary schools, something like a school that they had a special name for them. So that's when I left out.

598. KE: You left and you never took up anywhere else?

599. MP: No. I went on my own. I had worked long enough and I survived to get enough money. The pay was lower at the time.

600. KE: Okay now, I need to ask you about awards and honors that you have been given. I know there's probably a lot.

601. MP: Oh well, a few.
KE: Can you name some of them?

MP: From the district which I served, I served as the first black president after integration in that district.

KE: Of the?

MP: It broke up and went into the LAE, the Louisiana Association of Education of that district and moved right on to what we have now. So we've been changed from the third congressional district because of the parish assessment to the fifth congressional district. So we're on the other end. From the school system and various ones I received quite a few things that meant much. Well, from my students and members of the graduating classes they gave me a lot of gifts, honorariums and what have you. Up to now they're still doing things. In 1992 they had a school reunion which I wasn't able to attend and they focused a lot of things upon me, physical things, all of these things and they still send the plaques. I have about a couple hundred of those in boxes and things.

KE: So a few hundred plaques from?

MP: Various classes in the communities. Well, when they had that day they just outfit me with suits, all my clothes and finances. I have books that those who have gotten their doctorate degrees that they gave to me and many other issues. So I have all those things. As
I told you, they're stored in boxes. I just don't have the room for them because I'd get in a fuss if I tried to bring them out. I preserved all of their things that I could, their pictures and everything else. We have a copy of the tape of the activities that they had. However, they sent a limousine here for me and I couldn't get out. That was the issue. My daughter and granddaughter attended. I was ill at the time. They made tapes of the situation for me. And then still every class reunion, just two weeks ago there was one, they still give me plaques and other things that I need. I'm grateful. I'm grateful because I didn't know that so much had been done for them but they appreciate it.

608.KE: I want to know about other organizations that you have belonged to; civic, community, educational, political.

609.MP: Well, all of the parish educational association, Iberia Educational Association and the Retired Teacher's Association. Served as the legislative chairman in the AARP.

610.KE: You say you served as chairman?

611.MP: Legislative chairman of a section of the AARP for awhile. They still me the notices. I respond but I am not the chairman. I served as president of the local Mary B. Amos Retired Teacher's Association for awhile. Mr. Augustus has been president now for a good number of years. I served six years and they doubled that time on him because no one wants to go back to it. That's makes it kind of difficult. The benevolent societies and the
Masonic Lodge. True Friend, I served as assistant vice-president during my father's time and served after his passing as president until about six years ago since 1944.

612.KE: I'm sorry, True Friends Benevolent Society, you were president?

613.MP: Of Loreauville. I was president succeeding my father from 1944 with an indispersement of one break of about three years until almost about six years ago, 1988. Mrs. Melvina, one of my first cousins, she's president now.

614.KE: Melvina is?

615.MP: Melvina Durall. That's in our breaking up period she serves as the president. So that put's me out now. At my age I need to rest.

616.KE: You've done a lot of work.

617.MP: Well, there's been a lot put upon me. I still try to do what I can that's kind of I hope reasonable rather. In the church I served as clerk at one time for about a period of...(End of Tape 2 - Side B)

618.Tape 3 - Side A
619. MP: I am a deacon now. I serve as part-time superintendent and teacher of the Sunday School and now a good number of years as deacon.

620. KE: Also teacher and superintendent of Sunday School.

621. MP: I had my early beginning at Star Pilgrim Baptist Church in New Iberia. I became a member of that church in 1918, baptized there in 1918.

622. KE: That's in New Iberia, right?

623. MP: Yes. Reverend Jackson is the pastor now but the man who I was under, the first one, was Prince Albert. He baptized me in 1918. Left there in 1930, went to the family church in Loreauville.

624. KE: Are there other, this is the final question, are there other activities or affiliations that you have, maybe hobbies, interests, basically anything else?

625. MP: No. Only the early years when I came on the scene I'd serve as teacher, coach and everything. When I first started at IPTS to organize the first boy's basketball club. Then I went to Jeanerette and that interest would keep on going to get my school started.

626. KE: In 1935 at IPTS you organized the first basketball team?
627.MP: Yes.

628.KE: You've been kept busy you're saying with just building the Jeanerette School?

629.MP: Yes, until my retirement. When I left the school I left it with everything the other schools in the state had; basketball team, football team, band, forensic clubs and what have you and added on all of the departments to it. That's a contribution. That's it.

630.KE: That's a lot. Very briefly although I have a feeling this might be a whole story in itself. When schools integrated in Jeanerette, were you displaced in some respects by whites administrators or anything?

631.MP: No, I wasn't displaced. They wanted me to take another job and I just didn't feel like my school should have been broken up to that level, to the type of elementary school they wanted to make it.

632.KE: They wanted to make it an elementary school?

633.MP: Yes, a junior high as it is now. They call it Jeanerette - they took the name off from Booley and made it the junior high and all of that.
634. KE: I heard about this that they took away all of the...

635. MP: All the Afro-American names off the schools and then they named the schools after the streets that they were on, after the section and the ward where they were. My former principal's school was the Jonas Henderson High School, the first one. Then they moved out to what I think now is freshman high way on the road. They changed the name as the school grew. And my school, Booley, they removed the names and even the stadiums that were named after the supervisor, black supervisor, they discarded all those things. I had an interesting experience because I had an open field I actually enclosed there for a period of about near twenty-eight years.

636. KE: You asked for?

637. MP: A field, to close my school field up and put fence around it. Really it was because of finances I was missing. So I engaged with them to play in the white stadium two years and that cleared everything. We made an enormous amount of money and took care of all our debts. But as it was people just could come on an open field and you couldn't do anything about it. When they said integration, a fence went up. All declared they didn't have money for anything. A fence went up at every school in the parish. A fence went up. That's what your separate and equal was. They didn't have money for nothing. Called the school board members together, no money. But when that went up, I don't care how large the campus was they had a fence. I don't know if they were afraid for protecting the little white
child or keeping the little Negro child out or what but it went up. But I'm hopeful that it will become better. I'm hopeful. It's a long ways off. One of my students who was head coach I think in Jeanerette, he just left to go back to Lafayette. And the other students who were assistant coaches, they chose a fellah I think from Baton Rouge to come to be the coach and that's a terrible problem in Jeanerette right now.

638.KE: That they chose somebody from...?

639.MP: Baton Rouge, a white fellah from Baton Rouge to become the coach at that school.

640.KE: As opposed to choosing someone from the area who might be black?

641.MP: Yes and you have them qualified right in the system down there.

642.KE: Sounds like Jeanerette is...

643.MP: Well, they'll fight for it, that's one thing. They'll fight for it. They might chase them down but they'll go after you. They know it means hard times and it's rewarding to come through. It's kind of rough. Well, this area, this part of our community, they seem to just put what they want.
644. KE: What's that?

645. MP: I said in the Iberia section they put what they want and you hardly have no retaliation.

646. KE: So in other words there's less kind of organized retaliation among blacks if something happens. They're less organized in New Iberia?

647. MP: Well, I wouldn't say less organized. I don't know, more fearful or what. But they go out.

648. KE: In Jeanerette they fight?

649. MP: They'll go for it. They'll express their desires. If they don't get it they'll let you know how it is. The percentage of students are greater in the black community and receive less attention there. Maybe you've been faced with the problem since integration. Most churches have tried to put up what they call private schools. I don't see how some of them can manage with so limited a group of students. But some kind of way they're by-passing that and I don't know how the schools are inside, how they qualify for all the things that are needed. But they seem to be doing a good job putting it over the state. They are really knocking public education.
650. KE:  To avoid integration?

651. MP:  The mixture is there so they're not getting anywhere.

652. KE:  What do you mean?

653. MP:  The mixture is there. The students are getting together and they're going along.

654. KE:  So the students get along?

655. MP:  Yeah.

656. KE:  They want to be together?

657. MP:  Yeah, they're going together and all this coming about. You have them in the athletic department. You have well a good fleet of black athletes and they do well. And they accomplish much for the school. And I think some of the Negro coaches could accomplish what the other coaches seem to think they can do. They've been doing it. So it's just, sometimes it's a lily white situation that reflects. That's what they seem to think it is predominately.
KE: What do you mean when you say lily white? I understand the term but what do you mean?

MP: I'm referring to the implications are they just want to have it that way. That's all it is. So it's about a breaking point as such. You have anymore questions?

KE: I think I'll let up on you now. We can stop here.

MP: Well, if anytime I'm around, if anything you think I know I'll be glad to do what I can.