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AAHP 049 Thomas Coward
African American History Project (AAHP)
Interview conducted by Douglas Malenfant on June 5, 2009
1 hour, 14 minutes | 31 pages

Abstract: Thomas Coward grew up in Gainesville, Florida, graduating from Lincoln High School, and soon being drafted to serve in the US Navy during World War II. The Navy was segregated at that time, and he describes his experiences in wartime as well as after returning home. He explains that his experiences in the military inspired him to become a social studies teacher, in hopes of creating change. After attending Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, he returned to Gainesville and taught at Lincoln High School. Because Black history was excluded from textbooks and established curriculum, he describes the efforts he undertook to introduce Black history in his classrooms, and the ways he incorporated discussion of the Civil Rights Movement only to be accused of "subversive activity." He also describes some of his own direct action in relation to integrating Gainesville businesses and other establishments.

Keywords: [African American History; Alachua County, Florida; Lincoln High School; Civil Rights Movement; Segregation]

AAHP 049
Interviewee: Thomas Coward
Interviewer: Douglas Malenfant
Date: June 5, 2009

M: Good morning, my name is Douglas Malenfant. I'm with the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, and today I'll be interviewing Mr. Thomas Coward, former Alachua County city commissioner.

C: County commissioner.

M: County commissioner, thank you. Where were you born?

C: Born in Richmond, South Carolina.

M: In Richmond, South Carolina.

C: Yes.

M: When where you born?

C: Born in 1920—December 13th, 1922. And came to Gainesville when I was five years old.

M: Five.

C: And reside here since then.

M: Where did you go to school for primary education?

C: My primary education, high school, was Lincoln High School, and after Lincoln High School, went to the service in the Navy, and after returned from the Navy, I went to Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri.

M: When you were interviewed in the past, you once said that being the oldest boy in the family meant that your mother expected you to watch out for you little sisters. Did that require more vigilance or patience?

C: No, after my father died, being the oldest boy son, I was the kind of [inaudible 1:32] of family. I looked out for my mother and took care of most of the business for her, as my father would have been doing.

M: When you were at Lincoln High School, students there were known as the Big Red Terriers?

C: Yeah.

M: Yeah?

C: Yeah, the Big Red Terriers.

M: Terriers are usually known for their, like, fearlessness and tenacity.

C: Yeah.

M: Yeah?

C: Mmhm.

M: How did Lincoln High School teachers prepare you for society?

C: Very well. I, went to school and I worked in the various restaurants around town, but I went to school and the teachers were very dedicated persons. And being a youngster and a young fellow, I wasn't in the athletic program as much, but I was working with the teachers. I worked with the debating team for a while. But academically, they prepared me to go off to college. And after leaving the Service, I went on to Lincoln University. And came back; after finishing Lincoln University, I came back and started teaching at the school that I finished high school, the high school that I finished from.

M: So their education really prepared you for going on to—

C: More not, not academic so much, but prepared me for life, really.

M: Yeah. Did the teachers get involved get involved outside of school activities? Where they part of your community life? Did you see them in social events?

C: Not a great deal, but they were involved in the church activities and community activities. During the time I finished high school, the schools were segregated, as you know, and there wasn't a lot of involvement in the total community activities, just the Black community through the churches and social activities and things of that sort. And they were very supportive in all the activities that we were involved in, with the football, basketball; the program I was in, what they call the DCT program, diversified occupational program. Where they trained a person who may not be going to college but they would possibly have a job. But my idea was to pursue a college education, because I was told that the way out of the situation that I was in, a college degree would probably move me upward from where I—the kind of poverty-type situation I was in.

M: Who made that clear to you?

C: Basically, my history teacher and football coach.

M: Is that why you went into social studies?

C: Yes, I went into social studies, I got that idea because I was in the Navy. And at the time I went into the Navy it was—even though I was fighting a war overseas for the county that I loved, and it was the Old Glory, and the United States of America; and then, I came back. But after being in the Navy, and being segregated in the Navy, and I felt that I could do better. My idea was to try to make a change, and to make a change, the area that would possibly do that

would be in the social studies area, looking at the government, because that seemed to be the area that was keeping from achieving. [Laughter]

M: So it was the Navy that gave you that direction. Did you really want to be a teacher, though, when you were in high school?

C: No, no, no. I had no idea of being a teacher in high school. I wanted to get a college education in some area, and didn't have any idea in what area I would possibly go in. But after going into the Navy and experiencing the Navy, and experiencing the government, and getting the idea that the status quo was not what I was satisfied with, that I wanted to come back to make a change, and in order to make a change and go to college, the social study of government and history was what I needed to get involved in, to develop to make the change.

M: Thank you. So, when where you drafted into the Navy?

C: In December of 1942.

M: Where did you—where were you stationed?

C: I was stationed first in Norfolk, Virginia; then San Diego, California; Walla-Walla, Washington; and from there I went in the South Pacific.

M: Okay. What was your rank?

C: That's a, the—that was the, what was that? In the Navy, what was it? What was it in the Navy? I'm trying to think, now. It's the same in the Army, it would be a corporal, but it's a—I had two stripes.

M: Okay.

C: Yeah. [Laughter]

M: So, my dad was in the Marines, and he's never really spoken to me much about it. He was, during the Vietnam War. So, I I don't have really a strong appreciation for what that means. Where were you in relation to other people?

C: What's that now?

M: Were you in charge of other people then? Were you a leader in the Army?

C: No, no, not necessarily.

M: What function did you serve?

C: It was a segregated Navy, that was the thing about it, you know. We were, I was working with the radar outfit. That was a communication outfit, but then I was also in the, over what they called the BOC, Bastard's Officers Club. And I was the person who was in charge of making sure that the officers got all the things that they needed. Like the club, that's where they stayed; make sure their rooms were clean, the beds were clean, and that was the situation. But yet, at night, when we were short of help, I was in communication—we had what they called scope. And in the scope was, they would chart planes coming in, and ships coming in, and they have a certain sound. And you plot those on a graph, and it wasn't like a computer situation right now. You had to put a little magnetic thing on the board where you had the 360-degree display, and the area that the planes was coming in from the sound of the plane, you could tell where it was—or the ship—and then you plot that on the board, and you communicate that to the communication headquarters.

M: Uh-huh. You were in a submarine?

C: No, no.

M: No?

C: I was in the Navy.

M: Yeah.

C: But this was on, this was in the Pacific, we had an area there had a mound that we had built this mound, it was kind of a, it was like an underground, but you couldn't have underground because the water table in the Pacific was low. So we had to build a mound, and camouflage this big mound, and under that you had a Quonset hut in there, and then you put dirt over that, like, and new trees and leaves, like it was—well, a plane couldn't tell that that was a communication area. But we had little towers, you know, sticking out of there among the trees to get the communication.

M: Is that, that's where you worked; where would you have rested?

C: That was where I worked, what they call a Argus outfit, that what the Navy call the Argus outfit. I was not assigned that in the Navy as a ranking, but that was because of my—I guess my intelligence, and, and because they were short in the situation, they had to get, recruit people and I would come in there—but never recognized as an Argus outfit person. I was in the, what they call the mess hall or whatever: tending, or cleaning up the office, place and serving the bar, and serving in the eating, dining room, and all that.

M: So, segregation very much part of the Navy.

C: Yeah, and you see, that apart make us see: why wouldn't they give me the kind of rank or recognition in the communication area, rather than assigning me, and the pay and all that, for mess hall? I just felt that my intelligence and the way I

felt, that my knowledge of plotting the this on the scope, why not give me that kind of a ranking, and put me in the Argus outfit? But, that wasn't it. So this is the kind of bitterness that I developed then, so I wanted—when I came back to the States, it was a bad situation, because we fought together and we did all these things together. And when we got in to Indiana on the train after we were discharged, and we were coming back home; when we got to Indiana, we had to be separated in the coach. And we were together all this time overseas and everything else. Then, we were separated. We had to go to a place, we had to stop to a place to eat—at once, just to give you an idea—to eat, and the White servicemen went into the dining room, but we had to go into the kitchen area. And I recall having to eat off a big chopping block area; you used have a big chopping block where you'd cut meat. We sat around there and during that particular time, milk crates and all that. And we sat around there to eat and take a plate. And that had a business in my heart. I went out there and did my service, worked in the Navy for this—

M: You served your country.

C: — for America, for *my* country. And then, my country treated me like that. So, that was the kind of—

M: That was the, I'm going to go to—

C: When you ask me why'd I go into social studies and why I wanted that, that boosted me to try to get training and education and learn more about it.

M: Learn about the system that's, that's doing this.

C: Yeah.

M: Yeah? I have a question that might be more relevant to me than anyone else. You, you met your wife when you were in eighth or ninth grade, right? Well, when you were young, before you went into the Service.

C: Oh yes, I met my wife, I think she was in about the eighth grade.

M: I'm currently in a long distance relationship—

C: Huh?

M: I'm currently in a long distance relationship, so I'm, I was wondering, how did you manage the difficulties of being apart for four years?

C: Being what?

M: Being apart.

C: Oh.

M: If, that is, if you were together before you were drafted and then—

C: Oh no, no, no, we were just, we were friends. I didn't *marry* her until after I came out of the Service, and after I had gone to, I was in college.

M: Uh-huh. Did you she move with you to Missouri?

C: No, but she came to visit me at Missouri, but we weren't married then, see?

M: Did you keep in contact?

C: Oh yeah, we kept in contact. She went to A&T state university and—

M: You wouldn't know that from the biographies at all.

C: Yeah. But I went back, and I went to Lincoln University. So we'd write each other and kept in touch. We did that in the Service, we did that in the—when we were in college, and we just been together.

M: Well that's, that's encouraging for me! [Laughter]

C: Yeah.

M: So, the Atkins Warren and Associates that I mentioned earlier today, they say that you do credit your naval experience for your direction in life. What aspects of that naval service—

C: Who was that?

M: Oh, the Atkins Warren, it was the website that I'd mentioned to you earlier that had a biography of you?

C: Oh, yeah.

M: Which was quite similar to the biography you gave me.

C: Oh, yeah.

M: They say that you credit your naval experience for your direction in life, like we just established; what aspect of your naval service helped you prepare for the Civil Rights Movement.

C: That's just what I just mentioned: the Navy gave me an insight that there was a discrepancy in what the Constitution of the United States was saying, "We the people of the United States, in order to have more perfect union," and all that business in the Constitution, what it said. And me fighting in the, for the United States, and "I pledge allegiance to the flag," and all that. And then, I was treated inhumanly, you see, in a situation. That prepared me, because it gave me an insight that I wanted to dig further to try to change what was happening to me, and was happening in society and other Black males in the community. So, my idea was to develop that kind of a change. And to develop that kind of change, I

had to change the system; the system had to change. Because I found out that the government—it was the law! If I were to walk into a restaurant, or walk into a White restroom, I would be breaking the law. Because the restroom was set up in a situation that you had White women, White men, and Colored. That's what the restrooms was. So, you talking about unisex restrooms; we had that for years. So, these kind of things: that I couldn't go and eat into the restaurant, I had to ride in the back of the bus—even if we *had* the bus. So, the segregation situation, and I couldn't figure out that I went overseas, risked my life to come back to a society that did not treat me the same as others. I was treated even less than the prisoners of war. So you say, "preparing me"; it gave me a mindset that I wanted the change. [Laughter]

M: Yeah. So when you took that mindset and you went to college, you must have experienced university differently. It was, was it an all-Black school?

C: Yeah.

M: So, when you were in the institution—

C: I lived two blocks from the University of Florida. But I couldn't go to matriculate at the University of Florida. I couldn't go there as a student, University of Florida.

M: So would—you didn't want to go so far away.

C: Huh?

M: You didn't want to go so far away.

C: Well, I didn't want to go far away if I could have gone closer. I didn't have to go to Lincoln University out in Jefferson City, Missouri. I could have gone to Tallahassee; could have gone to Bethune-Cookman, in Daytona; could have

gone to Edward Waters in Jacksonville—it was a good school. But I wanted to go where I could—well, while I was in the Service, in the Navy, I went on the campus of Lincoln University. Because we had a station not too far away from Lincoln University, and we would go to Lincoln University. So, I wanted to go back there to school, because it seemed to be—the professors seemed to give me what I really wanted to deal with. And in order for me to really know what was happening to me, to know what was happening in society of Black boys and girls, I needed to have a background and education that would give me the insight on what I needed to do.

M: So when you graduated from Lincoln High School—or sorry, Lincoln University—you moved back to Gainesville?

C: Yes.

M: And you began teaching?

C: I began teaching at Lincoln High School, the same school that I graduated from. I got a job, I talked with the principal, and the principal knew me and knew I'd graduated. And talked with him, and I gave him some of my experiences, as I'm talking to you now, and the teaching. And at first, he felt that—he had the same idea and feeling I had, but he wanted me to work within the law. Because when I started teaching, I wanted to try to change things even in the teaching situation. The textbook that I had to teach from was textbook that the students in Gainesville High School had *used*. And when they get new books, we would get the old books. [Laughter] What you had to teach from. And I had to teach—I had to *teach* the things, government and history of this country. And what I was

supposed to be teaching from the textbook was not reality. Not the reality of what was really happening.

M: I assume they didn't mention people like Fredrick Douglass?

C: Huh?

M: They didn't mention people like Fredrick Douglass?

C: No, no, no.

M: That wouldn't even be in the textbook?

C: That was not been in the textbook. So, my students that I was teaching knew nothing about them people, I had to bring that in. Now, they have—if insurrection like Nat Turner or somebody like that, that would be in; the civil war and the like. You see, what happened, when I was in college, I learned that the movement for Blacks to come here as slaves; I knew that the three-fifth compromise; and the Constitution, and when they were developing or framing the Constitution, the slaves who were here, couldn't be classed as a whole person, they had to be a three-fifth of a person, because if you were dealing with the population, you couldn't make all the slaves in there a part of the population. They were not citizens of the United States, as such. They were classed in the South, as property of they master—the same as the cows, and the horses, and the goats, and all that. That was their property. And the Constitution of the United States, even in the Constitution and the Dred Scott decision and these things they were talking about, said that Blacks are slaves, had no rights that any White person or any government had to honor, you see. And it was not until 19—1896, in Plessy vs. Fergusson another—

M: Separate but equal.

C: Separate but equal situation came about, that it erased the Dred Scott decision. And all during the Civil War and during the Reconstruction period, you see, all of the Jim Crow laws, all the Black Codes, and all of the things—even though Black folks and Negroes at that time, they were free, they were free then, but they were free without money, and free without land. Free without a place to stay. So, they had to migrate back to the plantation, because they had no other sort of livelihood. And so, then they became what they call sharecroppers, but they weren't sharecroppers, because the masters hold them back. The Reconstruction period, the people still were enslaved, but not legally. So, all that period from 1865 up until 1896, and the period in between there, they were lynching and everything, all going on. When I went to Lincoln University studying the history from John Hope Franklin, so to speak, who worked up from slavery, and Negro in the United States, and learning that situation, and then coming *back* and get a job to teach, and none of that—!

M: None of what we just talked about.

C: None of that was in the history books, because the history book wasn't written to give people that. So then I, what did I have to do? I had to write a lesson plan to give to the White supervisor over Social Studies, what I was going to teach. And, it got to even the point that one time, my—but, my conscious wouldn't let me, it would lead me to teach students about what really this whole thing about, and the slaves—and the Negroes, and Blacks, and what everyone called them at that time—was an integral part of the westward movement of the South. If there was

a thorn in their side, everything was centered around the slaves during that particular time. When they got new territories, the West began to move, and as they come, they want to know, “What are you—are you going to take the slaves with you? Are you going to do the slaves—?” I don’t know how much history you know, but these things were not in the textbook. We had to talk about Jeffersonians, and talk about Andrew Jackson, Abe Lincoln, and George Washington, and all that. But we didn’t talk about Booker T. Washington, and George Washington Carver. I had to *insert* that in there. When the Civil Right Movement came about, I was teaching. And in the textbook, they had “pressure groups,” but the pressure group was the labor unions, and the other pressure group who were eventually pressured people to make laws on their behalf, but SNCC, and CORE, and the NA[A]CP, and all those other groups, were not mentioned as pressure groups. But they *were* pressure groups! So I had to, when we were talking pressure groups, they were not mentioned in the textbook. So, I was teaching my students there were also other pressure groups that were not mentioned in there. And the supervisor of the school came into my classroom, and I had on the board the other pressure groups, other than the labor unions and all that. So I had SNCC, CORE, NAACP. And she went back and told her superintendent, and told the director of instruction that I was—this was during the Civil Rights Movement—that I was teaching “subversive activity.” You know. [Laughter]

M: Yeah, you were just teaching facts! [Laughter]

C: In fact, had a committee to come back to the school and wanted to see me, and wanted know what was I teaching. I was teaching insurrection, you know [inaudible 33:06], get students excited; why was I doing that? I was teaching the facts of what the situation was. And they said, “Well, you supposed to be teaching social studies, and this is what you supposed to be—you see the script you supposed to—.” I say, “Don’t tell me how to teach. I’m teaching—I’m not teaching social studies, I’m not teaching history, I’m not teaching anything: I’m teaching students. And It just so happen that the material that I’m using to teach happen to be, in some cases, erroneous from the textbook. So, I have to teach the fact.” And I told them point blank that, no one in that room sitting around me had more knowledge about history, government, or what I was teaching than I did. And I was figuring then that I was going to be fired, but instead of being—gotten rid of, they moved me out of the classroom, put me in the front offices.

M: Is that when you became the dean? Or as an assistant?

C: Yeah. I became the dean so that I wouldn’t be directly involved with teaching the students.

M: Oh, that answers another question I was going to ask you: if you were planning to become the dean when you started?

C: No, no, no. They moved me in as the dean of students so I wouldn’t be a part of getting students to riot and all that kind of stuff. I would have to quell that situation; so they made me the dean of students.

M: *Did* students want to riot after what you taught them?

C: Huh?

M: Did students want to go riot after what you taught them?

C: Well, they got an idea that things were not right. I had to teach them the facts. I had to teach them what the facts were. I couldn't in good conscience be in there teaching them something that was erroneous. If I'm a teacher, and I'm teaching you, I'm supposed to give you the facts, and analyze what's going on. And so, but, I was a troublemaker, and a rabble rouser, or whatever you want to call it. But anyway.

M: How did you experience the closing of Lincoln High School?

C: Oh, it was a bitter closing. Students decided they would knock down lockers, and leave the campus distraught. I happened to be the dean of students at the time, and I had to try to call a group of them together, and I let them know that that's not the approach that they need to take. What they need to do was riot through intellect, but I found out in order to change things, you needed both sides; you need the intellectual part of it, as well as the riotous part of it. And then, because then you're intellectual, and you sit around the table and tried to deal with what was happening in the situation, you could always go back to what the—"If you don't do this," what the consequences would be, and why the students were uprising. So they need to change these kind of things.

M: So, I know your naval experience really affected your direction in life; how did having a daughter change your direction in life?

C: It didn't change a great—it made me more concerned about society, because I didn't want my daughter to come up in the same way that I did, and have to experience the same opposition. And I wanted her to feel that if she was an

American, and I'll have the same privilege as anybody else, anyone else, that she was just as good as anyone else. And to let her know, and so, education was a vehicle to an upward movement.

M: Your mother and father, they taught you lessons about life, right?

C: Yes, by precept and example. Not by intellect; by precept and example. Their hard work—

M: Did—did you, pass those on?

C: —their hard work, what they had to go through, and the wages they were paid, and the things they had to endure for us. It was seven of us in the family, so to survive—

M: Did you feel it necessary to pass the lessons you learned from them on to your daughter?

C: Yes, but my daughter was pretty much knowing what we were going through, and knowing what I was doing. Because she was out along, she went to—I got her to go to P.K. Yonge, because at that particular time, that was an all-White school connected to the University of Florida. And I said, "I want you to go to P.K. Yonge." And my standing in the community and all that, I figured they wouldn't deny me, and if I got my daughter in there, that I could get others to go to P.K. Yonge, also. So, that was [inaudible 40:02]. So my daughter was involved knowing what I had to go through, and she knew what my ideas were.

M: When did you meet Neil Butler?

C: Huh?

M: When did you meet Neil Butler?

C: When'd I meet Neil Butler? I met Neil Butler at the time that we were all in the Civil Right Movement. He was at the, he was working at the hospital. And he ran for a seat on the city commission. And won that seat. And he became mayor of City of Gainesville. We were a member of, Gainesville—the Human Relation Council, in which we worked to try to get people elected, or get people to be on boards and commissions. Because see, at one time all the various boards of the city and the county, you didn't have Blacks who represented on there, but they were dealing with Blacks. So, I went there, got a seat on the planning board for the City of Gainesville. City planning board. And Neil Butler was involved in the Civil Right Movement, and he got a seat on the City Commission. And I ran for the legislature, but lost that seat, and in the next year—a couple of years from then—Sid Martin, who was a county commissioner, left and went to the legislature. And I ran for *that* seat on the county commission, and no one ever thought that I would even win. But I was much more knowledgeable, and much more understanding, and knowing the government, because my major in college was history and government. So I pretty well, pretty well was well known, and I could speak better than most of them and put my point over. [Laughter] And during the Civil Right—

M: That was in [19]72?

C: That was in 1974? Yeah, 1974. Oh right, when I met Neil Butler—and we were working together during the Civil Right Movement, and he won a seat on the city commission. And later on I won the seat on the county commission, so we worked together.

M: I have an article here from 1968. It was on the front page of the *Gainesville Sun*. It says that Neil Butler, Al Daniels, and you were served at ABC lounge on 13th Street, got a mixed drink and talked. Why did that story make front page news?

C: Well, ABC had a liquor store, and they had—connected with the ABC liquor store, all of them had lounges. We could go in and buy liquor over the counter, but we couldn't go into the lounge to have a drink—which was segregated. Our aim was to desegregate all of these eating places, liquor places, and all the establishments. And Al Daniels, and Neil Butler, and myself wanted to change that. And what happened, we had a person—I'm trying to think of the person' name now—anyway, who—we were trying to do it through intellect, basically, and the other group was trying to do it through burning places down, or whatever the case may be. But anyway, we went to this city attorney, and told the city attorney—or, we went to the mayor of the city of Gainesville, and told him that if they didn't integrate the lounge on 13th Street, they wouldn't have a place to integrate it, because there was a group out there was going to destroy it, burn it down, or whatever the case may be. And they'll have a problem on their hands. And we said, "You ought to deal with this situation. And you won't have [inaudible 46:12]." The mayor told us then, "We'll have enough policemen and all that around to keep things like that from happening." I said, "Okay, you say you going have that." But I say, "Is that what you want? You'd rather do that, than to get the people to integrate?" And he said, "Well let me talk to my attorney." Well, the attorney at that time was Ben **Montench**. So we went to the city attorney at that time, and talked with him, and told him that what he needs to do is to integrate

that place. Well he say, “Okay, I’ll tell you what I will do: I will call Jack Holloway,” who was the owner of the ABC stores in the state of Florida. And he called Jack Holloway while we were there in his office. And Jack Holloway said then he would come down and discuss this with us the next week. And so, that’s what he relayed to us. We told him to tell Jack Holloway, if he wait until next week, he won’t need to come down, because he won’t have a store. [Laughter]

M: Is this the same liquor store that’s still there, next to the Krispy Kreme?

C: No, it was across the street, where the food store is, the earth food store?

M: Yeah, the Mother Nature one.

C: Mother Nature.

M: Or, Mother Earth one, yeah.

C: Mother Earth, that’s where it was. It was across the street. So we tell them, they wouldn’t have to worry about that anymore if he going wait ‘til next week. So, he said—so, he called back and told him that. And so, Ben **Montench** told him, said, “These people are serious, now, I’m telling you!” So, Jack Holloway said, “Well, what we will do, we will integrate. So we’ll open up the lounge to them the next day.” So we went to the group that was going burn this thing down or whatever, told them to hold off on to it.

M: Were they a secret society?

C: Huh?

M: Was the group that you’re talking about a secret society?

C: No, they wasn’t a secret society. They was—I can’t think of the guy’s name, but anyway, he was kind of the leader of a group that was ready to burn places

down, or destroy places, do whatever. It was a riot like you doing all around, because this was during the particular time all these things were happening. And so, they said they were going to do it the next day, and they'll have it open. So, the lounge did not open until two o'clock in the afternoon; it start at two o'clock, that's when the lounge opened. So, what we wanted to do was to test them, to see whether they going to *be* open at two o'clock. And we were going in to have a drink, to make sure that it was integrated. So when we got there, we had the newspaper people there, and they had the detectives there, and the waitresses, there. So we, the three, went in. Nobody else was in there! Usually at that time, people come in. So we went in, no one was there but officials and—! [Laughter] And we went in, and this is why I guess, this article—.

M: Well, that's a pretty good story.

C: I'll tell you what, this how—

M: Did it work?

C: Huh?

M: Did it work then, after that?

C: Oh, yeah!

M: Did it stay integrated?

C: They integrated it. And then, eventually, what they did—for a while—they closed the lounge! Rather than integrate, they closed the lounge. [Laughter]— closed it up.

M: Wow. Doesn't that defeat their business purpose?

C: But later on, they opened up. And the lounge that they had here, the one out on University Avenue and Waldo Road right here? They had a lounge there. Well, they closed that up. They closed that one up altogether, and used the lounge as a storage room. But anyway, we changed that. And then, we had a restaurant downtown; we integrated that. So Neil Butler and I, and Al Daniels, we were on the side of the intellectual side. And then we had another group, who opened up the theater, and then a group of us were appointed to a biracial committee because things were getting out of hand. I was one of the members of the first biracial committee, that had the—there may an article.

M: There is—oh, the article on the biracial committee? Yeah there is, I have that here.

C: [inaudible 52:00]

M: I thought I had it in that pile there. You mentioned in the *Gainesville Sun* that it's pointless to have equal access to facilities, such as the theater there, or a lounge, when you don't have the money to pay the fare. The *Gainesville Sun* said in 1977, that your mission was to see that all your brothers have the opportunity to earn that money. Has Alachua County fulfilled that expectation?

C: Yes, but to a great extent, in other words [inaudible 53:01]. When I went on the county commission, they had no employees and no person in the—in any leadership role at all. Here I am a county commissioner—a county commissioner—and look around, and all the heads, the department heads, and all the assistant heads, and everybody had a role. The only role that Blacks had at the county commission then was having two persons: they had assistant to the

county administrator, and they had one person who was in the supervisor of election office. And then, we had a person who was under the county manager who was a equal opportunity officer. And that is to keep things quiet—you know, to get—at that particular time, the movement was to get a Black person in there, to say, “Well, we got a Black person in there,” to make sure we appease the other person. I mean, I could see through all that. My experience had been through all that. And as a county commissioner, my point was to make sure that every department in there had someone in there had someone in there, some Blacks in there, who going to have some says, and some leadership roles, some involvement in county commission. So, that was the movement—and to try to get employees, to get people enough wages and money to go to the restaurants, and to the motels, and bars, and the places that they wanted to. So, this was a mission. So, what we call economic development; well the economic development kind of thing is still a movement. [Laughter]

M: Speaking of politics, what do you think about the election of Barack Obama?

C: What was that now?

M: What do you think of the election of Barack Obama? Did you think this milestone would come sooner or later than the present time?

C: I figured it would come if the right person would come along. And I was, when Obama came around, I was optimistic, because he had the kind of main mindset that I had. I realized early on that I could not fight the battle of desegregation from the battlefield of protesting and this kind of thing, and with language that was with no substance. I figured you had to do it through smartness, intellect,

and not a radical movement, but a coalition of people who were involved. And I was optimistic because the way the economy was going, the war was going, that someone who was level-headed to make a change would be able to make a change. The only doubt that I had was Hillary, because Hillary was popular in the [inaudible 57:21] and a woman—and the first woman. And I figured that that would be the [inaudible 57:28], but I had enough figured that the Democratic party, if they had any hope that Obama would be the president—because he was smart enough to do it, so. But, I did, I thought if he didn't do it this time, he'd probably do it the next time, but I was probably optimistic on that, along those lines.

M: Over your tenure in office, you've been interviewed numerous times by the *Gainesville Sun*, and I assume others. Is there anything that reporters, and in your interviews, you've never really covered that you'd want to cover, that you'd want to talk about that's happened that you don't think people have paid attention to?

C: I would say the thing that I don't think the *Sun* or the paper really realized, is the methodology that I used to get things done was not the traditional way of how you get things done.

M: In politics?

C: In politics. Here I am, one out of five on the commission, so to speak. To get anything done, you had to have the three out of five, or four out of the five, to get it done. You could either be on that board and be a loner, and push things that's

not going to pass, not going to materialize; or either you get into the mind of those individuals in spite of the Sunshine Law—

M: What was the Sunshaw Line?

C: Huh?

M: What was the Sunshine Law?

C: You, three commissioners can't get together and decide issues or anything pertaining to government or legislation without the public knowing. It's got to be in the public eye. In other words, what they would say, you got to be in the sunshine. It has to be transparent. It had to—all that. You and I can't get together and decide an issue; if I'm a commissioner and you're a commissioner, we get in the back room somewhere at night and say, "Well, this is what we going to do," and decide legislation, anything like that. I say, in spite of that, we had to convince our commissioner aside to go along with your measures, or what you got to do. You have to convince them that this is the right thing to do, you see? But now, we've had county assistant managers, we've had director of personnel, we've had the supervisor of jail, the head of the department over personnel; and so, we had these individuals *because* of my effort. And the way to do it, we got these individual Blacks to come on board to get into leadership roles in the county. And you couldn't do that by me getting on a soapbox and saying, you got to do this, you got to do this. You got to work with the individuals in a way that you convince them that this is the right thing to do, not to force them to say, "You do this, or else I'm going to do this." What are you going to do? You only got one vote. So you going to have to work through the system. You have to work the

system in order to get the things done. So, some of the things that I have done, it's the method that I used to get things done. I don't have all these plaques on the wall just because I did anything, because the methods that I used to get things done: the finesse, and the maneuvering, and convincing individuals.

M: That's something to be proud of.

C: Yeah, this is what you need to do. And no one ever had a idea that I would win a seat on the county commission. When I went on the county commission, I was the first in the state—not only county—to be a county commissioner. I went to the state meeting, the one Black out of all the county commissioners in the state of Florida to be there. So.

M: I imagine that was a huge room.

C: I was in a crystal ball. See what are you going to do? I could get there and raise all kind of sand, and do things, get nothing done. Or either use my intelligence, and persuasiveness, to get people to see that this is the right thing to do and let's get on with it. And a little threat, of course, if necessary.

M: Modern psychologists would, would definitely agree. [Laughter]

C: Yeah?

M: Modern psychology? It definitely—

C: Yeah.

M: They would definitely would agree that that's the way to go. So.

C: And so, you have to gain the respect of individuals for them to come around. You know, you can tell a person to go to hell, and they will get all angry, mad and

everything, and want to fight you. And then, you can tell that person to go to hell in such a way and such a tone that they look forward to the trip. [Laughter]

M: Ah, yeah!. [Laughter] That's very well said. I like that.

C: You see, my minor in college was in Psychology. [Laughter]

M: Oh, really? My minor's in religion.

C: Is that right?

M: Yeah, I'm majoring History, minoring Religion.

C: Mine was majoring in History and Government, and minor in Psychology—

M: I'm taking an educational psychology course now, that's just the only reason why I was able to pick that out. But that's, it's evident that that's what you knew.

C: Yeah.

M: Yeah.

C: I'd come home at night sometimes and figure out—I want to get something done, and I said, "Now, what strategy do I need to use to get it done?" And I threw it around and bounced it around in my head of how, what's the best approach to do it. And to do that, then, you look at the commissioners, you see? You got four commissioners, and you study each one of those commissioners' personality. [Laughter] You know. How you approach them. You can't approach them all the same way, because they all don't have the same kind of mannerisms. So you figure out how you would approach them. And as I say, the Sunshine Law, I couldn't go ahead, sit in the office, and talk with them and all that. But, well, on the telephone sometimes, get on the telephone: "Hi, how you doing?"

M: Smooth things over?

C: You know, you maneuver. And you throw something out on one way, and talk about the election, and they want to be reelected, and we talk about, I can throw them some votes one way. And well, sometimes you may not be—you need those votes. And those people, they look at me, and this is what they saying. I mean, through all the psychology, and all these strategies then. So, strategizing is a big part of politics, and how you handle it. And, I retired from the county commission; I was never defeated. And many times, I had no opposition. And when I had opposition, sometime I had two, three, or four opposing me. And I had to have fifty-one percent of the vote, and many times in the primary, I won in the primary, and then in the general election, well. Well there were some important individuals. Bankers, banker's sons, University of Florida engineers, mayor of City of Gainesville.

M: The mayor? Which mayor?

C: Well, **Cootman Collinger** was at one time; he was a University of Florida professor. But, Ben **Campen**, was a banker out in Hawthorne.

M: I saw one that—

C: One was an attorney.

M: I saw one, back in, what was it? It must have been in, the [19]70s. The gentleman was twenty-seven years old, and, he didn't have much going for him other than that he seemed to be a like a favorite son.

C: Oh yeah, yeah.

M: Do you remember that election? That's all right.

C: Yeah, but anyway, you know, what I learned in my campaign too, was how you could get people to vote. Do want to have a person just to be there? Or do you want a person with the experience? A person who has the knowledge? A person who has the understanding? A person who is a go-getter? A person who is a mover—a person who is a mover and shaker? A person who understand the government? A person who's going be on your side, to look out for your interests? You going to bring all the sides together and move this county forward? Or did you want to stagnate it, and want more of the same?

M: So, before we wrap up, is there anything else you want to discuss, or bring into light?

C: Well, I guess this is a start; this is some good information that I have. And the reason I asked about, can I get some of the information, because—

M: [Holds up newspaper articles] These?

C: Not—no, the information after you've compiled it.

M: Oh, yeah.

C: Not necessarily on *me* as an individual and *my* movement, but I would probably, write a profile of the growth and development of the City of Gainesville, Alachua County sometime. And I would probably use some of the material that you going compile.

M: Oh absolutely, yeah. Well, we'll be sending you the copy that I finish transcribing, and then the program will look over it, and do another sweep.

C: But I'm sure that there're other, you going to have other, you've talk with other individuals.

M: Yes, a lot of the people we're talking with are part of the Civil Rights Movement here in Gainesville, the Gainesville—

C: Yeah, that's what I'm saying.

M —Women for Equal Rights—

C: Mmhm.

M: —are a big part of the interviews that we're doing. So, oh yeah!

C: Because see, I'm—I would need, not just from that part, but from all the others. In fact, because see, when I put this together I would recognize those people. I'll—

M: Here's a card that will get you in touch—oh, no, that's that's study abroad. I did study abroad last year. That's study abroad, too. I'm sorry, I wanted to give you the Proctor Oral History Program card, but I didn't bring one with me. So, I guess we're going to wrap up—

C: The Civil Right Movement, do you have information on the theater integration?

M: The theater integration?)

C: I think it was Charles Chestnut, Aaron Green, and I can't think of who else it was.

M: I think at the Smathers library, they have a lot of that stuff, like a collection of it, and they—

C: Because, see, I'm going to the library—

M: And the *Gainesville Sun*, at the Alachua headquarters there, they have the index of the *Gainesville Suns* on the microfilm. And that's where I found a lot of these articles. Before I turn off the recorder, I have to ask you one more question on the tape: do you give this tape, copyright, to the University of Florida?

C: Do I give this—

M: The rights to the copyright for this interview to—

C: Oh, yes. Oh, yes; yes.

M: Okay, thank you.

C: That is, I'm pleased to let them accept this and include this in their archives if they wish to.

M: That'd be great. Okay. I'm going to go ahead and stop it.

[End of interview]

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