Interview of Marnesba Tackett Black Leadership in Los Angeles: Marnesba Tackett

Department of Special Collections
University of California, Los Angeles

Contents

Copyright Law

Restrictions on this Interview

None.

Literary Rights and Quotation

Photograph courtesy of Long Photography, Incorporated, Los Angeles, California.

Table of Contents

- Asked to head 1955 NAACP membership drive in Los Angeles--Reasons for drive's success.
- **TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (March 26, 1984)**
- Paul Robeson's protest against segregation at a concert in Kansas City, Missouri--Efforts to improve overcrowded conditions in black schools--The beginnings of the Mary Ellen Crawford case--Furor over the possibility that Los Angeles might become another Birmingham--United Civil Rights Council (UCRC) demonstration against the Los Angeles board of education--Questioned periodically by the FBI from 1963-67--Reflections on the McCarthy period.
- **TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (March 26, 1984)**
- Loren Miller, Sr., and George Crockett accused of being communists--Organizations that worked under the umbrella of the United Civil Rights Council.
- **TAPE NUMBER: V, Side One (April 4, 1984)**
- Fight against Proposition 14 in 1964--Governor Edmund G. Brown, Sr.'s unwillingness to come out strongly against Proposition 14--Tactics for discovering landlords and developers who discriminated against minorities--Influence of events in the South upon the Los Angeles environment--H. Claude Hudson--Leon Washington--Need to create a civilian police review board--Mayor's committee to investigate "Muslim riot" in 1962.
- **TAPE NUMBER: V, Side Two (April 4, 1984)**
- Malcolm X--Friendships with Ron Karenga, Tommy Jacquette, and other activists in the black community--On separatist movements--A strong belief in integration and in using the system.
- **TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side One (April 26, 1984)**
- Goes into real estate--Becomes executive director of the United Civil Rights Council (UCRC)--Working for Housing Opportunity Center (HOC)--Leaves HOC to work as fund-raiser for Kedren Community Mental Health Center--Offered job with Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).
- **TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side Two (April 26, 1984)**
- Activities as director of SCLC--Meets educator Dorothy Rich and organizes Project AHEAD (Accelerating Home Education and Development)--History of SCLC in Los Angeles--Cooperation between NAACP, Urban League, and SCLC--Leaves position as executive director of SCLC in 1981--Mother's illness--Consultant to Arnese Clemmon, founder of independent study program, Institute for Successful Living--Other consulting activities--Brief second marriage--Children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.
- **TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side One (April 26, 1984)**
- More on family--Causes and aftermath of the Watts riots--The present fight for civil rights.

1. Tape Number: VII, Side One April 26, 1984

Tackett

Terri [Keller Brown] is in junior high school, and Chris [Christopher William Brown] will be going to junior high school next year. They're both active young people.Hazel [Maurie Tackett Keller]'s next one is Cyrus [S. Keller, Jr.] Cyrus is— Oh, and I might say that Julie [Juliebeth Maurie Keller Brown] is a teacher. I don't believe she's working at the present time, but she did teach while they were in Japan. I don't believe that she's gotten a job. And the little interesting thing there, while they were in Japan they bought a car, and it's a two-seater. Then they have a van, which they left over here when they went to Japan, but it's still running. I said to them, "There's one question that I would like to ask you. Will you tell me why a family of four would buy a two-seater?" Julie's husband [William Lee Brown] spoke up, and he said, "You know, I thought Julie would get a job and buy another car." [laughter] So he said, "I bought the two-seater for myself to get me back and forth." At any rate, I guess they're looking for another car, but since Julie doesn't have a job, I guess they'll be riding in the van whenever the family goes out.Cyrus [Jr.] is living in Northern California, in Oakland I believe. He has one child, Jafar [Keller], who is now four years old, and he is just as smart as a whip. An interesting thing, at three years old I had gotten a television for mother's room, and Cyrus was trying to get it tuned in, working just right to get especially the programs that mother likes. Jafar was there, and his dad was working on it, and he picked up the book and he turned to it and he says, "Daddy, if you will read this, it will tell you how to fix it." So he's three years old. So he's quite a little man.Cyrus worked until last September at Rockwell International [Corporation] and was writing proposals for them. He and his wife decided that they would move up north. I'm not sure just what he is doing there now or whether he has a permanent job as yet. I thought it was not the most intelligent thing for them to do, but young people have to make their own way and do the things that they want to do. And so they are.Next to Cyrus is Michelle [Evaune Keller], whom we call Chelle. She was really the smart one in school, getting honors when she graduated from junior high school and from high school. But then when she got into college we made the mistake of giving her a used car, which after a few months she traded in for a new car, which meant that just having come out of high school she had to have two jobs in order to support the car.

And so she dropped out of college. She is now doing very, very well, however. She is going to school part-time in communications, and she is the communications assistant for the, I'm not sure I get this name right, I think it's United Church of Christ. They're stationed there in Saint Louis. She's a communications assistant and is doing quite well, and is directing the youth choir and the children's choir for her church. Her mother says that she is my child. She says, "Mother, she is just like you." [laughter] And she says, "Busy as she can be and taking charge of everything she's in." But nonetheless, she's very bright and is doing quite well.Then there is Marjo [Rene Keller], who is attending school at Grambling [State University] and who looks like she is going to become a professional student. She changes her major every year, to the extent that her mother has said to her, "Now, look, you go back there and you find out what you have credits in. I don't care what it is, but you get that piece of paper." So I'm not sure whether she'll do it this year or next year.And then the baby is Benjamin [Howard Keller], who was spoiled at birth. The doctors thought he was not going to live, and so he became a precious piece of tissue paper for all of the family. So he's [spoiled] rotten, but he's a fine young man. He was talking with his brother, who was here at the house at the time, and I heard his brother say to him, "What you need to do is come out here and stay with grandmother for a while and she will straighten you out." I said, "Now, you know I don't need this." But he is a fine young man, very active in church, and is nineteen years old and has not decided really what he wants to do. So that he is not in school at this time. I talked to him about it, but there is a generation gap you know. And I'm not sure what he wants to do. There's several of them, of his friends and members of the family, that feel that his frustration is probably due to the fact that he is probably going to go into the ministry. He's active in church and can quote the scriptures to you, whether he interprets it right or not. But those are the children.Now, the other children are younger. Joe [Joseph Orrin Tackett, Sr.] has three boys. One [Joseph Orrin Tackett II] is working for the telephone company and is a union "rep" [representative]. His mother was just telling me last week that he has gone with AT & T [American Telephone and Telegraph] in the split-up. The older boy [Charles Tackett] was in the army, and is now working for the company that his father worked for. His father was a salesman for a liquor distributor in the state of Kansas. The youngest one is in his last year in college. That's John [Jay Tackett], we call him Johnny. And he wants to teach,

actually wants to go to be an athletic director. This is his last year in college. He's in school: I believe his mother told me he's in Wichita now.Oh, and Joe [Jr.], the oldest one, has two children, Elizabeth [Tackett] and little Joey [Joseph Orrin Tackett III]. And those children are growing up now. Little Joey is just about ready for kindergarten, and Elizabeth is just as bright as she can be. She is named for several grandmothers whose names were Elizabeth. And I might say that my husband's first wife's mother just died a couple of weeks ago at 102, at age 102. So that's most of the family. And what are we doing now?

Balter

Did we talk about your stepson?

Tackett

Oh, Joe [Sr.], yes. Joe, I mentioned him as the liquor salesman for this distributor in the state of Kansas. He actually went to school and finished chiropractics, but never did practice. I don't know why he never took the test and never practiced, but he did very well as a liquor salesman. He was reared, actually, by his grandmother, and we lived just a few blocks apart. So that he and his sister were together all the time, and they did all of the things that sisters and brothers do. Such as bossing each other and telling us anything that they felt that the other didn't do, especially when they didn't obey what they wanted them to do.The interesting thing, when Hazel married, Joe did not speak to her for several months, because it was so stupid of her to marry a poor preacher when she could have married a rich undertaker's son that liked her. [laughter] And when Joe married Louise [Marnesba], oh, Hazel spoke to them, they were friends, but Hazel said to me, "What does he know about her? She's from New Orleans and he just met her and he's not sure," and all of these things. So I said, "You act like you are all each other's parents, but remember, Daddy and I are the parents. We're the ones who should be saying that." But at any rate, they really grew up together and spent a lot of time together. Joe was a stepson, he was born by another woman, but he was my son, too.

Balter

I understand he passed away.

Tackett

Yes, he died at age fifty-three, back in 1977. He died very suddenly of a heart attack. Drove his car home and fell in the driveway and never got up.

Balter

Marnesba, there's just a couple of things— Sort of chronologically, we're going back in time. Somewhat wrenching sometimes, I know, to do that, but that I felt were important that we get on record. Your recollections about— We alluded to, several times, the so-called "Watts riots," as they've come to be known, whether that's an accurate way of describing them or not, in August 1965. Certainly that was an event that has had a tremendous impact on the history of this city. A tremendous impact in many, many ways. What I'm interested in is your recollections of those events, the impact that they had in the black community, your recollections of what was going on at that time, how people were relating to that both in the black and white communities, as you recall.

Tackett

Actually, the riots came as a result, I think, of dashed hopes and expectations of the War on Poverty, when nothing changed in the black community. And because we were right at the cutting edge when the incident occurred over on Avalon [Boulevard], which was really not in Watts, with the police and a woman— I don't remember the incident clearly, but it just touched off conflagration, with young men going along burning buildings, and this sort of thing. And then with what you might call the normal police reaction to blacks, which caused police to come in shooting. Thirty-four people were killed. Most of them were shot in the back, and some were killed who just inadvertently went into that area that was cordoned off by police. As a matter of fact, when I left my house I had to turn to the right, because I could not go beyond Adams [Boulevard], because they came clear up to Adams here, and further east, all the way to Washington Boulevard.There was shooting through the night, claiming that there was shooting from buildings. I think a lot of it was sort of a yellow journalism, an overreaction of the press to things that they assumed were happening, because with all of the sniping that they claimed was taking place, no policemen were killed. They showed no pictures of police cars full of holes, being shot up from snipers. And my reaction to it, and to people who

were believing what they read in the papers, was that, you know, many of those people had to go out and shoot squirrels and rabbits in order to eat, and it seems odd to me that they're unable to hit a police car, as big as it is, that happens to be cruising down the street. So I think that it was thrown way, way out of proportion.There were those who said that it was planned. It was not planned. If it had been planned it could have been and would have been much, much more effective. And then too, if it had been planned, it seems to me that they would have had more sense than to attack stores, such as a furniture store which has one salesman in it, a liquor store which never has more than two salespeople in it at a time. So that there was not much to gain with the kind of— It was just a spontaneous thing with people going here and there.Plus, I believe, and I think with that I'm not the only one who has expressed this, that many—or some, not [to] say many—some owners saw it as an opportunity to collect their insurance and to get out of an area that they preferred not to be in. And I think they set the torch to their own stores. I was in the real estate business at the time, and one of our clients said to a salesman of mine that it's too bad that the riots didn't come this far and take my store. Interestingly enough, that store did catch fire some months later. I don't know the results, and I'm not insinuating anything, but it did catch fire. So that I think that the riots were way out of proportion.Now, what effect did it have? I think it had the effect of maybe polarizing the community to a great extent. Those persons who felt that we really were not getting very far in our fight for equality had at least another out, and that was the Vietnam War. So they moved into that, because I think an activist is going to have to find something to keep them active. If one thing falls, they all jump, go to another. Being an activist, I think I can say that. Another thing that happened, it gave an opportunity for the racist and the bigot to step forward with some degree of, what you might say, legitimacy. Thirdly, it proliferated the buying and ownership of handguns, that people bought ostensibly for their protection against the conflagration that's coming. It also caused some schism among those of us in the black community who were fighting for civil rights. Because you had a group that felt that we should adopt scare tactics and we should gain our freedom by any means possible, which became threatening. And there were some of us that began to move away, and then there was this, "We want to be separate and do our own thing." So for persons like me, who had been fighting to be included into the mainstream, an integrationist if you

please, I could not find myself fighting both ends against the middle. So I became quiet in terms of education, integrated education, and there were others who felt the same thing and reacted in that way.There were some positive things that happened. Among the positive things was the fact that a number of young people who had not been active became activists, and they were doing something—even if they were doing what in my opinion was wrong, was not the best approach. And that helped. Then there were people of goodwill and of good sense who said, "You know, the dashed hopes of these people had put them just on the edge where they could begin to do something like this." So money came into the community for job training, for some building, for some upgrading in the community. And there were people who came through there that were helped.One of the sad things about it is that the way programs are designed, and the length of time that they give to the programs, we find that they are really programmed for failure. Let's take the education under Title I. When a school moves above a certain percentile that school loses its money. So, you see, it's programmed for the teachers to say, "We can't move up too far, or we're going to lose what we've got. And what we have in hand is more important than the children that we're trying to bring up to a certain standard."So that there were some positive things out of it. I think there came some affirmative action, which did result in the majority of Afro-Americans who were trained and qualified to step in positions, gave them a chance to get into the positions. And that was helpful.I would like to see more of those persons who really took advantage of the civil rights movement by moving into better jobs, and moving into jobs at all— I think that it is unfortunate that more of them are not giving back to the community something for what they have gotten out of it. There are some that are doing that, but not nearly to the extent I think that it should be happening.I also feel that many of the radicals of that era have— They were bright people who took advantage of education and things, and those people now are becoming more conservative, and are doing good things in the community, and for themselves and for their families. So that it had its ill effects, it had its positive effects. I don't know whether we will ever have the kind of coalition and working together for the betterment of all people such as we had back in the sixties.

Balter

Marnesba, on that thought, we're coming— There's no real clear place to end sessions like these, but I think that we're coming near the end, certainly for now. Let me ask you a couple of things before we do end. One is, looking back over the several hours of sessions that we've had, spread out over a long period of time, are there any major areas or things that we have not covered that you feel were important, that we should have covered, omissions that could occur to you?

Tackett

I could probably tell you when I see what we have covered, because as I've talked today I haven't been sure that we haven't been repeating some things that were done before. I think that we have pretty well covered those things that were in my life and the things that I did. I think we talked about my years of working with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and the drives that we had and some of the accomplishments there. I think that we had mentioned those people who were the pioneers, especially Dr. [H. Claude] Hudson and Loren Miller [Sr.] and Thomas [G.] Neusom, and others who had really fought hard for civil rights and rights of all people. I think that we have pretty well covered it.And I think that we are seeing, at this time, a rejuvenation of the spirit that motivated us back in those days. I think Jesse [L.] Jackson is actually doing a marvelous job to, one, bring us to the realization that voting and moving into politics is certainly going to help. He has made many of us who thought that it could never happen know that the time will come when a black person can become president of the United States, which is something that we only said facetiously when we talked about a little black boy wanting be president. I feel that there is now an encouraging movement in that direction, while at the same time there's the discouraging fact of the lack of education and accomplishment still among our people. Schools are more segregated than they were when we fought in '63. The achievement of black children is no better in the schools in the inner city. And yet there are black children who are performing well in other schools.So there are many things that are left undone, while there are still things that are being done that give us courage. So I think, as I listen back to the tapes or see this written, there might be places where I would fill in some other things, but as it is now, I think we've had a very good session, and I appreciate the fact that somehow somebody

thought that all of the fighting that I've done was not in vain and that something ought to be written about it.

Balter

Well, I think that just about anybody who looks over these sessions will come to that conclusion. And I've enjoyed very much sharing this time with you, and I guess I have just one last thing to ask you—the answer may be yes or may be no. Are there any things that we have talked about, or things especially that you have remembered, that have surprised you or have been particularly important to you in remembering them, perhaps things you had forgotten or not talked about for a long time?

Tackett

Well, there are a lot of things that have happened that I have forgotten, and I'm meeting people all the time who are telling me that I did this or I did that or I helped them in this way or helped them that way. I have said to them finally, "One of these days you folks are going to stop lying on me." [laughter] Because as you go along in life you just do what comes natural. As we have talked I've thought about things that I haven't thought about for years, and it is good to reminisce and to talk about these things. People have been telling me I should write a book, and I don't know, maybe after I read this I will want to close the book forever, or I might want to write.

Balter

Well, I hope that you decide to write, and I'll be a person wanting to get a copy.

Tackett

Well, I thank you very much for this session.

Balter

Okay. I've enjoyed it very much.

2. Tape Number: I, Side One April 22, 1982

Balter

Mrs. Tackett, I'd like to start off by asking you some questions about your family background, when and where you were born, something about your parents and your grandparents, the rest of your family.

Tackett

I was born in Saint Louis, Missouri, on February 4, 1908. I was born to [Amy] Elizabeth Edwards and Ivory Adkins. My grandparents were [William] Richard and Annie [Williamson] Edwards, both of whom were slaves, but the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed the slaves, freed my grandmother as a little girl of about five years old. My grandfather was a teenager at the time. His real father was Alphran, Richard [Marnesba] Alphran, but he took the name of his slaveowner, who was Captain Edwards. I do not know his first name. They were in Louisiana. My grandmother's people were in Tennessee. She was actually the daughter of her mother and the slaveowner, as it was in that time. She had a brother who was also the son of the slaveowner. And then she had another brother and two sisters, who were born later to the man [Mr. Williamson] that her mother married.After my grandmother and grandfather married they moved to Saint Louis, and my mother grew up there and was married to Ivory Adkins. There were two children born to that marriage. After my father's death, my mother married Elias [Floyd] Tillmon, who was the only father that I really knew. My brother and I took the name of our stepfather, and I have three brothers and one sister. There are five of us.

Balter

What are their names?

Tackett

My oldest brother is [William] Richard [Tillmon], and the youngest is Edward [Elias] Tillmon. I have another brother, Floyd [Harold] Tillmon; we don't know where he is at this time. But my sister is Rachael [Elizabeth] Tillmon, now Poindexter, Rachael Tillmon Poindexter. [telephone rings] Would you excuse me? Let me answer that phone. [tape recorder turned off]

Balter

Mrs. Tackett, I wonder if you could, if you recall things that your grandparents might have told you, I suppose particularly your grandfather, about experiences before the ending of slavery. And also after that period of time.

Tackett

Actually, my grandfather did not talk about it too much, and he died when I was twelve years old, so that I did not have an opportunity to talk with him much. My grandmother, of course, was a very small child at the time that it happened. I do know that she did tell me that her mother and father were separated during slavery, sold apart. But they found each other afterwards, and they married, and they— Actually, I believe they moved to Memphis, Tennessee. But it was not too long after that when her father died of pneumonia. I don't know when her mother died.

Balter

Did she tell you how they were able to find each other?

Tackett

I don't remember the story, because I remember her telling me when I was a little child that they did find each other and were reunited, and her— I guess it was her baby sister who was born after that.

Balter

And then you mentioned that at one point it was your grandparents that moved to Saint Louis.

Tackett

Yes. And my mother was born in Saint Louis, and married there. And I was born, my brother and I were born, in Saint Louis. But we were reared in Kansas City [Kansas].

Balter

Tell me a little bit about your parents and what they did before you were born, during that period of time.

Tackett

Well, my father was a chef, cook, and he was the manager of the dining room and kitchen of the Union Club, a white club in Kansas City, Kansas. At the time of his death the owners of that club came to my mother, who really had had no experience along that line, she was a seamstress, and told her that she could have that job that her husband had, and that they would see to it that she had a living. She not only took that job but had her sister come from Saint Louis to help her, and her mother and father to move to Kansas City, where grandmother took care of the two of us and my grandfather worked at the Union Club. Grandpa had worked with a special land car, and he had been the steward on that car, buying food and stocking the car. So he had some experience there that helped my mother. That was the way she was able to take care of us until she met my stepfather, who—

Balter

Mr. Tillmon.

Tackett

Mr. Tillmon. And they married, and he was willing to marry a widow with two little children. Now Dad was a picture framer and stock man for the Daugherty Stationery Store, and, of course, the one thing that we never lacked was books. When school opened in Kansas City you paid for your own books, you had to purchase them, unlike here in Los Angeles. And, of course, he saw to it. All we had to do was bring our book list home, and when Dad came home from work that evening he came loaded with the books that we needed for school.

Balter

Now, this was Kansas City, Kansas?

Tackett

Kansas. Kansas City, Kansas, yes. We spent all of our school years there in Kansas City, Kansas. I was graduated from the Douglass School, the Sumner High School, and the junior college there. Of course, my brothers went to Kansas University, and my sister to Pittsburg [State] University. But I married when I was a senior in high school, when my husband promised that he would

send me to college. And when my daughter started kindergarten I started to college.

Balter

And the man you married, his name was?

Tackett

Joseph [Edgar] Tackett, who a few years after we were married went into the ministry, and was a Baptist minister.

Balter

Now, going back a little bit in time, what are some of your early memories as a young girl growing up in Kansas City?

Tackett

Well, I had a wonderful childhood. We lived in a neighborhood where there were several children that we played ball with, we ran footraces, and we lived in an area where the yards were adjoining, and it was flat, and there were about six or seven houses in that row. We often had track meets across those yards. There was not the heavy traffic that you have now, and so we had our baseball games, and the boys played—well, we call it hockey on ice, but we called it "shinny"—with sticks and cans out in the middle of the street.We had a very pleasant home. Our home was always open to the neighborhood children, and my mother was one who liked to have the children at home. So we invited the neighbors to our house perhaps much more than we went to the neighbors to visit.As a child in school I always thought that I had to be in the top part of my class, and my mother thought that too. So that I was active in everything that came along, and at the age of nine, and weighing about forty-two pounds, I tried to go out for the track meet at Douglass School. They did everything they could to help me, but I couldn't make it.

Balter

You couldn't make it.

Tackett

I found that same thing— At that time we had eight years of grammar school and four years of high school. When I got to high school, they had the girls

basketball team, and I tried very hard to get on the girls basketball team. But I had to give that up. So I settled for the debating team, for the school plays, for the oratorical contests, and that type of activity. In sports I became one of the main cheerleaders for Sumner High School, and that's the way I earned my letter.

Balter

Now, what were the patterns of segregation that you experienced in the neighborhoods and in the schools?

Tackett

Our schools were completely segregated. The schools in Kansas, except for Kansas City, Kansas, were integrated; they were not separated. But in Wyandotte County there was an incident—it did not involve schoolchildren—of a fight between a Negro, as we were called then, and a white, and the white young man was killed. After that they separated the schools. We—

Balter

This is in Kansas City.

Tackett

In Kansas City. In what was Wyandotte County, which took in a little more than Kansas City proper. Children, black children—Afro-American children, I like to call us—were bused, or they were given carfare to ride past white schools in their neighborhood, to come to the black school. So busing has always been acceptable for segregation; it's only unacceptable when the busing is for integration.We had teachers who were dedicated and who wanted us to excel. I can recall when there was competition between the schools in a music, classical music contest, that our teachers saw to it— Many of us did not have that music in our homes, but they picked up bright students and we listened to the records. And the school that I attended, Douglass elementary school, or grade school as we called it, won first prize. We made 100 percent in that contest with all of the schools in the city.I recall that there was a time when we had a mathematics contest among the schools, and we were given tests. Douglass School ranked highest in that test. Reading was emphasized. I did not realize until I wasgrown and moved away from Kansas

City that our schoolbooks did not give us any history of the Afro-American, because we had teachers who, when they taught us about the Revolution, taught us that Crispus Attucks was the first to die in the Revolution.We had, when I was in high school, visitors to come to our school. I heard W. E. B. Du Bois. I saw and heard Roland Hayes sing. We learned poems, and Paul Laurence Dunbar visited our school. George Washington Carver was brought to Kansas City and talked with us. Mary McLeod Bethune came and visited our school and spoke to us. So that there was never a time that I can recall in growing up that I felt inferior, or that I felt that I, as an Afro-American, could not do anything that anybody else could do.Now, we did not have segregation in transportation. You could sit anyplace on the bus, or on the streetcar. But you could not attend white theaters. There were stores in which you could not try on a pair of gloves or a hat. You could not stay in any of the hotels or eat in those hotels. I can recall one instance when I went with a friend to the stand-up counter at the dime store and ordered a hot dog and a bottle of pop, and they handed everyone around me their sandwich simply in a napkin, but mine was put into a sack. I took it out of the sack, standing there at the counter, and— But I hadn't paid for it, because I began to suspect something was wrong. The clerk said, "You can't stand here and eat that hot dog." And so, of course, I had put my hands on it, and I said, "Then I won't pay for it." And I gave it back to her. She says, "Oh, you have to pay for it." I said, "No. It's your hot dog and my money, and I am not going to pay for it."

Balter

How old were you at that time?

Tackett

I was about fourteen. I can also recall, I had long hair that I— My father was very much opposed to a woman cutting her hair, and they would not let me bob my hair when it had become fashionable. So finally I talked my mother into it. I had seen an ad in the ten-cent store that they would cut a child's hair for twenty-five cents. I had the quarter, and although I was a teenager, about fifteen years of age, as short as I am they did not know that I was not just a child. I took my quarter, I went, and I had this long hair that was down to my waist cut off. It took her just about three minutes just to take the scissors and cut it all around, just straight, no style or anything, and then she handed me

this hair in a sack. But I left there, and of course friends wanted to know, where did you get your hair cut? I told them, "At the dime store." And they said, "Don't you know they don't cut colored folks' hair at the dime store?" So that was one occasion when they did not recognize; I passed inadvertently. Because the one thing that I have never been ashamed of is the fact that I am of African descent. I've always been proud of that.

Balter

Now, I was intrigued by some things you were saying before about the school segregation in Kansas. As I understood you, you said that except for Kansas City, other schools in other places in Kansas were not segregated.

Tackett

That is correct. In Topeka, in Salina, in Coffeyville, Kansas, all over Kansas the schools were integrated. Whites and blacks went to school together. And they were going to school together in Kansas City, Kansas.

Balter

Now, when— This episode that you referred to, a fight, and a white man was killed, when would that have been? Around what time?

Tackett

It must have been in the late 1800s or early 1900s.

Balter

So before—

Tackett

It was either— It was before I was born, yes. Because I had never known anything but segregated schools. As a matter of fact, going down Washington Boulevard, there was a white school at Eighth [Street] and State [Street], Eighth or Ninth [Street] and State, and the black school was at Ninth and Washington. Whites and blacks used to walk down Washington from Seventh to Ninth streets and, well, almost walk together. And sometimes talk to each other. In the wintertime, when we went sleigh riding, there was a hill from one street down to the next, an alley, wide alley. And we all rode our sleds together there with no problem whatsoever.

Balter

So the segregation in the schools of cities such as Topeka was something that came later.

Tackett

Yes, that came later.

Balter

Do you recall around what time that would have been?

Tackett

No, I don't know what time that would have been. I said in Topeka the schools were not segregated. Now, Topeka is about, what, twenty-five to forty miles from Kansas City, and could be a part of Wyandotte County. Now, I'm not sure, but Topeka, yes, it could have been a part of Wyandotte County. Because the schools in Wyandotte County were segregated at that time. So I do know, though, in western Kansas, for years after that, as late as, oh, in the forties, I believe, the schools— In the thirties, I know the schools were integrated. They were not separated.

Balter

I see. What this brings to— I'm reminded—

Tackett

So, the reason you mentioned Topeka is because of the 1954 decision, which was Topeka versus the Board of Education [Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 347 U.S. 483, 349 U.S. 294 (1954)]. Interestingly enough, that case was that the father wanted his daughter to go to the nearest school, the neighborhood school, which was white. And she had to go across the railroad tracks on a dangerous route to an all-black school. So Topeka is probably a part of Wyandotte County. That shows that I have forgotten some of the history.

Balter

Although, as we talk about it I'm reminded of having read long ago C. Vann Woodward's book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow,* in which, I seem to recall

now, he pointed out that a lot of the Jim Crow laws came about after the 1910s and 1920s.

Tackett

Yes, yes, yes. As a matter of fact, in Kansas City there was a lot of activity with the Ku Klux Klan in the twenties.

Balter

What are some of your recollections of that?

Tackett

I can recall that the Klan visited several churches and demanded that those churches not have an integrated membership, that they not serve blacks, and demanded separation and that sort of thing. I can recall that. You see, being born in 1908, those were things that happened, that I knew about; I think that helped to cement my determination to do something about civil rights.And I have been active with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] Negro History Week. When I went to Kansas City Bible College with my husband—he became a minister after we were married—I know I asked if I could bring a program during Negro History Week, because there were only three or four Afro-Americans who were attending the bible college. However, it was not segregated at all. But I felt that those people did not know, and so I wrote *Heartthrobs of a Handicapped People*and put it together with a group who sang Negro spirituals. We gave the program first there, and every time someone heard it they asked us to come someplace else, and we were busy, I know, for a period of close to a year giving that program. We gave it in schools; we gave it for the chamber of commerce, for the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association], for church after church. And, of course, we were all volunteers, until the people that sang with me said, "Look, Marnesba, it's just going too far. We can't keep up." Because we had to pay our own transportation, and there was never a thought of anybody giving you an honorarium for that sort of thing. But we did a great deal to spread the history of our people, going back to Africa.

Balter

Now, it's clear that your pride in your heritage began at a very early age. What role did your parents and your family play in this? You talked some about the teachers and the programs at school. Did you have discussions in your family about—?

Tackett

Yes, we had some discussions. I think, though, I was kind of a rebel, because I can recall my father cautioning me regarding some of my forward acts, some of the things that I did and that I fussed about at home. He cautioned me not so much because he thought I was wrong, but because he feared for the repercussions that might come as a result of my refusal to take a backseat anywhere. And I— You know, the theaters that we could go to, I distinctly remember the Orpheum Theatre had a special ticket booth in the alleyway. You stepped in off of the alley, oh, I guess maybe twenty feet or so, and went in and you could sit in the balcony. At the Shubert Theatre you could buy tickets but you could only sit in the balcony. I don't remember whether they had a special ticket booth and entrance for you as they had at the Orpheum Theatre.I can recall that when they did decide, after the YWCA and the NAACP fought for integration, the right to eat in restaurants and whatnot, that what they did, they would set up a special counter for blacks, or Negroes, as we were called at that time. I can recall that in the department stores they had, at the rest rooms, they had signs up, "For White Only." I remember one of our friends—and I guess I came up with a rather militant crowd—who was running an elevator— By the way, [he] had a master's degree but during the Depression couldn't get a job, and he was running an elevator in the Jones Store when they put up signs, "Special Rest Room in the Basement for Negroes," and directed them there. He protested, and he lost his job as an elevator operator because of that protest.I guess I came along with a group that fought for civil rights all the way through life. A group of people who were just dissatisfied with the way things were going, and we were just active. And not only there, but I can recall when I was in high school, in the old Sumner High School, we had wooden floors. Between classes it was extremely noisy with the children walking from class to class, and then trying to talk above that made it just kind of a bedlam going from class to class. So they issued an order that we could not talk in the halls in going from class to class. And a friend of ours had a press and made numbers, and I was, of course, in that rebellious

group that— Then the next morning we stood in front of the school and we passed out cell numbers. If we had to be in jail we ought to have a number, and so we passed out cell numbers. Now, it's true, there were a few people who were suspended. I guess I was so short they couldn't see the number on me, because I was not suspended. [laughter] And when I found out that they were being suspended, knowing what would happen when I got home, I took my number off, pronto. But there were a few who were suspended, but we were able to compromise and we got the message across to the teachers.

Balter

At the high school, the militant crowd that you were running in, as you put it, were you organized into some sort of a formal club?

Tackett

Oh, no, we didn't have to organize, we were just together. We did not. And our class was an unusual class that was always thinking up something new to do, something different. I recall in our interclass sports, in basketball, I remember when we were juniors, and the junior boys were playing this particular afternoon, and we were winning. We were beating the seniors. And I said to a group— We had a saying then, "dropping the shucks", and if somebody got the best of a person we'd say they dropped the shucks on them. And there was a cornfield near by. The corn was there, you know, they had— It was dried up, so I said, "Let's go over to the cornfield and get those shucks." So we did and we brought them back. We stood in the balcony, and when that game was over, shucks were all over that place. We threw shucks all over the gym. So that there were things that we did that were unusual, and that gave our principal some headaches, I think, and gray hairs.

Balter

Now, at the high school, Sumner High, what was the racial makeup of the faculty and the administration?

Tackett

It was all black.

Balter

All black. So all the students were black?

Tackett

All the students were black; all the teachers were black.

Balter

And the principal, too?

Tackett

And the scholastic achievement was high. The one thing that I remember our principal saying in assemblies, "This is not a Negro high school. This is a high school. We're as good or better than any other high school in the United States." Our motto was "Be Prepared," and we had teachers who saw to it that you got what you should get. In literature, we offered all of the courses that they are now talking about here in California requiring in order to enter the University of California. We had Latin; Caesar and Virgil [were] taught in our high school. We had French, and— I don't believe we had Spanish, but we did have French, and we had Latin. And those were required subjects. For those students who were what we call college-preparatory students, there was civics and government, there was history, literature, English literature, American literature. You were allowed to take one or two electives a year. Among those were typing and shorthand, which I think should have been a required subject for anybody who wants to go to college. You could have clothing, cooking, gym. For the fellows, because at that time we didn't think, like we do today, that men and women are one and the same, we had woodwork classes for the men, manual arts.

Balter

How many black high schools were there in Kansas City at that time?

Tackett

One.

Balter

So this was the one black high school.

Tackett

The one black high school, and there was one white high school. Kansas City, Kansas, was a small town. There was one— When they changed the system to the six-three-three [six years grade school, three years junior high school, three years high school], they built a junior high school for whites and a junior high school for blacks. So that there was— In education there was absolutely no mixing. I can recall when my sister was in junior high school they had a sewing contest, and they did not even allow the white and the black schools to compete against each other. This was at Memorial Hall, and they had segregated seating. Of course, I went in with my little crowd and, taking note of what was happening, I did not need any help to get to my seat, I found a seat. And then they asked us to move. "We're perfectly happy right here." This was sponsored by the *Kansas City Kansan* paper, newspaper. Now, the Northeast Junior High School, the black junior high school, competed among themselves. The whites competed among themselves.

Balter

And yet they were all—

Tackett

And yet they were all in the same hall, and they had segregated seating. When you looked up, here were all the blacks over here, here were all the whites over there.

Balter

Were there any opportunities—again, sort of focusing on this period of time up to the end of high school—were there any opportunities for black and white young people to have any type of social interaction at all?

Tackett

None, no. There was no social interaction. Actually, none until you got into the YWCA. We were among the first to really work toward integration. Now, there was a black branch of the main YWCA. And, of course, all of the girl reserves, the business and professional girls, the industrial girls, blacks were in this setting and the whites were in another setting. I was perhaps the liaison, or the go-between, or the one to begin to bring about some kind of cooperation, some kind of togetherness.I was a member of the business-professional club.

We began to meet together and to do things together, and it was out of this setting in the Y that we started the sit-ins in 1930. You see, the sit-ins were not a product or original in the sixties; we had sit-ins in the thirties, when whites and blacks would go together to the theaters and the restaurants—and I was a part of that—and sit down to be fed. And would sit and sit and wait and wait and sometimes finally be waited on and sometimes never waited on. To go to a meeting in hotels, blacks had to ride the freight elevators; they couldn't ride the regular elevators. Yet they're going to the same meeting with whites and blacks in this hotel. I can recall on one occasion when I went to the Baltimore Hotel there when they wanted us to go around and come in another door. It happened we refused to do that and we did get in.

3. Tape Number: I, Side Two April 22, 1982

Balter

I wanted to ask you a couple of things about the sit-ins. First of all, the organizers— Now, this is a period in the thirties?

Tackett

Yes.

Balter

You had already graduated from high school, which was one or two years before that.

Tackett

Oh, yes. I graduated from high school in 1926.

Balter

Okay. The sit-ins that you are mentioning now, they were organized by people who were around the YWCA?

Tackett

Yes.

Balter

And what other organizations were involved?

Tackett

The YWCA and the NAACP were the major organizations, and the people who were involved were mostly people in those two organizations. Of course, they were joined by people who were in fraternities and sororities, but they also were members of either one or both of the organizations. It was really organized and carried out within the framework of the YWCA, and then about the same time that CORE was organized, we organized what we called COPOD, Committee on the Practice of Democracy.

Balter

And CORE was Congress of Racial Equality.

Tackett

CORE was the Congress of Racial Equality. But the CORE was not in Kansas City, and this included Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri. COPOD was a group of active men, women, young people, who were— And clergy. The church has always been a vital part of our thrust for equality, and so there were ministers who were a part of COPOD. I was one of the organizers in COPOD and, I believe, its first treasurer.

Balter

How would the appropriate city authorities react to these sit-ins going on? Do you recall?

Tackett

I do not recall any arrests at that time. You see, we were in the throes of the Depression, following the crash of 1929, and as I recall, at the same time that we were doing these things there were voter-registration drives, there were thrusts to have representatives in government. It was, oh, in the late thirties or early forties that we elected a commissioner to the city of Kansas City, Kansas. There was this thrust to break down the barriers in department stores that would allow people to try on hats and to be fitted for gloves. We were breaking down, taking those signs down, "For White Only," that appeared in the department stores in the rest rooms. And fighting for the lunch counters too, and hotels and theaters and all to be desegregated. I left Kansas City in

1948, and it was really not until the late forties and in the fifties that the theaters began to allow blacks to come in and sit anyplace that they wanted to sit.I can remember there was a park called the Electric Park, I believe, in Kansas City, Missouri. When I was a child, a teenager, at the end of the season that park was open for a period of a weekend when blacks could come to it. All of those things were the things that I saw, and recognizing that I was a citizen, that I had the same constitutional rights as anybody else, those things irked me. I began to refuse to accommodate these people who would make a fortune at the close of the season on allowing Negroes, who couldn't come at any other time, to go.

Balter

So it was just one weekend, period.

Tackett

Just one weekend, period, in September, after the park had closed down. And so, of course, the weather might not be good at all, you might be out there with your winter coat on. So all of that that I saw needed changing.Another thing that we noticed in the papers: if a crime was committed they would call a person's name once, and then in the article, "The negro did this and the negro did that" and "They caught the negro at such and such a place," just like they were talking about the dog, the dog, the dog, you know. And with a small *n.* And, of course, there was that thrust there. See, NAACP was started in 1910, and there was a thrust there to have people capitalize *Negro.* Now, of course, I could see no real percentage in capitalizing *Negro.* I see no point in capitalizing *black.* In fact, I see no point in you calling me by a color. Call me Afro-American, because that is what I am, you see. If you want to describe me you might describe me by my color, but don't treat me as a person without an origin. When you identify me by a color— And that's all *Negro* is, black. When you identify me by a color and that's the only way you identify me, you take away a part of my citizenship and a part of my birth-right. And it is true I do not know and haven't studied to search to find the city or the country in Africa from which I came, but I do know that my ancestors, at least a part of my ancestors, were brought over here on the ship as slaves. And if you wanted to say what you actually— For me to give my identity by birth, I would [be] an African-American-Indian. Because that's what is there.

Balter

That's what's there. Right.

Tackett

You see. And I, I just feel that when you start talking about us as a people, you ought to talk about us just like you would talk about the man who is here from Ireland. He's an American but he's of Irish descent. I'm an American; I'm of African descent. And I have wanted that. I suppose I instilled it, or we instilled it in our daughter, to the extent that when she made her application for college and they asked what race, she put down human. [laughter]

Balter

What is your daughter's name?

Tackett

Hazel, Hazel Maurie [Tackett Keller]. So I suppose the whole background of teaching— And so there is some advantage in an all-ethnic setting. There is some advantage. It's a cultural advantage and a historical advantage. And I had benefit of that in growing up in Kansas City, Kansas. I had benefit of that. I think that the children who have grown up here in Los Angeles, where they had white teachers even in a segregated setting, missed that advantage, they lost it. Because the people first were ignorant of our culture, because it was not taught, or of our history because it was not taught to them in the schools. And I had that advantage. I did not realize that our textbooks were devoid of our history because the teachers supplemented that.

Balter

Now, this raises an interesting question, I think. During various periods of time—more recently, particularly, the sixties—a lot of attention has been focused on the various separatist movements. Perhaps in my experience or memory, beginning with the Muslims early on and then later in the sixties with the so-called Black Power movement and other trends such as that. During the period of your youth, in the late twenties, thirties, early forties, along in there, was there any type of parallel movement that you were aware of?

Tackett

Yes. Yes, there was what we called the Marcus Garvey back to Africa movement. A number of people belonged to that, and many of us at that time sort of looked at them and smiled, you know, because our idea, and mine, has not been the necessity to colonize someplace else, but the necessity to become a full-fledged American citizen, first-class, into the mainstream with opportunities open. So that I can sit anyplace that I please, I can stay in any hotel I can afford to stay in, I can live in any neighborhood I can afford to buy a home in, and I want to go to school with everybody else so that I get the education that they get. And you see education is not just books, because we had it. And we had many— I've told you the instance of a friend of mine who had a master's degree running an elevator. We've had them with Ph.D.'s, with expertise in numerous fields, but they could not get a job. They couldn't get a job.I remember when I did the income tax for my mother and dad, and my youngest brother was in college, Mother and Dad became very upset with me because I took a deduction for Edward [Elias Tillmon], who was in college, for them. And, of course, she was called into question [by the Internal Revenue Service] and she went to talk with the man. He wanted to know why— "This is not an allowable deduction and why would you take it?" My mother said to him, "I took that deduction because my son is a Negro. Now he's in college just like your son. But your son can come out and in the summer work to help himself go to school. My son cannot get a job, but he's qualified. He could work at Grosman's (which was one of the department stores there) or he could work at the Jones Store as a salesperson. But he can't get a job because of the color of his skin. So I feel I'm entitled to the deduction." And the man says, "So do I," and said, "Go home and forget about it."

Balter

He gave it to her.

Tackett

Yes, he gave her the deduction. Now, all I'm saying is that I saw the time when qualified people could not get jobs strictly based upon that extra requirement that was put up when a person of color went to look for a job. Had nothing to do with qualifications, had nothing to do with educational background. It had only to do with one thing, and that was color, and before that person could open his mouth or make an application he was denied the job. Now we have

it, especially here in Los Angeles, where we have managed to fight to open the door, we've gotten a wedge in the door, so they're not educating the children, they're not teaching them to read. So that twenty years from now they can have a legitimate excuse for not hiring in addition to the color of his skin. He can't read, he can't go to college, he can't get a college education. And that's the reason that I'm fighting so for equal opportunity in education.Now, the thing about it is, if you are together, you at least are exposed to everything that the other child is exposed to. Not only that, you're exposed to the friendships out of you being there together. So if you happen to be outstanding in mathematics or in physics or in biology and you're going to school with this student whose dad has a factory or industry or whatnot, and you're out, you're looking for a person and you need somebody who is an expert in so and so and so and so, he thinks among his friends. And he says, "Where is John Jones? He was a whiz in mathematics when we were in school, and he is just the person we need. Dad, I'm going to find out what he's doing now and see if we can get him." It's the same thing that you have in baseball and football and basketball. You see, Magic [Earvin] Johnson is not paid what he's paid because he's black. He just happens to be the most fantastic basketball player there is, and so they want him and they don't care what color he is. And this is what has to happen in industry.

Balter

Now, to go back again—

Tackett

I'm sorry, I get carried away.

Balter

That's quite all right. It gives us a good idea of your feelings and thoughts on these things. During— Again, I must admit to being fascinated with the sit-ins and demonstrations and so on.

Tackett

In the thirties.

Balter

Against discrimination in the thirties. I think perhaps to a large extent because in the popular history nowadays we think of the civil rights era as being something restricted to the fifties and sixties. So I'm wondering, during this early period of time and the things you were involved in, were there any notable successes? Now, you mentioned that—

Tackett

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. For example, before the period of the sixties, the theaters were opened in Kansas; the lunch counters were opened; and they quit serving you at separate counters; hotels were opened. And the '54 decision in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* had ramifications that were much wider than just education. So there were many successes. As I said, in politics— And I'm thinking mainly of Kansas City, Kansas, where I was— I mentioned the three commissioners, one [of whom] was black. Policemen were being hired. I don't know whether— Yes, I believe that the fire department was integrated before '60.

Balter

Now, how was the white community reacting during this period of time, especially again in the earlier days, and did you have any allies in the white community of note?

Tackett

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Because, you see, the YWCA was the YWCA of the cities of Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas. So it was a joint— Oh, yes, yes, it was joint.

Balter

And did you run into any stiff resistance from some segments of the white population from time to time?

Tackett

Yes. There was some resistance, but nothing compared with the resistance in the sixties in the South, in trying to open up the South. Because Kansas was never a slave state. It was always free, and except for the complete segregation in the schools, in education, there was not a great deal of— There

was the dual system, but it was more subtle than in many other places, even than in Kansas City, Missouri, in the sister city.

Balter

Are there any particular incidents or forms of the white resistance that did take place that come to mind? Were there ever any violent incidents or vigilantism?

Tackett

No, no, not that I recall, not that I recall. There was some police malpractice, some brutality, but I do not recall there being an outspoken racism. It was more a thing that was understood, and the progress that was made was made by negotiation. For example, in this high school contest that I mentioned, I took it to— I was working then at the Sentinel Loan and Investment Company as the [book]keeper [and] cashier, and I told my boss. He immediately pulled together the ministers and businessmen in that community and went to the*Kansan.* And the *Kansan* was owned by a senator from the state of Kansas. So they mentioned the political implications as well, and the *Kansan* did not have another segregated type of contest.

Balter

That's right, the *Kansan* had sponsored it.

Tackett

Yes, the *Kansan* had sponsored it. And the same was true of the theaters. There were the sit-ins, but there was also the negotiation. There was the talking with management of the department stores and management of the theaters and the hotels, and then there was just, on the part of many people, there was just the refusal to accept and take this kind of segregation on an individual basis. For example, when we refused to go around to the other door. We stated that we were there for a meeting, and may we see the manager. We immediately go to the top, because the fellow at the door is only doing what he's told to do. So you ask for the manager, and then you talk to the manager, and you know— Now, that didn't open it up for everybody, but we got to go in to attend that meeting we were there to attend. The barriers were broken down, at that time, in that way.And with the heads of your

YWCA, white and black going together, you were able to get some things accomplished, and without a lot of fanfare, and without violence. I can recall the opening of Douglass State Bank, and the getting of that charter. It was a black bank, black owned, and there was resistance. But you always have an ally somewhere in the white community who would give you the ropes, the people to see who would intercede for you. And, of course, we were able to get the charter.So that was the way that it was done, and there was not the kind of resistance that we had in the sixties. I don't recall any instance of it. Of course, as I said, there was a time of the resurgence of the Klan, and making itself known in and around Kansas and Missouri, but that, you know, soon died down, because there have always been some people of goodwill who say, "This can't be." As a matter of fact, the kind of acceptance that the Klan is getting now is new. You know, in my lifetime, you don't find the people who are in the place of power speaking out against the Klan now, like we saw it then.

Balter

Yeah. Yeah.

Tackett

I don't know what the reason is, and that gets completely off the subject. But there were always people of goodwill who teamed up together to make things better, what they ought to be.

4. Tape Number: II, Side One September 8, 1982

Balter

Marnesba, last time we talked a great deal about some of your civil rights activities when you lived in Kansas City, Kansas, and I would like to go back at this point and catch up a little bit on your family life. I know that you got married in 1926, as I understand it.

Tackett

Yes.

Balter

I wonder if you could tell me how you met your husband, and about your children, and so on.

Tackett

Well, I met Joe [Joseph Edgar Tackett] when I was a junior in high school. We actually were introduced by a mutual friend who was a neighbor of mine, and he and I began a courtship. He was older. He had been married and had a child [Joseph Orrin Tackett]. His wife had died when that child was born, and the baby was just about a year old at the time I met him. We married my senior year in high school; we slipped off and got married, really. [laughter] And, of course, my mother [Elizabeth Edwards Tillmon] was very upset because she had planned for her daughter to— Who was doing well in high school, was very active in all of the things that we were doing in addition to the class activity with the *Sumnerian,* the newspaper, with plays in school, with the annual, and in debates and oratorical contests, and so she had in mind that I should go, of course, to college. My husband, who insisted on our marriage, or it was my boyfriend who insisted on us getting married, promised that he would send me to college if we married. So we married. I told my mother about it several days later, and she thought of having it annulled, but my father [Ivory Adkins] and a lady for whom she worked, and my Aunt Alice, actually talked her out of it. And some ten months and three days after our marriage on January 31— December 3—our baby girl [Hazel Maurie] was born. We lived at home with our parents for awhile, but then went on to housekeeping and finally we moved back together. Mother and Dad moved with us in a home that we bought. I went back to school; of course, my education was deferred, and I started in Kansas City [Bible] College when I enrolled my daughter in kindergarten.

Balter

Now, let me stop you for just a moment and get some of these names. Your husband was Joseph Tackett.

Tackett

Joseph Tackett. Joseph Edgar Tackett.

Balter

And then his child—

Tackett

Was Joseph Orrin Tackett.

Balter

I see, and your daughter—

Tackett

Daughter, Hazel Maurie Tackett [Keller]. The Hazel was for my husband's first wife, who died when the first baby was born.

Balter

I see.

Tackett

So those were our two children. Joseph Orrin was reared by his maternal grandmother, he lived with her, but we were a very close family, and in the summertime my daughter spent several weeks with him and his grandmother. Joe spent weeks with us although we lived in the same town; it was that close a relationship. And I know Mrs. [Jean] Scott, his maternal grandmother, said that these children are really brother and sister, and they felt that way all through life. My husband died after we moved here to Los Angeles in 1958, at the age of fifty-seven, and, of course, that left me a widow. I tried marriage a second time, but that marriage was annulled, believe it or not. [laughter]

Balter

That one was.

Tackett

And so I haven't had the nerve to try it since then. Yes, that was in 1961.

Balter

I see.

Tackett

Yes, he died in '58. I married again, Christmas of '61, and that lasted only a few months and was annulled.My daughter is, of course, grown. She has had six children. Her oldest child, little Edward Joseph [Keller] died of meningitis when he was eight years old. The other children are all about grown. The youngest went to college this year. He has gone to Wilberforce [University]. The one next to him is a senior in college, in Louisiana at Grambling [State University]. The oldest daughter is in Okinawa. I have just come back from Japan visiting them for a couple of weeks with her husband, who is a major in the air force, in the Strategic Air Command station there, and she is teaching in a private school there. She has two children: a daughter who is twelve; a son, ten.

Balter

And what are the names of these other children?

Tackett

Their children— That's Juliebeth, Juliebeth Keller Brown. Her husband's name is William Lee Brown. Their children are Terri Keller Brown, and Christopher [William] Brown. I might say—of course you know my height of less than five feet—her twelve-year-old daughter is five feet four and a half inches tall. So she looks down on her great-grandmother. The boy, I'm afraid, took after me. I hope he's going to start growing soon. The next to the oldest grandson is Cyrus S. Keller, Jr. [telephone rings] Would you pardon me while I answer that phone? [tape recorder turned off]

Balter

You were finishing up telling me the names of your children and grandchildren.

Tackett

Yes, yes. Cyrus Keller went to UC [University of California] Santa Barbara, did not finish there, decided in his senior year—twelve hours [units] from his degree—to drop out and take a trip to Cuba. And his grandmother was unable to persuade him to stay in school and then pay his own way to Cuba and anyplace else he wanted to go when he got a job. But he did come back from Cuba, and he has done very well on a job, and is now writing proposals for Rockwell International [Corporation]. Doing very well there.My next

granddaughter is Michelle [Evaune Keller], who is employed with a Christian organization in their communications division and is now going to school in Saint Louis in the evening. I believe she is enrolled in Saint Louis University there and has decided to get her degree in communications.Then there is Marjo [Rene Keller]. Her name is a combination of mine and her grandfather's. Marjo is studying in Grambling, as I mentioned, and her field is music, vocal music. And some minor, I believe in communications.Benjamin [Howard Keller] has just been graduated from high school, and this is his first year at Wilberforce. What he will do, and how he will do, I'm not sure, [laughter] but he is another tall one. He is a little over six feet tall.I didn't mention that Cyrus has a son, two years old, whose name is Jafar [Keller]. He and his wife [Francois] live here in Los Angeles.Now, on the other side, Joseph Orrin died in 1978 of a heart attack, and his wife [Louise] is still living in Kansas City. They had three sons. One is in college in Wichita. One is employed by the telephone company in Kansas City. The oldest— I'm not sure what he is doing. He did a stint in the service, and he is married and he has two children. He is Joseph Orrin [Tackett], Jr. Then there is Chucky—Charles [Tackett]—and the youngest one is John Jay [Tackett], the one that is in college. Joe's two children are Joseph [Orrin Tackett] III, I guess he is now, and Elizabeth [Tackett]. They are tiny tots.

Balter

So your family spans five, four or five generations.

Tackett

Five generations.

Balter

Your mother, who is still living—

Tackett

Yes, who is still living at ninety-seven. That's Elizabeth Tillmon. She is a great-great-grandmother, and then I come next, her daughter, my daughter, my daughter's daughter, and my daughter's daughter's daughter.

Balter

Wonderful.

Tackett

So there are five generations of women, in addition to the young men who are in that fifth generation. So Terri is twelve, and if mother lives, like some, to be 103, 104 or 105, we might have six generations. [Note: Elizabeth Edwards Tillmon died on April 7, 1983. See pages 61-62 of this oral history transcript.]

Balter

Six generations. Okay, now, after you and your husband Joseph Tackett were married and had obviously established yourselves in Kansas City, what were you doing for a living and what type of work were both of you doing?

Tackett

Well, my husband worked for an optical company manufacturing eyeglasses, and, after I finished school, I started— My first job was with the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] as an assistant to Mrs. [Velma Hardee] Middlebrooks, who was the executive secretary of the Negro branch, called Yates Branch YWCA. I worked there for several years as her assistant. I had charge of the college Y girls club, the industrial girls club, and was a member of the professional club called Deroloc, colored spelled backwards. And in that is really— Of course, now, I had been a member of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. We joined when we were in school. We learned what we called the Negro national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," when we were in school. We joined the NAACP in school as a part of our extracurricular activities.We had great people to come and talk with us. Roland Hayes visited our school. I remember Mary McCleod Bethune visited us. W. E. B. Du Bois. We were in a segregated school, and thanks to our principals and our teachers, we learned of our history along with the history of the United States and the world history. So it was only natural that, in working with the YWCA, that I began to establish interracial relationships as a member of the professional girls club. We associated with the club that—the counterpart in the white branch of the YWCA.

Balter

Now, you have referred to the Negro branch and the white branch.

Tackett

Yes.

Balter

Why was it that way?

Tackett

It was that way because of the dual system in the United States of America that separated whites from blacks. You see, at that time blacks—or Afro-Americans, as I really prefer—could not go to the white theaters, they could not swim in the city pools. There were those for white and there was a pool for blacks. The schools were segregated, and the Y, although they were a sort of a human relations group, still followed that segregated pattern. We had a committee of management which was made up of all Afro-American women. They had a board of directors which was entirely white, even though that board of directors was the board for the entire city.As I worked at the Y, and then I moved out into other work, first with the Sentinel Loan and Investment Company as a bookkeeper and cashier, and later with the Atlanta Life Insurance Company as a salesperson and assistant to the district manager, or as assistant manager of the ordinary life department of Atlanta Life in Kansas City, I went to the committee of management, and then they decided that there should be some integration. And I was the first Afro-American, Negro, black, whatever you want to call us, colored, elected to the board of directors. It was interesting because they gave you a list of committees, and you could choose the committee that you would like to work on. I made it my business to choose committees like budget and public affairs, and I listed as my third choice human relations, or interracial relations I think we called it then. And, of course, I was put on the interracial relations committee. I did not object to that, but I did feel, and I somehow have always felt, that we should be treated as persons, as human beings without regard to color.That came too from my early background with the NAACP, which at that time fostered color blindness in an effort to move us into jobs and into better jobs. They succeeded in having color, or race, removed from applications, hoping that they would look at the application, they would go over the resume, and they would choose the person that was best for the job. It just happened that there was always an interview, a personal interview, before you got the job, and it was at that personal interview that color entered into it and we were denied the jobs. And

yet there were many highly qualified blacks who could fill the positions. So we were relegated either to a profession such as a physician or an attorney or a schoolteacher, or to business, such as opening your black drugstore in a black neighborhood, a black theater in a black neighborhood. And those, in many instances, were provided for us by whites, who had their big theater downtown and the smaller theater, or movie house, in a black neighborhood.So I grew up in that kind of a situation, but somehow I always objected to it. I objected to being labeled by color and I objected to being given a special place to sit, such as the front of the train, the back of the bus, what we used to call the "chicken roost" in a theater house, where you had to sit up in the upper balcony, going in at a separate entrance [in] an alley, being unable to use the rest room or to— Well, I don't remember any signs on drinking fountains, but over the rest room door I can recall at, I believe it was at Emery Bird Thayer's store in Kansas City, a sign saying, "For White Only." You could not try on gloves and in some stores you could not try on hats. These were the things that I grew up in. I can recall a time when I went to the ten-cent store in Kansas City, Missouri, to buy a hot dog—

Balter

Oh, yes, I think you told me this story last time.

Tackett

Yes, I did, probably, and they wanted me to take it out in order to eat it, and that was just at a stand-up counter.So that having come through all of that, and being humiliated by it—because I never felt that I had a special place because of the color of my skin or the accident of my birth—so I had come through all of that and had become what you would call militant to fight against it. And we did through the YWCA, we did through the NAACP, and I mentioned to you the Committee on the Practice of Democracy [COPOD], I think, the last time, that we fought—So it was only natural that when my husband decided to further his education in the ministry and go to Nashville, to the American Baptist Theological Seminary, we went by train. I had ordered the tickets by phone, had picked them up, and when we got to Saint Louis we were seated in car four and they attempted to move us to car one, which was your Jim Crow car. The NAACP had fought the segregated interstate transportation through to the Supreme Court and had won the case, so that

they were really acting unlawfully to segregate us. We had gotten on the train and were seated— As you can see by his picture, my husband was very light, was often taken for Mexican or white, as I was taken often for Mexican or for white or some other nationality, Jewish, Chinese, anything. The black porter on that train identified us and came and told us after we were seated—on that special train everyone had seats, they were reserved—he came to tell us that we had to move. And, of course, it was at that time that I spoke up, because I was the aggressive fighter in our family. I asked that we speak to the conductor, and he came and he told us we would have to move. I got out my pencil and paper—having been an insurance woman, I always had pencil and paper in my purse—and asked his name and his badge number. And he began to redden up a little bit. I said, "You do not know about the Supreme Court decision, do you?" And I said, "I want to inform your boss that you do not know it." He said, "Well, that's all right, that's all right, I don't want to cause any trouble." And so we were allowed to sit there.A little later on—by this time we were at East Saint Louis—the train had stopped, and another good-looking couple, black couple, that there was no question about the fact that they were black, they got on and sat about four seats in front of us. I sat there as long as I could. I didn't see anyone go up to say anything to them, and so I went up to ask them if they had had any problem in being seated in car four, and they said, "No, not at all." And I told them of our experience.

Balter

So you paved the way for them.

Tackett

So I paved the way for them.

Balter

Now, let me understand here, you are now in the process of moving to Nashville?

Tackett

Yes.

Balter

What year was that?

Tackett

Nineteen forty-eight. After the marriage of my daughter we moved to Nashville, Tennessee. We sold our home and we moved there for my husband to enter the seminary. While I was there— In fact I had been on the campus only, oh, less than an hour I believe, we were looking around, when the president called me into his office and said, "You plan to stay with your husband here?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, we need a matron and a person to run our dining room and kitchen, and would you be interested?" So naturally, with us having sold out everything, I was interested in a job. And I took it. So that during the two years that we were there I served as, really, the matron, the purchaser of all of the equipment for the dormitory.

Balter

What was the name of the seminary?

Tackett

It was American Baptist Theological Seminary. And during that time I made what I think were significant changes. I understood that the year before I was there that there was a lot of illness among the students, and all of these students were students who were studying for the ministry, as was my husband. I talked with the Southern Baptist [Convention], who provided the buildings, and they furnished me an isolated room, so that if a student took a cold or had any disease that we felt was at all communicable, we isolated that student. The second year that I was there we actually used that room only once or twice, because I changed the menus to a balanced diet. And, again, I talked with the Southern Baptist, and they built me a new dining room with a steam table, and persons could have one meat and two vegetables, potato and dessert, and they had a choice. And we saw to it that they got green vegetables, that they got fruit, they got fruit juices and so on. Actually, we cut down the incidence of illness a great deal, and I think that was done by diet.Now I, of course, had not managed a dining room, but during the years that I was attending school, and I— No, it was before, I guess, I started to school, before my daughter was in kindergarten. My mother worked at the chamber of commerce, where they served a dinner meal and banquets, and I had worked on Tuesday for the special Rotary Club luncheon, and I worked extra for banquets. Being the kind of person who, if I am in a situation, tries to

learn all that I can about it, I said, I don't know, someday I may own a restaurant or run a dining room, so I'm going to learn everything I could. So I watched the way they worked and all, and I will never forget that one day I was working there in the place of the sandwich girl. She was out and the waitress came in and said, "I want the ham on brown toast." So I put two pieces of white bread in the toaster, and they were nice and brown, [laughter] and she kept coming back, "Where's my order of ham on brown toast?" I said, "I fixed it." She says, "I don't see it," and she'd rush back into the dining room, and finally she— My mother heard her call out another time, and so she came over, and I said, "She keeps asking for ham on brown toast, and I browned the toast." [laughter] She said, "She means brown bread."So, at any rate, I did try to learn all that I could, so that when I did go to Nashville I had just a little background, and I knew to send and ask my mother what to do, and she sent me a book of recipes for fifty so that we could get our measurements properly worked out. And I cut the food bill there by 35 percent. I took inventories, and I counted it— Of course, I had a background in bookkeeping with the Sentinel Loan and Investment Company, and it seems that all of my life I have been asked to take jobs that I didn't know anything about.As a bookkeeper for the Sentinel Loan and Investment Company, I didn't know anything about bookkeeping when Mr. Sewing came and asked me. I had been working at the YWCA. Of course, we were in the Depression years, and he said that several of the women on the committee of management had all recommended me. And I said, "Well, you know, I don't know bookkeeping, but when do you plan to open the loan and investment company?" He said, "In about thirty days." I said, "Okay, I'll know how to keep books by that time." He says, "What will you do?" I said, "I'll enroll at Jackson Boyd Business College." And in the course of six weeks I had taken elementary bookkeeping and secondary bookkeeping and the course in accounting, by staying up all night every night working. My husband, who was really a jewel, did the cooking and took care of Hazel and all of those kinds of things so I could go to school in the daytime and then study all night. I didn't have to wash any dishes or clean the house or anything for six weeks. It was wonderful. [laughter]

Balter

Tell me a little bit about your experiences in Nashville. How long were you there and what—?

Tackett

Well, in Nashville, we were there for two years, and my husband finished that three-year course in two years. Of course, as the manager of the dining room, I dealt with a number of people. My name was Mrs. Joseph Tackett. I forgot that I was named Marnesba, because I objected to the practice of white people calling you by your first name and you having to call them "Mr." or "Mrs." or whatnot. So I was Mrs. Joseph Tackett. I was never called by my first name. Also, there was a habit among blacks in the South to call each other "Mr." or "Mrs." rather than to use their first names. I think that was because they abhorred having whites call them, older people, by their first name, and here's a twenty-year-old or an eighteen-year-old that you call "Mr." or "Miss." So they compensated for it by never getting well enough acquainted, as I said to them, with anybody to call them by their first name.So I did not have any bad experiences in Nashville. I can recall that when I went to get my driver's license in Nashville, that they— When I got it back they had put white on there, so I had to go and have that changed. I think that they had taken it from [my] driver's license in Detroit, where I paid no attention whatsoever to what was on my driver's license. At any rate, I had it changed, because I said if we had an accident in the South and my husband's license said Negro and mine said white, we would be in deep trouble. I said they would lynch him before they found out the truth about us. So I had it changed.I was treated with respect. I can remember one instance, I bought a dress for my daughter, who had married and was pregnant. I bought a maternity dress—

Balter

And she was living with you when—

Tackett

No, no, she was in— I had sent it to her.

Balter

I see.

Tackett

That dress faded, and when I went to visit her I brought the dress back to the store and I said, "This dress is faded." They said, "Well, sent—" I said, "No, it

was never sent to the cleaners, and it faded." And when the clerk just got uptight about it, I said, "I would like to speak with the manager." And I said to the manager—my husband was there—I said to the manager, "This clerk was very nice to me when I purchased this dress." I said, "Now she has been very disrespectful, now that I am returning it because it has faded." I said, "I feel that I should have a refund of my money or get another dress." And she apologized in front of him, and he made an adjustment. When we left the store my husband said, "This is the last time I am going downtown with you." He said, "In the first place, when these folks look at you, they are not sure what you are. And when you open your mouth they know you are not colored. [laughter] And I am not going with you anymore." So from that time on, he would drive me, maybe, downtown and he would let me out and pick me up later. But I felt that I had lived for forty years and that I was not going to warp my personality now that I was in the South. That my job would be to try to change the South.

Balter

While you were in Nashville did you get involved in any of the civil rights activities, as you had been in Kansas City?

Tackett

No, because I was pretty much confined to the campus. The most that I did in the city was go in to church. And I remember one Sunday that I went to church, my husband was away, and he had taken the car. I went with a number of the students at the college. When we got on the bus to come back the only seats that were available—Well, there were seats in the back available. And there was a white couple that sat in the middle of the bus with a number of vacant seats in front of them. So I went and sat in the seat in front of the white couple. Other people became frightened, but another gentleman, a minister came and sat there with me. And I loud-talked. I said, "Now, there are more blacks on this bus than there are whites. The back of that bus is full, and I have no intention after paying my fare of standing up because a white couple chooses to sit in the middle of the bus." And the white couple got up and moved to the front of the bus. So that was about the extent of my involvement there.I was very much involved with the youth group at the church that I organized called the Baptist Youth Fellowship, BYF. I had a great

association with them.When I went to the stores I refused to go to black sections. I remember that a friend took me to the theater and we had to walk a half a block down the alley to go to that theater. And I said to her, "Mot, why in the world would you bring me to this theater?" I said, "I am with you and I will go in because you are nice enough to take me to the show, but I can tell you right now I will never, never do this again. And I would hope that you wouldn't do it." Well, of course, she says, "We're used to it." I said, "But I'm not, and I'm not walking a half a block down anybody's alley just to see a show."So I had that militance, but I was not involved with any of the groups there. Life was pretty much— And then, of course, there was Fisk University there, and there was Tennessee State [University], so that it was a kind of a college community, and people associated with other members of the schools that were there. There was a good bit of college entertainment, and then, of course, we were very much involved in religious activities as a result of being at this seminary. So that I was involved, but not in a civil rights movement, except as a kind of a one-man band.

5. Tape Number: II, Side Two September 8, 1982

Balter

Now, Marnesba, you were in Nashville for a total of how many years, did you say?

Tackett

Two years, two years.

Balter

And then where did you go next?

Tackett

Well, I actually left Nashville— My daughter's husband, the Reverend Cyrus Keller [Sr.], took sick with a kidney infection. After his kidney operation, then the ball-and-socket joint had to be removed, of his left arm, and during that period of recuperation I had brought them to Nashville. So he was going back to take a church in Independence [Kansas], and my daughter said to me, "Mama, would you come—?" By that time she had two children, Eddie Joe and

Juliebeth, and so she asked me to go with her. So I left Nashville with them and left my husband there. He would graduate that— But before graduation he was called to a church. He had completed his work and was called to a church, so he received his diploma by mail. And was number one in his class. But I went with them to Independence, Kansas, where her husband was called to a church, very small church. She wanted to get a job, but it turned out that her husband really did not want her to work. So I went on to Kansas City and took a job with the Internal Revenue department [Internal Revenue Service] for six months. Then my husband came and we drove down— because I had the car— we drove down to Fort Valley.

Balter

Fort Valley, Georgia?

Tackett

Yes, Fort Valley, Georgia. I was there with him for about a year and a half, two years. He was pastor of a church in Fort Valley called Trinity Baptist Church, and the director of the Baptist Student Union, which was a union of Baptist students, or organizations of Baptist students, on the various college campuses in the South. He directed the Baptist Student Union and pastored the Trinity Baptist Church there. I was asked by Atlanta Life Insurance Company, for which I had worked, if I would go to Detroit. They wanted to open an ordinary [life insurance] department there. I managed to persuade my husband to let me go, and that maybe he would come to Detroit to pastor, to get a church in Detroit. After I had been in Detroit for about a year—

Balter

And what year was this now?

Tackett

This was 1950-51, I believe, and, of course, I had worked in the church with him there during that period of time.I also had another experience in Fort Valley. It was in 1950 that they took the census, you know. I saw an ad in the paper and I applied for census enumerator. I had the qualifications, so I was called to take the test. The person there, Cullpepper, an attorney Cullpepper, found out that I was black, so he called me and he said [imitating a thick

Southern accent], "Is this the person who applied for census enumerator?" And I said, "You want Mrs. Tackett?" I said, "Yes, this is Mrs. Tackett." So he says, "Instead of coming to the library, would you come to take the test in my office?" Well, I knew what it was all about. I said yes, and I took the test. I was so mad I just put down whatever I thought, and when it came to the utilities I included telephone as a utility bill, so I missed that question. He told me, he says, "You got another fifteen minutes, would you like to look over the test?" I said, "No, I put down what I thought of, what I thought was right the first time, and so I'm satisfied." So he said, "Well, if you wait a minute I'll grade your paper." And he graded my paper and he said, "You have passed the test." So I said, "Okay." [And he said] "And we'll notify you."Well, the time came when we were to have this course on how to take the census. There was a woman there from South Africa, a white woman from South Africa, but a very friendly person. She came to me and she says, "You are the colored person who they told me took the test." I said, "Yes." She says, "You know, I made the highest grade on that test, I made 100 [percent], and they told me it was a colored woman who made the next highest grade on that test." [laughter] I said, "Oh, is that so?" So he had us sit in a room and he called everybody by name but me. He was not going to call me Mrs. Tackett, and he knew he had better not call me Marnesba, he just sensed that. So when he came to me he would say, "Next." And sometimes just for meanness, you know, I would have my head turned or something, you know, and he would say, "Next, you!"He saw me on the street once, and he was behind me. I was waiting for the light to change at the corner. I heard someone [makes throat-clearing noise] clearing their throat, so I kind of turned around and looked up, and he says, "Howdy, how are you?" He just would not say "Mrs. Tackett," you know. Then at one time he said to me, he says, "You are not from the South, are you?" And I said, "No, I am not." He said, "Well, I can tell you're a Yankee." And so—

Balter

By the way, unfortunately, those who are reading this oral history can't get the flavor of your wonderful imitation of his voice, unfortunately. [laughter] But just for the record—

Tackett

Well, at any rate, he— So then he told me, "Now, you've got the largest enumeration district," because they gave me all of the colored, but there were a few whites who lived there. And he told me, he said, "Now, there are a few whites there, and don't go there. I will take that; you'll get paid for it, but I will go there." So anyhow, when I turned in my paper, I had been to everybody. And he looked. He said, "Oh, I see you got those white families." I said, "Yes, I couldn't tell by the color of the house whether they were white or not." [laughter]

Balter

Not until you knocked on the door, huh?

Tackett

Of course, you know I knew, because other people had pointed out, but I just told him I couldn't tell by the color of the house whether they were white. At any rate, that was a real experience.I found something of the art of survival of the black man, of the African, in a hostile white society. They actually carried out that scripture that said, "Don't let your right hand know what the left hand is doing." Because they could not remember, in many instances, what their age [was]; they couldn't tell me how much money they made. They used the expression, "Ma'am, as near as I can come at it, I made about— Oh, Miss, I don't know." I found that they did not— They couldn't tell you just how many people were in their families. So that really the census report is not entirely correct from the South. Because I would say, "Did you work in the peaches? Did you work in the planting of cotton? Was that about two weeks?" "Oh, Miss, it was more than that." I said, "Was it six weeks?" "Well, as near as I can come at it— Miss, it was somewhere between two weeks and six weeks." So that they know not to give you an answer. The reason that they do not is because they have been robbed so much of their possessions; they've had their homes taken away.I knew one man who really was quite a wealthy black man there. He raised pecans. He had several orchards, I guess you'd call them, of pecans or groves of pecans, and his money was in several banks and in several names from Atlanta to Macon [Georgia] to Fort Valley. And his family was just as he was. He'd educated his children, and his son and his wife lived there and worked with him, but they knew not to tell any white person their business; they knew not to give the United States of America any complete

information as to age, marital status, number of children, property owned, number of years in school. Actually it was amazing, and there were people who said to me, "You should write a book of your experiences just taking the census in Fort Valley, Georgia."I also worked for a county agent there for a few months, but I left there after a short time. And then when I was in Detroit with Atlanta Life Insurance Company, my husband finally wrote to me and said that he was not going to leave Fort Valley and asked me to come back. So we came back. And on the way back, I had a terrible experience. We stopped to buy lunch, to take out. My husband went in and bought chicken. It was put in a brown paper bag, just like scraps, the potatoes, the chicken, and all just thrown into that bag. He brought it back to the car. We drove down the road a piece and drove off to the side to eat. When I opened that bag I actually was unable to eat, because I just simply could not swallow. I said, "They have thrown this together like it's garbage." And I said to him, "I don't know why you want to bring me back to this godforsaken place."That was in September, and I went to work for Dr. Troupe as his secretary on another job that I didn't know anything about, and that is a job as a secretary and to take dictation. So that this was another crash course. I bought a stenotype machine and took a correspondence course from La Salle [College]. So that here again in thirty days I was taking dictation from Dr. C. V. Troupe. And I worked there, really, for six months, because by February 1, I had persuaded my husband to leave that church and to leave the South and to— I wanted to go back north, and he said to me, "What about Los Angeles?" I said okay. So we called my uncle and aunt who lived out here and asked them about it, and I can remember Raymond [Welton] saying to me, "Marnesba, come, this is the place. It's a good place. There are jobs available, but out here you will be a little fish in a big pond, instead of a big fish in a little pond."

Balter

Well, I think that's a good place to stop, and next time we'll pick up in Los Angeles.

Tackett

In Los Angeles, okay.

6. Tape Number: III, Side One March 19, 1984

Balter

Marnesba, since it's been quite a long time since the last session of your oral history, perhaps it's only fair to the listener and the reader for both of us to make some explanation of why there's been such a long gap. To some extent, certainly, there have been scheduling difficulties, but most importantly, it was the long illness, and then sadly, the death of your mother [Elizabeth Edwards Tillmon]—

Tackett

Yes.

Balter

—who was how old when she died?

Tackett

Mother was ninety-eight, and had been in relatively good health until June, I guess, of 1982, when she had an operation on her eye to remove a cataract. And incidentally, there was no problem with the eye. But because she was diabetic, problems developed, just from that short day and a half in the hospital, with her feet and the circulation, and it finally led to amputation of a couple of toes, and then amputation of the foot, and she just was not able to survive all of that. We had really looked forward to her one hundredth birthday that we had hoped to celebrate. But she was very ready to leave this world; she was tired. And we feel that, although we miss her a great deal, that it would be wrong to grieve and want her to stay here, when she really felt that it was time for her to leave.

Balter

When did she pass away?

Tackett

Mother passed away on April 7; it's been almost a year.

Balter

Of 1983.

Tackett

Of 1983, yes.

Balter

Tell me just a little bit about— I know that your mother was living with you for a long time before she died. When did your mother join you here at Los Angeles?

Tackett

Well, she came to Los Angeles with us.

Balter

Oh, she did?

Tackett

Yes, she came to Los Angeles with us from Fort Valley, Georgia. She had lived with me in Kansas City [Kansas] from— In fact we shared the same home in Kansas City in the late thirties, early forties, and then she, after spending some time with my brother [William Richard Tillmon, Sr.] taking care of his son [William Richard Tillmon, Jr.], and some time with my sister [Rachael Elizabeth Tillmon Poindexter] when her babies came, she then— By this time we had moved to Fort Valley, and she then came to Fort Valley to live with us, and moved from Fort Valley to Los Angeles with us.

Balter

Well, that gets us naturally into the point we were at when we left off last time, long ago, which was that you and your late husband Joseph [Edgar Tackett] made the decision to move to Los Angeles from Fort Valley. And we had just touched briefly on why you came to Los Angeles. What were the basic reasons, and why did you choose Los Angeles as the place to come?

Tackett

I frankly did not choose Los Angeles; it was my husband's choice. I think I had mentioned to you that I had thought of Detroit, and spent [time] in Detroit as an insurance "man," in quotes, with the Atlanta Life Insurance Company. It was my desire that we would go North. However, my husband had prevailed upon me to return to Fort Valley. He was a minister and he felt that the time was not right for him to leave there. But on the way down to Fort Valley— I

don't know whether I told you this before, we stopped at a little roadside stand for lunch.

Balter

This was the episode with the chickens in the bag.

Tackett

With the chickens, yes. I had mentioned that to you. And I decided then that I could not stay in the South. As I said to people then, it took me four months to get him to decide to leave. He asked me if I would come to Los Angeles, what about Los Angeles? And I said anyplace is better than here. And we did move to Los Angeles. My husband had been in the optical manufacturing work, griding lenses according to prescription, and so of course when he came here, leaving a church there and not having a church here, he immediately applied for work as a lens grinder at one of the optical shops here. It happened that each week his check bounced—his paycheck bounced—so that did not work out. And he then, because we needed money, talked to my cousin's wife, who suggested that he go out to Douglas Aircraft [Company], sent him out there. He took a job there as an assembler, and continued working there until shortly before his death. He was the assistant minister to Dr. J. Raymond Henderson at Second Baptist Church at Twenty-fourth [Street] and Griffith [Avenue]. He was at the time of his death the assistant chaplain at the county hospital [Los Angeles County-University of Southern California Medical Center], working for the [Los Angeles Baptist] City Mission Society. But he had had an automobile accident. A fellow ran a red light. He had a heart attack at the time of the accident, and seven months later succumbed to a heart attack.

Balter

What—?

Tackett

That was in 1958.

Balter

Nineteen fifty-eight, so you— Just about six years after you came to L.A.

Tackett

That is correct.

Balter

What was the situation, at that time, at any rate, in the Baptist church? I take it that your husband had been a minister in Fort Valley. Had he attempted to find a ministry here in Los Angeles before he came? Or was that not the way you did it? Or what?

Tackett

Well, you see, in many of the denominations they have a hierarchy that places ministers, such as the Methodist churches, and so on. And I believe this is at least partially true with Presbyterian churches. But in the Baptist church, each church is an autonomy, and the members of that church "call" their minister. We left Fort Valley without his having sought a church here. So naturally financial circumstances made it necessary for him to find a job, and many of the Baptist ministers, you know, establish their own churches. They call a group together and set up a church. He was not inclined to do that, but we joined the Second Baptist Church. We were there only a few weeks when Dr. Henderson asked him if he would preach a series of sermons for him, three. And he did, and then when an opening came for an assistant minister he asked Joe if he would accept that job. And he did. He [Henderson] was also instrumental in introducing him to the people at the City Mission Society, where my husband was the associate chaplain and was slated to become the chaplain upon the retirement of the chaplain, which was due in a few months. But my husband passed away before that could happen.

Balter

I see. What was it about Los Angeles that made your husband want to come here?

Tackett

I do not have the slightest idea. [laughter] There is no way for me to know why he chose to come to Los Angeles. But that was his decision. He didn't say [we should] go back to Kansas City, where he probably would have gotten a church very easily. But he said to come to Los Angeles, and so here we are.Of course, I had some interesting experiences when it was found that we were moving to

the West Coast. An agent, an insurance agent for New York Life [Insurance Company] whom I had met in Fort Valley, suggested that I attempt to work for, or I apply at, New York Life on coming to Los Angeles. In talking with my company, they had suggested Golden State Mutual. And I first went to Golden State Mutual [Life Insurance Company]. At that time Golden State was principally an industrial insurance company. They wrote ordinary [life], but only through their industrial agents. Of course, I refused to carry a debit, because I felt that industrial insurance was really not the best kind of insurance for persons to buy. And after talking with them at Golden State, and not being able to come to terms to do only ordinary life insurance, I decided to go to New York Life. I talked with the manager of the local office here for some, oh, perhaps forty-five minutes, or an hour, when finally he said to me, "Of what extraction are you?" I said, "Extract? You mean, like vanilla, or what?" So, he said, "No, I meant, you know, what race?" I said, "Well, I am an Afro-American, Negro." He said, "You know, we have a gentleman's agreement with Golden State Life Insurance Company that we would not take any of their agents." And I said, "What does that have to do with me? I have never worked for Golden State Life Insurance Company and do not intend to work for them." He hemmed and hawed around, but did not allow me to actually fill out an application after all of that conversation.I went from there to Occidental Life [Insurance Company] and— No, I'm getting the story wrong, first to Prudential [Insurance Company of America]. After talking with Prudential for some time, he wanted to know what my race was. And then he assured me that they were not prejudiced, and they had no objection to a person being Negro working for them, but they had to admit that they had some prejudices against women. So, of course, I was in double jeopardy there, and was not allowed to fill out an application.I then decided that I would see if I could draw unemployment insurance. On the way home from the unemployment office, I drove by and I saw the sign, Beneficial Standard Life Insurance Company. And I said, "Why not give it one more try?" I did. And I talked with John Furity, who said to me, he says, "You know, we have never had a Negro in this department, but I would like to have one. I want you to take the test, the aptitude test." And so I did. He called me in a couple of days later, and said to me, "I would like to talk to you again." He says, "No woman has scored as high on this aptitude test as you have, and I would like to talk with you again." I went down to talk with him. He says, "I would like to hire

you. I want you to know that I have no prejudices, but I cannot promise you about the prejudices of other people here. I can't guarantee that you won't run into some prejudice with other people." I said, "I don't object to that. I've been fighting all my life for the rights of people, and the right to work and to receive the same salary," and so on.Then I found another roadblock. They had a blanket rule that all Afro-American persons, all—whatever you want to call us, black, colored, Negroes—would be written substandard. And that's substandard 2.

Balter

What does that mean, exactly?

Tackett

Well, it just means that automatically, because of the color of your skin, you pay a higher price for your insurance. For the same coverage. Now, you have to pass the same physical examination, and you have to qualify on all other points as anyone else, but you are written down simply because of your race. So then I told him no, I would not work for that. So we decided to talk again. He said, "I'll tell you what we will do. We will judge every application individually, and if the person qualifies for standard insurance, we will give them standard insurance." So, I, of course, I had some cases that I had to fight for, and I earned the reputation of being a fighter. And as I met the president of the company and other officers, they would say, "So this is Mrs. Tackett, the fighter," and that was my reputation with Beneficial Standard.In the meantime, I took courses in insurance, and I met a number of other agents. One agent, who was the general agent for Occidental Life, saw me and said for me to come and talk with him, that he would like to hire me. He says, "You know, I have some Orientals in my office. I have whites in my office. I have some Jewish people in my office, but I have no blacks. I would like to talk with you about becoming an agent for our company." And he told me what they would pay, and so forth. So, I said, "Okay. I will put in the application." I didn't quit Beneficial, but I put in the application. He called me several weeks later—Of course I qualified; he hired me. He called me several weeks later to say that the company would not allow him to hire me. Well, I did not ask him all the reasons why, because I was sick and tired of hearing these lies about the reasons for not hiring a person. And there was no reason; my record was

immaculate as far as work in insurance in Kansas City, in Detroit, and now in Los Angeles.So I continued with Beneficial Standard Life Insurance Company until 1962, I believe it was. I opened my own office, had a general agency from '58. In fact I was in the process of opening that general office at the time of my husband's death. I knew that he had had the heart attack, and I felt that he could work in the office. They had promised me at Beneficial they would teach him how to program, and I said he could do my programming for me and I could sell the insurance on the outside. At any rate, I opened the office, and just a few days before we were to go into the office my husband died of a heart attack. So I was left alone.Interestingly enough, my brother [William Richard Tillmon, Sr.], who was a teacher in Kansas City, Missouri, came out to the funeral, and the morning after the funeral he says to me, "Does Joe have any overalls that Joseph Orrin [Tackett, Sr.]"—our son— "and I can put on? And we will go out and finish up that office so you can move in." I said, "I don't know whether I am ever going to that office again." He says, "You sound like you've lost your mind." He said, "You're going to move in that office if you have to move out. So, does Joe have any old overalls that we can put on?" So they went out and they did such things as putting on the last locks on doors, and doing some painting, and one thing [and] another for a couple of days, so that I was ready to move into my office. So—

Balter

Where?

Tackett

On La Brea [Avenue], 2318 South La Brea. So I really had no opportunity to really grieve over my husband's death, because I had to go to work immediately, which I think is the best thing that could ever happen. I would say to any person, when they lose a loved one the best thing to do is to get busy, and to keep busy. Now I have jumped over a lot of things, and I need to back up. [laughter]

Balter

Okay. That's fine. I did have a couple of questions. At Beneficial Standard Life Insurance Company, that you worked for for some time, the policy of charging

a higher price to blacks for insurance, was that written down anywhere, or was that just sort of understood within the company?

Tackett

I do not know whether it was written down. I did not see it in writing but it was a very definite understanding within the company. I am sure that the white agents who were working there, of course, had no problem with it. It's interesting that most whites have no problem with feeling that blacks are inferior, or that they do not deserve the same consideration, they do not deserve the same pay for the same work. The whole syndrome, or the whole mentality, of separate and unequal is so ingrained in people that I have found they really do not realize that they are prejudiced. They really do not realize that it is wrong to treat another human being a certain way simply because he has been cast in that role. It is difficult for people to really overcome that. Just as it is difficult, I find, for many of us to assume equality for ourselves, because we feel that we are somehow bound by the other person's wishes for us. And that's my fight, that you establish your own right in this world. You should have, and you should demand for yourself, all of the opportunities that anybody else has. Now, if you do not run as fast as somebody else, it's all right. So he's beat you. If you do not qualify to climb the ladder in a job situation, to move into management, that's all right. But don't prejudge me because of the color of my skin and say because your skin is a certain color then you cannot type as fast, you cannot run as fast, you cannot hit a baseball as hard, you cannot work a problem in physics as well, you cannot manage as efficiently as someone else.

Balter

But, for some reason, when it comes to insurance you have more money to pay.

Tackett

The truth is—and this was my argument there—that by this time Jackie Robinson was a leading baseball player, [and] had proven that black people could play baseball, and could hit a ball when a white man was throwing the ball at him. You know, I mean, this kind of thing. Paul Robeson had proven that a black man can play football as well as anybody else. So that by this time

I said, "On what premise do you say that all black people die faster than others or are not as physically strong as others, when you've got these men in baseball, basketball, track, and all, who are your fastest men in the world, your top basketball players? When you have this to show that these people are strong and just as strong as anybody else, why do you feel that a physician who can do the first successful heart surgery who has a black skin will not live as long as that white man who comes along after him and finds out how to do a successful heart surgery, open-heart surgery?"

Balter

Now, this practice—

Tackett

So in that fight I began to raise things, so that they began to write blacks standard insurance. And now I think there's no question about it. Every person now, I think, in life insurance is judged on the basis of, on an equal basis, I should say. He's judged by the work he does, by his physical examination, by his reputation. Because they look into the reputation of a person—they don't want to insure gangsters, that sort of thing. So I think there is no problem in any of the insurance companies now. There's neither the problem of getting jobs in insurance companies. We have blacks who are working for practically all major insurance companies now.

Balter

Well, this practice of charging higher prices to blacks that you found was in effect at Beneficial Standard, was it your impression that that was the case at most insurance companies, or at all insurance companies that they did that kind of thing?

Tackett

Well, let's take Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, for example, who only wrote industrial insurance on blacks, and the highest ordinary policy that they would write was a five hundred dollar policy on the life of a black person. So, yes, it's true. And you know, industrial insurance—that is where the agent comes around, you know, and carries a debit—that insurance, of course, is much higher than ordinary life.

Balter

I see, okay. Another question comes to mind, and I know this may be a difficult one to answer, but I wonder in the case of your early experiences in Los Angeles, how you think this played itself out. It occurs to me that, in business, that there may on the one hand be people who do the hiring and firing who are enlightened, shall we say, and truly are repulsed by the idea of prejudice and job discrimination, and then there are other situations where it becomes, for various reasons, in the best interests of the company to not have that policy. For example, in insurance, perhaps because they want to be able to sell insurance to black people or to other groups, that they begin to realize that if they don't have black insurance agents and so on— And I wonder what your thoughts are on the interplay of these factors, especially in a city like Los Angeles, in business, of beginning to overturn some of the discrimination in job hiring. What are your feelings on that?

Tackett

Of course, when I came to Los Angeles I found the same kind of discrimination that I had found in Kansas City, in Detroit, and very little better than what I found in the South, in Nashville, Tennessee, and in Fort Valley, Georgia. Whenever it becomes financially in the best interest of the majority—and I think whites, whether they are the majority or not still consider themselves the majority—whenever it is in their best financial interest to move toward equality, desegregation, they do it. For example, let's take Magic Johnson in sports. He was not hired and given a twenty-five year, $25 million contract because he was a black boy. It was because it was in the best interest of the [Los Angeles] Lakers team to have a young man like Magic Johnson, who is a fantastic basketball player and can play every position in the game. And the same was true with insurance. And, of course, you can take Hank Aaron, who at one time was the highest paid baseball player. Not because Hank was black, not even because Hank was highly educated. It was because he could hit more home runs than anybody else in the world. And his record still stands. Now, the same is true when they found that it was profitable to sell insurance to blacks and that they could qualify; when they'd gotten over that prejudgment, prejudice, they then, of course, began to hire blacks. And when they came in and were successful at writing insurance, they said, you know, we'll get a few more of them in and we will sell a few more policies. So this has been the

situation all around.On the other hand, as a result of affirmative action, as a result of the civil rights movement— And it didn't start in the sixties. I think people really need to quit saying that the civil rights movement started with Martin Luther King [Jr.]. It doesn't take anything away from him to know that back in 1910 the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] was started. In fact, before that there was the Niagara Movement, and before that was Nat Turner, and before that was Sojourner Truth, and before that was Harriet Tubman or back about the same time was Harriet Tubman, so that the civil rights movement through the years, through the century has made some progress. And frankly—this is beside the point—but I am really very thankful that I have had the opportunity to live at this time and to be a part of that general movement since I was a teenager. So it brings me back, if I can come back, to when I came to Los Angeles in 1952. One of the first things that I did after getting a job was look up the NAACP office.

Balter

And you had been active in the NAACP office in Kansas City.

Tackett

Oh, yes, yes. Oh, I had been active in Kansas City from a teenager, because we joined the NAACP, you know, through our schools. There was an advantage as well as a disadvantage in segregated schools. In the segregated schools you had the teachers who were interested in your progress and in the progress of the whole, of all of our people. So, of course, in our schools we saw the people that we should be proud of: Roland Hayes; we saw Mary McLeod Bethune; we saw W. E. B. Du Bois. All of these people were folks who came and spoke to the assemblies in our high school, and so there was that advantage. The great disadvantage was that after you have excelled in school, after you have gone to college, after you havegotten your degrees and your Ph.D., you can't get a job commensurate with your qualifications. So that I am definitely an integrationist, because I think that unless people begin to know each other and find out what people can do, you just don't have a chance if you are a person of color.Now, getting back to when I came here, I looked for the NAACP office. I went in, I paid my own membership, and it happened I came here in the— This was in the early spring, and the drive was going on. I said, "Well, give me a few memberships and I will sell some memberships." And I

did. And I was not connected with any team, so when I went back to make my reports, it was of "the Marnesba Tackett" and the memberships that I had brought in. And then at that time we had what we called FFF, the Fund For Freedom, and that was a special drive selling seals. It happened that Mrs. [Velva] Henderson, Dr. Henderson's wife, was the chairman that year, and she asked me if I would serve on the committee with her.

Balter

When you say "seals" do you mean seals to put on envelopes?

Tackett

Yes, seals, NAACP, similar to an Easter seal or a Christmas seal. And these were called Fund For Freedom seals. So she headed that drive, and I worked in the drive and later went on the board of NAACP and then became chairman of the membership— Well, first I was chairman of the education committee, and later chairman of the membership committee.At this time we were in the courts. In fact, before the Supreme Court in *[Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas].* That decision came down in 1954, I believe it was May 17, 1954. Dr. Henderson was a very active person in NAACP, leading the church into memberships and all. But I had gone to the NAACP before we actually joined at Second Baptist Church, and was working there. Well, at any rate, I worked— Our church, I wanted to say to you, our church participated in that case by raising the money within the church membership and paying for the briefs that Thurgood Marshall, in trying that case, [submitted] before the Supreme Court. On the day that that decision came down we had a rally at the late Reverend T. [Timothy] M. Chambers [Sr.]'s church then, which was on McKinley Avenue [Zion Hill Baptist Church]. And that was a great celebration.At this time I was chair of the education committee, and the first thing that we did— And, by the way, my committee was interracial. We met at night over at Jefferson High School. Mr. Hammerman, Sam Hammerman, was very supportive and was a member of my committee, and our first job was looking into the schoolbooks to see the stereotypes that were being presented to our children on a day-to-day basis as they studied in the classroom. And we began to pick those out. My first trip down to the [Los Angeles Unified School District] Board of Education was as chairman of the NAACP education committee, and it seemed like for many years I couldn't stop

going to the board of education. I was also the chairman of our newsletter and put out the newsletter. About this time Georgiana Hardy was running for the board of education and they ran a slate of three persons. I do not remember the names of the other two. Georgiana was the only one who won, and she then was the only member on the board of education who really had an interest and a concern for all of the children and for an equal opportunity in education. On that board were two women, a Mrs. [Ruth C.] Cole and Mrs. Stafford—

Balter

This would be Edith [K.] Stafford?

Tackett

Yes. And they— We were going through the McCarthy period and the book-burning period. Everybody who was at all liberal was labeled a communist, and so we knew that we needed to change that board of education. So I worked with the Committee for Better Schools. That was where I met Zane Meckler and where I met Joe [Joseph] Roos and Jane Solomon, and who else worked on that committee? Well, I met a group of people who were interested in changing the board of education. And, of course, Mary Tinglof and Ralph Richardson ran the next term, and they were running against Cole and Stafford. After the primary, when Ralph Richardson had beaten Mrs. Cole, then Mary had pushed Stafford, Edith Stafford, into a runoff. And they asked me— In fact it was Congressman [Augustus F.] Hawkins who told them to get Marnesba Tackett to work in that black community, to turn that vote around. The vote in the primary, in the black community, had been approximately two to one for Edith Stafford. In the general election that vote was three to one in favor of Mary Tinglof. And that really won her that election.

Balter

Now, it had been two to one in the primary?

Tackett

In the primary.

Balter

And then three to one against her.

Tackett

And three to one against her in the general election.

Balter

Well, let me ask you— I understand Edith Stafford developed a somewhat racist reputation at one point. Apparently she, in addressing some group or other, was praising the government of South Africa. So I'm a little intrigued by the fact that, at one time at any rate, the vote for her in the black community was two to one. How would you account for that?

Tackett

I account for it in that the black community to a large extent was not aware of that. Secondly, that she had the incumbency, and people, and especially black people, when it came to education, were just for their children getting an education and they just voted yes on the bonds, on anything for education. And it was because they did not know who she was. But an interesting thing happened. She was to come to the Baptist ministers' meeting, of all the Baptist ministers in the city, black Baptist ministers. And I went to that meeting and I passed out questions among those ministers that they were to ask her. That really brought it out. [laughter] Of course the ministers then went to their pulpits and told people to vote against her because of her racist attitude. She tried, but she was not able to overcome her own prejudices, and they were able to see her for what she really was. In the meantime we had Mary Tinglof to come, and I didn't have to plant any questions. I [said], "You just ask her anything you want to ask her and decide for yourself." And they did and they could see that she was very genuine. In fact, Mary Tinglof was far ahead of her time, because I can recall when we began the push for integration, and we were simply saying send children from these overcrowded schools to the undercrowded schools, underutilized schools, which, of course, were all white, she kept saying to me, she says, "Marnesba, the bus runs two ways. The bus runs two ways." I'll never forget that. Because we are so used to overcompensating for whatever progress that we make that it had not occurred to us that the bus should run, or did run, two ways. And she said, "We need to send blacks to the white schools, but we've got to send whites back over the other way."

7. Tape Number: III, Side Two March 19, 1984

Balter

Marnesba, before we go on with the history of your involvement with the education committee and with the school board, I'd like to go back just a little bit and ask you a few things. Obviously you came in contact, as you said, with the NAACP by looking them up, going into the office. And clearly you became one of the leaders in a very short period of time. How did you find the NAACP chapter here compared to your experiences with the chapter in Kansas City? How strong was it? How many members? How influential, and so on?

Tackett

Of course, Kansas City is a much smaller city. However, percentage-wise I believe there was much more interest in the NAACP at the time I left Kansas City, and there were many more members, than I found here in Los Angeles. I was amazed that in a city this large, and with this large a population, that we had less than five thousand members. As I began to tell you, I worked with the education committee, and when Tom [Thomas G.] Neusom became president he asked me— The year before he became president, Dr. [John] Evans had headed the drive for membership in the NAACP. This was in 1955, and membership had gone up to about six thousand. He said that he could not head the drive the next year, and so Tom Neusom asked me if I would head the membership committee. I said, "Yes, but I will do it only on one condition, and that is, if you have them to name me in July to chair the membership committee for the next year, for 1956." Which was unprecedented. We usually had the election in December and started a drive, and then after that, you know, you reorganized with the new board members and you selected your chairpeople. And that was true with the membership committee. In February you start your membership drive. So the board after some discussion agreed that they would do that. In September I called a group together, sending out a letter asking them, saying to them, "You have been selected to come to a meeting at such and such a time." You learn in salesmanship that there are certain words that have more power than other words, just like some people have more power than other people. And that "selected" got them. So these selected people came, and I told them that we should begin to plan for the membership drive for next year. And so we did.Then I knew that

people liked incentive. I guess I went back to 1952, when there were the various divisions like the Eastside and the Westside and business division and so on and then there was the Marnesba T. Tackett ["division"] and the memberships that I brought in, because I wasn't connected with anything. I guess it made me feel good. So instead of organizing with these persons I said, "I want to organize differently. I want you people who head divisions, and I want to name the division by you." So I had the Chuck [Charles] Fielding division. I had the Toby Evans division. I had the divisions by the different names of the people. And we met, oh, I guess three or four times and we planned our big kickoff for the first Sunday in February and for our meetings each Sunday following that. I planned to close that drive at the end of March, and I took off two months from my job so I'd do nothing but run that drive. And my husband said, "Okay, do it." He was very supportive. We actually extended the drive by one month. We were going great guns and we had one month for cleanup. [phone rings] And that year we had over fifteen thousand, we got over fifteen thousand members. [tape recorder turned off]

Balter

Marnesba, you had mentioned just a little bit ago that you were somewhat surprised that the membership of the NAACP was as low as it was in Los Angeles. Why do you think that was the case?

Tackett

I really think it was because of the selling job. You know, people join and they renew their membership in organizations and groups that ask them for the membership when it's over. You renew your magazines because they start two or three months ahead telling you that your subscription will soon be out. And I think— [telephone rings] Can I go answer that phone? [tape recorder turned off]

Balter

Now, you had just begun explaining why you felt the membership was fairly low at the NAACP here.

Tackett

Oh, yes. I had said that it's a selling job, and I think if people are reminded— And then, too, through the years it has been a person-to-person drive, and you miss a lot of people that way. [tape recorder turned off] I think that there has to be something special to remind people that the membership is again due. For example, I had many people, during the time that I was at the NAACP, to come in and we'd ask them, "Are you a member of the NAACP?" "Oh, yes, I'm a member." "But when did you join?" And they joined two, three, five, ten years ago. Nobody since that time has said, "Your membership is due again. Will you join?" [That] year we tried to give people the incentive to work, and they pulled their friends in to work for them so they would get more memberships and their name would be up on that board and they would have more memberships than anybody else. In the period of those three months when we conducted the drive, we raised more money than had ever been raised, and we had more members; we had over fifteen thousand members. Another thing [was] getting attention of a number of people and setting a high goal. This year we had Sammy Davis [Jr.] as the honorary chairperson of the drive. And Sammy bought a life membership that year.

Balter

By this year you mean—

Tackett

The year that I was the chairman. And with the people vying for first place with the competition there, they could not hide behind the Eastside or the Westside or the business division or the church division, because their name was up there, and if they bombed, everybody would know who bombed. So I think that was the thing that helped that drive to go. That had not been done in that way before.

Balter

Did you find at that point in time any reluctance on the part of some black people to join the NAACP?

Tackett

No. No.

Balter

Not concerned about recriminations or things like that?

Tackett

Well, not here in Los Angeles. Besides, the list was not public. So that it was not— There was another thing that added to that. And I must give it credit. One, in 1954 we had had the Supreme Court decision which people thought was going to bring about a better day. Secondly, Emmett Till had been lynched in Mississippi, and that was a strong incentive. That was a crisis that moved people to feel that something had to be done. And thirdly, Rosa Parks was arrested in December, just before the drive started, for sitting on the bus, and the Montgomery bus boycott started. So that there was, in addition to the way the drive was set up, there were [those] kinds of incentives to do something to better the condition of our people here in the United States of America. Los Angeles was no different. We began to look at the prejudices and the things that we didn't have here, because people kind of thought when we came to Los Angeles that we were free, you know. But it wasn't so.

Balter

I think that might be a good place to stop for today.

Tackett

Okay.

Balter

Then we'll pick it up next time.

Tackett

All right. I've enjoyed this more than I ever thought I would.

Balter

I'm glad to hear that.

Tackett

I almost dreaded it. [laughter] Because I thought, I said, "How in the world will I ever think of anything to say?"

Balter

But you always do.

8. Tape Number: IV, Side One March 26, 1984

Balter

Marnesba, we were talking a little bit off tape at the end of last session, and as often happens, we got into an interesting topic when the tape wasn't rolling, and I'd like to go back for a moment to your days in Kansas City. I understand that you were present during a very famous incident involving Paul Robeson, when he was speaking in Kansas City, and I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about that for the record.

Tackett

Yes. The thing that brought it to my mind was hearing a play, a one-man show, where the person was enacting Paul Robeson. I mentioned then that it was not quite accurate, because I was there. It was a concert that was sponsored by a group in Kansas City at the convention hall in Kansas City, Missouri. You know, Paul had decided that he would not again sing to a segregated audience. So, of course, Kansas City assured him that it would not be segregated. But what they did was sell tickets of the same caliber to blacks on one side and whites on the other side. After singing his first group, Paul came to the stage and asked that the lights be turned up. They were, and he looked over the audience, and he said, "You know, I do not sing to a segregated audience. I see black on this side and I see white on the other side." And he left the stage. There was a long period there before he came back. He finally came back to the stage and he said, "I had refused to continue this concert. They have persuaded me to come back. I will sing, but I will sing under protest." And he changed his whole program. He sang nothing but civil rights and protest songs, and the last song that he sang, it was "Stop Jim Crow." He stomped with the last of that song on the stage so hard that it reverberated throughout that auditorium. Interestingly, a few whites trickled out when he first protested, and after that several got up and walked out. But not a single black person left the auditorium.

Balter

Did most of the whites stay?

Tackett

Most of them stayed. I would say probably one fourth of them left and [the remainder] heard the rest of the concert.

Balter

Was there any discussion between blacks and whites while Mr. Robeson was offstage?

Tackett

Well, we weren't close enough together to have a discussion. But there was discussion among blacks and blacks, and I'm sure there was some discussion among the whites. Of course, the papers carried the account of it the next day, and the weekly paper carried the account of it on the weekend.

Balter

I'm interested in whether, in the discussions in the black section, there were disagreements as to whether he should come back and sing, or whether to support him.

Tackett

We were, of course, glad that he came back, simply because we loved him and that voice is one that is memorable. So we were very happy that he did continue to sing. However, we were just as glad, if not happier, that he had protested. Because I had noticed how we were seated. However, I think sometimes you get so used to segregation that you felt that just being able to buy seats in any place equally with whites was some advantage. Because in Kansas City, at that time, you were not allowed to enter hotels. There's an interesting story about that, of a group that met and they did not allow the black person who was a part of that group to come into the front door and use the front elevator. It was interracial and an international group, and so there was an Indian who had a turban. He borrowed his turban, and with that turban on his head he used the front elevator on several occasions. [laughter]

Balter

What year did the Robeson incident take place? Do you remember?

Tackett

I don't remember the exact year, but it must have been— I took my daughter, who was born in 1926. It must have been either the late thirties or early forties.

Balter

Now, when we were talking last time, we had had some discussion of the issue of segregation in Los Angeles schools. One thing I was interested to know is when the *[Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas]* decision came down in 1954, what types of plans, if any, about what to do in Los Angeles, how to apply that to the situation in Los Angeles, began to be discussed around here?

Tackett

That was not discussed too much here until 1963, when we began to notice the overcrowded condition in the black schools. Well, we had noticed it prior to that, but we began to do something about it. And really, it was started with the Caugheys [John and LaRee], who, in 1962 I believe, had said to the [Los Angeles Unified School District] Board of Education that something should be done about the overcrowded schools.In the meantime we had had Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] here in the early spring of 1963, and the board of education had continued to do nothing. So after King left we formed the United Civil Rights Council, which I mentioned to you. And out of that we had four committees. I headed the education committee. The first step we took was to relieve the overcrowded condition in our schools. We had Manchester [Elementary] Avenue School, which had double sessions from first grade through the sixth grade, which meant that the children going to that school would never have a full day of education in their entire elementary school period. So that school was bad. Then we began to study what the situation was. About that time the Urban League had asked for a survey to show that there was discrimination among teachers. The Urban League gave us their survey, and we took that survey to FEPC [Fair Employment Practices Commission] and asked that FEPC study or review the policies and the actions of the board of education. What we found was that 85 percent of the teachers in black schools were black; 85 percent of the black teachers in the system were teaching in these black schools. Hence, we felt that something had to be done about that.So when we went to the board of education—this was about

June of 1963—we asked several things: One was that the teachers be distributed throughout the system, and not on the basis of color. Two, that the teachers be upgraded, because we found that at that time there were only thirteen elementary principals—twelve women, one man—[who were] black. There were two secondary principals, one in a junior high school and one in a senior high school. And, of course, we felt that was wrong. We looked at the tests for the last few years, or the prior years to 1963, and we saw that blacks just did not make the list. I think there were fifty on the list. And blacks were below fifty.Then the next thing that we asked was that they do something to eliminate the overcrowding of schools. We stated that there were approximately four hundred schools that had empty classrooms. We asked them to bus children from the overcrowded classrooms, or overcrowded schools, to the underenrolled schools having empty classrooms, and to bus them a distance of not more than fifteen miles. Those who were opposed to integration of any kind began to oppose busing, and that's when busing became a bad word. We just weren't able to move on it. However, since we were not able to move on it, we decided that we would look at a school and see if we could find a parent who would be willing, on behalf of a student, to file a suit against the board of education. So the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] worked together on that. And one of the members of my committee—Her name is Elnora Crawford. Elnora went out to the park and she talked to children who were playing in the park and told them about segregation, and she found there Mary Ellen Crawford.

Balter

This was no relation to Elnora Crawford?

Tackett

No, and I got— Her name is wrong. It's Elnora— What is her name? Elnora Crowder. Elnora Crowder. And she found Mary Ellen Crawford. Mary Ellen said to her, "I think my mother and daddy would file the suit against the board of education." She was attending [David Starr] Jordan [High School]. Now, we found that Jordan sat on its own eastern boundary line. Normally a school would be sitting in the middle, or as close to the middle as possible, of its boundaries. But Jordan sat right on the end of its eastern boundary line. And

next to it were junkyards of broken-down cars, and they were mashing those cars with a lot of noise. We felt this was untenable. The Crawford parents, Mr. and Mrs. Crawford, were willing to file the suit on behalf of Mary Ellen. And we did, in the fall, I guess it was, of 1963— Or it may have been 1964 when we first filed that suit, I'm not sure.

Balter

I think my research tells me, actually, about late summer, about August of 1963.

Tackett

Yes, I think that it was August of 1963.

Balter

By the way, one question: when you say the boundary line of the school, I assume that you mean the boundary of the attendance to the school.

Tackett

The attendance district, correct, of the school. And we felt that this was untenable. So that suit was first filed to close Jordan because of its poor location and to send these children to other schools. Mary Ellen Crawford was the first one in that suit *[Crawford v. Los Angeles Unified School District].* The board of education began to make some promises to us. And that suit lay dormant for several years, until, actually, the Caugheys decided that something needed to be done about it and they were willing to do it. Not the NAACP, but the American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU] was willing to do something about it. They spread it out and they got several additional persons to sign that they were discriminated against by the way the boundaries were drawn and so on. So the Crawford case was reopened. This was about '68, I think. That case went on for a couple of years. We won the suit. [Los Angeles Superior Court] Judge [Alfred T.] Gitelson was very fair in his decision on that suit, and he ordered the Los Angeles board of education to do something about it and to do it by, I believe by '70 or '71. They began to appeal and it went all the way to the [California] State Supreme Court. We got a unanimous decision from the state supreme court. But they still appealed, and, incidentally, still have not paid the attorneys who won that suit for us, which I

think is unforgivable. [Note: On April 16, 1984, the Los Angeles Superior Court ordered the Los Angeles board of education to pay the attorneys' fees. On April 30, 1984, the board authorized payment of $1,355,369 to the attorneys.]

Balter

Now, I think a little later we'll get into some of the more recent history of the desegregation case, but at this point I'd like to go back. I find the development of the United Civil Rights Committee—

Tackett

Council, yes.

Balter

Council, to be— Looking at some of the record from those days, it appeared that it very quickly became an extremely effective organization. It had at least two or three very large civil rights demonstrations, one in 1963, late 1963, that had about five thousand people, which I think even during that period of time was a pretty respectable size for a march. Tell me a little bit about how that organization began to be formed. I know that a number of different local organizations were involved with it. Who was the impetus to that? How did that get started?

Tackett

Well, we had brought Dr. King here to Wrigley Field, and that field was filled to overflowing and people were on the street around that field when Dr. King and Ralph [D.] Abernathy came here. Dr. King was, of course, the main speaker. An interracial group had gotten together to bring Dr. King here. And among other things, Dr. King said we should— He says, "You asked me what Los Angeles can do to help us in Birmingham [Alabama]. The most important thing that you can do is to set Los Angeles free, because you have segregation and discrimination here, and police brutality," and so on. Shortly after that, Reverend Dawkins, Maurice Dawkins, put a piece in the paper saying that unless something was done in Los Angeles that we would have Birmingham-type demonstrations here. Well, of course, nobody wanted that kind of a demonstration here. The demonstrations with the dogs and the fire hoses and so on. In the program that we had printed to bring King here, we showed a

police dog with his fangs open like he was going to bite a person, and I think that also triggered it. So that we got together, after— Oh, when that appeared in the *[Los Angeles] Times*—

Balter

This was like an opinion piece?

Tackett

Of Maurice Dawkins, Reverend Maurice Dawkins. When that appeared in the *Times,* it upset [Los Angeles County Supervisor] Kenneth Hahn, it caused the media to— And that appeared about May 30, I believe on Decoration Day. At that time Chris Taylor, Dr. Christopher Taylor was the president of the NAACP. He was barbecuing in his backyard when the press came to ask him about this article of the Reverend Dawkins. Dawkins was former president of the NAACP and was a person who could get the news, kind of like Jesse [L.] Jackson, you know. He was good coverage. So they wanted to know what it was all about and what we were planning. Chris immediately called a group of us together, that same group that had put on the rally at Wrigley Field. And as we met together, we said, what shall we do about it? Kenneth Hahn was excited about it and he said, "We do not have to have Birmingham-type demonstrations here." So he called together the power structure, and we were asked to talk to the power structure about it. And, I mean, the power structure was there. People from—

Balter

Can you tell me some of the people that were there?

Tackett

Well, there were heads of industry and heads of housing and policemen and the board of education. They met together, and after speaking— And interestingly enough, we had met together, we had formed a board, and *[S.]* Wendell Green had called us the United Civil Rights Council, that was his name for us. We thought, well, this is good. At that time he was editor of the *[Los Angeles] Sentinel.* We said, "Well, what shall we do?" Well, it happened I was not at the meeting, but I was called at home, and they said to me, "Marnesba, we have made you the chair of education, and we want you

to give the education committee speech at this meeting with the power structure." And so we did. Chris Taylor made the opening statement. Brookins made the closing statement— that's Bishop H. Hartford Brookins. He's now bishop, but at that time he was pastoring the First African Methodist Episcopal Church here. Let's see, it was Wendell Green, I believe, talked about police brutality. Norman B. Houston talked about discrimination in industry. I talked about discrimination in education, and Thomas [G.] Neusom— No, I believe it was Wendell Green who talked about housing, and Thomas Neusom talked about police brutality.

Balter

Thomas Neusom was an attorney?

Tackett

An attorney, Thomas Neusom. Yes, he was one of the first attorneys in the Crawford case, and did depositions, took depositions, and all, for us in the Manual Arts [High School] gym case. Following that— And let me give you just a little interesting thing aside. They wrote my speech for me on education. [laughter]

Balter

By they, you mean who exactly?

Tackett

I don't know. [laughter] I don't know who it was. What was the man's name who was the head of ACLU at that time?

Balter

Al [Abraham Lincoln] Wirin perhaps?

Tackett

No, no, Al Wirin was the attorney, we met in Al's home. He has passed away since then with cancer; he left here and went back to teaching up north.

Balter

Eason Monroe?

Tackett

Eason Monroe.

Balter

Of course.

Tackett

I think maybe Eason wrote my speech. At any rate, they insisted that I read it. I did, and then I gave it before the— I talked before the board of education and said practically the same things. We had a rally out at Beverly Hills High School. There were a number of important people, especially people in the entertainment field. [Burt] Lancaster was there and Tony [Anthony] Francioso and Ann-Margret, oh, the big stars. By this time I had gotten so tired of reading that same speech that I decided that I would forget my speech and leave it at home. I did and they called on me to give that speech. And then I just got up and talked. I got home, and somebody had— My phone was ringing when I walked in, and they said, "Marnesba, you were *wonderful!"* I said, "What do you mean?" "Do you know that that whole thing was broadcast?" [laughter] And here I had decided to speak extemporaneously. But at any rate, from that time on nobody ever wrote a speech for me, I wrote my own.I believe our first demonstration was a demonstration on the board of education. The reason for that was that in meeting— Mr. [J. C.] Chambers from the board of education always came to the meeting of the education group. He was just adamant about opposing everything that we said and did, and when we asked if they would do something about it, Chambers was opposed to it. So I sent a telegram to the board of education breaking off the negotiations. We decided that we would mount this demonstration. We met at Reverend Brookins's church then that was down at Eighth [Street] and Towne [Avenue]. That was that historic building that was built by our famous architect Paul [R.] Williams—not [built], I guess drawn by him—and was to have been a historic monument. But after they moved out of the church I think some stragglers went in and probably built a fire in there to try and keep warm and burned the place down. But we met there and then marched up the hill.And it happened that on the day of that first march I was taking my real estate license test. I couldn't change that date, so I took the test, and I did not get down to the church. I have never lived down the fact that they were

walking up that hill out of breath, singing, and I came along riding in my car. [laughter] But it was purely accidental. I was really trying to get down to the church before they left.So we did have a tremendous crowd that day. We were not slated to be on the program, but people who were with me said, "Interrupt the board meeting, interrupt the board meeting, and go up there and speak." I said, "I don't think that I should do that." And they said, "Yes, you must." Mary Tinglof by this time was president. [They] said, "She will recognize you. Yes, she will." And Tom Neusom says, "I'll go up there and stand beside you." So he and I and Nira Harden went up and stood at the podium. And Mary Tinglof recognized me. That was the first opportunity that we had to present to the board of education those things that we wanted for teachers and for pupils to relieve the overcrowding there, and that's really how it started. In addition to that, of course, we had demonstrations on housing down in Torrance, large group there, and we had a counter group that marched against us. But there was no conflict.

Balter

Do you recall the name of that group?

Tackett

Yes, I think it was— Had they formed a White Citizens Council then? It was the equivalent of the White Citizens Council out here in Los Angeles. And, of course, that backlash group formed then. And very often when we demonstrated they also demonstrated. They would walk toward us, you know, but they were just to one side. There were dagger looks, but there was never any demonstration.

Balter

What was the posture of the Los Angeles police towards these demonstrations, at this time at least?

Tackett

That's interesting. The police were always there, watching and taking pictures. But they did not in any way stop us. There was never any confrontation, because, you know, Martin Luther King had come along with his nonviolent approach. And we, before demonstrations, had meetings and we talked about

the nonviolent approach—if we entered into any civil disobedience, how we were to act and how we were not to resist the police, except we would not cooperate. They would have to pick us up and carry us off, or drag us off and there were a number of interesting things that happened along that line. As I was a spokesman for the group, the group met at my office every Tuesday evening, and that was when we made the plans for what we would do on the following Thursday. We went over what had happened on Monday at the board of education. And I think that we may have had some people there who were not friendly but did not let us know they were not friendly. At the board of education my picture was taken so many times as I would sit— I usually sat on the aisle, because I had to get up to go to the podium to speak. And they would come and kneel down right in front of me, as close as I am to you, and take my picture.

Balter

About two feet.

Tackett

About two feet, and take my picture. So much so that one of the ladies that was usually with me said, "Is there no more privacy in the United States?" [laughter] But at any rate, this was the kind of thing that happened, and the police called you often, and at this time I started having visits from the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation].

Balter

Tell me about that.

Tackett

About every six weeks I would hear from them. They would call me on the telephone. They would want to know if I knew of any demonstrations that were going on; they wanted to know if I knew of any illegal acts that people were planning to commit. They wanted to know what could be done, what was going to happen, and so usually I told them the things that we would like for the FBI to do. That we would like for them to take some part in bringing about equality—that was what we were after. Then they would come, always in twos, to my office and identify themselves as from the FBI, and they would

sit down and talk to me for, maybe, fifteen or twenty minutes, a half hour. And they would question me about what was going to happen.I remember on one occasion there was a group that had threatened to blow up the Statue of Liberty. They told me the name of the group and wanted to know if I had had any contact with them at all. So I told them no. I said, "Now, there would be a little difference between the way you would handle it and the way I would handle it. See, you would arrest them if you saw them. I would just persuade them not to do it." They continued from about '63 until '67.The last visit was very interesting. They asked me—By this time they had decided that I was either crazy or a good citizen, I don't know which. But they asked me if I would join some organizations and would let them know whether they were planning anything. They said "communistic organizations," and so I asked them, "What does a communist look like? I've never seen one to know one." That startled them a little bit. Then they called the names of some organizations that they would like for me to affiliate with, and they happened to be some organizations that I knew of and who had been supportive of the education committee and of the United Civil Rights Council. So I told them, I said, "Oh, I know those organizations. They've been so supportive and I just praise them to high heaven." And they have not visited me since. Now, they might after they read this, again, but—[laughter]

Balter

I hope not. Do you remember the names of some of the organizations that they mentioned?

Tackett

I would not like to call the names of the organizations, because of the effect that it might have with somebody who is reading this history, or who might hear it on tape. I did not tell the organizations that they had called their names, and I have never mentioned the names of the organizations. But I have told the story of the visits of the FBI many, many times.

Balter

So I assume, at any rate, that these were organizations that were involved in civil rights activities.

Tackett

They were organizations that were involved in civil rights activities. At that time, and we may be getting back to it, anybody who really was for freedom and equality for everybody was a suspected communist. I even had Chambers, on the board of education, to mention communism in connection with something he was saying to me. And my answer was that the communists must be wonderful, wonderful people if they could think up all the same good things that I think of. And I object to you giving them the credit for those things which I think up which are right and good. So they did not accuse me much after that of being communist. I don't know what they thought about me, but, anyway—

Balter

While we're on this subject, I'm interested in your recollections— Of course the anticommunist activities of the FBI and other agencies and individuals and congressional committees, and so on, didn't stop with the fifties and the McCarthy period, but certainly the McCarthy period, so-called, was the most intense time of that. And that would have actually, I guess, already have been going on at the time that you came to Los Angeles.

Tackett

Correct.

Balter

What are your recollections about the way that the McCarthy period affected the NAACP and the civil rights movement here in Los Angeles?

Tackett

I think that that McCarthy period made a number of people very frightened. The NAACP tried to be very, very careful that no people who stated that they were communist were a part of the organization. I think that if they knew of any person who they felt was, if not communist, but had in mind overthrowing by force the government— If they talked in that term, they were put out of the NAACP. So the NAACP has never had within it any major communistic activity. And I think that they were eventually given a clean bill of health. I noticed some, in the NAACP, that people here seemed to be very careful that nothing that was communistic, you know, got into it.My feeling about that,

really, is that you do what you believe honestly to be the right thing to do. Now, if somebody who does something bad on the side happens to do the right thing that you believe in, your heart is right. Then I see no reason for me to stop doing what I believe is right because somebody who's bad does it too. And this has been my mode of action all the way through. I don't care if a communist says it, I don't care who says it. If a Nazi says it, or whoever says it, if it is the right thing— I may throw out everything else that they say and do, but if they say that one thing, you cannot brand me because I believe that that is right, and I stand up for it. And this is what I have done. I have never felt that it is up to me to witch-hunt, to try and ferret out those persons who were communists. I think we pay the FBI, the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], and the police to take care of people who are doing things that are illegal.Another thing about it that has concerned me is the fact that the United States government has never outlawed the Communist Party. I think that if you believe that it's wrong and that it is against the law, then you ought to make it a criminal act. And inasmuch as we have never done that, it certainly is not up to Marnesba Tackett to take it upon herself to try to find those people who are doing something that's permissible, and that is to be a communist. Now, if I saw somebody who was actually harming somebody else, setting somebody's house on fire or that sort of thing, I wouldn't hesitate to call the police and tell them to get busy on this. But just to try to find some person who has labeled themselves as a certain party, it's not up to me to try to find that for the FBI or for anybody else. It's not up to me to stop doing anything that I'm doing because they do it also.

9. Tape Number: IV, Side Two March 26, 1984

Balter

During this period that we've been talking about, the fifties and the sixties, when a lot of people who were politically active were either accused, or it was implied, that they were communists, or reds, or something like this, are there any particular episodes or individuals that come to mind? People who were targeted in that way?

Tackett

Well, one in particular in the late sixties, when [Thomas] Bradley first challenged [Samuel W.] Yorty for mayor. The mayor published two types of brochure, one mimeographed, several papers stapled together, and one a very slick type, very nicely printed paper. He circulated the mimeographed paper in the black community. I heard of the one that was being circulated in the white community, and I went down to the city hall and asked for it. And there on the front they had several communist type— Or excerpts from papers that had been printed before, and had Loren Miller [Sr.]'s picture on there, and the implication was definitely that Loren was perhaps communistic to people seeing it. Loren, along with all the rest of us, was supporting Bradley against Yorty. And the thing that is interesting is that Loren was one of the foremost civil rights attorneys in this country. And like everybody who was a civil rights worker, we were either accused or suspected, or it was implied, that we were either communist or had some communist backing. My theory, of course, is that those who are communists, who admit that they are communists, are really backed by the right-wing party financially, so that they can carry on their activities and in that way it promotes what the right wing wants to promote. But Loren was a highly respected attorney, and too late in life was made finally a judge and lived only a few years after that.There were others who were suspected. Of those who came out publicly, I know in Detroit, Judge [George] Crockett, who was then an attorney, was one of the attorneys who defended the— Was it the eleven? I'm not sure about that. When he ran for judge in Detroit, they tried to use that against him. He is now a congressman. He gave up the judgeship.

Balter

This is George—

Tackett

George Crockett, yes, of Detroit, Michigan.

Balter

The case that you're referring to of the eleven, what was that about?

Tackett

There were eleven people, I believe, accused of communism, and they were being tried for whatever they had done. I don't know what it was exactly. But I know George Crockett was [the attorney for] one of the defendants, and I remember him telling me— I wrote insurance on him in Detroit. This was in the fifties. And George said to me, he says, "You very well know that I may end up in jail." And it did take Atlanta Life [Insurance Company] almost a year to issue that policy, because they had to really dig into it. I had moved from Detroit, but he wrote to me and said, "Finally they have issued the policy." [laughter] It was one of the first policies in that amount that was written in the Atlanta Life Insurance Company. And that was for only $25,000, can you believe it? [laughter]

Balter

It doesn't seem like much now.

Tackett

That's right.

Balter

One of the things that I wanted to ask you concerns a little bit more on the United Civil Rights Council. Because to me, at any rate, it seems like there are coalitions from time to time that come up, and some of them are successful and some are not, as far as achieving their goals politically. Some of the organizations that were involved [in] the United Civil Rights Council [were] of course the NAACP, the ACLU, the American Jewish Committee, the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations], the California Democratic Council, the Congress on Racial Equality, the Urban League, and a number of others. Of all these different organizations, which ones were the ones who were the really active organizations in the council and which were the ones that perhaps were more on paper?

Tackett

All of those organizations that you have mentioned were active. Perhaps the least active was the Urban League, which had to be careful of its nonprofit status. The Community Relations Conference of Southern California, which itself was a coalition of organizations, was perhaps more on paper. However,

they did carry on what you might call a parallel work with us in human relations. The most active organizations, or the front-runner organizations, were the NAACP and the ACLU. They were perhaps the most active in the UCRC. But all of the fraternities, sororities, all were members. They sent representatives, they were not in the forefront. The persons who were in the forefront, really, were the chairpersons of these committees, and the people who worked with them on committees. And on these committees, people from all of these organizations served. But actually, in the beginning, the UCRC was called the NAACP-UCRC. But some people of the NAACP felt that we were moving a little further than they wanted to move. So they withdrew the name, although the NAACP continued to participate, and to participate fully. The first chairman of UCRC was the president of the NAACP. And it was after the NAACP sort of pulled away that Bishop, now Bishop Brookins, he was Reverend Brookins, became president of UCRC.

Balter

When you say that some people felt that UCRC was going a little bit further than the NAACP wanted to go, was there some feeling about tactics, or was it more other issues?

Tackett

I think it was more recognition, and that the NAACP did not want to be, I guess, recognized at the same level with the United Civil Rights Council. They preferred that the United Civil Rights Council be its own and that the NAACP do its thing. One of the things I think they felt, for instance, with the education committee was that NAACP had had an active education committee for years. I was the chairman of that committee once, which is probably the reason that I was made chairman of UCRC education committee. And I think they felt that UCRC was getting credit and NAACP was not getting the credit for it. So there was a little pull away there and a little friction. You know, that often happens in organizations. But NAACP continued to be active with UCRC.

Balter

Now, [of] the groups that did become active in UCRC when it was formed in about 1963, especially such organizations as the ACLU, the American Jewish Committee, the AFL-CIO, had there been a working relationship in the

previous years between groups like NAACP and groups like ACLU? What was the relationship and how did this more close cooperation develop?

Tackett

It actually developed through Dr. King. You see, Dr. King, with his charisma and the power that he had all over the United States, he was able to bring people of diverse characters, ethnic backgrounds, etc., together in a way that I think has never before been done in the United States of America. And that happened here in Los Angeles. When you used the name of Martin Luther King it just drew people together. So that when we decided to bring him here for a rally, that actually solidified the group and it was that group that was the core group for forming the United Civil Rights Council. And so you drew in all of these people. That was the most effective coalition that I have known of since I have been in Los Angeles because we had people from all ethnic groups and religions who participated; we had Catholics and we had Protestants, we had Mexican-Americans, we had some Chinese, Japanese, plus all of these groups that worked together. In my committee we had them, and I really think that that was the strongest coalition that we have ever had, because I think most of these organizations did what they're doing now. Each one goes its own way, and every now and then they come together on something. But we were together on those four things that we worked on. There was the education, the economic development, the housing, and police brutality—or justice under the law, as Edgar Edwards always called it, who was very active. And there were many people who were extremely active and in the front of the push for civil rights.At that time, although we always included everybody, it was actually the discrimination and segregation of blacks, which is the most notorious segregation and discrimination that we have in this country, that was the case. I have seen many protests and movements patterned after that movement since that time, and we see it in a number of cases. People are accomplishing things for themselves through the kind of movement that was actually started, I guess, by Rosa Parks, really. Because if she hadn't sat on that bus, Martin Luther King would probably still be pastoring Dexter Avenue Church [Montgomery, Alabama]. [laughter]

10. Tape Number: V, Side One April 4, 1984

Balter

Marnesba, we've been talking about the period of time in the early sixties, and obviously a great deal was going on during that period of time that affected civil rights. One issue that I know you and many other people were involved in here in Los Angeles, which was a state-wide issue, was the attempt, first, to prevent from getting on the ballot [and], finally, to defeat so-called Proposition 14, which was put on the ballot back in 1964, I think it was, by the California Real Estate Association and others in an attempt to repeal the Rumford Fair Housing Act. What was your role in that? What do you recall about the campaign to defeat Proposition 14?

Tackett

Well, of course, that was in the days of the United Civil Rights Council, UCRC. We had a housing committee that was headed by [S.] Wendell Green and by Florence Vaughn Jackson. We had had many demonstrations in Torrance and in the eastern section of Los Angeles County, in the Covina area, for fair housing. We were using the Rumford fair-housing law as the basis for our actions, really. When Proposition 14 came, naturally UCRC attempted, one, to keep it from getting on the ballot. And when we found that it did get on the ballot, of course we launched, along with many others in the city, the "No on 14" campaign. You remember that that was written in such a way that when you read the proposition you would think, "Well, this is all right, and this is what it should be." Because they had approached it from the idea that whoever is going to sell a house can decide who they want to sell it to, and they can discriminate in the sale of their home. They did not put it in such words that the layman could clearly understand what they were about, which was to keep chiefly blacks and other minorities from moving into neighborhoods that they wanted to keep all white.I can recall when [former Congressman James Charles] Corman in the [San Fernando] Valley was running for office. He had a dinner that I attended with a number of others. Table 14 had a large sign on it saying, "No on 14." We also were anxious to have Governor [Edmund G.] Brown [Sr.] at that time come out strongly for integrated housing. We were not able to get him to do that because he was afraid of not being reelected. And in attending a meeting in Sacramento of civil rights people, it was a large interracial meeting, the question came up as to whether we should, in order to be sure that Brown would be reelected,

whether we shouldn't soft-pedal some of the things that we wanted in civil rights. My position there was—and I stood up and said so, and kept them from moving to a soft-pedal on civil rights—I felt that we should become stronger. Because you cannot appease the enemy, and there is no point in trying. Of course, we lost on that, but Al [Abraham Lincoln] Wirin of the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] took the decision on Proposition 14 to the Supreme Court and it was finally declared unconstitutional.

Balter

That was both by the California and the U.S. supreme courts, I believe.

Tackett

Correct, correct. It went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Balter

Now, I'm interested in the attempt to get Governor Brown to come down against Proposition 14. Were there delegations that went up to meet with him or people—?

Tackett

Yes, we did. We met with him, we talked with him. Of course he was concerned about reelection. And it is my position that you do not compromise that which you believe strongly in in order to gain your enemies, who are not going to vote for you anyway. They are going to oppose you anyway. So there is no point in you catering to them. What you need to do is to strengthen those persons who are with you by continuing to strongly come out for those things which you really believe are right, and those things which your supporters believe to be right and want to happen as far as government is concerned.

Balter

Were you personally present at any of the meetings with Brown?

Tackett

I was, yes, I was personally present with at least one meeting where we talked with him. But I was not the leader in that group.

Balter

Right, right. But you were there to see?

Tackett

Yes, I was there.

Balter

Did he raise any arguments besides the problem with being reelected, in terms of why he should not come out against Proposition 14?

Tackett

Not any that convinced me. [laughter] I should say, not any that convinced me. I think that Governor Brown— And we're talking about Pat Brown, the father, who was governor at that time.

Balter

Of course.

Tackett

I think that he was a strong supporter of human rights, and we supported him for that. I think that he was advised, and ill-advised, by some of his supporters that those things that were controversial he should soft-pedal. So he never came out against us; only, he didn't come out strongly enough for those things that we believed in and that we felt that he believed in too.

Balter

Do you recall any of the other people or organizations that were involved in the meetings with Brown?

Tackett

[Carlton] Goodlet from up north.

Balter

Carlton Goodlet?

Tackett

Carlton Goodlet was involved, and we had a united— We had a south and a north group working for— Really that group that worked was mostly the Committee for Representative Government. We had a group in the north that was working and a group in the south that was working. Wendell Green, who was then editor of the *Sentinel* here in Los Angeles, and Carlton Goodlet, who had a couple of papers up north—I don't remember the name of those papers—really worked together. And it was in that group— The brothers who finally went to— Both were congressmen from that district. You know them well, I'm sure, but I have a mental block on that. I can't think of their names now, but the two brothers were there. [Philip A. and John Burton] And I recall one meeting that we had that was [an] all-black meeting, that we would not allow one of the brothers to come into that meeting at that particular time. Which was quite interesting because I felt that the people that were your friends and who you know to be your friends should be welcome at all times, and you need to begin to forget the color line, and work together in coalitions for what you believe to be best. I'm sorry I cannot think of his name. Maybe I can think of it later.

Balter

Okay. Now, during this period of time when fair housing was a very big issue in California, were there—? What was the situation here in Los Angeles, what type of fights went on in this area, not just at the ballot box, but otherwise that you or the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] or other organizations were involved in around fair housing?

Tackett

Well, we were very much involved with attempting to have the laws obeyed, and through CRCSC [Community Relations Conference of Southern California] we developed the fair-housing groups. And these fair-housing groups were in various sections of Los Angeles and in the surrounding part of Los Angeles. This was back in the late sixties when the fair-housing groups really came into prominence. I worked for the Housing Opportunity Center [HOC], and my first job with the Housing Opportunity Center was in working with, and helping to organize, fair-housing groups.We had groups in Orange County, we had groups all over Los Angeles County and the San Fernando Valley, in the Covina area, in the Pasadena area, and I met with those groups. We trained them to

be checkers where a minority had gone in to rent a place that was supposedly available and found for various reasons that it was not available. They used excuses that it has been rented, my mother-in-law has decided to move in, we are taking it off the market because we have to do some refurbishing. There were just many, many excuses. Then they also had an application that certain people had to fill out, and then it would take three or four days before you would hear from the application. Now, the checkers followed that up by going in and assuming all of the posture of the minority. And we found often that the unit was available without an application, without even checking on the job, and asking people to move in immediately. They would go so far as to write the check for the deposit and then say, "Do you know about the fair-housing laws?," and attempt to persuade them to rent it, and very often the minority was sitting out in the car waiting. The second person—they went by twos—would go out to the car to bring the minority person in and very often they rented it. If they didn't rent it, of course, we had FEPC [Fair Employment Practices Commission] that you could appeal to. We had attorneys who volunteered their services, and they would go to court and could win up to ten thousand dollars. Well, a few of those kinds of victories actually made people more cautious about saying that they would not rent to Negroes, or they would not rent a mixed couple, or they would not rent to a foreigner. Go ahead—

Balter

Oh, I didn't mean to interrupt you, but I gather, then, that you feel that there was some significant success in this program.

Tackett

There has been significant success in the program. However, can you believe it that today there is still segregation in housing. There is segregation, of course, against children and against mixed couples and against singles moving in. So that the fair-housing groups still are working—

Balter

They still exist?

Tackett

Still are very active, and are still having some victories. But old mores, old beliefs, old built-in prejudices are hard to kill. So that it takes some time before they really succeed in breaking down all barriers.

Balter

Now, I believe, if I understood you correctly, that the housing groups were originally formed under the auspices of CRCSC, and other similar groups, the Community Relations Conference of Southern California.

Tackett

Yes, correct, yes. HOC was formed under the auspices of CRCSC.

Balter

The housing groups that still exist today, are they still connected the same way organizationally? Or are there new organizations which have taken—?

Tackett

There is a Fair Housing Congress, and they are under that umbrella. Although CRCSC is still very supportive, I think that CRCSC is not now what you might call the father or mother or parent of the organizations. They come under the Fair Housing Congress but are still very close to CRCSC.

Balter

Now, you mentioned to me earlier when we were off tape that you had been involved in some marches against a builder named Don Wilson in Torrance. I was interested in that because the ACLU was involved eventually in a lawsuit against this builder. But you apparently were involved in the demonstration end of things. Tell me a little bit about that.

Tackett

Yes, we were involved in the demonstration. It was interesting that it was in Torrance that there was a counterdemonstration against us. At the same time that we were marching, they came facing us. However, there was no confrontation.Thomas [G.] Neusom, who now has passed away, was very active in the United Civil Rights Council, in its organization and as an attorney for UCRC. One who volunteered a lot of time. And a young attorney who worked in his office offered to purchase one of the homes, Don Wilson's

homes, there in Torrance. And it was interesting, the number of things that they did to try to actually keep him out. I think there was a little something about the check, whether the money was all in the bank at the time he wrote the check, and various things. I think he finally gave up on trying to get the house there. But that case may have been a part of the suit that ACLU filed against— In fact I think it was a part of the suit that was filed against Don Wilson.In those suits we always prevailed, but even that did not make it possible. I had a friend that was looking for a home. It was interesting. These people had the money, had the cash to pay, and looked in several of the new sections that were being built up. And it was interesting how they could come and sometimes stand for a long time and just were ignored. And then they were showed, finally, the model home. They were discouraged from making an application. They insisted. When they insisted they just found reasons why they could not qualify for the home. And yet we knew of friends, Caucasian friends, who did not have the cash that they had, did not have any more stability as far as employment was concerned. And this couple already owned property, rental property, but they couldn't qualify to buy a single home. It was interesting. They tried several places. They finally gave up, bought additional rental property, moved some rental property from other sections of the city and built that up on a lot that they purchased. And they're doing quite well. Retired now.

Balter

That's good.

Tackett

[laughter] Living off of the rents from their property.

Balter

We've been talking about civil rights activities in Los Angeles in the early sixties. Of course, at this same time, a great deal had begun to go on in the South, with voter registration drives, the Freedom Riders, the attempts to desegregate the schools and the universities in Alabama, Mississippi, and so on. Many very famous episodes there. What do you recall, and what was going on here in Los Angeles, among people active in the civil rights movement in terms of relating to what was going on in the South? I know that

people from here went on the Freedom Rides. What type of organizing support work and ferment was there here concerning the events in the South?

Tackett

Of course, Los Angeles was very sympathetic toward what was going on in the South. We did raise money that we sent to the South. We did encourage young people from here, Freedom Riders, mostly college students who spent their summers on the Freedom Rides in the South. I was not as active in that phase of it because my priority was in trying to get equal education right here in Los Angeles, where we had a lot of discrimination, a lot of work done in terms of the way boundaries were drawn.I can recall in the Wilshire-Olympic corridor where if the line had simply been drawn east and west instead of north and south, they would have integrated the schools in that area automatically. In the southern area, there were places down toward Carson where if they simply had drawn the lines a little differently, we would have integrated those schools. There was so much resistance there that I really did not have the time to work actively; I only supported in spirit the Freedom Rides and all in the South. Because all of it needed to be done. It all needed to be worked on at one and the same time, and there were just hardly enough people to go around to do all of the things that needed to be done. And I find that today we are almost in the same place, especially in the area of employment.

Balter

Do you remember any of the people from Los Angeles at that time who did go to the South, especially some of the younger blacks, and whites for that matter, who were involved in the civil rights movement?

Tackett

The names do not come to me right at this moment. Perhaps if you had asked me about it earlier I might have been able to think of some of those and have been accurate, and could have been accurate in giving the names of people that I knew who went to the South. I know Robert Lyons participated in the civil rights movement in the South. I don't believe that Bob was in Los Angeles, however, at the time. He came here later.

Balter

I would assume that people who went on the Freedom Rides, and [became] involved in voter registration, and so on, came back to Los Angeles and spoke and gave reports on what was happening.

Tackett

Yes, we had many rallies and people talked to us about what was happening. Of course, you know, we saw it on television, and in the papers we got accounts of it. I know that one person who was very active in going to the South, and who went back often, was Dr. H. Claude Hudson, who was, and has been for years, active in the NAACP. He has been called "Mr. NAACP" here in Los Angeles. I know that just a few days before Medgar Evers was murdered, he was visiting in Medgar's home, and Medgar told him at that time that his life really was in danger. He came back to Los Angeles, and I think it was only a day or two later that he heard that Medgar Evers had been killed. And then in a few days he was back there to the funeral of Medgar Evers. So Dr. Hudson was very active and very brave, went through the South where things were happening, and I remember that he said to me that— So many young people had been jailed for their activities from the marches and whatnot, and he said, "You talk about wall-to-wall carpeting here in Los Angeles. Well, I went out to the stadium where they had fenced in the people. I saw wall-to-wall people, young people, that they had put in jail or that they had arrested." They didn't have room in the jails. They were arrested and they had been fenced in at this stadium. And he said, "They were there wall to wall."

Balter

While we're on the subject of Dr. Hudson, why don't you tell me some of your impressions of his leadership here in Los Angeles.

Tackett

Well, of course, for many years they thought there would never be another president of the NAACP in Los Angeles because Dr. Hudson was its president. That was just before my coming here in 1952. When I came Dr. E. [Emory] I. Robinson was the president of the NAACP. But Dr. Hudson was always active, always served on the board, was always in some official capacity, both locally and nationally, with the NAACP. As a matter of fact, I remember him saying to me, "Everybody who lives north of Forty-seventh Street and west of San Pedro

[Street] ought to thank the NAACP for opening up housing for them."And, of course, you know it was Loren Miller [Sr.] who gave much of his life to civil rights, much of his work as an attorney to civil rights, and it was Loren Miller who, with Dr. Hudson's blessing and urging, took the case all the way to the Supreme Court regarding covenants that would say that I will [not] sell [my] home to anything other than a white person. As a matter of fact, you know, Richard [M.] Nixon bought two or three homes that had that convenant in the— [laughter] If you look back into some of the titles you will see those covenants, but of course they're not enforceable now, and we have the fair-housing laws that are against it. But as I said before, people still try to. So I don't know of any major civil rights activity in Los Angeles, certainly since I have been here, since 1952, that Dr. H. Claude Hudson was not an active part of.

Balter

When did he retire as president of NAACP?

Tackett

Well, he didn't retire as president, I guess he— I'm not sure, I think it was back in the late forties. But you know, Dr. Hudson, I remember him also saying that during the time of the sit-ins, and the wade-ins, that he said he was arrested for wading in, going swimming out in Cabrillo Beach. So it wasn't new.Then another person who was very active in civil rights was Leon Washington, who was the owner of the *Los Angeles Sentinel,* that started as a throwaway paper, and Leon Washington was jailed. And it happened that we were neighbors back in Kansas City. It was Leon who started the slogan "Don't spend your money where you can't work," and actually brought about a lot of changes along Central Avenue, where there were many stores owned and operated by whites, many of them by Jewish persons, who lived in the Beverly Hills area and other areas and who hired no blacks whatsoever. There were five-and-ten-cent stores along Central Avenue and no blacks were hired. And yet they were in black neighborhoods. And you know we are seeing that today, now. Many Koreans are opening stores in black neighborhoods and they hire no blacks, only Koreans. But they are serving exclusively the black community.

Balter

You mentioned the stores, white-owned stores along Central Avenue, and so forth; as I recall, and I'm a little hazy on this, but as I recall, at one point the campaign did begin to try to force those businessmen to hire blacks. Was that something you were involved in?

Tackett

Yes. We were involved in that as part of employment. And the stores did hire blacks as a result of that. But it was not only along Central Avenue; all along Crenshaw [Boulevard], you see, there was a time where the Broadway, the May Company, and other stores along there hired no blacks. Now all of those stores hire blacks. Those that are still there hire clerks, even managers who are black. We also had campaigns against the grocery stores, the chain stores, the Boys [Market Inc.], ABC Market [Corporation]. We demonstrated against those markets in the predominantly black neighborhoods that hired no blacks at all. I can recall back in 1967 when we had a campaign just to get box boys hired, and box girls, in the various stores. And the labor unions supported us in that kind of thing.

Balter

They did?

Tackett

Oh, yes. That was a part of the work of the United Civil Rights Council.

Balter

Speaking of UCRC, there was another issue that the organization got involved in, in early '64. Apparently UCRC asked the Los Angeles City Council to create a police review board. And I'm interested in what types of problems with the police were being experienced that led to that development.

Tackett

Of course, Martin Luther King [Jr.], even back in the fifties, and in his speech in 1963, the famous "I Have a Dream" speech, he mentioned the police brutality. We have experienced a difference in the way police handle persons suspected of wrongdoing, of crime, in the black community and in the white community. There have been many police shootings. There were beatings. Women driving nice cars, black women, were stopped and [asked], "Whose car is this?" and

this kind of thing that was really very insulting. One of the things that we actually fought for was justice in the way all persons are treated, especially by the police. And we had asked for a police review board.It was about that time that they had what they call the "Muslim riot" on Broadway [Avenue], where they had been meeting on a Saturday evening prior to Sunday. Many of these men were leaving, some of them with their clothes on hangers because they'd been to the cleaners. And you know one of the practices of the [Black] Muslim man is that he must always be well dressed with a suit, shirt, and tie, and so on. They were leaving the temple, and the police stopped them. And they shot them, they beat them, and there was really no need for it, they had done absolutely nothing wrong. But somehow our law enforcement people become upset, afraid, whenever blacks meet together to try to do something for themselves. And it is true that the Muslims called white people "white devil," but, you know, sticks and stones will break your bones but words can't hurt you. And they resented that sort of thing.The Muslim temple was shot up several times, and after that incident, in which one person was crippled for life and I believe another person was actually killed there on Broadway, Mayor [Samuel W.] Yorty set up a committee. I was asked to serve on that committee—it was an interracial committee—when we talked with the police about it. And it was interesting how one policeman, when asked the question, "Why was it necessary to shoot this man?," stated that he came with his hands open as though he would grab the policeman around the neck to choke him. And my answer was, "You had a billy club, you had a foot with a shoe on it, you are trained to subdue people, and how could you consider a man who was advancing towards you with both hands open, not with his fists closed, and with nothing in his hands, how could you consider him a threat to life?"Well, it was that, with a number of other similar incidents of disrespect, that caused us to feel that what we need is a civilian review board, because the police not only were supposedly disciplining their own, but it was like the culprit deciding what his own discipline should be for his wrong act. We felt, and we still feel, that a civilian board looking into these things would be much more objective than the police themselves could possibly be. And so back there we asked for a civilian review board, and I think we're still asking for—

Balter

I believe that's true.

Tackett

—a civilian review board, which they object to. In any other case, they ask for a party who is a disinterested party, who can look at things objectively. That's true with juries and all. We felt at that time that that was what we needed in order to curb this. And not only to curb what was happening, but to try to change the attitude of many people in the community, especially our young people, who consider the police to be their enemy instead of their friend. We need a police force for the protection of the people, and to protect them against those people who do wrong. But the policeman is not supposed to act as the judge and jury and executor of persons whom they suspect of wrongdoing. And this is what we are against. We were against it at that time and we still are. There have been several incidents, for instance, against the Black Panthers, and the thing that bothered us was we found that from time to time somebody from the police force would infiltrate the group, and they would be the chief instigator of trouble that would bring the police in. This kind of thing I think is wrong.

11. Tape Number: V, Side Two April 4, 1984

Balter

Marnesba, the committee that you've mentioned, Mayor Yorty's committee that you were appointed to, do you recall any of the other people that served on that committee at this point?

Tackett

Well, a young fellow named Tafoya, I think was his name, was on that committee. Probably Tom Neusom, I believe, served on that committee. We met only a couple of times, two or three times. I can recall, though, when we attended a meeting at Second Baptist Church, a rally following the incident, that I sat next to a friend, Gladys Haney. They mentioned that the mayor had called this group together, and I said to her, I said, "You know, I've been asked to serve on that group." And she looked at me and she says, "Well, Aunt Thomasina!" [laughter]So we were sort of looked upon with some question if we agreed to serve on that committee. I don't remember all of the people that were on there. I do remember just a couple of us. And then, of course, there

were policemen on that committee. I don't know any of their names. I didn't even try to learn their names. And there were some, of course, Caucasian citizens who served on the committee. We met a couple of times, and I think we made some kind of a report. But as Wendell Green said, you did not have to be a Muslim on that night. He said, "You just had to be black and moving to be shot by the police." And that was really the situation there.The meeting that we had at Second Baptist Church, that church was filled to capacity. It was the second time that I had seen Malcolm X, and he was a tremendous orator. I don't know whether he ever went to college a day. He was, I think from his history and I have the story, was a high school dropout and was involved in a number of things. But he had a tremendous brain, and he was a real activist, and I think he began to see that although— He said on that day that if you do not hate white people who have discriminated against you for two hundred years, there is nothing that the Muslims could say to you to make you hate them today. He was electrifying, really, as a speaker, and it's unfortunate that he did not live because his whole attitude had tempered somewhat from the hate groups. Because he had found in his world travels that all white people were not devils and that there could be a coalition working together for humanity, and he was leaning in that direction. So it was extremely unfortunate that he died so soon, like Martin Luther King, that he was assassinated so young. Because I think there was much unfinished work that both of them could have done for the good of all of the people.

Balter

The committee that you mentioned, you mentioned that it issued a report. Were there any recommendations that were made and were any of those recommendations—?

Tackett

Well, of course, part of that grew out— One of the recommendations from us was that there should be a review board, that the police should use more restraint, and that they should not converge on people who are not doing anything, who are just a group simply leaving the temple after having a meeting that evening, getting in their cars, going home. There was absolutely no need for any kind of an altercation, and this was the consensus of our report.

Balter

Now, Marnesba, one area that I'd like to get into for a little bit, you mentioned that when you got appointed to the committee that your friend accused you of being an "Aunt Thomasina," and of course it's well known that, at a certain point during the sixties that— You've talked about the Muslims and you've mentioned the Black Panthers and others, Malcolm X, the rise of what, I guess, has been loosely called the Black Power movement, Stokely Carmichael and other figures. [door bell rings; tape recorder turned off] The point I was making is that I think it's fairly well known that, especially during this period of time, there were tensions between various parts of the black community, between—perhaps I'm characterizing somewhat loosely here—younger and more militant blacks [and] the older generation, or people who'd been involved in the civil rights movement. There were even attacks and criticisms of Martin Luther King himself. The word "Uncle Tom" flew around quite a bit back in those days.

Tackett

Yes, yes. [laughter]

Balter

I'm interested in your impressions and experiences and remembrances of those types of tensions and debates among blacks, in Los Angeles especially.

Tackett

Well, yes. I knew [Maulana] Ron Karenga very well, who organized the group called US [Organization]. And Ron, of course, was teaching young people Swahili and martial arts so that they would take care of themselves, such things as jujitsu and so on. And then there was a group called the Young Men for Total Democracy. There was another group, with Tommy Jacquette, and I've forgotten what they called themselves. But anyhow, the name itself was kind of threatening, and I said to Tommy, "Why the threat in a name like that?" And I can't recall what it was, but he said, "So we can scare them." There was a beginning on the part of a number of young people to feel that the dogs, the fire hoses that were being used in the South, the homes that were being bombed, the killing of those three innocent girls in Alabama, in Birmingham, that they felt you ought to strike back. Of course, that is sort of a

natural humanistic thing, to strike back. They were beginning to feel that things weren't moving fast enough. These people, and all of these militant groups, were all good friends of mine. I could talk with them. They were young people. They didn't mind telling me that I was too old, and that after thirty you really are out of it. I remember saying to Tommy Jacquette, I said, "Tommy, when you are thirty-one and you have your rocking chair, I will buy your house slippers for you." [laughter]And I remember saying to Ron Karenga, I said, "Ron, you are teaching these people Swahili. But you have your master's degree; what you need to be teaching them is hard work, study, education, so that they can enter into the mainstream. We will open things up." I said, "How many jobs are these young people going to get when they go downtown and say good morning in Swahili?" But they all still love me. There's not a one that won't come up to me and kiss me now. [laughter]

Balter

How did Karenga respond when you said that to him?

Tackett

Well, I think it was, "Aw, go on, Miss Tackett." That type of thing. We remained friends although we talked very frankly. I talked with all of them very frankly. With the Black Panthers, in a meeting, I said to them, "We all want the same thing." But I said, "You have a suicidal tendency. You want to be killed. Why do you want to be killed?" I said, "I'm different. I don't want to be killed." I said, "I want to wen. And I want all of us to enter into the mainstream. I want equality in education. I want fair housing." And we talked. "We all want the same thing," I said, "but you think that you can fight to get it. There are many more rocks out there that you can hide under just like the Indians now. Because the tactic that you are taking will wind up with annihilation." I said, "You can't afford to do that."I remember saying to my grandson [Cyrus Keller, Jr.], who was young, who was very upset over what was happening, and I said, "Well, what do you think you can do?" He says, "Well, there's bombing, there's all—" He's in high school. And it happened that we were standing in front of the Capitol building in Sacramento, and I said, "Turn around and look at that building." I said, "How much of the white man's Coke would you have to buy and drink to get enough bottles? And how much of the white man's gasoline will you have to buy to fill those bottles to

blow that up?" And he looked at me and he didn't say another word. Because the whole idea of attempting to get equality by fighting for it is only to end up in defeat. Because we do not own the ammunition. We do not build the rockets. We do not manufacture the guns. We do not have the airplanes. Why, one young man, at one time, said to me, "I think that we will take over Mississippi. They need to give us a country of our own here, and I think it will be Mississippi." And I told him, "Well, you just go right on." I said, "And so you get everybody collected together, and they can just fly over there with one bomber and have an accident. They wouldn't do it on purpose, but just have an accident, and blow all of you up. So I'm going to try to keep a few people here to propagate the race after all of you are gone." Of course, I was over thirty. [laughter] And they would then remind me of the generation gap: "You are from the old school."I think, though, that the Black Panthers, the Muslims, US, Young Men for Total Democracy, all of that group now is over thirty, and they have found that we must use the ballot box, that we must use education, because many of them are educated and holding good jobs now. They have found that education is the key to moving into the mainstream. That's number one. Because if you don't have an education you can't hold the job to buy the home and the food to feed your family. So, to me, education is number one, and then next to that comes equality and fairness in the employment of people. I am not as concerned about women being given an equal opportunity as I am about all people being given an equal opportunity. I think if we do that— And this was really what UCRC was all about, it was what HOC was all about, it is what SCLC and the NAACP are all about. I think that's what we have to work toward.

Balter

Well, I think in addition to the debate over tactics, militant tactics versus working through the system, or even as part of that same debate, as I understand it, [there] was also a debate between an integrationist point of view and various aspects of a separationist point of view. Again, according to my understanding, [a separatist view] would range from the Muslims, a strict separatist point of view, to perhaps something along the lines of the early thinking of Stokely Carmichael, where you set up independent or autonomous institutions in the black community and bypass the white power structure.

Tackett

I frankly do not believe that there is any way to bypass the white power structure. I think that that is impossible. I think what we have to do, as blacks in a hostile society, mainly a hostile society, is really learn how the system works, and then make the system work for us. Certainly there must be economic development by blacks in the black community, but not only in the black community. The economic development has to be that we produce and that we set up the kinds of industry and commercial establishments that have appeal to all of the people. I think it is fruitless for us to depend upon that part of the 10 or 12 percent of the population that will come to us to buy. I think that that is stupid and I think that until we appeal to all— Because any time you have something that a person wants and needs they will buy it from you.And I will say now what I say to my people all the time. When we discover that we can think as well as we can play basketball then we will have it made. When we find out that we can work an experiment in physics as well as we can run with a football, you see, we will have a commodity that people will buy. They do not pay Magic [Earvin] Johnson $25 million over a period of twenty-five years because he's black. It's because he plays basketball better than anybody else. And when we can build, let us say, a mousetrap, going back, better than anybody else builds a mousetrap, then everybody will buy that mousetrap and you don't have to depend on just the black people in the black community to buy it.This is what I'm talking about. Integration. I am an integrationist. We live in a country of many people. And I do not believe in reinventing the wheel. If you get in a community with a group of people that is doing something well, and you learn how to do it and improve upon it, you see, then you move into the mainstream. You can't be kept out of the mainstream. They pull you into the mainstream. This is what we have to do. This is what I have been preaching in the organizations that I belong to. I helped to organize UCRC. I helped to organize the Black Agenda [Inc.]. But I don't believe that the Black Agenda has to be jet black, only black. I think that the Black Agenda has to be run by blacks, but it doesn't have to be all black. I cannot fight against discrimination and racism for myself and then turn around and become a racist in something that I'm doing or attempting to build up.My position is, and the thing that I'm fighting for, is education. I don't care where you are, and I don't care whether the teacher loves you or not, you are there to get what the teacher has, and I don't mean in her pocketbook. Get what the teacher has to give you, and there is nobody that can keep you from

absorbing it if you are there exposed to it. Integration in education is simply exposure to the same thing that everybody else is exposed to, and that is what we are talking about. I'm glad to argue with anybody who wants to argue against integration. Not against busing, or for busing, but integration. And I think that we've got to come to it if this country really is going to survive. Because with all of the different people that we have here, we cannot set up a whole lot of different countries, unless we are going to be like they are in the Middle East or like they are even in Europe, where country is fighting against country. We are one, and we need to be that way. And the people that we bring into this country— And we were brought here. We didn't come of our own accord, we were brought here. The people that we bring into this country ought to have a chance to develop to their full potential as a part of this country, as citizens of this country. That's what it's all about.

12. Tape Number: VI, Side One April 26, 1984

Balter

Marnesba, I'd like to start off today's session by catching up with some of the things that were going on in your personal life. We've gotten caught up in the political whirlwind, and we should go back and recapture some of the important events in your life. One thing that we have alluded to several times in your sessions was the death of your husband, Joseph [Edgar] Tackett, in 1958. I wonder if you could tell me about that, how it affected your life, what the circumstances were, and so on.

Tackett

My husband had been in an accident some seven months before his death. And incidentally, his death was in April, as was my mother's and my father's and my stepson's, all in the month of April.

Balter

In different years, I assume.

Tackett

In different years, oh, yes. My husband was the assistant minister at Second Baptist Church at the time of his death. He was also the assistant chaplain for

the [Los Angeles] Baptist City Mission Society, and was stationed at the city hospital. What is it, USC [University of Southern California]?

Balter

The [Los Angeles] County-[University of Southern California] Medical Center?

Tackett

The county medical center. And he was on his way to the center at that time that he was struck by a car that ran a red light just a couple of blocks from home. At that time I was working for Beneficial Standard Life Insurance Company as a life underwriter and was preparing to move to the La Brea [Avenue] address and open my general agency. We were to move on the, oh, somewhere between the fifteenth and the twentieth was the target date, and he died on April 13.I at that time did not know what I would do. He died of a heart attack. He had a heart attack at the time of the accident, and I didn't know what I would do. But my brother came here from Kansas City to the funeral and said to me the morning following the funeral, "Does Joe have some overalls that I can put on to go out and finish up your office?" We were to live in the back of the office.Incidentally, I think my husband had a premonition, because he had been the kind of person who turned over all of the business to me. He brought his checks home and he just depended on me to do things. But he took the leadership in finding me this office to set up my general agency. And I sort of marveled at him taking that leadership but did not really recognize it until he passed. I know that when we were remodeling it, I was doing most of the contracting for it, getting people to do the things that needed to be done, and planning it. And often, as I drove along this street, it just came to me, "Is this what you want without Joe?" And I could not understand why that thought kept coming to me until the Sunday morning when he passed. When the doctor came out of the room— Because he had had the attack at home, had fainted, or fallen out at home, getting ready to go to church to preach that morning. And when the doctor came out about 8:15, out of the room, and said to me that he has expired, my answer was "This is it." I knew that that was what had been coming to me all during that month when we were preparing the place.When my brother said to me, "We will go and finish up so you can get moved," I said, "I don't know whether I want to go back there." My brother said to me, "You will go." He says, "You sound like

you've lost your mind." He says, "You're going to move in there if you have to move out." And so, the next morning after the funeral, we went and we worked on it, and we were a little late getting in, but I moved into that office about May 1.Interestingly enough, I had not really shed tears. My daughter said to me— They were living in Bakersfield, and of course they came down. She said to me once, "Mother, have you cried?" And I said, "Well, I don't know. Am I supposed to cry?" But when we moved in, the man who was to have put in the carpet and was to have finished it came on the day that we were moving and wanted to stop the moving to fix the carpet. I kept saying to him, "No, you can't. You should have done it before. You'll just have to wait, and you'll just have to move the furniture to put the carpet down." He kept after me until I just screamed, and the lady who was helping me came with both fists up, and she says, "Get out of here or I will kill you. Get out of here." And I just screamed, and that was the first time. And I think it was good for me because I had a good cry after that and it seemed that things were better.The only thing that I did find was that I was unable to sleep at night. But I found if I turned the television on and looked at it for a few minutes, I would fall asleep. Then if I would wake up and the television was going and I'd get up to turn it off, I then could not go back to sleep. So I would leave it on. I ruined my television set leaving it on all night with nothing going on just so I could sleep. I had friends who said, "What are you taking, medicines?" But I took no medicines. I'm not a person who can take medicine very easily.So I began. I worked from there and built up that agency and then finally went into real estate and continued civil rights work. Because how can you do otherwise? I think that actually his death helped me to mature and become self-sufficient as an individual and to perhaps do a little better the things that I had been doing with his help.Because he was an avid reader, and he read rapidly—I read slowly—and we worked together. When I was asked to make a speech, I would say to him, "Joe, I need some quotations about certain things." He kept all of his books—the *Reader's Digest, Coronet,* and books like that—and he could go and look at the outside of those books and just in a few minutes pick out a book that would be apropros for the illustration that I wanted to make. We had courted when I was in high school, and I made A's on all maps, raised maps and things like that, for history, and it was because he made the maps for me [laughter] because I couldn't draw a straight line with a ruler. So I had depended on him for things like that, and often when we were doing things

around the house and I needed to read up on something, he would read to me while I was cooking or washing the dishes, and I would get it from his reading, so I was really quite spoiled. Whenever I had anything to look up at the library, he enjoyed doing those kinds of things, and so he would do that research and that sort of thing for me.So, I missed that a great deal, and I had to start doing a lot of things for myself, including killing a bug. I never thought that it was possible for me to kill a bug, until one day I saw a lizard going up the outside of my house, and it scared me, so I said, "Suppose that thing came in the house." So I got the rake, and I managed to get it down, and killed the lizard. That doesn't sound good to environmentalists, but I'll tell you if that lizard had come in the house, I would have had to move out. [laughter]

Balter

That would have been a different story.

Tackett

Yes, so I found that there were a lot of things that I could do that I did not know that I could do, after his passing.

Balter

You mentioned, if I understood you correctly, that the auto accident, in which he had a heart attack at the time of the accident was about seven months before the fatal heart attack. How was he in between? Was he hospitalized in between times?

Tackett

He was under the doctor's care. By the way, he was planning to leave as a machinist. In addition to the ministry, coming here to Los Angeles, he did not have a church, and he did not organize one, and he worked as a machinist for Douglas Aircraft [Company]. He was never able to go back to work after the automobile accident. He was not hospitalized. He stayed at home, but he was under the doctor's care constantly, and he did some of the work at the hospital that he was supposed to, in visiting the sick. He was supposed to have become the head of that work for the Baptist City Mission Society, because the person who headed that was retiring, and here my husband passed away before he could retire.

Balter

You mentioned right after your husband's death you moved into your insurance office on La Brea, and then you said that you later went into real estate. About when was that? And did you move into a different office at that point?

Tackett

No, not at that point. I continued with real estate and insurance, of course, as an independent insurance agent and started with real estate. However, the Santa Monica Freeway came through, and various businesses, especially gas stations, were buying up land near the freeway off-ramp. Texaco bought that property, and I moved here to the present property.

Balter

By that you mean—

Tackett

I moved here to Fourth Avenue, from there. When I first moved here, I had not thought about having my office here. I established an office out on Figueroa [Street], Forty-eighth [Street] and Figueroa [Street]. Selling real estate, I went to cooperate with a broker who had converted his garage into an office. And I had these garages back here, and I said, "Why not?" So I converted two of the garages into an office, and did my real estate business from home. Then, after mother was not too well—Well, it really was not that. I was asked to become the executive director of the United Civil Rights Council [UCRC], which job I took.

Balter

Now, this would have been about what year?

Tackett

That was about 1966. I guess 1966.

Balter

Okay.

Tackett

I moved here in 1964. And I had been active, of course, with the United Civil Rights Council since '63, in fact was one of those who helped organize it. I moved here in '64, and then the riots, so-called, were in '65, I believe. And it was in '66 that UCRC was experiencing some difficulties. We were in the old UAW [United Auto Workers] building at San Pedro and Manchester [Avenue], and they asked if I would take that on. I did, in an attempt to build it up. However, although we did a number of things that I thought were very worthwhile, we had come into the Vietnam War, and following the riots there was this separation, and "we want to do our own thing" kind of thing. So that many of the activists who had been very active with UCRC found another interest in fighting the illegal war in Vietnam.And then we were extremely interested in what was going on in the [Los Angeles Unified School District] Board of Education. Our case against the board, *Crawford [Crawford vs. Los Angeles Unified School District],* had sort of died, or sort of been put on the shelf. And we were concerned about the schools, in the schools that were earthquake prone. Of course, those were the older schools, and they were in the minority areas, in the South Central area of Los Angeles, and so we became very much involved in that.My real estate and insurance business sort of dwindled. And in early, I guess 1968, we decided to close the office for UCRC, and Ted Watkins with WLCAC [Watts Labor Community Action Committee] took that building over. It was a UAW building, and, of course you know, Ted is the representative for UAW. And I thought, "Well, I'll come back home, and I will revive my real estate business." But then CRCSC, the Community Relations Conference of Southern California, had started the Housing Opportunity Center, and I was asked if I would work for fair housing. The Hoover redevelopment project was moving people out of the Hoover area, and we felt that if they were going to move out, we would try as much as possible to get them to move into integrated areas. The fair-housing laws, as you know, were in effect, and Proposition 14 was in the courts, so we— And we were working, really, for fair housing. So, I let them talk me into that. I said, "I had intended that I would work up my business again, and that I would never leave it again." But I let them persuade me.So I went to work for the Housing Opportunity Center, under CRCSC, and saw that that area, that had really been an integrated area, was moving people, and they were moving in two directions. The Caucasians were moving in one direction, the Afro-Americans in another direction. And the stipend that they received from

government just was not enough to put people into housing that they could afford, that would be decent, safe, sanitary, and in a good environment. So, I wrote that up, and Mr. [Richard] Mitchell, who headed CRA [Community Redevelopment Agency], made the statement that I was very critical of what they were doing. I said, "It is not that I am critical. I simply am stating the facts as I see them." There really was not the kind of service that these persons should have. They had social workers who were supposed to be helpful if they found problems. There was a young woman there who was supposed to get those problems and see if she could do something about it. And she said to me, after she had been there several months, "Marnesba, you are the only one who sees the problem, and who brings the problem to me." And there were problems of people who were not in the best of health, there were people whose children were having problems, there were those who needed money if they were going on to college. The social workers somehow did not see those kinds of problems that I was able to see, that really made it help.Well, suffice it to say that, following my report, they did not want to re-fund me to continue to criticize them [laughter] so they withdrew the grant from CRCSC. By this time, the Housing Opportunity Center was moving toward fair housing and attempting to build, under the old Section 236 [Fair Housing Act], and expanding the fair housing. So, they said to me, "You'll have to give up your license. We want you to come to work, but you'll have to give up your license." I said, "No, thanks. I am going, finally, back to my business, and build up my real estate business." Actually, they finally said to me, "Look, we have to have you. We don't care whether you put your license on ice or not—just don't get in any trouble—but you must come."So I started with the fair housing and with the fair-housing groups. We had some forty-five fair-housing and human relations groups when I started there. When I transferred over to housing development, we had some sixty-three groups that we were working with, and they ranged from Orange County to the San Fernando Valley. These groups were very active in seeing that the Rumford Fair Housing Act was implemented and in attempting to sponsor further legislation for fair housing.After we had been there, the government, as usual, changes the rules, and they decided that fair housing was not the number one priority, that building is the number one priority. We had been in existence now since '68 or late '67, and it was now 1970. And although we had an attorney who had been

with FHA [Federal Housing Authority] and we had a city planner who had his master's degree in that, we—

Balter

Do you remember their names?

Tackett

No, I don't remember their names. But they had not actually gotten any building going. I had said to them, "Look, you don't need a person with all of that technical knowledge, because you will hire people to build the buildings, but you need a salesman." And, of course, I had said this—I put my foot in my mouth, so to speak—and then they came to me and said, "Marnesba, will you do the housing development?" I said no at first, and they said, "Look, we are going to be defunded if we don't get some development going, and you need to come over here and get this going." So, I did two things. One, there was a builder (and don't ask me his name now: you'd have to go to CRCSC and look in the archives to get it) who was tearing down some fifty-four units in Westwood. And he said that if we could move those houses off, we could have them. So what we had to do was one, find the land, and two, get the okay from HUD [United States Department of Housing and Urban Development] to insure under [Section] 236. And we had to work fast. Well, I had a terrific woman, Peg Hancock—Rosemary Hancock, her nickname was Peg—and Peg was a builder. Peg could speak the language of a builder, or of a sailor, if you please, [laughter] and she scouted around, found land. We were able to tie the land up sufficient for these units, on several different sites, and we were able to get a contractor and an architect to work with us. HUD let us negotiate for it rather than having to go out to bid, and within six months, we were moving buildings—some two-story buildings—in the middle of the night, with Peg out there directing it. The builder who was giving us the houses said, "Look, if you don't get them off of here in two weeks, we will simply tear them down." Well, we couldn't let them do that, because they were good buildings, and—

Balter

What was his hurry, if I can just interrupt a moment?

Tackett

Well, so he could get the units that he was building there, the high rise, up and get it going.

Balter

Okay.

Tackett

So Peg told him, "I will move these buildings in two weeks if you will let me come out here and manage this." He said, "Okay, and I will give you a bottle of Scotch for every building that you move." [laughter] So Peg got out there with those workmen, who were screaming about the buildings being in the way. She directed that whole thing, got those buildings moved, and got seven bottles of Scotch [laughter] in two weeks, because she got those buildings off of there. It was really a marvelous thing.Julian Keiser, who heads CRCSC—HOC was a project of CRCSC—made the statement when he asked me to come to the general assembly meeting— In introducing me, he said, "We have had experts. One an attorney who had worked with HUD, another a graduate in city planning, and for two years we didn't get anything done." He said, "But Marnesba has come in here, and in six months all hell has broken loose." [laughter] But it really was first surrounding yourself with people like Peg, and Jay Harbor. Now, Jay was a whiz at mathematics. And Peg was a whiz at finding land, getting approvals downtown. She had a way of getting to people, and she would take blueprints down there, and in one day, just go through from person to person and get all of the okays that we needed. With those two and a good secretary, I was able to do things that I did not know I could do. But it was because I was surrounded with the people who could give me the information and who could do the legwork that was necessary. My job was to take what they had done down to HUD and sell it. And I was able to do that.So, we were able to get going. In a couple of years we were able to build those units, and have a total of eighty-four units. We had, into HUD, about an additional $10 million worth of work. I had become a housing consultant, recognized nationally, a part of the National Association of Housing Consultants. And we were able to really move things through. We worked from Ventura on down to the Centinela Valley.But when Mr. [Richard M.] Nixon became president, the first thing he wanted to do was get rid of OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity]. And he did succeed in curtailing the funds,

holding up the funds. Because of just a very slight technicality, they were going to shut down the funding for HOC. I took it upon myself to talk to people in the office in San Francisco, who said to me—and to the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] attorneys—who said to me that the only violation that we really had was that we were slow in getting some reports in. No question of the money being used wrong, or anything of that sort, and HUD had okayed a corporation that I set up with Florence Jackson, the attorney, for a for-profit corporation called New Vistas in Housing and Management. HUD had said to me that they would give me about a thousand units. With that, we could have been perpetuated. With that and consulting, we could have gone along without that [the funding]. Our executive, however, did not go along with me on that, and that housing went to a friend of his, rather than us taking over the management. That [the management] was of our units and the other, and he had it changed, even though HUD had okayed it. So when they decided to close us down, we had no base to keep operating.

Balter

Right.

Tackett

They asked another group that was Mexican-American, that had built some single-family housing in Calexico, I believe, to come in and close us out. Well, when the board voted to accept that— Of course, I told them [to] vote against it; I said, "Let's sue." The board did not go along with me, so I said, "Okay, I quit." And they said, "Well, you can't quit. You've got to stay here to—" I said, "I'll never stay here for the demise and cremation of the Housing Opportunity Center. I would only stay if you're going to fight. But if you're not going to fight, forget me." And I thought then, "Now I will go back to my own business."

Balter

Now, this was what year?

Tackett

This was now in 1973. "I will go back to my own business." And lo and behold, one of the members of the board said, "We need a fund-raiser out at Kedren Community Mental Health Center. And, Marnesba, I think if you are going—" And also, another group wanted me to come with them, the Stovall Foundation. The Stovall Foundation did not have a definite offer, but they felt that, you know, that I could work with them. They said, "Well, at least go out and talk to the executive director at Kedren Community Mental Health Center." And so I did. Now, this was on Tuesday. When I went there, he was already ready to hire me. I put in no resume, no application, nothing. And I said, "Well, when do you want me to come to work?" He said, "Immediately." This was Tuesday. I had already given a two-week notice. So I went in on Wednesday morning, and I said, "I'm leaving Friday. I need a week to rest before I go to a new job on July 2." And they asked me to stay, and the then director of the group made up of Mexican-Americans said to me, "Marnesba, what can we do to persuade you to stay?" I said, "I cannot think of the miracle that could make me stay here to shut down HOC." So he said, "Well, that's that." So I said, "Okay. I want a week's vacation. You pay me on June 1, [laughter] and on July 1, I'm gone."So I stayed there Thursday and Friday, and come Friday evening I said good-bye to them. My desk was cleared of everything that I was going to take out of it, and I left HOC. I spent one week resting and getting some things together, and went to Kedren, so I'm still not back in the real estate business. [laughter]I worked at Kedren from 1973 to '76, raising matching funds for the government loan for the new building, capital funds for the new building. My largest donor was Mark Taper, to whom I wrote, along with several others, asking if they would be sponsors. And sponsors would be expected to make a contribution. He finally came to Kedren to see it, and I took him out to see the site, and in a couple of weeks, his secretary called me and said, "Mr. Taper has decided to give you $50,000."

Balter

Wow.

Tackett

And when I hung up, I screamed. My secretary said to me, "What's the matter?" She came running. I said, "Mr. Taper is sending us $50,000."At any rate, I was there until January of 1976. I left on the fifteenth, and I said, "Now

I'm going back to my real estate business." That evening—it was the week of January 15, Martin Luther King [Jr.]'s birthday—SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] was having— By the way, I was on the board of SCLC, and we had had many executive directors. In the September before, Dr. [H. Hartford] Brookins, who was— Bishop Brookins, who was our president, called and asked me if I would just work part-time to try to pull SCLC together. I told him no, I could not do that. But at any rate, this night, we went to the essay contest on January 15. We left the essay contest, and a few of the board members and I went to have some dessert, over on Washington [Boulevard]. I told them then, I said, "Today was my last day at Kedren." And they looked at me and they said, "Well, then, you can come to SCLC." I said, "Well, I don't know. I had thought I would go back to my business." So they said, "Oh, no, you can't do that. You've got to come to SCLC; SCLC needs you." I said, "Well, I don't know whether Reverend Brookins really wants me now." He did ask me. In fact they had voted to hire me on a part-time basis, but I wasn't able to come. I said, "There's no way." It happened at a meeting I missed, back in September. So I said, "Okay." So, the next morning I called "Brook," as I called him. He is an AME [American Methodist Episcopal], of course, and my son-in-law [Cyrus Keller, Sr.] is an AME minister, and—

13. Tape Number: VI, Side Two April 26, 1984

Tackett

Yes. The next morning I called Bishop Brookins, and when he answered the phone, I said, "Brook, I left Kedren as of yesterday, and I want to know whether you still want me to come to SCLC."He said, "Of course, the answer to that is yes. But how much will it take to get you?" Well, he knew that I'd been making more than they were able to pay. We had had several directors; the most we'd ever been able to pay was $1,000 a month, and we were often behind in that. He says, "What were you making?"I said, "Well, my salary at Kedren was $20,000." I said, "In the meantime, I would sell maybe one piece of real estate, or two, during the year that might bring it up to about $25,000."He says, "Oh, lord." [laughter] He says, "We can't do that."I said, "Okay, I'll come for $1,000. I'm crazy."So he said, "When can you start work? Like yesterday?"I said, "What about next week?"So he said, "Okay." The board would meet on the Wednesday in between—this must have been on Tuesday

morning—and he said, "Come to the board meeting tomorrow."I said, "No, I won't come to the board meeting, but you have them vote." And I said, "What I will do is come in as the acting director, and I will come from my business of Tackett Services, as opposed to coming there for a salary, because," I said, "if I am going to have to take out Social Security, and all of that, out of that $1,000, I'll never make it."So he said, "All right, then, we'll ask them to put you on as acting director." So I stayed on as acting director for five years.When I went there our income from the magazine, called *SCLC*, was $700 a week. And the editorials were repeats, and it was just not the kind of magazine that I thought we should have. So, one, I started to try to improve that, to look for ways to raise more money. I talked with Steve Blood, who was running that operation, and I had him to hire an editor, to put that editor in my office, and to pay that person. I hired a young woman who was a photographer, as well as a writer, who was excellent, and in a few weeks Steve Blood decided he wanted to bring her into his office. I said, "Steve, I still need somebody here, and I want to know if we cannot raise the amount of money that you are giving us from the magazine"—which was negotiable all the way. So he raised that from $700 a week to $1,200 a week. And he was sending each month $1,000 to the national office. That had been $500, but we raised that to $1,000 a month. So that was the basis on which we operated.

Balter

What were some of the key issues that SCLC was concerned with during the time that you were director, that five-year period?

Tackett

Well, of course you know, since my main priority, or my pet peeve, is the lack of education of minority children, especially black children, I naturally was trying to find some way to help with the education of our children. That was one. Another thing was affirmative action. Because we were really concerned about the upward mobility of blacks who had been working for years at a level, and they had seen others come in under them and just move on beyond them. Another thing, many blacks came in with much higher qualifications—college degrees, and so on—and yet were hired at lower levels. So that was tremendous, that was another focus. We also maintained our focus in housing, cooperating with the fair-housing group, not working with that

directly, except maybe as referrals if it was brought to us and we thought it needed to go to the fair-housing group. And then the other thing was economics among blacks and black businesses, encouraging blacks to trade with blacks and to trade in places where blacks worked. We, as a result of that, began to publish the *Legacy,* which was not just a newsletter within SCLC, but was an issues letter that dealt with what is going on today, as opposed to talking about the board members and things of that sort, and, of course, it said what SCLC was doing. We also were active in the area of police practices in the city. So those were the areas in which we worked.Now, I had talked to a friend of mine who came here from New York, but who continued to take the *New York Times.* I said, "You know, I am interested in some kind of a program in education where the parents would be working with the schools to increase the achievement of their children, to raise their test scores, and just motivate them to education." And she said, "I have an article from the *Times*that I will bring to you." So she brought me this article that told of what Dorothy Rich was doing in Washington, D.C., and in other places in the country, and I wrote to Dorothy Rich. I wrote to Michigan, where one of her programs was being instituted, and they mentioned that the superintendent in Fresno was instituting this program. Well, I wrote to them, and then I got telephone calls back. And Dorothy Rich said to me, "I'll be in Fresno for a workshop, and maybe you would like to come." I talked to the superintendent of schools there—his first name was John, I don't remember his last name—and he invited me to come, said I would be most welcome. He actually had called me. So I went there. In the meantime, I had received an RFP under CETA [Comprehensive Education and Training Act].

Balter

RFP?

Tackett

Request for Proposal for Funds.

Balter

Okay.

Tackett

Under the CETA program. I was working with one of our board members on that program to start an educational program working with parents to help their children. And they ranked me so low because that wasn't what CETA was about. CETA was to get people into jobs, you know. I said to them, "This program will not only get people into jobs, but it will prepare them for jobs in the future, so the program is both immediate and long-range." I went to my councilman, Dave [David S.] Cunningham, and he was head of the grants committee, and I told him what it was about. He said, "Marnesba, it's needed and we will fund it." He said, "You appeal," and I did appeal, and we went through all of those things and we got it.Nonetheless, I did go up to Fresno, and I went to the [Los Angeles Unified School District] Board of Education, and Superintendent Johnston, William Johnston, not only okayed the program but he recommended the program. We started what we called Project AHEAD—that's Accelerating Home Education and Development. And for the first year it was at no cost to the board of education and it was funded by CETA.Nonetheless, CETA required that you try to get jobs for these people. I found that I was losing my best people because they were the ones who could get the jobs, and who got the jobs. I also found that I had some people who thought that CETA was a welfare program and they didn't have to work. So we had that to go through with, and I had to say to them, "You think that you're on welfare and that you cannot be fired. But I have news for you: I can and will fire you if you do not do the work." And the work was simply that they would simply visit the homes of the parents who agreed to participate in the program, that they would visit the homes once a month, and they would take to them what we called "appetizers," educational appetizers. In other words, we were trying to whet the appetite of the children for learning, for education. And these were little, you might say, like games that they would play with their children, that would help the children in reading, would help them with their math, would give them a self-image, because at times we told them the stories of people who had done worthwhile things.Now, we found there were a hundred schools in the Los Angeles [Unified School District] with children who were testing below the 25th percentile. And we asked to work. We started out working in nine schools. Then, the second year, the board of education added seven schools. So we had seven schools that the board of education contract paid for and we had nine schools that CETA paid for. At the end of the second year, we had done so well with CETA in getting

jobs for people, and then I was able to keep it by writing a letter stating that we would not want to send people out for interviews because we planned to keep them on our staff. Well, of course, you know, that was just great. And at the end of the second year, CETA was asking us to carry the program another year, but we said, "No way, we don't want it. Because CETA hampers our work." And the board of education took us on, and they did fourteen schools. Okay. Then the next year they raised it to twenty schools.

Balter

Does this program still—?

Tackett

And the program is still going; it's going in ten schools. Of course, because of our problems with finance, Proposition 13, etc., they have cut it back to ten schools. But it is very active, and it is going very well under Sylvia Rousseau, who succeeded me as the director of Project AHEAD.

Balter

Marnesba, I wanted to ask you a little bit about the founding of SCLC here in Los Angeles. I understand that it was first established here in L.A. about 1966, according to my figures, '66 or '67. Does that sound right to you?

Tackett

That is about right. I think, actually, it became a chapter of SCLC, a bona fide chapter of SCLC, in either late '67 or early '68, when— Because it was not until that time that Dr. King had moved from the fifteen southern states to say it would be nationwide and chapters could be formed. Before that time there were affiliates and there were sponsors, and so SCLC had had offices that were supporting offices of the work that was being done in the South. But they were not concentrating on work here, and, actually, it was not until UCRC [United Civil Rights Council], which is really the forerunner of SCLC here, that SCLC began its office.

Balter

Now, how would you compare the role of SCLC to the role of the NAACP? Say here in the Los Angeles area? Was there an overlap between the groups, or were they intended to serve different functions?

There was some overlap. However, the NAACP historically has used the legal process for moving through the courts to get what is needed to make changes. SCLC is more of an advocacy organization that moves to the streets and to the offices of the legislators, and we never had a legal redress group. It was not until just recently that we even began to think that we needed attorneys, and that was because the legal redress group of NAACP was really not functioning. But we have always referred to each other and to the Urban League for service in those areas where they had the most expertise, in the area of actually getting jobs. That's Urban League. And training for jobs, Urban League. In cases—legal cases—to the NAACP: police brutality, in employment, when employees sued for discrimination, that was NAACP. What SCLC did, and we were forceful in doing it, was getting things changed before it came to that. We very often could call and discuss a civil rights matter with the police chief, with members of the legislature, with insurance companies, and all, and we were able to get things done.One example, a person called me and said, "Our insurance policy has just been cancelled. We took it out, we paid the full premium, they have sent us the check and there is no reason for it." So I said, "Okay, give me the details." And I called the company, and I asked to speak to the head of the office there. They said, "May I tell him what it is about? He is not available at this time." I said, "You simply tell him that Marnesba Tackett, the executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the organization established by Dr. Martin Luther King, is calling. And I'm calling to talk with him on a civil rights matter." She said, "All right, thank you." In about ten minutes my telephone rang. He called me, he was very friendly, and he said, "What is it?" And I told him what had happened, and that I wondered why and wondered if it was redlining, or the reason for sending the check back. So he told me he would look into it. In a few days my friends called me and said, "They have called us and told us it was a mistake, and to send the check back, that our insurance was in force and that it never had been out of force."That's just one, but we were able to solve many problems simply by the force of that. In another case, a child had been sent home from school, and the mother called me. The child was not in whatever it was that was going on, some upheaval in the school, and they sent young people home. This child really was not a part of it, but, you know was sent— I remember when my little grandbaby was spanked [laughter] along with another grandbaby—I

didn't do the spanking—but he was entirely innocent of what had happened. And so that's the way it was with this boy. So I called and asked to speak with the superintendent, and they straightened it out right away, and incidentally, said to the woman, "Call Miss Tackett off!" [laughter] "Call her off!"So that SCLC had that kind of reputation. And that was not a thing that was done by NAACP at all. As a matter of fact, you know, when NAACP had to put up this million dollars, because of a boycott in Mississippi—

Balter

Right.

Tackett

—and all, we gave them $500, we gave the NAACP $500. So we have all cooperated, and there may have at some times been some little rivalry, but never to cause the organizations to split up. As a matter of fact, we have the Black Leadership Coalition on Education that has a tri-chair: the NAACP, the Urban League, and SCLC. And the people who head those three organizations are the tri-chair of that, and each one serves for four months of the year. So that we come together to fight whatever it is. However, if it is an employment problem that Urban League feels that they need the help of SCLC and NAACP, they have it. If it's an educational problem, and SCLC has really been on the education thing, the others come to the aid, you see.

Balter

Right.

Tackett

So, there is some, naturally, there is some overlapping, but it's more in the spirit of cooperation than it is a matter of vying for first place in getting a job done. [tape recorder turned off]

Balter

Marnesba, I know that in 1981 you left SCLC, and Mark Ridley-Thomas took over as executive director, and he still holds that position now. What finally got you out of SCLC? Did you finally get back to real estate then, [laughter] or are you doing something else now that I don't know about?

Tackett

Not really. I am back to selling one or two pieces of property, maybe, a year. But I'm really not into it, and I'm not trying to get back into real estate. What I really— You say, what got me out of SCLC—

Balter

Yes.

Tackett

One was age. I was seventy-three, and I thought, "It's about time that you ought to quit getting up every morning and going to work." Secondly, my mother [Elizabeth Edwards Tillmon] was approaching her ninety-sixth birthday, and I knew that I needed to spend more time with her. I felt that the best way to do it would be not to have obligations where I had to be away hours and would be obligated to go to meetings at night that I couldn't get out of. And I felt that she had cooked dinner for me long enough, and that it was time that, if I didn't cook the meal, that I shared that with her and shared washing the dishes, and that sort of thing. So I spent the time with her.And then, of course, in early '82—well, mid '82, July, to be exact—she had the cataract removed from her eye, and as a result of pressure— She was diabetic. Her sugar was high. They gave her insulin, which she could never take, and she went into hypoglycemia. Her legs bothered her. They were afraid of thrombosis and they put the thrombosis hose on her. She went into the hospital on Sunday afternoon. By Wednesday morning, when we were bringing her home, she could not stand on her feet, they were just so tender and sore, and lesions had broken out, five lesions on her feet. And those lesions just progressed to the point where she finally had to have two toes removed, and then to have the foot removed just above the ankle. And it was just more than she could take. I think the mistake was having the cataract removed. Otherwise I think she'd be here, looking toward her one hundredth birthday in December. So those were things that took up most of my time.In the meantime, a young lady who was interested in young people who had not been able to find their way in high school and had dropped out for many, many reasons, some of them drug related, some of them babies out of wedlock, children having babies and not getting back into school, and some students who had come through elementary school without learning to read

and just found that they could not function in high school— So a friend of mine told her to come and see me. She did, and I became interested in what she was doing and said to her that I would see what I could do to find funding for her. And she asked if I would become a consultant to her program. She depends on me a great deal, just, I guess, out of experience, to give her advice. So I am consultant to this program. It's an independent study program sponsored by the Institute for Successful Living. And she has three components—

Balter

What's her name?

Tackett

Her name is Arnese, Arnese Clemmon. Arnese has her master's degree in psychology and counseling, and she is doing a marvelous job with these young people. It is amazing. Of course, the state legislature has provided for independent study, and I was able to connect her up with the board of education—which would have gladly hired her as a teacher, and she refused to take a job—and to hook her up with a contract for independent study. They pay her the ADA, that's average daily attendance allotment, for these students. In an independent study program that is tailored to that person's need, she actually brings these young people from where they are to functioning young adults. And it's amazing how these young people, who could not make it in high school, come to her, complete their work. She accepts nothing less than a C; she doesn't accept a failure of any kind. And they stay there to either return to high school, to get their diploma, or to get the high school equivalency through passing the GED [General Educational Development] test. And her enrollment this year is over two hundred.When her building was robbed, vandalized, burned, these young people came and sat out in the alley in the hot sun, in June, to complete their work for the GED. And she is not only teaching them the academics, but she is teaching these young people how to be mothers, how to rear these children they have, and she is helping them to get jobs. So that she has the three components. There's the family counseling, and these young people come in with their parents.

Balter

Now, I take it that this is one of the primary things that you're doing now, serving as a consultant to—

Tackett

That is the primary thing, as a consultant to that, and I do some other smaller things for people. And I've kept my real estate license. I'm debating whether I will renew it at the end of these four years, because I will be approaching eighty. I sell a piece of property every now and then, and I really feel that I have been blessed, because, you know, I worked at SCLC, started at $1,000, and when I quit, I was still making $1,000 a month at SCLC. And I had written the proposals that had extra money coming in, and I administered the programs for the first couple of years of those programs, in order to build SCLC, get equipment that we needed. I turned my whole salary back, to the tune of about $18,000.And it was interesting, each time that I wrote a proposal, the administrator got less money than the people that worked. They said, "How is it that the administrator doesn't get more money?" So my excuse for that was, "I am spending part-time, because, you know, I still direct SCLC," and then I said, "So, you will pay my money to SCLC." Which I didn't take from SCLC, so I didn't have to pay taxes on it.

Balter

Now, are you still on the board of SCLC?

Tackett

No, no, no. Someone mentioned that when I said that I was retiring, and I said no, that I felt that the new director coming in should have a free opportunity to put into effect his program, and that I would always be as close to him, or her, as my telephone. I would rather be of service that way. I do serve on the board of the Martin Luther King Legacy Association, which is, of course, an independent, nonprofit corporation that is tax deductible. And I do serve on that board. I just sort of feel that I have to serve on that board, but we only meet every three months, four times a year, which keeps me from getting into the hair of the person who is directing it. And I serve on the committee that has been set up as an advisory committee to the Martin Luther King Legacy Association, or to Project AHEAD.I think, in that way, it gives the work an opportunity to go forward, and to make changes without anybody turning

around and expecting me to say, you know, "We always did it this way, and it ought to stay this way." So I find that I work better with it, and I'm very proud of what is going on at SCLC and in Project AHEAD now. I think they're doing a fine job.

Balter

Marnesba, before we end this oral history—because chronologically we're certainly talking in the present now— I would like to go back for a little while and pick up a few threads that I think we've left over the last several sessions, and some things that are, I think, important. First of all, in terms of— We were talking about your personal history, and I know that off tape you mentioned to me that you were briefly married a second time.

Tackett

Well, everybody's entitled to one mistake! [laughter]

Balter

I certainly got the impression this isn't something you want to talk about very much, but why don't you tell me what you will? [laughter]

Tackett

Well, yes—

Balter

Just for the record, so to speak.

Tackett

Well, yes, three years after my husband's death, I met a minister, an older minister, from South Carolina, and I married him. His name was Stewart, H. [Howard] W. D. Stewart. But I think— I guess I have to take some blame, because after having had a successful marriage, where two people work together over the years, you were kind of looking for a duplicate, and that's an impossibility. So, after a few months, that marriage was annulled. Now, I admit, my mother said to me, "I will never tell anybody that that marriage was annulled, because you folks are too old to get an annulment." [laughter] But the judge did give me an annulment to that marriage. And it was an experience that I'm glad is over.

Balter

Okay. Tell me, we've mentioned from time to time various of your children and grandchildren, and I know you have great-grandchildren, but why don't we, for the record, talk about them just a little bit. Tell me about your children, and your stepson, who I know passed away.

Tackett

Yes. Well, my husband was married before, and his wife died when his son, Joseph Orrin [Tackett, Sr.], was born. And after we married I had one daughter, so there were the two children, Joseph Orrin [Jr.] and Hazel Maurie [Tackett Keller]. My husband's first wife was named Hazel, and I named my daughter after his first wife, who died when their baby was born. There were members of my family that didn't like that, especially my mother. And I had an aunt who named me Marnesba, who felt that if I was going to have a baby, and that baby was a girl, it should be named Marnesba. Nonetheless, we lived through it. [laughter]And my daughter grew up and married an AME minister. Now, her dad was a Baptist minister, and she said to me, she said, "Mother, what should I do? I'm Baptist, and Cy—" Her husband is Cyrus S. Keller, and she said, "And Cy is a Methodist." I said, "Well, sweetheart, you will have to go with your husband," I said, "as a helpmate to him. And it's just all right, because your daddy will baptize the children in the bathtub at home." [laughter] So she did.She joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church and is very active in that church. They now live in Saint Louis, Missouri, and she is the development director of the United Negro College Fund for the states of Kansas and Missouri. She had six children. Eddie Joe [Edward Joseph Keller], her oldest, died of meningitis when he was eight years old. And the other five children are still living. She has one daughter, Juliebeth Maurie [Keller Brown], who is married to Bill Brown—William [Lee] Brown—who is now a lieutenant colonel in the air force. They are stationed in Spokane, Washington, having done a tour for three years in Japan just prior to coming back and moving to Spokane. They have two children, Terri and Christopher.Terri was born on her grandmother and grandfather's anniversary, and so her dad named her Terri Keller Brown. I wanted them to call her Keller, but they said, "No, it sounds too much like a boy's name." I said, "But that's so cute for a girl to be called Keller, instead of Terri." But no, she's called Terri. Christopher is Christopher William. The William is after his dad, but they do not call him Bill, they call him

Chris. And they are both in school. Terri is quite an athlete, and by the way, she is tall. When I was visiting with them at Thanksgiving time in their lovely new home, I asked Julie a question, and she says, "I don't know the answer to that, ask the giant." Terri is going to be, I'm afraid, close to six feet tall. She is very tall. And Chris, who is a boy, at eleven years old is about the height of his grandmother. We're hoping that he's going to grow when he gets into his teens, because we'd like for him to be a little taller than that.

Appendix A Index

Notes

*. Elizabeth Edwards Tillmon died on April 7, 1983. See pages 61-62 of this oral history transcript.

*. On April 16, 1984, the Los Angeles Superior Court ordered the Los Angeles board of education to pay the attorneys' fees. On April 30, 1984, the board authorized payment of $1,355,369 to the attorneys.
