

## **A TEI Project**

# **Interview of Lester Bankhead**

## **Contents**

### **1. Transcript**

- 1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE (SEPTEMBER 21, 1989)
- 1.2. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE (NOVEMBER 15, 1989)
- 1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO (NOVEMBER 15, 1989)
- 1.4. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE (DECEMBER 5, 1989)
- 1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO (DECEMBER 5, 1989)
- 1.6. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE (DECEMBER 27, 1989)
- 1.7. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE (DECEMBER 29, 1989)
- 1.8. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO (DECEMBER 29, 1989)
- 1.9. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE (JANUARY 12, 1990)
- 1.10. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO (JANUARY 12, 1990)
- 1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE ONE (JANUARY 22, 1990)
- 1.12. TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE TWO (JANUARY 22, 1990)
- 1.13. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE ONE (MARCH 8, 1990)
- 1.14. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE TWO (MARCH 8, 1990)
- 1.15. TAPE NUMBER: IX, SIDE ONE (MARCH 20, 1990)
- 1.16. TAPE NUMBER: X, SIDE ONE (MARCH 25, 1990)
- 1.17. TAPE NUMBER: X, SIDE TWO (MARCH 25, 1990)

## **1. Transcript**

### **1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE SEPTEMBER 21, 1989**

HENDERSON

I'll let you start the usual way with family background, parents, where you were born, and all that.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I was born in Union, South Carolina.

HENDERSON

You said that's Union County?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Union County. It was in the country. My father's name was John Hayes Bankhead. My mother's name, before she married, was Pearl E. Askew, Pearl Eugenia Askew, that's what the E stands for.

HENDERSON

Had they grown up in South Carolina also?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, they'd both grown up in South Carolina. My father had grown up in Union, South Carolina. My mother grew up in Cherokee County. Both of those are counties— Union County and Cherokee County.

HENDERSON

Okay. When you say out in the country, you mean like on a farm?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. On a farm near the Askews. My first recollection of my home life was when I used to really be around my mother a lot, going to and fro, you know, and doing whatever needed to be done around the house.

HENDERSON

When you say "house, " this was a farm? A working farm? Or is this just a house in the country?

BANKHEAD

My first recollection was not the farm, see. It was just around my mother in the home. Then it went from there on out, spread from there to the farm, whatever else. But I'm talking about my first recollection as being a part of the family, as being with my mother and walking around with her. In the process, leaving from the house, around the house, and into the farm at that point, was when I used to walk along. I always liked to draw. I used to draw on the ground all the time. I would always draw on the ground in the sand. If there wasn't any sand and we had to stop for something, I would be carving out a place where I could draw with anything I could put my hand on— a stick or

weed or whatnot. My mother would say, "What are you doing, boy? Come along." She noticed this all the time. Finally, one day she said, "You are gonna be an architect."

HENDERSON

Really?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. At that early age. I didn't know what an architect was, I just knew—

HENDERSON

You were about—what?—like six, five?

BANKHEAD

Really about five. One of the earliest things I remember was that. And it made me, because of what followed afterwards. I can never forget that. I hardly remember any time other than that that she said that, but she told me that.

HENDERSON

You both knew what an architect was at that time?

BANKHEAD

I didn't know what it was at that time. She knew, but I didn't. I didn't know what an architect was. I don't ever remember her explaining to me exactly what an architect was. I just remember her saying that. I assume from then on she recognized the way it was and we didn't discuss it. Wherever I was drawing, she'd just let me do what I was doing. And she probably would aid me. During the time when Santa Claus came, she would bring things in— You know, Santa Claus would bring me things that would aid me in that respect.

HENDERSON

That's great.

BANKHEAD

Drawing boards, pencils of different colors, [tape recorder off] I might mention the backgrounds of my parents.

HENDERSON

Yes. Did you know your grandparents?

BANKHEAD

No. I didn't know any—Oh, yeah, I knew one of my grandparents. I knew my father's father [Lewis Bankhead]. He, as I recall, was a farmer. I never knew anything about the farm, but I remember being at his house several times as I grew up. I remember visiting his house, I remember his wife, and I remember his sons

HENDERSON

Your uncles.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, my uncles. One of the things I remember about his house that stood out was I was at his house one time when there was a cyclone.

HENDERSON

Like a tornado?

BANKHEAD

Yes, a tornado. It just tore up everything. I can remember that very well. His wife was afraid, and she was getting under the bed and all that kind of stuff.

HENDERSON

You mean the cyclone was coming towards you?

BANKHEAD

It did come.

HENDERSON

You could see it coming?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I saw it. I heard it and saw it. You could see parts of houses through the air. Just see parts of houses and barns and tin and everything that comes off a

building just flying through the air. A cyclone. So I remember that about my father's father's house. I never knew my mother's father [Aaron Askew]. I don't think he was living, actually. But my mother went to school. She graduated from Tuskegee [Institute]. She was there at the time when Booker T. [Washington] was there. Booker T. was— I don't know whether he was her teacher or not. But anyway, she graduated from Tuskegee. So she was a teacher.

HENDERSON

A schoolteacher.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I remember that the first school I went to was with her. She would carry me and my twin sister. I had a twin sister.

HENDERSON

I didn't know that.

BANKHEAD

A twin sister named Thelma. Thelma Addie Mae Bankhead, Thelma A. Bankhead. She was a twin sister of mine.

HENDERSON

Maybe I should stop you here and ask how many brothers and sisters you have?

BANKHEAD

Did I have?

HENDERSON

Or did you have.

BANKHEAD

There were six of us. There were four boys and two girls. I'll give you the names if you like.

HENDERSON

You can. What was your position among those six? That is, were you the oldest, the youngest?

BANKHEAD

I'm the oldest.

HENDERSON

Being the oldest boy carries some responsibility.

BANKHEAD

You'll learn about that later—how much it carries responsibility. My mother died when I was young.

HENDERSON

You were about to say something, and I cut you off. You were talking about your grandparents.

BANKHEAD

We finished about my grandparents—about my father's father. But then I started talking about my mother's parents. I don't remember any of them. I don't think they were living. Then I think that I got into the educational background of my mother.

HENDERSON

She was a Tuskegee graduate.

BANKHEAD

She was a Tuskegee graduate. I think that was the thing that enhanced my life as far as [moving] towards technical and architectural areas. That was one thing that unconsciously kept me in that direction.

HENDERSON

Okay, so in a sense, knowing that she had gone to a college gave you the incentive to look at education positively.

BANKHEAD

Right. Even though we were on the farm, I never was a farm kid. I never was the average farm boy because of my mother. I never experienced whatever you want to call it— I never experienced it because of my mother—the closeness of me and my mother. I didn't experience many of the things that young boys experience. I was very close to my mother. [There were] a lot of things that I didn't go out and do with other boys and things, because of my mother's health.

HENDERSON

The usual stereotype of farm boys is that they're dumb and stupid. I take it you didn't fit that.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I didn't fit that. I didn't fit the picture of a country boy. I never did fit that. I never did fit that because of my mother.

HENDERSON

She would encourage you to read, or she— Because she was a teacher, she always had educational things around.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, she had things around for me to read. I remember stories. She'd always teach us stories that had a lot of logic in them. A lot of logic in them. I'll never forget one of them she taught me was "Get Out of the Rut."

HENDERSON

How does that go—"Get Out of the Rut"?

BANKHEAD

I kept the article, and I also got a good vision of what it meant. It stated that after the origin of the original animals in the world, when man did not have roads and things like that, he traveled the trails of animals because he didn't know about construction. There were big animals who would go certain ways, and man tended to travel in some of those ways. But in the meantime, the animals would go from high places down to low places in pursuit of water, and water would get into their path. The water would get into the path where they walked, and that area would be washed out and become a rut. See, the

animals lived in the high areas, but they had to go down to get the water. In the process of doing so, it became a path where the water would come into that path, and it would travel down also to the water, to the low area. That became a rut. She told me that I was to get out of the rut. The question was how do you get out of ruts? How do you get out of ruts? If those animals traveled in the water and they got so deep, if you got in that rut you could not get out of that rut until you got to the bottom where—

HENDERSON

It's difficult to get out of a rut.

BANKHEAD

So the question was— Those animals didn't get out of the rut, so some of the animals— Not only a physical rut. But also became extinct because they didn't have knowledge enough how to get out of, not the physical rut, but the other rut.

HENDERSON

The mental rut.

BANKHEAD

The mental rut. Those animals that became extinct. What are the big animals?

HENDERSON

Dinosaurs?

BANKHEAD

Dinosaurs and things like that. They were in a rut. They couldn't adjust. So back at that age she taught me that kind of a thing. And she was talking about— I was just telling you the basis of the origin of the rut conception. So then she went on to say that man also gets into ruts, and if he doesn't become technical and inventive, then he too will become extinct himself. But because man wasn't an animal, in the sense that he thought and he knows how to get out of ruts, then he was able to survive. But she also stated that there were many people— young kids, young men—who were still in ruts. Those were people who did not get educated. They became extinct. Not in the same sense that the animals became extinct, but as far as living and maintaining



themselves on a level that would give them the best of society, of life. They became extinct in that respect. So that was some of the basic things that she gave me at that early age. I remember another one was— Let me see, what was the other one? If you build your house— If you do a job, do it very well, do it so well— And she quoted Kipling, I think. Your house may be hidden in the woods, but if you build a mousetrap, build it so good that the world will make a beaten path to your door.

HENDERSON

Okay. I think that's Emerson. Or Thoreau— Either Thoreau or Emerson.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, well, one of them. But anyways, this thing that she told me and explained exactly how it went, I could see so vividly what she was saying.

HENDERSON

I can see what you mean. Because the typical farm boy would not have Kipling quoted to him.

BANKHEAD

That kind of information that young. Not only did she quote it, she gave examples of what she was talking about. That made me know what it meant. As far as ever looking back and doubting anything, I never doubted anything. I don't ever remember doubting what I could do. You know what I mean. Because, I guess, that's the way it was.

HENDERSON

You were saying "doubt"— You mean in terms of race? Like your ability versus white kids'? The reason I ask the question is that in the discussion so far we haven't talked about racism, and that can come up real, real late.

BANKHEAD

I didn't even think about it. I didn't even think about it. No, I didn't.

HENDERSON

At that age, you didn't know anything about racism.

BANKHEAD

No, no.

HENDERSON

You were just growing up.

BANKHEAD

Right. No, I didn't know anything about racism or anything of that kind. I was just growing up. I think that created stability within me at that age. I wasn't thinking about race at that time but dealing with the intangible things that would be an obstruction to your thinking or whatever. She gave that to me.

HENDERSON

Now, you told me she died while you were young.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I was twelve years old when she died. And my sister died. They both died on the same day—three hours different that day—my twin sister. They had the influenza. It was back in the early thirties. It was a big, big vacuum. Having a twin sister who I used to go with hand in hand— We used to hold hands all the time. My father enjoyed the two of us holding hands. That's one thing I noticed he always enjoyed. We used to go to school— When we started to school, the first school I remember going to was my mother's teaching school. She would teach in a one-room log cabin out in Cherokee County. That was where my uncle [Oliver Askew] lived—my uncle and my mother—both of whom were considered people who lived in the big house.

HENDERSON

Okay. This was her brother?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. There were other children of the same family, and they were out on the farm. But my mother and her brother lived in the big house. They were the people who lived directly around rich white people. That's how she went to Tuskegee.

HENDERSON

They sponsored her or helped her go there?

BANKHEAD

They saw within her the capabilities and they started her. That's how she got to Tuskegee. That way. At that time, not just black people but most people period were [only] going to high school. Now, my father, I don't think he had a high school education. I'm sure he didn't. There was a big question of—I know now—why my mother married my father.

HENDERSON

I was wondering about that. How did they meet? She's a teacher, he's a farmer.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, well, there was a great emphasis on character at that time. In communities, there were certain families that stood out as leaders in a community, whether they were black or white. There were black families who the white families relied on to get information about the vast other populace. The man [may have] had four or five thousand acres of land and people on all the lands. He would need somebody to bring information back about how things are, what people are thinking, in order to handle them. That means that in this county there's maybe one black family that stood out. Even though it's in Union County— Over in Cherokee County, maybe there's another family in different areas that stood out. The white man depended upon these people, even though they lived in the house, to get information from the others in order to bring it back to him in order to know how to conduct— We'd say, "Well, he's the big man." I don't care how big you are, you need information to know how to conduct the things that you did with people. You always have that. We call it intelligence gathering in the government. Spies, all that kind of thing. That's true in every aspect of [life]. I don't care whether it's church or where it is. It's true.

HENDERSON

Now, you're not saying that these people were Uncle Toms?

BANKHEAD

Well, in one sense, you might consider them Uncle Toms. Because anybody who'd bring information back, why you give them the name Uncle Tom, whether it was yesterday, day before yesterday, up to today. You can name it what you want to name it, but in essence it's the same thing. We used the term Uncle Tom because we wanted to have a negative impression so people don't do it. But what about the people in the high echelon—the government? You don't call them Uncle Tom. You might call them, if it's not favorable, a "spy." But if it's favorable, we call it "intelligence gathering." See what I mean? So that's really the way that is. Now, back to what we was talking about—my mother and my father being a part of my— My father was not a part of a group that I know of. But he was from a hardworking family. I don't know that much about them other than that. He was hardworking. His brothers were all hard workers. I assume they were respected for that. But at any rate, they had a high degree of cleanliness. You couldn't lie. You couldn't drink. You couldn't—

HENDERSON

High character.

BANKHEAD

You couldn't spit. Those kinds of characters were [highly] considered by most people. And also my father's appearance— My father was a huge man, two hundred pounds or more. The concept of strength and bigness and all that kind of thing is historically a big thing, like David and Goliath, Samson. It's a carryover from that thing. It was quite necessary at that time that you have giant men, because you didn't have machines and all this kind of thing. Well, this is a carryover. Also, health was a big factor. You know, when they'd bring a slave away from Africa, they wanted the slave that is healthiest. The most—

HENDERSON

Robust. Athletic.

BANKHEAD

Robust. So they could lift logs, and they could do all those things. The tendency was to consider that greatly. For that was at a time when not manufacturing but whatever was not as high as it is now. You know, like,

technology wasn't high then. As technology increased, the brawn of men began to decrease. At this point, man is on the cutting edge, if you want to say that, of extinction— male extinction. This I'll bring up later. But since we're talking about it—

HENDERSON

Well, let me kind of get you back to after your mother died. What was the relationship with you and your father and your brothers after that? And one sister.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, one sister. I was twelve years old, and the relationship between us then was difficult because I wasn't close to my father. None of us were close to our father. When she died, I didn't know him, he didn't know us. We didn't really know one another. We never did know one another. I know more about him since he's been dead than I knew when he was living. Because I didn't know the reason for his being how he was. But I know now. So after her death, we were on the farm, and he was very frightened of the fact that he lost his wife and we had property. I was in a family where as far as you could see there were family—uncles and everything. They owned the land. That was another thing that made me quite different from the average. We owned our own land.

HENDERSON

Oh, you were not sharecroppers.

BANKHEAD

We weren't sharecroppers. We weren't ever sharecroppers. But we had sharecroppers.

HENDERSON

You had sharecroppers on your property?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. As far as we could look, we owned the land. After that, in a country like that, you didn't have any income—money. So a lot of people would grow vegetables and things and carry them and sell them. My uncle

[Christopher Bankhead] was very good at that. He fed a whole town during the Depression. My father kind of uprooted my mother from her educational thing, because she was raising kids. Then he saw that some of the people were selling stuff, so he insisted she go and carry stuff and sell, too. And she really wasn't physical. When she started that, she passed on. You know what I mean? So that left me kind of as the mother. Because my sister was— I don't know whether she was seven years old, or what. But she was very young. Mother had taught me how to cook and wash and sew. Well, she knew more about what was going to happen than— You know, she had prepared for this because she knew her health condition. That was one of the reasons she married him, was because of health. He was so robust, you know.

HENDERSON

You mean she was always sickly or ill?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. As far as I can remember, she was very sickly. Never complained. I'm weak in that respect now for women who are sickly. But anyway, after she passed, my father was scared. We were working on the farm, and we had the farm going real good. We were up before this guy would get out of bed. He was scared that he was going to die, too. So he asked me when he got up, did I think I could carry stuff down and sell it?

HENDERSON

Now, this is in the town? In the market?

BANKHEAD

In the town. The town was about twelve miles [away]. We had a one-horse wagon, and we had two mules. I said, "Yeah, I'll do it." So we would gather food—potatoes, tomatoes, beans, okra—you name it. I was twelve years old, and I was driving that distance by myself with my wagon loaded with food. When I drove into town and the people would see me— They would see me and look at the boy on the wagon. They were so amazed that I would be selling stuff.

HENDERSON

Nobody robbed you or anything?

BANKHEAD

No I

HENDERSON

This was back in the time nobody was thinking about that?

BANKHEAD

No. They'd steal other people's stuff. But when I'd drive and stop and pull up and go up and down the street— I didn't know anything about selling in the black neighborhood. I didn't know anything about that. I sold wherever.

HENDERSON

You sold to whomever.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. To whomever. Hillbillies. I'd drive my wagon up there, and they were so amazed that a little boy— They would just come out and look. "What you selling, son?" So on and so on. I didn't know how to beat [cheat] people, and I didn't know how to put bad stuff on people. At that time, I know I had an aunt. She would put all kinds of stuff on people.

HENDERSON

When you say "stuff, " what do you mean? Like spells or voodoo or—?

BANKHEAD

No, no! I'm talking about food!

HENDERSON

Food. Okay, you mean sell rotten food? Something like that?

BANKHEAD

Yeah.

HENDERSON

You were an honest person.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, they'd sell second-class food. They might sell beans and things—put it on top—and underneath it'd be something else. They used to make butter. You made your butter—churned it and made your butter—and you mold it yourself. They would put dough in the middle of the butter. People were all excited about it and everything. In the middle of the week, they get cutting into the butter and come to find it's some dough. My stuff I would get Friday afternoon and have it ready, just fresh, you know, and pretty. Before I'd get into it they would have bought me out. I'd make sometimes thirty dollars a day on Saturdays. I'd be ready to come back home, and other people would just be getting there. People would steal that stuff, but the people— Because I was small and they were so excited about it, they would not steal anything and they would not let anybody else steal anything. This was a great inspiration, the greatest inspiration that I think I could have had. You couldn't tell me I couldn't sell a nail, you know. I would always come back with everything sold out. So the first sack of flour, home-made flour that we ever ate, I bought it. My sister didn't know how to make bread. So I said, "I know what I'll do. I'll get some homemade—" Self-rising flour had just become invented at that time. I bought twenty-five pounds of self-rising flour. I came back like Santa Claus. My dad was excited; everybody was excited. I could leave home Friday afternoon, go out and pick up stuff, go to town, come back and bring enough groceries for the next week, and then put some money away in the trunk.

HENDERSON

You were like mother and father.

BANKHEAD

I know. That's what I'm saying. I grew up as the mother of the family because they didn't know— Dad would never take any time. He didn't know how, after that many years not having anything to do with it. He was very jealous because Mama knew how to— She was educated. She knew how to deal with people, and he didn't like her to be around her people. Then, because he didn't like that, he moved away from her people, moved over to his people. And the same thing happened with his people. It was his people. He didn't like that, see, so— He didn't like me because when he tended to discredit her, it made her fall toward me. See? Unconsciously and consciously, it just



aggravated him. He always got hostile towards me because of that. That had a big bearing on my life, which wasn't good. But anyway, I used to go down and sell the stuff and bring it back. And I'll never forget— My father was— Before long, he started courting again, as we call it. So he needed money to go out. I would make the money, bring it back, put it in the trunk. I would be making the money, but I didn't want him to take it out and play with the women.

HENDERSON

This is fantastic. I mean, you were making the money, so you were giving him an allowance, in a sense.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I put it in the trunk. But then he couldn't handle it. Because of the fact that I'm a kid twelve years old, and I'm making the money, and I'm bringing it back— So he just looked for me to steal some of it. That I never would do because I thought about the rest of the kids, you know what I mean? I thought about the rest of the kids. If I wanted some, I wanted to give them some. I didn't have any authority to take anything that I was making. I never had nerve enough to ask him, "Can we take some of this?" He never did offer any, he never offered it. But he would take the money on Saturday, when I collected a little money, take it and have his nice haircut and have his clothes cleaned. He would leave on Sunday just looking so sharp. He'd be gone, and we would talk about it. [laughter]

HENDERSON

You'd know your daddy's gone courting.

BANKHEAD

We would talk about him taking the money from us and going this— You know, "So-and-so, so-and-so." That kind of a thing. But that period lasted a long time. I got so I was about fourteen years old, and I was really doing good. So people would ask me to take part of their product and try to sell it. I wouldn't do it, because their product was so inferior. My whole time I was down there one person would be with me there—one person who was kind of off.

HENDERSON

What do you mean "off"? Not retarded?

BANKHEAD

Kind of retarded. He didn't do anything but fish all the time. That's all he did. He fished, and he sold the fish. So what happened, he would always have a fish. I got in the place that if I had anything left, I would exchange it for a fish, because I wanted to bring some fresh fish home. So he and I were together for a long time. He would meet me at the same place and stay with my wagon and all. [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON

You were talking about this friend that would go with you. What was his name?

BANKHEAD

I want to call him Hercules, because he was so big, but his name wasn't Hercules. Let's call him Ernest, just for the sake of a name. He did fishing, and he would always sell fish. He would watch my wagon when I started going into other neighborhoods. He would watch my wagon.

HENDERSON

When you say "other neighborhoods," what, black neighborhoods?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, black neighborhoods. On my way from the white neighborhoods, back down toward the store where I would do my shopping, there were some other neighborhoods and people whom I didn't know. See, the people everywhere I'd go, they were so excited they would watch everything. But on my way back, there were people who didn't pay any attention. It wasn't the same type of people. They might take something. Plus, I went in there so long I'd have to feed my mule. So while my mule was eating, things like that, I'd have him keep it where my mule could get it. The mule would be [hitched] to the wagon. You couldn't take him loose. A lot of cases, you'll take them loose from the wagon. Unhitch and let the mule eat. Take the thing off and let him rest. But I didn't have that kind of time. So he would be there. I would even sometimes have somebody run some water in a bucket and let him give the water to my mule. But anyway, we were together for a long time. The people who knew him

[would say], "You gonna carry this guy around with you?" They said, "He steals." I'd say, "He never stole anything from me." They didn't classify me as one of them. They would always classify me as some kind of a way different. They didn't hardly see anybody black around me. They'd say, "He steals, you know." He wasn't too clean, either. You know, he wasn't very clean. So they'd say, "He steals, he steals." I'd say, "No, no, no. He doesn't steal." I never take people for what they would say about another person. I dealt with him for maybe a year or two and nothing ever happened. I'd always wind up with the fish. But the last thing he did for me, he stole something. That's how we ended. He stole something from me, and when I was coming up he ran. I'll never forget it. He ran and went up on the bridge and across the top of the bridge. I called him. I called him because I wanted to tell him, "That's all right, what you did." Man, he ran. He acted like he had committed a hideous crime. That's the last time I saw him. I'd ask people about him, because I still wanted to tell him how I appreciated, whatnot. But I never did see him anymore. That was the end of that one. So I did this for several years. That's where my first business aspect, of how to handle it and how to deal with people—

HENDERSON

That's where that developed?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, that developed— That's right when it occurred. I can deal with most anybody. And today this is the answer to something I'm trying to deal with right now— people. I guess this was a lot of giving and taking and all that kind of stuff. But anyway, that's the way it happened.

HENDERSON

Let me just ask you this question. At what point did you become aware of race? In South Carolina, I know, there's a—

BANKHEAD

Oh, I was aware of race in South Carolina. I was always aware of race after I got to be any size. Because my father would say, "Don't have nothing to do with white folk."

HENDERSON

Now, when you say "any size, " this is like— what?—six, seven, eight?

BANKHEAD

Oh, I would say when I started going to regular school. Or when I'd go up to the store, after I started going to the store. Now, when we were young we were so far in the country till we didn't— You know, at the first epidemic of flu, we were so far away the flu couldn't find us. We always seemed to be the last house next to the jungle. It seemed to have been. I don't know how my daddy always found those places. You know, last house next to the jungle.

HENDERSON

Now wait. When you say your daddy found these places, you moved around?

BANKHEAD

We moved twice, three times in my lifetime.

HENDERSON

I thought you were very settled on a farm, but you are saying you moved?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. What I'm saying is that we moved three times. We first had a farm— This wasn't our farm, but we didn't sharecrop. We always would lease or rent the land, but we were always independent. I don't know much about this. That was over where my mother and my father— Where the first— That was in what-you-call-it county.

HENDERSON

Cherokee [County].

BANKHEAD

Cherokee. Then when we came to Union County, we moved way back someplace, and we'd have no relationship with white people. Because my daddy— Of course, this town was a long way. It was a long time before I could even go to that town.

HENDERSON

Now, I'm looking at this map. When you said Union County, I decided to get a map and look this up. I see Cherokee is next to it. What was the name of the closest town? Was it Jonesville? Or Union? Union is a town.

BANKHEAD

Union is the closest.

HENDERSON

Yeah, Union looks like the county seat of Union County.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, that's right. And Jonesville was near there, too. But Union was the place that we dealt with. In Cherokee County, there was a city of Gaffney, Gaffney, South Carolina. But anyway, what was I talking about?

HENDERSON

We were talking about when you became aware of race. You said you were so far out in the country you didn't—

BANKHEAD

Yeah, yeah. Race. Yeah, my father always said, "Don't have anything to do with whites. Don't have anything to do with them." We wouldn't speak to white folks. We didn't speak to them. We passed them just like it was a post. Never speak to them. Never say anything to them. And we had to go right through one of the guy's yards all the time to go to school.

## **1.2. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE NOVEMBER 15, 1989**

BANKHEAD

I don't know whether I should tape this or not, but I didn't tell you about my childhood during my mother [Pearl Askew Bankhead]'s life, did I? Not much.

HENDERSON

You told me your mother said you should be an architect. She saw you drawing in the dust and sand.

BANKHEAD

Well, anyway, my mother passed when I was about twelve years old. We weren't very close to our father [John Hayes Bankhead], because he just wasn't the type. We were very close to our mother.

HENDERSON

Yes. You told me about that.

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah? That's on the tape?

HENDERSON

Yes.

BANKHEAD

And about my mother's death?

HENDERSON

Yes. She died of flu.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, and my sister—

HENDERSON

Your sister [Thelma Addie Mae Bankhead] died on the same day.

BANKHEAD

My twin sister. Oh, you have that now. Well, that's what I didn't know whether I told or not. I think I did tell you about selling— Yeah, we talked about the produce.

HENDERSON

Selling produce in the market. You had this wagon that you would take.

BANKHEAD

Now, maybe I should—

HENDERSON

I see you have some notes there. That's good.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I checked and— But I didn't know whether I had gone over this or not. Now, the other thing was I began barbering. I started barbering when I was a little boy.

HENDERSON

I don't have that.

BANKHEAD

Okay. I want to get this straight. We can leave out some and take on some as I revise it. Now, my uncle [Willie Bankhead] was a barber. That's how I became involved in barbering.

HENDERSON

Okay. This uncle was related to you through your mother or father?

BANKHEAD

Father. I might give a little background on that, too. My uncles and his cousin— The big thing was hunting. That was excitement. My uncle and his relatives would come over, and they'd go hunting. Sometimes they'd be wet. But my uncle's health wasn't too good, so he would have to stay home with my mother. They'd all come over. Maybe six or seven of them, and they'd all get out and go hunting. He would feel kind of lonely, because if he got damp he would catch cold and have the pneumonia. Every-thing. He was sickly. So he would stay home with my mother. So my mother suggested, "Willie"—his name was Willie— "Why don't you go to school?" He was way up in age and all—maybe twenty. He didn't think much of it at first. As he continued to come around, she talked him into the notion of going to school. So he went off to school, and that's when he learned to do barbering. He cut hair all the way through school—got a degree and everything. You know what I mean?

HENDERSON

Do you know where he went to school?

BANKHEAD

He went to Morris College. Morris College and— What other school did he go to? I know that Morris College is one of the schools he went to. Later on, he went to some other school. But the main thing is how he got involved in school. He promised my mother that when I got of age, he was going to see to it that I went to school, got an education, as a payback for what she done for him. So while he was going to school— He was the only one on his side maybe that finished high school. See, my mother was a graduate of Tuskegee [Institute]. I told you that already. That gave her an insight on how to help people—psychology and whatnot. That's what I think made a difference in my life. All the people whom she was around were affected by that. People in the country didn't know anything about anything like that, you know, but then when somebody like her came along that did know, she acted and taught them and whatever. Just her presence meant a lot to whatever churches they were involved in. But anyway, he graduated from school, and he would come back home. He would cut my father's hair, and he would sometimes cut ours. So then he gave me his old clippers, and I started cutting hair. I was cutting hair at home in a chair, see.

HENDERSON

Did he teach you how to do it, or he just gave you the clippers?

BANKHEAD

He gave me the clippers, and I just looked at how he was doing.

HENDERSON

You watched him do it.

BANKHEAD

I watched him do it. Then, from then on, I just went on. I would cut all the neighbor boys' hair. I would really enjoy cutting hair on Saturday nights and maybe some on Sunday morning. Then when I would go to church, I was behind some of the young people whose hair I cut, and I would just enjoy seeing that compared with the rest of them that didn't have my haircuts. They had bowls on their head. Everybody was saying, "Who cut your hair? Who cut your hair?" "Bankhead. Bankhead." That kind of influenced— And all the girls were happy. "Bankhead cut it. Bankhead cut it. Aw, it's so pretty. So pretty." I



could shave a mustache with a single-edge razor blade. I could cut and shave around your ears just like you have a regular razor, because I did it so much I got used to it. But I couldn't use my father's razor because he was afraid I'd get cut. But I just used— You know, I'd go right around the edge and shape the mustache. I would be making a little money. I would be late for Sunday school because I was cutting some of the neighbors' hair. My father wouldn't say anything about it because everybody in the church would be saying, "Who cut your hair? Who cut your hair?" Country church, you know. So he was proud of that. But he wouldn't let me cut his hair for a long time. He noticed how well I cut other peoples' hair. So finally, he said, "Maybe just trim a little around here." Just trim around here, because he didn't want me to get up high. So finally, he would say "Trim around here, " and I would do more than he said.

HENDERSON

You gave him a full haircut.

BANKHEAD

Then finally I got to give him the full haircut. When my uncle came home, he would say, "You just had a haircut. Who cut that?" He says, "Lester." He says, "Mmm, he's doing well!" Like that, you know. So I cut hair. Then, when I got in high school, I left home and I went to school. I was in seventh grade. That was seventh grade, when I left home. So I carried some food from— I worked my way through school, mainly. I would carry food from home, and then I would start working as a barber. I cut hair at my house, and then finally I got a job at a barbershop. From then on, I was cutting hair all the way through. My whole career. But also, while I was in school— This is when I was away from home, I would— During the winter I was going to school, and I'd be late getting to school because of the farm. My father— Sometimes I'd be as late as six weeks late getting to school. I remember one time very well. The last time I was late, I guess. I don't know. I came in, and everybody [all the kids] was telling me, "You can't get in. You can't get in. You're too late. Too late." So then the principal, his name was Reverend Simms, called me in the office, and he said to me, "Do you know how late you are?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Do you think you can make it?" I said, "No, I don't think it. I know it. I know it." And he said, "I believe you. I believe you." See, my uncle went to school at the same place. He worked his way through school.

HENDERSON

Now, this is a high school.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, this is high school. He had a very good reputation, my uncle did. The same principal taught my uncle. At this time, my uncle had finished that and then finished college, and he was teaching, too. He became a principal. So he said to me, "I don't worry about you. I don't worry. Don't pay attention to what anybody says. You came here to go to school. They're all here at home." He said, "They won't do anything. They won't cut the wood. They won't help their parents do anything." He said, "Forget what they say." I was proud of him being proud of me. Then he said, "Don't worry about it. You can do it. You're made of the stuff to do it. You're made of that stuff. I don't doubt you. I don't doubt you." So I got in there, and I started studying. I was working, you know, I worked my way partly. But I was studying like everything, because I didn't want to have to go back home. Because a lot of people went away to school and they didn't succeed, so they came back home.

HENDERSON

Embarrassed.

BANKHEAD

The community would be embarrassed and everything. The people at home who were left back there would think that you were trying to be uppity or be something different. Or dignified and all that kind of stuff. They would hope you fail, so it would make them feel not too [bad]. I had an uncle [Oliver Askew], and he was almost wealthy. He had farms and— We didn't have anything compared to him. And none of his children would go to school. He sent them away to school. They didn't like it because they didn't have all that food and didn't have all the grandiose things that they had—that my uncle had. You know, he had a large plantation and a smokehouse full of meat. You name it. Everything you could ever want. New cars and everything. Because he was kind of a hand down from the big house. He and my mother both. I think I told you about that—the big house, big-house people. So anyway, that kind of helped him a lot. They went away to school and came back. At the time that I went, my mother had passed and it was just me. My uncle was very proud of

me because I was named after him. His name was Oliver. My name is Oliver, too. That's the O— Oliver. So I succeeded pretty good in school, and then I started working from the school. I liked trade, you know, so—

HENDERSON

How far away from home was the school? Now, is this far?

BANKHEAD

Oh, about six miles. That was a long way in the country. That time that I had to walk part of the way back in the cold and— One time I remember I caught a ride from this white man. I couldn't get in the car. So I had to stand on the side [running board] and hold. He opened the window enough for me to hold. Then I was going to freeze to death. I got so cold I couldn't— I rode all the way on the side of his car. There wasn't anybody in the car but him, but I couldn't get in the car. I had my bag on the other arm, you know. That's the way it was. That was one incident. I'll tell you another incident. The white people ran me.

HENDERSON

What do you mean, "ran you"?

BANKHEAD

I mean, just got after me.

HENDERSON

Chased you?

BANKHEAD

Chased me, yeah. There was a group of white guys in cars. They would just be out having fun, you know, like that. They weren't going to school and all this. There were maybe ten or twelve of them. They had those old cars, and they didn't have tops on. They'd be riding around. Also, I had a cousin and some friend— You know, guys who didn't go to school. They would be out in bunches, too. Well, sometimes they would get fighting. My cousin had a fight with this same group. I don't know what happened. But anyway, I was coming home and I was carrying my bag to get my clothes washed and everything. I was walking. They passed me, and my cousin was coming this way. They saw him, and they said, "Ohhh." They stopped the car and jumped out and were

going to start chasing him. Before they got to him, he went up the hill that way. I was hoping that they would stay down there, because I figured they were going to get after me.

HENDERSON

Next.

BANKHEAD

Next. [laughter] When they saw him get out of the way, they saw me and said, "Let's get that nigger! Let's get him!" You have barbed-wire fences along the side of the road where you keep cows or whatever. But what happened, those barbed-wire fences rot down and the post is gone. If you have a cedar post— That's what kind we used all the time—cedar posts. The cedar post would not rot. Right now, you find that you can use cedar for a mud sill, because it doesn't rot. So what happened— They nail these staples right into these posts. Everything would rot away but the part that wouldn't rot—that's the red part. So the posts would fall down, and the needles and everything would go all over it. The only thing you could see was the end of the post. So they grabbed that post and were going to get after me. Grabbed it— That's the only thing you could see. And the wires were still attached to it. They were jerking the wires, trying to get them loose. They're going to get me, you know. I was still going on walking towards them. I still hadn't stopped walking, walking kind of slowly. And so they didn't see— They couldn't get— Those guys looked around. They said, "Let's get him. Let's get him. Let's get him." About five of them got out, and they started towards me. I was still walking. But I had decided if they were really going to get me, I figured which way I was going down through the woods. I would leave my bag. I'm saying, "I know they can't catch me. I can run like a rabbit." [laughter] But I was still walking. They walked right up to me. I didn't run. See, I wouldn't run. They said, "Where you going?" I said, "I'm going home." "Where you live?" I told them where I lived. "Where you been?" They all were standing, looking at me. One of them was talking. "Where you been?" I said, "I've been to school." "You been to school?" "Yeah, I've been to school." "Where you go to school at?" I told them where I went to school. "What you gonna be?" or something. Anyway, I was talking to them. So one of them said, "Don't bother him, he's going to school." I saw my cousins way up on the hill. I got angry with them because they weren't down

to help me face the music. But it was good that they kept going, because it would have been a fight, you know? They probably would have got me, too. But then I stood there and talked to them and everything. They said, "Don't bother him. He's trying to go to school." I told him that, said, "I'm trying to go to school." They said, "Okay. Well, you go ahead." And that was the incident.

HENDERSON

They drove off?

BANKHEAD

No, I passed them.

HENDERSON

You just kept on walking?

BANKHEAD

I kept on walking, and they were still back there in the car. I don't recall which way they went, because I was so scared, so glad to get away from them. I was praying. After I left them, I said, "Boy. Those guys ain't bad." That's what I said. I came to the conclusion, at that date, that people are really not bad. Because they could have killed me and wiped me up. About seven of them. And they were raving. Because I talked to them, and they listened. They just went right along, "Don't bother him. He's going to school." I know it's because they had been told to go to school, too. They probably weren't going, but they felt like they should go. But they just let me alone. Those are two incidents that occurred. One was on my way to school from home, and the other one was on my way from school back home. Those two incidents stand out very well when you talk about— See, the man who was in the car, he saw me out there in there in this cold, and he wanted to help me. But he didn't want to be a "nigger lover." He didn't want people to say, "Look at him riding with a nigger." So he told me, "Hang onto the side of the car." That showed his feeling for me. But still, he was thinking about the mass of people who would probably—

HENDERSON

What they would think of him.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, think of him. So I rode all the way up to— He was going to make a turn and go the other direction. He told me, "Well, Union [South Carolina] is that way, and I'm going this way." He let me off. I thanked him.

HENDERSON

That was pretty good.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Pretty good. Now, I understand that. I can understand the problem with— He had to please two people. He had to please his race, but at the same time he had a human feeling for me standing in the cold. That was another case where I said that if people could be— It's really no mean people. There are really no mean— If they could achieve their objective without hurting anybody they would, because no one wants somebody to dislike them. Everybody wants people to like them. So if they can achieve the objective, whether it's a feeling or whatever it might be, and not hurt another person— Because, in a sense, when you hurt someone else, you hurt yourself. See what I mean?

HENDERSON

That's a deep concept.

BANKHEAD

They would not do it. I'm fully convinced of that. I'm convinced of this, too, that in order to achieve harmony with anybody, you do not do evil for evil, so to speak.

HENDERSON

Right. That only starts a downward slide.

BANKHEAD

That only starts a continuation of wars and things like that. One people says they're going to get even with my kids when I'm dead, so I'm going to make preparations so that when that time come my kids will be in a position to withstand them. But if you had said to any race, "You have a right to exist like

any other person exists, you have a right to that. We want to see that you have that right." I don't care what—in greater number or smaller number. But if you did that, then, in a sense, you'd have the appreciation, and the other person wouldn't be prepared to offset you. That's why you have war and—

HENDERSON

And that's a waste of energy.

BANKHEAD

A waste of energy. It's like the United States right now and Russia. See what I mean? They both decided- All the money that they spent, preparing for this and preparing for war.

HENDERSON

It's a waste.

BANKHEAD

Just a waste. Of course.

HENDERSON

But now, let me ask you this question. At the time that these incidents were happening—when you got this ride from this white man—did you understand all that at the time?

BANKHEAD

No.

HENDERSON

Or you just felt that this man is being kind and going about as far as he can go?

BANKHEAD

No. No, I didn't understand it then. I didn't understand at that time. But since then I've understood it clearly.

HENDERSON

But you thanked the man. So you understood that he was doing you a favor?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I knew that he was trying to do me a favor. I knew that. But then, on the other hand, I said, "Well, he's got this whole big car here. Why didn't he let me sit inside?" Sit inside, see? But I didn't know. I had an idea why he didn't want me to sit inside, but not as I know now. I had an idea why those guys— I really didn't know exactly why those guys didn't bother me. I really didn't know that. But since then—

HENDERSON

At that time.

BANKHEAD

At that time, no. But anyway, while I was in school I worked, I cut hair, and I did this, I did that. I was always interested in architecture and drawing.

HENDERSON

This is even in high school?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. In high school. Even before I got to high school. At that age, I found out what you do, you do it. People will appreciate it, and they will try to make room for you. Because I was interested in trades, and I was interested in woodwork and things like that. The teachers around me always noticed how diligently I did whatever we were doing. So they gave me a key to the manual training room [woodshop]. I could go over there and work at night. Anybody that wanted to work with me could come work. They gave me the key. I saw that all the tools were locked up from the manual training room, you know what I mean? I had my way with that department. I'd go there at night, and they had bright lights. I wasn't very used to bright lights. To go over there and have all that electric machinery— Every machine was turning and stuff and all this electric stuff— Man, that was exciting. I'd go over there and stay till late. The thing about it, I could close the door, lock it up, turn the lights out, go on back. So that happened. The principal knew about all this going on.

HENDERSON

Oh, he knew you were there at night?



BANKHEAD

Yeah. The man who was over the trades told him how effective I was and how good I was. They always needed somebody to help out wherever. If you've got that many students, you can't handle that. If you can get a student that could handle other students, that's a big thing—you know what I mean?—influence them in the right manner. They noticed I did that. There were some students who would note how they noted me, and they would follow in my footsteps. So there were students who would come over at night and work with me. The rest of them, they wouldn't come. They didn't want to— They didn't like shop, didn't like anything that would get their hands dirty, didn't like any work or anything like that. But I was interested in turning those things and making this and making that. One of the bookcases I made was put in the hospital. The last time I was there, it was still there. Inlaid wood. I enjoyed inlaying wood. I'd cut out a piece and put a piece in there and make it real smooth so it would be like glass.

HENDERSON

This is still there? This is in a hospital in South Carolina?

BANKHEAD

This was in school. But the hospital was there in the city [Union]. It was a prize piece, so they put it- As you go in the hospital, it sits right in the door as you enter.

HENDERSON

Were you making furniture to sell?

BANKHEAD

No, no.

HENDERSON

You just made it as a hobby?

BANKHEAD

Well, that was in the trade shop. See, in the trade shop, you had to make a certain thing to get grades.

HENDERSON

Oh, like a school project.

BANKHEAD

Yes, like a school project.

HENDERSON

Okay, I've got you.

BANKHEAD

So that was one of my school projects. But I didn't just go for a school project, because I worked at night, and I had three, four projects going then. They'd have a show day and have officials of the city to come down and show off, because the school was given— The city was giving so much money, you know, and the state and things like that. They wanted to show some proof that somebody was doing something. They used me as a model, because everything I was doing exceeded the rest of them. So that's what they were doing. Then what happened, the gentleman that was over the trade— We used to go out in the city and work on people's houses—maybe cover a house and put steps up to them. All those kinds of things on a house. You know, the trade center did. So I would go with the trades teacher. Finally, he and I would go out and do certain things. The rest of them, you couldn't get them close. So we repaired things. Finally, I would go out myself—me and another guy—and do the same thing. Another incident then was— We were doing that, and we spread it out in the city.

HENDERSON

Which city is this?

BANKHEAD

In Union. So what happened, a friend of mine and I— At that time, they had a lot of houses. They didn't have cars and things—they had stables. They had stables where they didn't have horses, but it was a carryover from the time they did have stables. That time they were buying cars, but the houses were built and they still had stables. Everybody also had chickens and a chicken yard. So what happened, a friend of mine and I, they asked us to repair not a

chicken coop, but they had a place where you have a chicken lay eggs in cabinets. Have you ever seen anything like that?

HENDERSON

No, I never have. I thought of that as a chicken coop.

BANKHEAD

Well, a chicken coop is on the ground. You put chickens in, and the chickens go in the coop. It's made out of lattice material, and a lot of air can get in. But that holds the chickens in. Sometimes the hens have small chickens. It keeps them from running around, drowning, or getting into this or that. They put the hen in the coop, have little holes so the chickens can come in, go back and forth, and go out and exercise themselves. The hen was still in the coop. And you feed the chickens, too. That's how they raised the chickens. That's how they got the poultry. They didn't have such things as big poultry farms like they have now. Everybody, in the backyard, raised their own chickens. Then they had where the chickens laid eggs. If they laid their eggs on the ground, different things would destroy them. Dogs would eat chicken eggs. So what they did, they would build something up against a wall and cut holes in it for the chickens to climb up there with a little ladder and go in there. They would have a little thing in a ledge in front. The hen would go around, and she'd look in this hole. She'd say, "No, I don't think I want to go in that hole, " and then go in another one. She'd finally go in a hole that she liked. Just like you see birds making nests in trees. Same principle. So what happened, they were going in. We would put straw and hay and stuff in there. They'd go in there and move it around and take their bill and push it this way, push it that way. Get it suitable for when they lay eggs. They would lay eggs, and we would get the eggs out every day. Whatever. Sometimes maybe there'd be half a dozen in there. You'd just try to see, but there's a lot of times they would finally have their nest big enough to let them have about twelve eggs. They would sit on those eggs for a number of days—I think it's twenty-one days— then the chickens would hatch. So they had to be careful of the chickens hatching. If you aren't careful, the chickens would come out and fall on the ground. But if the nest was on the ground, then that wouldn't occur, because the chickens wouldn't be falling. But the main thing was we had to build that thing across and make it for the chickens to go in. That's what this man wanted us to do.

HENDERSON

This was like a white man in the city?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. There were wealthy white people in the city, and they were the ones I'm talking about. There were a lot of poor whites and poor coloreds, too. They're just people. But the wealthy ones, they had big— It wasn't plantations, but it was big areas, maybe two or three blocks for one house. They had everything there—gardens and everything. So what happened, they wanted somebody from Simms's high [school] to come up there and fix the thing. So we went up there and we started fixing. It was so rotten, we said, "Let us build one." So the guy said, "Can you build those?" I said, "Yeah, we can build them." Because we're taking all this stuff and measuring things at trade tech— draw the plans and everything. Well, they didn't believe it. "No black can do that." "Well, I don't see any whites doing it, either." That kind of thing. But anyway, we said, "Buy us some lumber." It was easier to make the thing than try to fix the things up they had. A lot of those places, the chickens had roosts in them and a lot of stuff in there. So we just tore that thing down and—

HENDERSON

Built a total new thing?

BANKHEAD

A total new thing, and built it. When he saw that, he said, "Gee whiz, did you-all do that?" He was impressed. So we said, "Let us build your chicken coop." And we built a coop. In the meantime, we cleaned out all that stuff that had been there for years. Sometimes they wouldn't clean that place back there for maybe a year or two. Chickens and whatever would be back there—rats and you name it. It's just a mess. So we got in there and took rakes, hoes, and things, raking and piling everything. The man was so impressed, when we got through doing that we asked him to let us build him a garage. He said, "Well, if you built all that, maybe you could build a garage." So he bought a load of lumber and a— Now, remember, my father— It's time, now, to go home. I don't want to go home, because I don't want to go back to the farm. My daddy forgot about me until farming time. He'd give me a little package of food, and he'd think once you left the farm it's so nice in the city. You don't

have to work in that cold and everything. You should survive off of that. You still have to eat! But [when it came] time to go to work on the farm, he remembered that real well. So my daddy wrote for me to come home one or two times. He always thought that I would be in the city getting with the girls and getting with the bunch in the city. He was always afraid that I was going to get in the wrong bunch. He thought that I was messing around. He must have figured I was messing around some here, and I didn't have what I was doing. Still, when he got ready to [farm], I wouldn't go home. So he came down there, and he brought the wagon. He was going to take the furniture back. He was going to try to make me go back. He was going to take the furniture so I wouldn't have anything to sleep on. But what he didn't know, I had moved away from that place anyway. I lived with a friend of mine down the street. He took all of the clothes that I had up there where I was living at—where he thought I was renting from. I was staying somewhere— I didn't tell him that I wasn't renting there anymore. I was staying with a friend of mine and wasn't paying any rent at all. So he make sure that I— Now, wait a minute, I'm getting ahead of myself. The man that he admired and the man that he bought all his shoes from— This guy that had nice shoes— He bought shoes and he bought a dog from the same man. The man was named Bruce. So he named the dog Bruce. He was a bird dog. My daddy liked bird hunting, because bird hunting was beyond something that black people did—niggers did. Niggers didn't bird hunt.

HENDERSON

Now, was Bruce white?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, Bruce was white. He was a wealthy white man. But my daddy practiced after the wealthy people, you know. He bought fine stock horses. He didn't want anything that wasn't the best, [even] if he never paid for it. See, so what happened, he bought those nice shoes and he bought the dog. And he named the dog after the man- Bruce. We didn't know it. So what happened, we were working on Mr. Bruce's garage, and my dad came up there and was talking to Mr. Bruce. Mr. Bruce asked him, "Do you have a son named Bankhead?" My daddy said, "Yeah." He said, "Is he going to that school down there—that Simms's high school?" And he said, "Yeah." He said, "He's doing some work for

me. He's the only nigger ever worth anything from that school down there." That's what he told my daddy. They both got excited because I was doing all that work for him. My father liked that. I didn't know my father knew where I was. So I looked up and saw my father driving up in the wagon. Boy, I said, "How in the world did he know?" Now, he thought we were down there running around trying to chase after women. My friend and I, we didn't have any shirts on. Man, we were sawing and nailing up a storm. I don't know whether we even had a hacksaw or not. My daddy came in and just stood there and looked. He was so proud till he said, "Well, we want you at home. We need you at home." He said, "I wrote you and I wrote you." But he saw what I was doing, and he just left me with the Bruces. Mr. Bruce told him where I was, you know. So he said, "Well, I'll tell you what you do. When you get finished with the roof, you come on home." But I didn't know that he took all the bedclothes from the house that he thought I was living in. So then I saw the guy who I went to live with. I was living with my friend. He said, "Your daddy came by and got all your bedclothes." He thought he was going to make sure I didn't have anything to cover up with. But, you know, I'm in the city now, man. What the heck. I can find another cover. So after I finished that place, man, I didn't want to go home. Oh, I hated to go home. But I went on home. I got home, and we worked that summer. And I think I went back the next year. But anyway, how I got away from home, my brother and I— We both had planned to leave the farm. What happened, we said, "We're gonna rush and get every-thing done." There's nothing going to be undone, see, so my dad couldn't send after me. So we did. When we left, we got up on the hill, about a mile away from the house, and we had on straw hats. We took our straw hats off and vowed we would never go back to the farm. We made a vow. We made a vow we would never go back to the farm. And we didn't. I didn't. No, we didn't. Neither one of us did.

HENDERSON

And you were still—? You were leaving the farm at this point to go back to the high school?

BANKHEAD

No. When I left the farm and I bowed my head, I had finished high school then. But that was an incident about what I did in carpentry. Things like that. That was one incident.

HENDERSON

Now, I'm curious as to how you got the idea to go to college. Where did that come from?

BANKHEAD

All my life I planned to go to college.

HENDERSON

So there was no doubt when you were in high school?

BANKHEAD

There wasn't any doubt, man. Wasn't any doubt. Oh, I was going to college, man, from a kid. My mama said, "Get an education." Come hell or high water, I was going. So much so that when my daddy didn't want me to go, I just left. I went away and stayed two years, and he didn't know where I was. He didn't know where I was. The only reason he found out, he got sick. My sister [Sally E. Bankhead] and brothers knew where I was, but they didn't tell him because he was mad. Because he wanted me to stay home after I finished high school. He wanted me to stay home four years on the farm and help him while they'd go to school. These were my four years. I wasn't about to do that. And my brother said, "No, no. We don't want you to do that." They wanted me to go ahead and help to show them the way, because my barbering there at home and at school— My brothers had taken up the same thing. Four brothers. All of them took up barbering. They came right behind me, exactly the way I went. They all went to school and barbered their way through school exactly the way I did. So they would tell me, "You go. You go." They helped me go.

HENDERSON

When did you make your choice to go to Voorhees [College]? That's where you attended college, right?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, well, let me give you a little background on that. After I was there in high school, this principal told me, "We know you're made out of that stuff. You can go. You can do it." I ran into different teachers all along my life—people who would spur me on. I liked math and I liked trade and I liked anything that you could figure out and come to some kind of result. But I didn't care anything about English and that kind of stuff. I said, "What the heck, I can talk, anyway. Anyone knows. We talking, anyway. Why the heck do I want to take English to learn how to talk? It doesn't make sense to me." There was a lady named Miss Gandu who was the math teacher. She encouraged me: "You're good. You've got a good head on you. Don't you mess around doing what these other guys do"—playing football and all that kind of stuff. Well, listen, I wanted to play football, because of all those women out there in skirts cheering. Girls are hollering, "Go! Go! Go! So-and-so!" I liked that. I wanted that. But I hadn't played football a lick, hadn't practiced a lick. Okay. The coach got sick with pneumonia. So then the principal took over the coaching job and also took over teaching math. He didn't know either one of them. So what happened— He had been asking me about playing football. He said, "You're a big husky [guy]." I'm from the farm. I run a lot when I'm a kid. I'm a light, fit guy. So he'd been asking about playing football. I didn't want to play. I didn't want to be hitting anybody and things like that. I always wanted to be the guy with the brains. I would look at those guys. I said, "Why isn't he running around that guy?" I just knew I could do it. "I just know I can do it." So while the other guy was sick and this principal was coaching, I asked him to let me play. He said, "Okay." I told him I wanted to be the quarterback.

### **1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO NOVEMBER 15, 1989**

BANKHEAD

I wanted to be the quarterback. I wanted to be the brains.

HENDERSON

You wanted to be the big shot.

BANKHEAD

I knew I could get by those guys, take that ball and get by them guys. I said, "Why didn't you do this? Why didn't you do that?" Little did I know that the



other guy was thinking, too. So what happened, we were practicing. It was snowing and cold. What would happen in the city— A team would come to the city to play. If they didn't have enough big guys, they picked guys out of the city that weren't going to school—just go find anybody that could knock you down, and particularly the guys who had been going to school there before and played football and still weren't doing anything. They would just wait for those guys, and the guys would wait for the opportunity to get out there and show themselves off. Big guys. So the guy told me— They didn't like it, because how in the heck could I be a quarterback if I haven't practiced? We were out there practicing but— He told them to give me the ball. So there was a big guy. He didn't even go to school there. He didn't even go to school. They called him "Yellow." He weighed about two or three hundred pounds. His point was to get you. But you see, I thought that— I didn't know they were going to get me. But when you're practicing, if you're on the other side team, you get him, you know? This guy was on the other side, other team. So I ran two or three times. Man, I was running, you know. [tape recorder off] So I ran two, three runs, and I was getting on down that field. But they had planned to make this guy get me.

HENDERSON

They set you up?

BANKHEAD

Set me up. They didn't even try to stop him. That guy ran over me, man, knocked me down and knocked me out. That's all I knew. When I knew anything, came to myself, I was on the side line lying out there by myself. The rest of them were still out there on the football field playing. I kind of looked around. I said, "They didn't put anything over me?" You know, I got sick after that. So I said, "Shew." See, Miss Gandu told me, "Don't get out there and mess with that football. That ain't going anywhere. Don't do anything. You'll get out there and get killed and get hurt. It doesn't make sense. Don't you do it." She kept warning me. She liked me because I liked math. So I got up from there, and I said, "Well, I'm not thick. I'm not thinking about this stuff." I got up and took my little togs and things I had. We didn't have any togs, hardly. Didn't hardly have anything. I left there and went on home. I said, "I'm not ever putting one of these things on anymore." And I didn't. [laughter] So that

was my only football try. But the other thing was, this principal, Reverend Simms, he believed in me. So anything that the rest of them in class could not do, I would want to do what they were doing. I would do something that they couldn't do. That's the only way I would want to do anything. This was the inspiration I got. Whatever they couldn't do, give that to me. With algebra and math, they would have some awful problems, man. One problem may go all the way across this blackboard, and it may go all the way. You've seen long algebra problems.

HENDERSON

Like different equations? Yes.

BANKHEAD

Different equations and minus this and minus that and all this kind of stuff to the certain power and to the tenth power and back and forth. But anyway, there was a problem coming up, and I knew that nobody knew how to work it. There was one girl in the class who was smart. Her boyfriend was smart, too, but he wasn't too hot on math. So I said— Now, this teacher—the one I'm talking about, the principal—he's teaching math. He believed in me, and I knew it. So I was working on that problem. I think they had it the day before and nobody could work it or something. He said, "Keep the assignment for the next day." So what happened, he tried everybody in the class on that problem. He had a daughter in there, too. He just talked about her like she was nothing. And then he talked about me—what time I came to school, how late I was and everything. I'm a prime example he was using. Anytime in the class, he would always wave me up and tell about me. "He's made out of stuff. Look at what time he came." So what happened, they all tried the problem. Now, at night, I worked out that problem in my sleep. I don't know whether you've ever had that experience or not. You think about it so hard, then you go to sleep, and you can work on it in your sleep. I woke up and I got the answer to that problem. I didn't get the answer exactly the way the book said to get it, but I got the answer. So that day I couldn't wait until he called me. I was the last guy he called to do it. The principal made it a business to do that. Everybody else couldn't do it. Nobody else could do it. Then he'd give them a lecture and say, "Now look at Bankhead." I went to that board. I felt like a giant. The only thing threatening me was that one girl who only asked one question where I

didn't know how it got from here to here. One place. I said, "I hope she doesn't see that. I hope she doesn't see it." But anyway, I put all that stuff up there and that place where I wasn't sure about, I just put my own version of it. It came on out. I knew I had the proper answer, but I just took another cut that the guy didn't take. I invented that. So everybody was just sitting there quiet and everything and then I got through. I had a pointer, you know, a wooden pointer, and I was pointing to this and this. I got to that spot there and I just ran on over it. I was hoping she wouldn't say anything. I knew nobody else was going to say anything. Then she finally said, "How did you get that?" I said, "My way." [laughter]

HENDERSON

She went right to the point.

BANKHEAD

Right to the point. She followed everything and got to that point. You know what happened? The principal was so sure of what I was saying, he didn't pay her any mind. Didn't give her a chance to say anything. He ignored what she was saying—didn't know what she was saying. He just gave them a whole lecture of what I was made of and when I came to school. That's all he would do. He would get in the auditorium, and with everybody in the auditorium he would lecture on me—what I was made of. He talked about how I was made of that kind of stuff. Okay, now, from high school, I'm ready to go to college. He asked them where they were going to college— all of them. "I'm going to Spelman [College]." "I'm going to this." "I'm going here." I didn't say anything. So he called me after class was over, and he asked me, "Where are you going?" I said, "I don't know." I told him I wanted to go to Tuskegee [Institute], but I didn't have any money. I wanted to work my way [through]. That's the only thing I ever thought about. But Tuskegee's a long way, too. So I heard about a school named Voorhees. I had written them and they told me, yeah, they needed a barber. They needed a barber at the college there. They had to have a campus barber and everything there. So I told them about— The name of the man I had written was Blanton. He was the principal there. What happened, he [Simms] told me, "That's the right thing to do. Don't pay any attention to these kids round here. They aren't going to do anything but talk, talk. They wouldn't get out of bed in the morning to cut wood. They won't do

anything. You're the only one that we'll give a recommendation for from Simms's high [school] to do work in that area." You know, like that work I was doing? He said, "We've got high recommendations for you. They aren't gonna do anything. They've got no background. You were on the farm. You're made out of stuff, made out of the right stuff." So what happened, he said, "You do what you're gonna do. But go down to this school at least two weeks ahead of time and help them to clean the campus up after the summer. They're getting ready to open up for the fall. All that stuff is growing up around there, and the buildings need cleaning because there are students in there. Help clean the whole thing up." Getting ready for the fall, you know? Blanton had told me that I had a position to take the barbering—barbershop—be campus barber. So that's how I got into Voorhees. See, he told me how to do it. Go round there. "You do this, you do that, do the other." And that's what I did.

HENDERSON

You didn't have to take any exam or anything?

BANKHEAD

When I went to Voorhees? No, because I just finished high school. I don't remember taking any exam. I just went there, because this high school I was going to was recognized by the state. No, I didn't take any exam at Voorhees. But Voorhees was an agricultural school. It wasn't particularly an architectural school, but in agriculture you have to know some architecture. But I was so good in high school, when I got there I started right off. They soon found out that I could do drafting and all that kind of stuff. I taught a drafting class. I taught a drafting class there.

HENDERSON

Now, they didn't have a drafting instructor there already? You started this?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. They had a drafting instructor. That's who I was teaching for—the drafting instructor. They had shop. They had welding. They had a blacksmith and had all those trades and things. A man by the name of Reed was over the trades, and another gentleman was over carpentry. They had the different trades. But anyway, that's how I got to Voorhees. When I got there that

summer, I rode all night. It was a long way on the bus and the train and waiting here to catch a different train and catch another bus. We got there about three o'clock that night. I thought we'd never get there. We got to the little city named Bamberg [South Carolina]. Somebody carried us out to the campus and showed us where the bed was. I went in. You talk about bed bugs! Whew! God, you turn the light on and you see them running like— So I saw them. My God! Whew! I slept that night some kind of way. The next morning you'd see blood all over the sheet where they bit you and you rolled over on them or something. So I said, "Well, I know what I'm going to do. I'm gonna kill these suckers." [laughter] This is what I said. The next morning I got hot water. And nobody knew how to— It seemed like nobody knew— I can't see how in the world it got that dirty. It had been dirty for a long time— years—gummy places in the crevices and everything like that. So, man, I got some hot water, and I started scalding that place down and scrubbing it down. And that room where I was, man, I had that thing clean. But the next room over, they would come from that room over in through the cracks and everything. I said, "Gee whiz, we've got to get this whole thing cleaned out." My buddy and I, we cleaned that whole barracks out. I don't know how many rooms there were, but we cleaned the whole barracks out. And then we started to— That was the old building. If you were the newcomer, you got the worst of everything. I cleaned that out, and then we started cleaning the rest of the place, start cleaning the whole campus and everything, trying to get familiar with it. I wanted to find out where was the barbershop, where the barbershop place was and all that kind of stuff. What happened, I stayed there and the school began to open. I didn't know that whoever was in the politics and had the money would get the best of everything. I'm staying there a whole month, cleaning up the place. I kept asking about, "When am I going to start barbering?" People needed a haircut, and they never would allow me to.

HENDERSON

You mean they never would let you go ahead and do barbering?

BANKHEAD

They wouldn't let me. They showed me the barber place, but they wouldn't let me do anything because they were waiting to get whoever had the most. So finally they got a guy whose father was a minister. He had two sons, and he

had some money. He came in and paid. But when I entered that, I think I had three hundred dollars. I paid my tuition, and I had seventy-five dollars left. I was going to work my way through school. I didn't owe— I wasn't owing anybody anything after I worked my way through school—worked half a day for the school. I didn't figure I'd have to pay my way into the barbershop to be the campus barber. Most the time most of them worked half and went to school half the day. So what happened, I wasn't thinking about that. When this guy came in— I'll never forget his name. His name was Daniels. Daniels got the barber chair—became the campus barber. But that didn't stop me. I took a chair and got a piano stool and cut the barber chair's legs off and fastened the chair to the piano stool. That's what I used for my barber chair in my room, and I cut hair in my room. Then when it was time for the lights to go out, I'd go down in the— They had a latrine down there where you took your showers and everything. They didn't have one shower here and one shower there. They had a rod with holes in it. You turned the water on and the water would shoot out and everybody would get under all along. About ten people would get up and get in there while the water's coming in. You just have a thing on the end. You'd turn it, see, and you'd get your shower. And they had another place over there. They didn't have one bowl like this where you wash your hands. They had a trough.

HENDERSON

Boy, that sounds rough.

BANKHEAD

They had troughs. You turned the water on over here and it would be running and little holes in the pipe went out here and you're washing your face, you know. Things like that. Dry off, whatever. That's the way it was. They had a space in the middle there. I used to take a chair and go down after the lights go off, about eleven o'clock, on campus. So I'd be studying, maybe, till eleven. You've got to go down there and cut hair after eleven. But the latrine stayed on and the bathroom lights stayed on all night. Because you have to go down there. There were lights in the hall, but in the room they would go out. So I'd either be in the hall cutting hair or I'd go down there and study in the latrine. I used to cut hair down there. That's the way I would do it.

HENDERSON

Did the school authorities try to stop you from doing this since they had a campus barber?

BANKHEAD

No. Because of the way I acted, they could hardly say no. They could hardly say no, because everybody was telling them what a fine person I was. They had a Sunday school there, and I was A-1 in Sunday school. The minister and all the people that had any tendency that way, they started liking me right off, from the word go. I could talk. Back there, I still could talk. The first thing you know somebody who didn't like somebody to talk aggressive, they didn't like me, because I'd be talking. But the minister liked me because my father was a minister and I was reared up in the church. My grandfather was a minister. Biblical things, I knew all that, and I wouldn't take a back seat. They told me that God made heaven and earth in seven days and then rested. I said, "Who? God resting? God resting? God? God resting?" That was the thing I threw on all of them. When I said, "God resting?" Everybody that's anybody, I don't care if they're a theologian, when you said that, they know where you coming from. They're either going to flee from you or tell you you're crazy or get you out of the way. They don't want you messing around. Because all the studying they did in college told them that God rested. They don't believe it themselves, you know—about God resting. What kind of God rests? What kind of God is that? [laughter] But anyway, the minister really liked me. It was an Episcopalian school, and I became Episcopalian. I was a Baptist, but I became Episcopalian there.

HENDERSON

Because Voorhees was Episcopalian?

BANKHEAD

An Episcopalian school, yeah. The Episcopalian churches in the North, that's how most of the schools in the South, especially the private schools—Tuskegee and all of those—got support. We had a nice singing group, and they would go and sing all through the north to raise money. I don't know if you're familiar with that at all.

HENDERSON

Yeah, I know Fisk [University] had something like that.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, Fisk is a similar fish. And Brown, he could sing. You know, he could sing. We had some guys there like that that sang like women do. They sang like mockingbirds. They picked those types of people from wherever they could find them, because they were an asset to the school. When they went on these singing engagements or whatever they were, they would cause them to give them the money. Yeah. They are using that same technique now. But anyway, I didn't get that assignment. So I said, "Now, what's next?" They told me that I would be able to take care of the chickens. Okay. They had a poultry farm, like. But they bought the chickens at first. Instead of having hatched them, they would buy them by the thousand. When you buy them by the thousand, they would put them in a room, and in that room they'd have a heater. That heater would be about four by twelve. You would have to put wood in it to keep it hot. They had big oak logs to put in there. It had a door that you raise up. The thing was made out of brick. You raised the door up and you put the stuff in there. The heat would keep the chickens warm. So what happened— You had straw around there for the chickens to put droppings on. See what I mean? And you take that out every so often so they wouldn't catch germs. But if you left that door part way up and that straw was right there at the door, then the fire would just run on out and burn everything up. So the next job that they were supposed to give me was to take care of the chickens. But somebody else came along who was a little more popular and had a little more money—a little more pull—and I didn't get that.

HENDERSON

Whoa!

BANKHEAD

Boy. I am not going home, though. Because my dad didn't know where I was. You know, my dad didn't know where I was. I left home. I was out living in another place. So I didn't get that. They wound up putting me on the farm. I had to be on the farm. In the morning I worked on the farm. They had some huge dray horses. Have you seen those dray horses on—?

HENDERSON



The Clydesdales.

BANKHEAD

They're on the beer commercial?

HENDERSON

Yeah, they're pulling the Budweiser beer wagon.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Like the beer. They had some horses like that somebody gave them. Big horses, man. I'd been on the farm, but one horse was as big as two of them. So they gave me two horses and a big plow. But they didn't know me. I'd plow. I'd plow. But I just couldn't understand why they— One horse would have been enough, but they always had two. It didn't make sense to me. But anyway, that's where I was. They threw me on the farm. So what happened, the guy who was the agricultural] man, he soon— Because whatever I did, I always did it right. He soon says, "Bankhead, we want you to do some-thing else other than just doing this here hefty work." Wherever there was something to be done dependable, he'd want me to do it. He wanted me to teach an ag class. So what happened though, I was working half-day— And I'll never forget— The girls would be going to school, and it would be cold. They would be laughing and going to school, and I'd be out there plowing with those two big old horses. I felt so humiliated. Because when I was in high school, I got to be very popular. I was doing extremely well. This minister was telling me how popular, how good I was. This, that, and the other. I came down there thinking I was going to get a choice place in the college, and I wound up on the farm. So it was a letdown. I would be plowing, and all the girls would be laughing and passing by. They didn't even see me, and I felt bad. But what happened, the guy who was taking care of the chickens, he left the door halfway up and burned all the chickens up.

HENDERSON

Yes, you told me about that.

BANKHEAD

I did?

HENDERSON

You told me part of this story. Keep going. You want to get this on tape.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. Burned the chickens up. So then they came to me and said, "We want you to take care of the chickens." I said, "What?" Not only that, they had a barrel that sits in the corner. If you leave that barrel open, one chicken would jump in there and eat. Then another would jump in there and eat, and they would jump in there— Fifty of them would jump in there. And when they jump in there, they couldn't jump back out. See, they jump up on there and they jump down in— When the food got low, then they couldn't jump back up high. All of them would be in there. Sometimes twenty chickens would be dead in the morning. They'd say, "Well—" Then they told me what had happened. They said, "We want you. We're losing too much." The chickens are burnt up, you know. Chickens would all run and they would try to hide and everything and they were fighting.

HENDERSON

No, I think you told me the chicken coop burned down.

BANKHEAD

No, no. That's a barn you're talking about. That's a different story.

HENDERSON

Oh, that's a barn.

BANKHEAD

That's a different story altogether. But anyway, so they got me to take care of the chickens. I said, "Okay." Mind you, now, I'm working half-day already. So I just start working half-day, but I was taking care of the chickens, too.

HENDERSON

And going to school on the other half day.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. The other half day. Now, what I did, I made a place like a bed with the chickens. I made a bed and slept in the corner in the chicken house. I said, "Now I've got it made, because I can study." I had a light, see. I said, "Now, gee whiz, I've got this made, you know." And that's what I did. But what happened—

HENDERSON

And you could save money that way, because you weren't staying in the dorm.

BANKHEAD

No. No, I'm working my way, paying for everything. I've got news for you. I went there with seventy-five dollars and gave it to the minister to keep for me. When I left there, I had about a thousand dollars. I had clothes. I had more clothes than any of the teachers on the campus. I was cutting hair for two dormitories—both ladies dormitories. That's the way I worked my way up. I'll tell you about that as we go.

HENDERSON

Now, let me ask this question: what year is this you're talking about at Voorhees?

BANKHEAD

Around '36 and '-7. Or '-8, maybe. Because I know it was '42 when I went in the army. I was out of school in '40. I was out of school a year before I went into the army. That was the only free year I ever had in my life. I was free. I said, "Look here, I've worked my way all the way all of my life and had no fun." I couldn't go in the army and get killed. I said, "This is one year I'm gonna blast." And I did. I didn't let up.

HENDERSON

Fortunately, you weren't killed. One of the things I did want to hear was the barn story, because that was one of the times when Voorhees wanted you to use your architectural talents.

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah. The barn story was— They had known that I had quite a bit of work, because when things would go wrong around the school, right off I'd be fixing

them and doing this and doing that. They could rely on me to fix them. Something's going on, you need a door hung, need this and that and the other, in high school in seventh grade I studied all that stuff. I built a log cabin when I was in high school, going out in the forest. Log cabins, you know? I built a log cabin. I went back home, and I built a log cabin for our barn back home. I knew how to do that. So when I got there, they soon found out I could do this and do this and do that. The barn burned down the year before the last year I was there. Now, I stayed down there every summer.

HENDERSON

You stayed at Voorhees in the summer. You didn't go home?

BANKHEAD

No, I didn't go home. I stayed at Voorhees every summer, and whatever there was there was necessary to do— That way they got onto what I could do. So when the barn burned down, the war was just getting into full fight. The instructor there who was a carpentry instructor was supposed to build a barn. But the government— All trade schools had to contribute, let somebody come in from the community and work in that school. In particular, the trade schools. That was a must, and they would almost take over the school. They did put somebody in there— People from all walks of life would do any kind of work. They had carpenters selected from out of the state and brought them to these schools. So what happened, they didn't have anybody to build a barn, so they decided that I knew enough architecture— Could I build a barn? Yeah, I could build a barn. I said, "Give me somebody to work." There were some guys that stayed there during the summer. I'll never forget, about five guys and I built that barn.

HENDERSON

Now, you designed it as well? Did plans on paper?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I'm sure I had some kind of plan, because everything I went by was a plan. It was a stable and some-place for the cows and everything. I'll never forget, there was a hallway running down through the middle of it, with stables and things on the sides. And it was bigger than the one they had. It

was nice, too. I finished that before the summer was over. So the government guys had part of the trade building. They were doing work for the community—making shoes, doing this, doing that. When I finished that, then I was helping Mr. Reed upgrade all the campus. So what happened, the instructor who worked for the government wanted a vacation. He had a month left. They discussed the things, and they went out and looked at my work. I didn't know anything about it. They decide that I was able to take care of his class for a month. That's the only cash money I made from the government. They gave me half of that guy's salary for that month. That's the barn story. We remodeled—put a new floor wood down in the kitchen. The thing that stands out in my mind that I hadn't learned beforehand, and I'll never forget—In the kitchen, there was about an eight-inch pipe column going up in different places. We were laying the floor down, and I was wondering how in the world that man is going to get that thing around that post. The post is square. How are they going to get that thing around? I couldn't understand how they'd get that around there. That's one thing that stands out in my mind now. He showed me how to get the thing around the post—how you cut it.

HENDERSON

Is the floor tile?

BANKHEAD

No, it was a floor T and G, that's tongue and groove.

HENDERSON

Oh, boards.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. About four inches wide, and it was oak.

HENDERSON

Okay, I'm thinking of linoleum tile. They didn't have that then.

BANKHEAD

Oh, they had it, but this dining room had fine— All the buildings had nice hardwood floors.

HENDERSON

Hardwood floors, okay.

BANKHEAD

We're putting that thing down, and you couldn't have any cracks. So he showed me how to do that thing. Boy, that was the one thing I learned from Mr. Reed that I liked. I didn't particularly care for Mr. Reed. He's the one that shoved me all the way through that stuff from one place to another and didn't give me any credit. That was one of the bad aspects of the period when I was in Voorhees. I don't know whether I should put this on tape or not.

HENDERSON

It's up to you.

BANKHEAD

I don't think so. It's very— I'll tell you.

HENDERSON

Maybe we should keep your life story on the upbeat.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I want to keep it on the upbeat, but I had some low spots, too. But that was a low spot that I told you about—how they shoved me around from one job to another.

HENDERSON

Well, you've triumphed. You've triumphed.

BANKHEAD

Oh, no question about that.

HENDERSON

You've gone way over that.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, no question about that. When I really triumphed was when they told me that they selected me as being one of the characters from Voorhees that deserved this award I got. That's when I realized how you can do things, and people are not aware of it. You don't publicize, but still somehow or another it gets to be known. You know what I mean? Just doing your thing, you see. That was the only thing I was doing. I'd never get out and make a big publicity this, that, and the other. But I was just doing what I call "my thing"—trying to do the best I can as I go. I think that has accounted for—I don't figure I've been doing any big thing ever. But whatever I can help, or do whatever I can do, I do that. That is, if I'm doing a piece of work, I do the best. See, I'm loyal to— You can be loyal to people. You can be loyal to things. And if you're not loyal to one, the chances are you're not loyal to the other. That's true. If you're loyal, truthfully loyal, you are loyal. You're not just loyal to people. You're loyal to a job. I'm drawing a line here. I want to see it beautiful. I want to see it straight. That means that you're loyal to that.

HENDERSON

It's a idea about integrity—professional integrity.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, yeah. That's all I'm saying. There's no question about it at this stage of the game. The things that I know, I know. And I know this too: That being exposed to a certain integrity, people respect it. People may hate you, but they respect you. And if he hates you real bad, he may turn it completely around. When they understand you, they can turn completely around and they can be your best friend. A good example of that is how the South hated black people. When they realized to some extent really what was going on, they became good. But those hypocrites, they aren't ever going to do anything different.

#### **1.4. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE DECEMBER 5, 1989**

HENDERSON

We were discussing a few minutes ago the extra year you spent at Voorhees [College]. This is your college education. Can you tell me a little more about that?

BANKHEAD

It was a two-year college. I was taking agriculture. That was my major. But while I was taking agriculture, the fact that I had a background in architecture and building construction, anything on the campus that required that— After they learned that I knew about that, they had me doing it. Whatever it was— fixing doors. If it's fixing windows or floors or whatever, they would have me do it. I think I told you about how I built the barn. The year that I was supposed to graduate—to leave— they told me the fact that I did all that extra work at the school and taught— I taught drafting, architectural drafting. They decided that with all the work I had accomplished— Even though it wasn't directly in my field— Now, the agriculture department did require you to know about building barns and outhouses and maybe take care of the home to some extent. So that was in keeping with part of the agriculture department. Nevertheless, I was much more extensive in the architecture and the drafting and the building than what they required. There were some students who came in and they just took nothing but building— building only—and got certificates in building. A degree or whatnot. But agriculture was my—

HENDERSON

That was your original major.

BANKHEAD

My major, yeah. But it turns out that I probably did more work otherwise than I did— So I was about to leave, and I didn't have any credit for all the work I had done in architecture and building things. So they said, "It's a shame for you to leave here without all the credit for what you've done here." So they went to the state—or to whatever—and they got permission for me to stay another year so I could get that extra credential, which was in the architecture field.

HENDERSON

Okay. Now, Voorhees, the original program you were there for, was a two-year program.

BANKHEAD



A two-year program in architecture.

HENDERSON

In agriculture?

BANKHEAD

Agriculture.

HENDERSON

Okay. Was it a four-year institution?

BANKHEAD

No, it was two years.

HENDERSON

It was just a two-year institution.

BANKHEAD

I stayed there three years, see, because of this.

HENDERSON

Just for the record, which three years was this? This was nineteen what?

BANKHEAD

Oh, in 1942 I went in the army. I was out of school and everything for one year. So let's back up from 1942. In 1941 I didn't do anything but have fun.

HENDERSON

We'll talk about that, too.

BANKHEAD

In 1940, 1939, 1938. That was the period.

HENDERSON

So you got that certificate. Now, this was a regular certificate that other students were getting who had come there originally to study building trades?

BANKHEAD

No. No.

HENDERSON

This was something totally aside?

BANKHEAD

This was something totally different. They had a certificate in building. Someone might come there just to do carpenter work and get a certificate just in some kind of building trade. But mine was different in that I got something that pertained to architecture and building. It was a different kind of certificate.

HENDERSON

A very special certificate just for you.

BANKHEAD

This was a special certificate. Nobody got anything like that. So the day when I graduated, I was on the roster two or three or four times. I went up there once to get the thing for agriculture. Then I went up there to get the special certificate. Then I went there because I had given more to the life of the campus than anybody else on the campus at that period. Those were the three or four things I got. So that was for that period. And I graduated.

HENDERSON

Do you mind if I go back and ask a few questions from conversations I've listened to? You were going to Simms High School. I am a little confused as to where Simms was located relative to your home. That is, your farm as you were growing up. Where was it located?

BANKHEAD

Okay, now. Simms High School was in Union County [South Carolina], and Union was the county seat of Union County.

HENDERSON

But it was not in the town? It was not in the town of Union?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, the school was in the town of Union. But I lived in Cherokee County when I went to school. That was a bordering county.

HENDERSON

I know you didn't live at home. You told me that.

BANKHEAD

No. I was living in Cherokee County—actually, in the country, because that's where the farm was. So when I left there I went to Union to go to school. I went there, and I had to start in the seventh grade because what I'd had in the schools before then didn't give me enough credit. So they started me in seventh grade. I was supposed to have finished the seventh grade, but the school I was in in Cherokee County was a one-room school. After that, I had lived in Union County and they had what was known as a Rosenwald school. [Lessing J. ] Rosenwald was the name of a person who gave money to build a lot of schools in Union County—all throughout the county—for educational purposes.

HENDERSON

I've heard of that program.

BANKHEAD

So what happened, they went about as high as the seventh grade there. But when my father [John Hayes Bankhead] moved from there over to Cherokee County, then there weren't any schools like that. The teacher in that school didn't know as much about math as I did. So I just went there just kind of running around there. They were a school where you would have to go out and find wood in the woods to burn to keep warm. We'd go out in the woods and find trees and things that are broken down, and we would bring it back and chop it up. They had one big wooden stove in that one room. Some of it's a log cabin. They had one teacher there. Her name, I'll never forget, was Mary Edwards.

HENDERSON

She was not the teacher in the Rosenwald school.

BANKHEAD

No.

HENDERSON

She was in a one-room school?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, she was in the one-room school. But that's the same county that my mother [Pearl Askew Bankhead] taught school in when she was in Tuskegee [Institute], in a one-room school, too.

HENDERSON

Did this teacher, Mary Edwards, know your mother?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. As a matter of fact, they were kind of far related because my father's brother married her sister. As a matter of fact, my uncle, the one I was telling you about, Willie [Bankhead], was kind of going with this lady. Because she had connections [WITH?] the family already, she hoped that she would get into the family, too. The Bankhead family. Because it was kind of an aggressive family, know what I mean? My uncle [Christopher Bankhead], man, during the Depression he fed a whole town, including part of me when I was in high school.

HENDERSON

Let me ask another question. In your high school, you had a teacher by the name of Miss Gandu.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, Miss Gandu. She was a math teacher.

HENDERSON

How do you spell that name, Gandu? Is it Indian?

BANKHEAD

G-A-N-D-U, I think. Miss Gandu. I don't remember what her first name was, but I'll never forget Gandu.

HENDERSON

I thought maybe her name was related to the man from India.

BANKHEAD

Oh, no.

HENDERSON

She was black?

BANKHEAD

She was black.

HENDERSON

Now, here's a trickier question. You told me in the second session that how you heard about Voorhees was that you wrote to Blanton and asked him for information.

BANKHEAD

Right.

HENDERSON

How did you find out about Voorhees period, in order to write to Blanton?  
Where did you first hear about Voorhees?

BANKHEAD

My mother graduated from Tuskegee. That's where I wanted to go all the time. So in my process of trying to find out how I could go to Tuskegee, somehow or other I heard about Voorhees. Somebody told me that there was a sister school to Tuskegee. The lady, Miss [Elizabeth E. ] Wright, who was the originator of Voorhees, was a graduate at the same time as my mother was from Tuskegee. She came out and she opened up that school in that particular place.

HENDERSON

So Voorhees was not that old when you went there. It had started I don't know when. [1897]

BANKHEAD

It was old, but nothing compared with Tuskegee. It was old.

HENDERSON

And the person who started Voorhees was Miss Wright?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Wright.

HENDERSON

All right. I think we're ready to move forward from the time when you told me you had graduated from Voorhees. Now you've got a year of freedom.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. What happened, I had worked all my life, night and day, and never had any— You know, with my father on the farm. There wasn't any time. He'd save time. He had a wet-weather job, and he had a dry-weather job. So you couldn't miss it. In wet weather, you'd be in the buildings beating out peas and shucking corn, piling it up and stacking stuff, because you couldn't get outside. And as soon as it dried up, you'd be back outside on the farm, doing whatever had to be done.

HENDERSON

Farm work never really ends.

BANKHEAD

I'll say it never ends, because— After my mother passed, I was twelve years old, so we had to take care of everything—the cows and things like that. The cows would be out, and they would get lost. We'd work until sundown, then we'd have to go get the cows and bring them in and milk them. So the cows sometimes would get lost. Or lost from us—they weren't lost from them-selves. [laughter] They would be in the bushes and everything. They're bedded down for the night. Because in the daytime they walked around and gathered food. So we would have to ride on our mule and things. We would have to be very still in order to locate them, because they'd bedded down. They weren't moving anymore. So we'd be still. Cows have a digestion system

which means that they eat the food and it goes to a certain place, but it's not digested right then. That is known as chewing the cud. We'd hear them chewing, and every now and then they'd swallow. That's how we'd find out where they were.

HENDERSON

Oh, all this is very noisy—all this chewing and swallowing?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Well, everything would be so quiet and everything. You would hardly hear them chewing, but you'd hear them when they swallowed. So that's the way we'd find them a lot of times. One would be lying there. We'd try to get them together and get them home. Then we'd have to milk. We milked them at night and milked them again in the morning. In the morning, we'd get up early. We'd have to do all that before we'd go to work in the field. Then we would have to cook the breakfast. You know, it's the general routine of farming. But at that time it didn't seem like much, because when you don't know any different you don't know any better.

HENDERSON

That's life.

BANKHEAD

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Okay. Now, my real question is that you had said earlier that when you were graduated from college the war was going on.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. I went in the army in 'forty-two.

HENDERSON

Okay. But you were drafted.

BANKHEAD

Yeah.

HENDERSON

So my question is, when you got your draft notice, had you already spent this year living freely before you got drafted?

BANKHEAD

No.

HENDERSON

So you got drafted and then decided you would take some time and—

BANKHEAD

No, I got drafted before I got out of school. And, as an amusing something—  
You may not want this for the record.

HENDERSON

You want me to turn this off?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, turn it off, I'll tell you. [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON

So you knew you were about to be drafted. You had some forewarning.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. I had registered.

HENDERSON

You had registered. Okay. So you graduated and decided that before you get drafted you will take this time to enjoy life before you get killed.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, before I get killed. That's the way I looked at it. So that year I just had a lot of fun, that's all. The first free year I had in my life—free—just come and go. Girls or whatever, it didn't make any difference. I wasn't in love with any of them. Some of them I loved, but I knew I couldn't—

HENDERSON



Did you stay near the campus or did you travel? What did you do during that whole year?

BANKHEAD

Oh, no, I wasn't near the campus. I was a good distance from the campus. I was in another city by the name of Spartanburg, one of the prestige cities in South Carolina. It's a progressive city, you know, close over to Union and Lockhart and Chester and little things.

HENDERSON

Spartanburg is a fairly big city compared to Union.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, a big city. It's probably bigger than Columbia, the capital. It's one of the big cities. So that's where I stayed until I was drafted.

HENDERSON

Okay. Just for the record, you had about a thousand dollars that you had raised from—

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah, while I was in school.

HENDERSON

So you had plenty of money to live on.

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah. But I was a barber, see. I didn't have any problem getting a job out there.

HENDERSON

So you were still barbering while you were taking this whole year off.

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah. I was barbering, making good money barbering then. I built a clientele, and I was making good money.

HENDERSON

But you didn't travel or see anything? Do anything adventurous? Just stayed in Spartanburg?

BANKHEAD

I stayed in Spartanburg and explored Spartanburg. I don't know, I might have been out of there once or twice or something, but nothing particular.

HENDERSON

So you got drafted. Let's talk about going into the service. Which branch did you go into, and where did you have to report? You said the army.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, it was in the army. The branch of service I was in was ordnance—ammunition ordnance. It was an ordnance that supplied ammunition to the front. There wasn't anything between us and the front but the half-tracks and things who picked up the ammunition and carried it to the tanks. We were right behind the front always.

HENDERSON

Wait, wait, wait. This is too fast. Let's go from getting your draft notice and then boot camp and training. Let's talk about all that.

BANKHEAD

Okay. In boot camp, it was just the usual process. You get in boot camp, they carry you through the process and make you forget what you—

HENDERSON

Forget you were human.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. And you think, "I thought this and I thought that." "Who told you you could think? Shut up! Listen!" They really shake you up and break you loose from the everyday life and set you up so you'll be useful for them.

HENDERSON

Where did you go for boot camp?

BANKHEAD

I was in Fort McClellan, Alabama.

HENDERSON

You were in Fort McClellan?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, Fort McClellan, Alabama. That's where I took my boot training.

HENDERSON

Was that an all-black boot camp or was it mixed or what?

BANKHEAD

No, no, no. The company was black, but they had some white companies, too. A battalion could be made up of white and black. Some battalions were probably all black, but we had mostly white officers. So I took my training there, and they selected people who had something in common with what they were going to do. They selected me for my class—the type of work I did of value. That's why they selected me. For almost nine months, I wasn't attached to any group. I was just floating around waiting for the company that I was supposed to join to go overseas with. See, [I was] placed with them because at that time very few people could read blueprints. So that made me very useful. They knew that from the beginning of the whole thing, but I didn't know. I just kept bouncing from one place to another, and I wasn't doing anything. Just eating. They'd attach me to a company, and I'd just eat, and go to town, whatnot, you know. I said, "Is this what I'm gonna do?"

HENDERSON

This is still at Fort McClellan?

BANKHEAD

No, no. I moved to Camp Pickett, Virginia. Camp Pickett, Virginia, is where I trained, where I joined the company. But I moved a little bit from here to there. Fort McClellan is where I got my training. Then I left there, and I was sitting around until the company which I finally joined came by. That was

Camp Pickett, Virginia. When the company came up to Camp Pickett, Virginia, then this was the company that they had planned for me to be with.

HENDERSON

Was this the corps of engineers?

BANKHEAD

No, it was ordnance. [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON

Okay, so you were with the ordnance company at Camp Pickett? When did they ship you overseas?

BANKHEAD

Let me give you a little history on that. When they brought the company in I was there, and they were going to appoint me as a technical person for the company. The group that had been together for some time— regulars, whatnot—they had a person who was over the carpenter who was head carpenter. So they appointed me as the head carpenter. There was a discussion about whether he would stay or whether he wouldn't. But they had to determine whether or not I had the qualifications that my record indicated. So the thing they were going to do, we were going to make shipments overseas. They had to have somebody who could figure out cubic—

HENDERSON

What size? Cubic yardage? Cubic feet, or what?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Because in the ship, it's a cubic measurement, because you're going to put in boxes and things like that that occupy a certain amount of space. Each battalion had a certain amount of space on the ship. You had to know each box—how much you could put in what. So that was my job. They had people in the company who were testing me that were just regular. They were trying to figure that I didn't know it, because they didn't want me to take the position of the guy who had been with them all the time. So they had the lieutenant— One of the guys who had developed a friendship with me— He was the one who made the contact to indicate that I did know. I didn't know

that he was secretly trying to check me out. The lieutenant asked me, "Can you figure a square?" I said, "Sure." "How do you figure that?" "When I figure cubic, " I said, "All you have to do is to multiply this by this and that by that and that's cubic volume." He said, "Is that right?" I said, "Yeah." So I told him, and I gave him an example of a box. I said, "And that's the kind of space you need." He said, "Let me tell you something. We're gonna promote you right now to technician T-5." He said, "Now, do you want to go home?" I hadn't been home since I had been in. He said, "We're gonna give you a pass to go home, and you go home. And then you come back and everybody in this company is at your disposal." At your disposal. Oh, man, I was swell. I really didn't know what it encompassed at the time. But I came back—

HENDERSON

So you did go home.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I did go home. But I just barely got there and came back. I wanted to see my wife, but I didn't get to see her.

HENDERSON

Wife! You married—

BANKHEAD

I wasn't married then, but I wanted to see the girl [Mary E. Wright] that I finally married. Not that I knew I was going to marry her. But anyway, I wanted to see her. I didn't get to see her, so I went back. By the way, let me tell you about an incident that occurred when I was on my way. Now, I was so happy that I made T-5 that I had them put it on my jacket. But the record didn't indicate on my pass that I was T-5. I was sitting up there on the bus. The police would go up and down the truck, go up and down all the buses, and see if they can see somebody AWOL and this, that, and the other. So I had T-5 on my what-you-call-it. Some places they didn't think black people should be able to be technicians like that, so they asked me for my pass. They looked on my pass, and my pass said I was a private. They tore my stripes off and threw them in my lap and said, "You've got no business with them on. What are you putting them on for?" When guys go home, they would put those things on to

make them think that they're a sergeant, lieutenant, things like that. So they tore them off, threw them in my lap. I got so mad at them, I didn't know what to do. Do you know what I mean? So I was going to get on my captain when I got back about the embarrassment I had, but I never did. But anyway, I got back there, and little did I know they were going to work the stew out of me. I didn't know what I was getting into. But people know more about you than you know about yourself. They knew I was a person that would— They found out, in the process of just that nine months— They would put me at the head of a group and maybe go to eat or do this, do that. Then I'd go to another group. They had the records, you know, and they could tell exactly where you fit and know how to put you in charge. You know, when I left to go to the train— To go from the farm or what it was to the place, they put me in charge of somebody. They know, man, they know. But anyway, I got back and they gave me two things to do. I had to put the insignia on all the trucks, on all the things that belonged to our battalion and our company. The Stars and Stripes and all those kinds of things. I had to figure out the cubic [measurement] of everything that goes on that ship, including trucks and everything.

HENDERSON

Okay, everything that you guys were going to take, you had to figure out the size of it to fit into the hold of the ship.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, the size of it. So what happened, they gave me a book, some books about six inches thick. You know, several of them. They had all these insignia that go on whatever it goes on. They also gave me a book pertaining to figuring out some of the stuff that we had to deal with as far as cubic measurements were concerned. So I would take the book at night and figure out what I was going to do the next day. So when the next day came, I had everything laid out for each person to do. See? They really admired that. Because most people when night came, they would go to bed or whatever. They didn't work. But I was doing the same thing I did at Voorhees. Same thing I did on the farm. It wasn't a big thing to me. It was a pleasure for me to figure that out and have it ready. I distributed this to this guy, distributed that to that group, that group, that group. I had to select a group that would be part of it. Because old guys who didn't want me to be this, they would disrupt my

program. So I just selected mostly new guys that came in. And they told me, "Whoever—" He said, "We're at your service. Everybody from the captain on down." If I said, "I want So-and-so and I want Captain So-and-so, " they would get it. Boy, I was walking around there until I almost died. I killed myself working and didn't know— Because when I got overseas, man, I worked myself stiff. But in the process of making all these preparations and things like that, I did that. And all the insignia and things. All of the people that I had were a kind of technical people. They picked people who could do certain things, especially the group that I had. The rest of them were just lugging— handling ammunition and picking it up and all that kind of stuff. All throughout the whole service, I always had technical people. Because I couldn't put signs on ammunition and rights-of-way and things like that for the trucks and things who were going to pick up ammunition unless I had somebody who knew how to do a sign. So what happened, I had one guy, I'll never forget him, his name was Jessie Trotter. He's from Mississippi, and he was kind of like an artist. It took him always to do anything. But they had selected him—

HENDERSON

Wait. It took him what to do anything? Took him a long time?

BANKHEAD

It took him always. Because artistry takes a long time.

HENDERSON

Oh, okay. Artists like to be perfectionists.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, perfectionist. And he didn't know anything about templates. We had to cut templates with numbers on it, so you could do it fast. Stencils. We had a stencil machine. He didn't want to use the stencil machine, because he wanted to do everything himself. To say, "I did it." You know. "I did it." I had trouble with him all the way through, but I could never get rid of him because they knew his record. When they looked at his work— He was painting pictures of people, of captains and everything, to send home. You know, that kind of thing.

HENDERSON

He'd paint pictures as souvenirs for gifts and things. People would mail them home?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. So that was the type of guy he was. Then I had some other technical guys the same way. Carpenters and things like that. You name it. So I got everything ready. The company had been to New York, to Staten Island, and had a kind of outing.

HENDERSON

What do you mean by "outing"? Do you mean liberty in a scenic—

BANKHEAD

Liberty. Liberty.

HENDERSON

So you-all were set loose on New York?

BANKHEAD

They were set loose in New York, and they hadn't been to New York. I don't know whether you should put this on there or not. But it allowed you to be with a certain girl that down South you couldn't be with. I don't know whether you want to tape that or not.

HENDERSON

Well, you keep talking. Go ahead.

BANKHEAD

You can delete it. So they went to New York, and they had a chance to be around these little white girls, and they just had fits. They went crazy. So the company— I mean, psychologically, the people knew what they were doing. So after they went there, they came out here to Needles, California. It was hot.

HENDERSON

Wait, wait. You all went from—



BANKHEAD

I didn't go— The company—

HENDERSON

Oh, the company. Everybody else but you?

BANKHEAD

But me, because I wasn't with them. All I could hear when they got back— They were talking about "Staten Island, Staten Island." See, because they'd been there before, and they'd come to California, come to Needles, California, on the train. When they came in that night from training there, they all had pistols and guns and they were raising sin, you know what I mean? And talking about, "We're gonna straighten out the United States, " and all that mess. They're going to straighten out the United States and all that stuff. But they still said they were going to go back to Staten Island. They all were thinking about the same way they went there before. And I was enthused. I said, "I want to see Staten Island." Somebody told me how much fun they had. That first time to Staten Island was just giving them some kind of liberty and making them enjoy being in the army. So they were looking forward to another occasion like that.

HENDERSON

You say this is a plot on the part of the upper echelons of the army to satisfy the privates?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Right. Satisfy them, you know.

HENDERSON

Did anybody ever say what happened in Needles to get people in— [tape recorder off] What had happened in Needles, California, that made people return to Virginia with guns and say, "We're gonna straighten out the United States"?

BANKHEAD

Well, Needles, California, is a hot climate. They were preparing to go to Africa. See, Needles, California, was hot. That's here. You hear them say the Dead Sea or Dead Desert, somewhere out here?

HENDERSON

Death Valley.

BANKHEAD

Death Valley. Because we were going to Africa, and they want a similar condition to what it's going to be out there. So they came back, and they didn't know they were on their way overseas. But I figured we were going overseas, because when they started talking about mosquito nets and things like that, I know you've got to go someplace where insects are going to be. So I picked up on that. They had nets, you know, that were real, real big. See, in a cold climate, you don't need a net. So I said, "We're going somewhere hot."

HENDERSON

That's hot.

BANKHEAD

Hot, because we've got these nets and we were packing them and all that kind of thing. But we got ready and got everything straight and got everything packed. I was sick, because I was working myself to death, and I thought maybe I wouldn't have to go. But meantime, we had changed all our officers. We had officers from California and from different places who were more human. But the guys that we had were mostly southern guys, and they weren't used to people being human to them. They had to be dogged and be kicked around.

HENDERSON

These are black guys? They needed to have somebody kick them around?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. See, they were from the South. But the officers that they had weren't that caliber.

HENDERSON

They weren't from the Southeast?

BANKHEAD

No, they weren't from the South. We had one officer [Adams] from California. I'll never forget him. He was a chemical [warfare] lieutenant. We had different ones, other types. But what happened, these guys got back from here [California]. They'd heard about people looting and doing this and doing that from the World War I—kicking out this, taking over this town, and everything. So what happened, in the summertime all the officers were on leave for some reason or other. The only one that was legally on leave was a lieutenant from California. That Saturday afternoon, the guy— They called him Needles, because he was from California. He went downtown and somehow or other the information got out that some white people had killed him or something. Then they started a riot. They said, "We're gonna clean this place up."

HENDERSON

Wait. There was a black guy that went downtown—

BANKHEAD

Right.

HENDERSON

This is in Needles, California?

BANKHEAD

No, no.

HENDERSON

This was back in Virginia?

BANKHEAD

That's back in Virginia. But the guy was—

HENDERSON

He was from California?

BANKHEAD

He was from California, from Needles. And they called him Needles. He was a clown. Anyway, he went out and somebody said he got killed or somebody did something to him. So they decided that they were going to take over.

HENDERSON

This is in Virginia?

BANKHEAD

It's in Virginia.

HENDERSON

All right, now I'm with you.

BANKHEAD

So they came in and called the whole company out to have them get ready. You know, "Let's go down and take over this city." I knew they were going to mess up. There wasn't any order. There weren't any officers there or anything. Nothing but noncommissioned officers. They decided that everybody's going, "Everybody and his brother, let's go." So I told the group that I had, "Don't you go nowhere." I said, "Because they aren't gonna do anything but go down and get killed or mess up or something." I knew they were going to do that, see. They were clowning and drinking, and clowning and shooting. They wanted to make sure that everybody went. They came through the barracks with a gun and said, "Everybody get out of here. Everybody and his brother." So I told them, "Don't you go nowhere." I had about eight people. I said, "Don't go anywhere. Nowhere." They came through there twice. They said, "Sarge, we're not sure." I said, "Now listen. When they come back through here, you have your guns pointed out from under the cover." When they came back through there with their guns, we had our guns pointed out from underneath the covers. So the guys looked and saw the guns, and they just kept on through. But after they got outside, then they shot back through the barracks. Yeah, I shot back through the barracks, and I was scared they were going to hit us. So then after a period of time they left. So they left and went down to the gates. You know, they had MP's stop points. So they left and went down there. While they were down there, the MP wouldn't let them in.

HENDERSON

In? Or let them out?

BANKHEAD

Wouldn't let them into the city.

HENDERSON

Okay. Wouldn't let them off the base?

BANKHEAD

No, they were off the base. But they had also block points where you couldn't go into the city.

HENDERSON

Okay. I didn't realize that.

BANKHEAD

They couldn't go into the city, because the city didn't want an influx of people doing all kinds of things. You had a MP point where you would go into the city, and you would have to present something to get in. So they wouldn't let them in. They said, "Okay, you wait here, we'll come back."

HENDERSON

What city were they going toward?

BANKHEAD

They were going to a city in Virginia. I don't know. I don't remember the city or the town. But anyway, it's a small town. What happened, they wouldn't let them in. They said, "Well, you just be here when we come back." They came back and got the seven half-tracks and got all the things that had guns on them and loaded them up. Particularly the guns— The ones had the fifty-caliber machine gun. They got everything they could carry.

HENDERSON

This is serious stuff.

BANKHEAD

They went back and said, "We're coming in." They trained their guns on that what-you-call-it and said, "We're coming in." The sergeant knew that they were going to do that. When they got back there, nobody tried to stop them. Nobody was at the checkpoint now. They were surprised that nobody— They wanted to shoot. They wanted to attack something. Nobody resisted them at all. They went all around in the city and everything and didn't shoot anybody. I said, "My God, if was I gonna do all that, I'd have to shoot somebody." Then they came back, and they'd run out of something to drink. They came back and made a lot of noise. Just crazy, you know, drinking and stuff. So what happened, they came back and went to bed. That next Monday, orders came out to take all the guns. They first took the ammunition, because they didn't want you to know what's going on. Took all the ammunition so you wouldn't have any— See, this group was the resistance group. They figured that if they let them have guns, then they were going to fight whoever. So they took the ammunition first, then they collected the guns. Then maybe thirty days after that they quarantined us. We couldn't go anywhere. All of a sudden, we heard sirens and everything. The army group of people who handle belligerent groups came to each one of the corners of our bivouac area and they set up guns. Guys would set up those rifles and had them tripods. Couldn't anybody move. The officers had been stripped of their guns and everything. There weren't any guns nowhere. So then they came in, looked around, had everybody come out, and started asking questions. What happened that night? Who did this and who did that? So I told my group, "You say you were asleep." See, we didn't go out and do nothing. I said, "This is gonna happen. If they come back in here to question us, you just tell them you were asleep." So, sure enough, about a month, two months after that they came in and had everybody get out. They asked us why we didn't stop them. There's a private— He thought because he was a private he could get by. But in the army everybody has a responsibility. If one guy don't do right, it passes on to the next one down to the private. He's supposed to stand up and do what's right. If the officer doesn't do it and you know it's wrong, something's supposed to happen. This guy was a yap, yap, yapping. He says, "Why didn't you do so-and-so?" So everybody who was responsible, they either took them out of the company— Some of the sergeants there I never saw anymore. The only lieutenant we kept was Lieutenant Adams. That was the guy from California. You might make a note of that. He was a chemical lieutenant.

HENDERSON

What do you mean, "chemical lieutenant"?

BANKHEAD

Chemical warfare. He's the one who had— You know, each company had a division of chemical, whatever. So he was head of that division. He was the one who was on vacation legally. The rest of them weren't. So they got rid of all of those officers, and all the noncommissioned officers that were supposed to participate in— So when they asked me— I was at the head of my little group in line. They asked me. I was a technician, though. They said, "I notice that you are so-and-so. Why you didn't do this?" I said, "I was asleep."

### **1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO DECEMBER 5, 1989**

BANKHEAD

So he asked me. I was the head of my little group that didn't go out. He asked me, "Why you didn't do so-and-so." I said, "I was asleep." And they questioned me. Anything they might ask, if you're asleep, you're asleep. [laughter]

HENDERSON

You didn't hear anything, you didn't see anything!

BANKHEAD

They said, "We understand there was shooting in the place." I said, "I didn't hear it." Everything they asked me, I was asleep. They couldn't prove anything. Everybody that was with me said the same thing. I told them what to say: "Asleep. Asleep. Asleep." So they couldn't get anything on us. They knew I wasn't asleep, but you couldn't prove anything.

HENDERSON

Now, did they also know that you guys had stayed in your barracks? Did other people tell them you had stayed in your barracks? Did they find that out?

BANKHEAD

No. No. They sure didn't. I don't remember them asking that. But they knew that we weren't out there. So we must have been in our barracks. They were

aware that with all that going on, we couldn't be asleep. But what could they prove? So the guy wouldn't let us alone. Then all the guys that were doing all the talking and telling everything, they handled them, court-martialed them, and court-martialed all the officers and relieved them of duty.

HENDERSON

Was there any publicity about all of this in newspapers?

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah! Oh, sure! In the town's paper, yeah.

HENDERSON

What about all across the country? See, I've never heard of this riot.

BANKHEAD

Well, it wasn't a riot. They didn't riot. They have had plenty of riots. But that's what they wanted to do. They said, "We're not gonna go over there and fight the Japs. Not gonna fight the Germans. We're gonna clean this place up, here and now." That's what I had heard a lot of times. And this is what they anticipated doing. When you're ready to go into a battle situation, something like that, they have a tendency to feed you, I think, a certain type of food that will make you aggressive. Some people say they give you gunpowder and all that kind of stuff. Not really. But you know that they say if you want to make a dog bad, you feed it gunpowder. Have you ever heard that?

HENDERSON

I've heard that.

BANKHEAD

I don't know how true it is. But anyway, they did feed you certain foods for certain things. Like, for example, because you don't have women with you, they'd give you saltpeter.

HENDERSON

Was that to depress the sex drive?

BANKHEAD



Depress the sex drive. They give you some pills to depress your sex drive. I'm sure they give you whatever else they want for how they want you to react. They want you to be bad, they give you something. You'll be wanting to fight everybody, you know what I mean? But anyway, when they came back from Needles, California, and they went to New York and were in Camp Pickett, you know, what finally happened, when we thought we were going back to the place we were talking about where they had had fun, that's when they shipped us out overseas. [laughter]

HENDERSON

They told you you were going to New York, and instead you went overseas?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, we went to New York, but we were out there in those big LSTs [landing ships] out there in the water. I kept looking, and they were looking, too, to go to Staten Island. We went to Staten Island, all right, but not those things I'd been waiting for. Big old LSTs had the big gates down. You just walked up, and they had guns every step of the way. They had somebody standing so you couldn't get out. The minute we start getting off the thing to get into the other thing, they told us, "Pep it up! Pep it up! Pep it up! Pep it up!" Our captain was a southerner. He was a small guy, but he never gave an inch. He knew psychology, and he knew how to handle whoever. They got southern officers, because they were acquainted with southern guys. They knew exactly how to handle it.

HENDERSON

Now, you guys went up from Virginia to Staten Island on a train?

BANKHEAD

Up on a train. A convoy or whatever. But anyway, when we got there, we got on LSTs and—

HENDERSON

Now, the LST is a ship?

BANKHEAD

Not a ship. It's a thing that carries you to the ship.

HENDERSON

The LST's a transport?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Transport. The whole end of it drops down, so they can put whatever on it—vehicles, troops or whatever. Then it closes back up. It's a seagoing vessel. But anyway, they let us down. When I looked out there through the fog and I saw that big ship sitting out there, I said, "Oh, no. We're not going to Staten Island." I said, "This is a trick." I knew it, man. It's just fog as far as I can see. Boy, and I heard that big whistle, "Whooo, whooo, whooo." I said, "Shoot! This is a seagoing vessel. That's where we're going. That's where we're headed." So they were telling you, "Get out! Let's go! Let's go! Let's go!" If you resisted, they would kick you and push you. I'll never forget— One of the worst guys or the baddest guy that I had known in the company— He was just bad! When he got in there and found out he'd been tricked, he sat down in the corner and he started crying. He said, "Mama!" Boy, I thought I would die! They tricked me too, but for him to be the baddest guy in the company and then get on there and act like he was acting— It was just comical! He was saying, "Mama!" I was about to die. Even under those conditions— I said, "This guy over here is supposed to be bad, and he's the chickenest thing on the boat!" He sat over in the corner and started crying.

HENDERSON

Goodness. Now, about what date do you remember that you guys were shipped out?

BANKHEAD

Oh, November.

HENDERSON

November of, like, '42? 'Forty-three?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, '42. Because we landed— We were on the sea a month or more. It was colder than anything. We didn't land because of a conflict of information that was being fed into a— A German got into connection in there and messed it

up. We were supposed to land one place, but we landed in another. Also, they had a ship, a French [Vichy government] ship, named *Jean Motte*. And the intelligence indicated that *Jean Motte* was not in the port of Casablanca. *Jean Motte* was supposed to have been back there somewhere else. We weren't supposed to have this kind of conflict, as it were. Then they found out that the battleship out there which encountered our ship— We had to stay out there till *Jean Motte* got rid of all this ammunition. We were out there for days, because they had to put that ship out of commission before we could get in. We didn't have any battle wagons in the class of the *Jean Motte*. As far as we knew, the Germans had the *Jean Motte* back in the other coast. But mess around, and here the *Jean Motte* is in the Casablanca port down there.

HENDERSON

Oh. I had forgotten that the French [Vichy] government by that time was cooperating with the Germans. Was this the French government ship? Or was this like a French resistance ship?

BANKHEAD

No, no. I think the German government had taken over France. France had capitulated to the Germans.

HENDERSON

Right. Now, had the French navy also capitulated to the German navy?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, yeah. We didn't have anything on our side but the British.

HENDERSON

So when you saw this French battleship, you didn't want to tangle with it.

BANKHEAD

We didn't want to tangle with it because we didn't know it was there. See, we didn't have the information that that class of ship was there. I don't think we were prepared to do battle with that. We didn't have planes and things to knock it out. You remember the German *Bismarck* and the *Gaspée*? It sank "the pride of the British nation"? It was the *Gaspée* or whatever. I forget what

it was now, but anyway that same thing occurred with them, too. That's another of the ships.

HENDERSON

What was the name of the ship you were on?

BANKHEAD

Boy, I think it's *Andrews*. It wasn't one of the biggest ships, and it wasn't one of the smallest ships. But it wasn't adequate for what we were doing, because that thing rocked like a boat. [laughter]

HENDERSON

Did you get seasick?

BANKHEAD

Oh, everybody got seasick. It was a makeshift— Because what happened— We had chains that attached to the top of the ship and attached to the bottom. Then we had lengths of chains for bunks all the way up. Maybe eight people or ten people, one right over the other.

HENDERSON

Ten-people bunks?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Chain bunks. You had chains attached to the bottom floor and attached to the top. Chains all the way down. Then you had chains going back up. Then you put your bunk on top of that. You had layered bunks. Then the soldiers got seasick and all that kind of stuff. And the ship was bad. I had to be back in the hole, man. I left that hole. I left that hole and got right under the steps where the officers would come down. They told me to move. I didn't move. They kicked stuff through the steps and down on me. I said, "Well, when those officers get ready to get out of there, I'm gonna be near that place, too. I got out of that hole because people were seasick back there and they weren't even going to the latrine. It was just a whole— It's a mess, you know.

HENDERSON

Well, where did your ship dock? Where did you guys end up in Europe?

BANKHEAD

We were supposed to end at Casablanca. But they had places known as Green Bay, Blue Beach. They had different phony names. We didn't end where we were supposed to land. We were unloaded in one of the Green Bays or something. They would never tell you the English name of where you were landing, because if you did, then everybody knew. But the Germans got into things, anyway, and they'd anticipate.

## **1.6. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE DECEMBER 27, 1989**

HENDERSON

We had talked about your army career and you were describing how at Staten Island people were being shipped out to be put on an oceangoing ship.

BANKHEAD

Right.

HENDERSON

I listened to that tape again, and I was really laughing over this tough guy who was—

BANKHEAD

Crying.

HENDERSON

—crying "Mama." [laughter] Before you pick up again, let me run by you— Camp Pickett. You know, I was asking what little town was it close to? I see it on the map here. It's in Nottoway County, Virginia, down close to Portsmouth, Norfolk, Petersburg. It's really in the middle of nowhere. Do you remember what little town was the closest one to it? Because I see no road that goes to Camp Pickett. I wonder what little town it was that was close to it that the guys were going to take over. Let me read off these names and see if they sound familiar.

BANKHEAD

Okay.

HENDERSON

One of them is Darvills, Harpers Home, Ordsburg, Rawlings, Danieltown, Blackstone—it's like the biggest town near there—Wellville. None of those sound familiar?

BANKHEAD

No. Well, actually, I don't remember the town. We weren't in Pickett too long. I don't remember the town. I remember them leaving. They were going to take over a town. I just remember that. I don't remember any names of towns.

HENDERSON

Okay, well, we'll toss that aside. So your company is now beginning to— Oh, you had actually crossed the ocean, I think, in the tape, and had gotten to Casablanca.

BANKHEAD

Had we? I don't think so.

HENDERSON

You were about to land in Casablanca, and there was a German ship there in the harbor that intelligence had thought was somewhere else.

BANKHEAD

Right. What was the name of that ship?

HENDERSON

You told me the *Bismarck*.

BANKHEAD

No. The *Bismarck*'s a German ship.

HENDERSON

It wasn't the *Bismarck*?

BANKHEAD

No, the *Bismarck* was— It's the pride of the German army. They sank the British ship—

HENDERSON

Oh, the *Gaspée*. You told me the *Gaspée*.

BANKHEAD

No.

HENDERSON

No. Okay. [laughter] You tell me.

BANKHEAD

Give me the name of the French ship. That's the one I'm talking about.

HENDERSON

Oh, *Jean Motte*.

BANKHEAD

*Jean Motte*, that's right.

HENDERSON

Okay. That's what it was.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. *Jean Motte*. That's right. We were held at bay for thirty days until they got that ship out of our action, because we didn't know it was there. Intelligence didn't know it was there. We thought it was in some other port. I don't think they came prepared to do battle with a battleship. So what I think they had to do was bomb it until either the ship ran out of ammunition or they got it out of commission. See what I mean? In many cases, that's what they have to do in order to deal with a situation that they didn't expect. So I think either the ship ran out of ammunition or they put it out of commission. So then we could move in. There was confusion in the landing because we were supposed to land— They had what is known as separate beaches—Myrtle Beach—not Myrtle Beach, but Blue Beach, Green Beach, and different places.

HENDERSON

Used like code names?

BANKHEAD

Code names, yeah. So we were supposed to land in one place, and we landed in another one. There was confusion in our landing, because we thought that we would land in one place and we landed in another. And the preparation to land there wasn't as suitable as we thought. I think the Germans intercepted the code, and they were— At least they confused us. I remember parachuting into the beach at night. We thought there were Germans, and we were shooting at them. I don't think we realized until the next day that we were shooting our men.

HENDERSON

What? Goodness.

BANKHEAD

I think it was said that we were shooting our own men until a sergeant came down, because we didn't have any light. Somebody saw that the insignia on the sergeant was an American insignia. I think, from what I heard, they realized that we were getting the wrong people. The next morning, I understand, they took a lot of the bodies that had been killed and did away with them before we could actually see them. Because if they left them out there for you to see, it would affect the morale of the troops. I think they always tried to avoid anything that would affect the morale of the soldiers. I'll never forget, when we were landing I kissed the ground, because I was as glad to get over there as I was to get back.

HENDERSON

Now, when you say the first ground you saw, it was the sand right there on the beach?

BANKHEAD

It was on the beach, yeah. I just thanked God that— You know. Then we had to march. We marched on a high knoll like. It was quite barren. It had been washed, you know— It's aged. And the rock and everything— The salt had



washed away the rock. But we had to get a clear space so we could see. There weren't any bushes and anything like that you could hide in. So we got out there in a clear spot so we could see. How come a high spot? Because it was raining. It was really raining. It's a rainy place around Casablanca and those places. It's warm and muggy. Wet.

HENDERSON

But now, when you landed, you knew you were in Morocco somewhere. You didn't know exactly where you were.

BANKHEAD

When we landed, I didn't know where we were. Because they had told us on the ship we were going to land in Casablanca. By the way, on the ship, after they had taken our ammunition, taken our guns before we got on— Due to the condition that had occurred—you know, the uprising— they had taken everything from us. So when we got off the boat, the first thing they gave us were our guns. Then later they brought the ammunition in. And they had what is known as a bandanna [bandolier]. One across this way, one across that way.

HENDERSON

Oh, across your chest.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. So then the captain said, "Well, I guess you know we're on our way and this is war." Something to that effect. He said, "Just remember, look out for yourself. Take care of yourself. There's nobody here to take care of you. Remember, every man for himself and God for all." That's the thing he said. I wanted to get on him right there. It seemed as though they tricked us out in the ocean there, and when they finally gave us the ammunition to do anything with— What could we do with ammunition on the boat? But he told us on our way. I'm sure he didn't know that it was going to take us that long to land. It took us thirty days on the water, and everything got real bad. Conditions got awfully bad on the ship, because the ship that we were on— I think it was Andrew—

HENDERSON

*Andrews.*

BANKHEAD

It was named *Andrews*. It was a makeshift thing that you put up right quickly. We had chains attached to the top of the ship, and then we had layers of beds underneath this, hanging from those chains, right? All the way down, you know.

HENDERSON

You told me about that. You told me you had gotten seasick.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Yeah. I got seasick, and everybody got seasick before we got off the boat. Because they finally couldn't cook hardly because she would rock. So that was the trip on the sea. I think I told you about how I would see planes go out, and see a few of them come back.

HENDERSON

No, you didn't tell me that.

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah. Well, that's how most of the time you determine what kind of condition [there was] on the front. What's happening on the front. They would send out dozens of planes, and if you don't see a dozen come back, you know they got cut down in battle. Many times when they came back somebody was on there seriously sick. They would send out flares to help. So it's an emergency landing, and people would be ready to take care of them. But I had noticed that every so often planes would go out and they wouldn't all come back. I said, "Gee whiz, what happened to those planes?" I knew something was happening to them. So then, that's when we realized that there was a battle going on before they landed.

HENDERSON

Now, these planes were coming off like an aircraft carrier?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. There wasn't anyplace for them to land. It was an aircraft carrier they were coming off.

HENDERSON

So you guys had hit the beach and found a clear spot. What comes next?

BANKHEAD

Anyway, we found a bivouac area, and we bivouacked. I'll never forget. They told us not to drink any water. No water because it's a warm place and there's a lot of typhoid fever and also malaria and whatever. So the only water you could drink— If it rained you might catch some in your helmet. At that time, we didn't have any water to take baths, or anything like that. A lot of times we bathed in our helmets. Just take the water in the helmet, take whatever bath you took. It's just some water in your helmet, you know. Then we had canteens of water for our drinking. Not drink the water that was in the immediate area. We always carried water. So we dispersed out and finally— I'm trying to remember now. After we left there— Well, the main thing— Our objective there was to carry ammunition supplies to the front line, and we had to set up depots of ammunition. What would happen, the ammunition was taken off the ship and then the half-track or whatever would bring it out. My job was to identify the ammunition and then put it different places. When they bring the ammunition in, they need to know where to put it. Because at that time we didn't have any lights. We did not have light, because if we did, then the enemy would catch you. So they had real small lights. What happened, I would have to label the ammunition, and when they would bring it in, they'd know where to put the ammunition since the labels were on them. That was one of my chief jobs where I was on the front, always.

HENDERSON

This ammunition is live?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Live. And because the truck guy— The thing that picked it up was a half-track. It was half tractor and half, you know, almost like a tank. They would pick the stuff up and would carry it out to the tanks. They were protected, had armament, the tanks. Because they were the last thing behind the tanks. So they would have the half-tracks. The trucks wouldn't do it, because the trucks would get mired down. See, so it was the next thing to a tank. When they would come and pick the ammunition up, I'd come and bring the ammunition.

My group and I were there to have the truck directed to where it's supposed to pick it up. That would be at night. I don't remember ever in the daytime doing too much of that, because the enemy would see you. Know what I mean? So most of the time, if I can remember, it was at night.

HENDERSON

It was at night. Did they cover the ammunition with tarpaulins or with camouflage nets?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. They camouflaged it. Yeah, they always try to camouflage. Whatever color that was on the ground or whatever, they would try to match that because of the enemy seeing. All the vehicles were camouflaged. And we, too, were camouflaged. Camouflaged clothes.

HENDERSON

Okay. Did you meet any of the actual combat soldiers or fighters or any of the—?

BANKHEAD

You mean the enemy's?

HENDERSON

Well, the enemy— I was going to ask that question next. Did you meet any American combat soldiers?

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah. I saw American combat soldiers, because we were right behind the front lines.

HENDERSON

Right behind the front lines? So you had contact with them?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. We had contact with them. What we did, we supplied the people who supplied the front. We followed the front. We were an ammunition company. That was our purpose.

HENDERSON

But now, did you ever feel in danger? Did you ever feel like you were going to—? Did you feel like the enemy could easily break through and get to you?

BANKHEAD

Well, there were times, yeah. At times we thought so.

HENDERSON

And did you ever see any actual enemy soldiers?

BANKHEAD

No. Visually, no. I know they were there, because they bombed us and killed part of our company and all that kind of stuff. We would be moving in places where they just left, and they would always tell us not to get in a foxhole that they leave. You know what a foxhole is?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Dig out a place for you to shoot from.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, to shoot from and hide, too. Most the time I would always carry my pack, and I would always be ready to dig wherever they landed. But most of them would not dig. Just "Let's get that." So I'll never forget. I had dug a hole. Well, let me explain this to you. What would happen sometimes, we would take tactics that would surprise the enemy. We'd maybe move a lot at night. Maybe two or three o'clock, the company'd call and tell us, "Let's move out." We'd move out, and we'd move around mountains and terrain that would be almost impossible for you to go direct. So we would go by night and go around. I remember one night we rode all night going around the mountain. The next morning they realized we were there—

HENDERSON

Oh, the Germans did?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. That we were there. So they started bombing us. They were going out to get the truck that carried food for the company—would have to go out to places where they had the food and pick it up and come back. So they bombed our truck and killed some of them. They didn't just bomb you— They'd bomb you and then strafe you. The plane would just go over and drop the bomb, and then they'd double back with the bullets. You could hear the bullets hitting all in the leaves: "Shiu—shiu—shiu— shiu—shiu—shiu!" You know, like that. You're hoping that none would hit you. That's when you're supposed to be in your foxhole.

HENDERSON

But now, in between being bombed and the plane coming back around to strafe you, would you have to dig a hole that quickly?

BANKHEAD

No. You wouldn't be able to dig a hole that quick. No. Whenever you land, you're supposed to dig a hole—when you land. You have to do whatever's necessary to protect yourself at all times. We had those shovels on there with our pack. So everywhere I stopped, I started digging a hole.

HENDERSON

Okay. So you were wise.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I was digging a hole all the time, first thing I would do. And they would be smoking and talking and act like soldiers. I'll never forget the— We called them Jerry— That's what we called the German pilots— Jerry. They called them Jerry. I had dug my hole, and then Jerry came over and dropped a bomb. We knew it was coming back, strafing, so everybody was running. They were all trying to get in my hole. [laughter] They'd beat you to your hole and get in your hole, man. Then you couldn't get in. You had to fight them out. "This is my hole." But you just stayed close. So I got in my hole. They just stuck their head down on me, you know, about three or four of them. They had their heads sticking down in my hole.

HENDERSON

Now, where is the rest of their body?

BANKHEAD

Up in— Out.

HENDERSON

You mean, all they could get into the hole was their head?

BANKHEAD

Was their head. That's all they could get in the hole was their head. Some of them couldn't get that in there, because they didn't know where the hole was. They were just running. Many times we ran and got under bridges and whatever we got. I remember that day. They had the whole company, including the captain. By the way, we had a captain named Captain Snellgrow. I was thinking about him, trying to remember his name.

HENDERSON

Captain what?

BANKHEAD

Snellgrow. However you want to spell it. He's from the South. But anyway, we all got under the bridge that morning. Part of us got under the bridge. And what happened, I got out of my hole and ran. There's a bridge down there. We all got under the bridge, as many as we could. See, that was good protection. So then, after this was over, the captain told us to get ready and get out of there. Because if you're anyplace and they know you're there and you're too open to fire, you're not supposed to stay there. Because you're in danger and not going to achieve anything. The only thing you're going to do is just let them know where you are. So you have to move. Otherwise, they just bomb you to death. So we moved from that area. I never saw the captain. I don't know what happened to him. But sometimes when the things get thick, those guys will thin out.

HENDERSON

What do you mean "thin out"?

BANKHEAD

You won't see them for maybe two, three weeks or a month. That's true.  
That's one thing I liked about—

HENDERSON

Well, now, wait. These guys couldn't escape into the countryside.

BANKHEAD

Who? The captain and all?

HENDERSON

You're saying guys would disappear for two or three weeks.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I mean, some of the officers would disappear. They would disappear. Because I guess there was a order, I mean, or whatever, that you were supposed to protect the people who were the key people. I assume that when things became critical, they would disappear because of— For what reason, I don't know. Mainly, I think, to save themselves.

HENDERSON

Oh, okay. I've got you now.

BANKHEAD

But now, that's one of the things I liked about General [George S. ] Patton. He was in the thick of it all the time. He didn't—

HENDERSON

Did you ever meet Patton?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I met Patton. I think I told you about it.

HENDERSON

I don't remember. Was he just like his image in the movies?

BANKHEAD

Somewhat.



HENDERSON

He had pearl-handled guns and was kind of tough?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, he's a tough guy. You remember him slapping that—

HENDERSON

No, I just remember that from the movie.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, well he slapped the guy, because the guy had been in battle and had been wounded or something. He was visiting the hospital out where the war— And a guy started crying. He didn't like it that the guy was crying. He knew the guy was hurt. You're not suppose to cry. If you're hurt, take it. I understand he slapped him. I don't know it for a fact, but he slapped him because everybody was talking about it. Everybody was angry. They thought it was horrible enough to be hurt, but then to have somebody slap you on top of that, they thought it was real bad.

HENDERSON

Patton was trying to get him motivated.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, Patton was trying to make him into a soldier. If you're hurt, just hurt, still stand up and fight some more. Don't lie down and whine like a woman, [laughter] So he didn't like that.

HENDERSON

Did you meet any of the Moroccan people?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Sure. I met quite a few Moroccan people. We used to go to the show on evenings, and we would see the Moroccan men, the Moroccan women. We met quite a few. Moroccans lived in huts, you know, straw huts. A lot of them didn't live in houses.

HENDERSON

Oh, I didn't know that.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. A lot of them didn't live in houses. A lot of the guys would go in the huts and all that kind of thing. I never did. I could never—

HENDERSON

You never visited any of them.

BANKHEAD

I saw them, you know, but I never— Some guys would go in there and live in there. But I didn't. They had the cattle sometimes in the hut with them. The little wooden— Little straw houses or whatever makeshift they could afford. Then they had a section in Morocco named Medima, known as Medima.

HENDERSON

Is this a town? Or this is what?

BANKHEAD

That's a little town out from Morocco. That's where there were the most primitive people I have seen in my life. The streets were very narrow and dirty. You've heard people talking about squatters? They had squatted all their life, and they'd sit down there like chickens. And their feet would be just like chicken feet. You know what I mean? I know they could stand up, but the way they looked— They were real short, small people. I didn't visit that place much, because I didn't like the sight. It was just horrible.

## **1.7. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE DECEMBER 29, 1989**

BANKHEAD

You could tell from Paul [R. ] Williams's work and the type of business he did that he didn't have the freedom that the white was having. And it was more so when [Cory] Jenkins come along. Because it was a little more liberal. Consequently, he got in with the state and did a lot of state buildings and—

HENDERSON

Libraries and schools.

BANKHEAD

Libraries and things. Schools. Maybe private residences, as Paul did. Paul did Frank Sinatra's and a lot of the people who—

HENDERSON

Yes. Movie stars as his clients.

BANKHEAD

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Okay, are you ready to get started?

BANKHEAD

Now, where did we stop before? [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON

Okay, I'm looking at my notes. You had talked about General [George S. ] Patton. You had met General Patton. And you were outside of Medima, a town in Morocco.

BANKHEAD

The kind of condition they were living in.

HENDERSON

Yeah, the conditions were kind of bad.

BANKHEAD

Right. Now, I assume that we would start with the movement from Casablanca on out. There's different sides of my career in the army. There's a social side, and there's a— I don't know how you would say it. There's a side which is the social side, right? How I socialized with the people of any particular area. And also there's a side which is what I was there for.

HENDERSON

Your duties.

BANKHEAD

My duties.

HENDERSON

Let's talk about the social side. I think the duty side would be more interesting to an armament historian. So let's talk about the social side.

BANKHEAD

Well, the other day when I was telling you about the bivouac area and all this kind of thing, I think I would like to put this in it. My duty in the company was— Anytime we moved into an area, as I told you before, I had to lay out the place where they pick up the ammunition. In the area where we were bivouacking, we had to set up a area— When we weren't at the battle front, we had to set up a area and make it as comfortable as we could while we were there. We had to make that as near like home as we could. Now, I'm going to set up an area. We put up the latrines and put up a place for the kitchen. We had to be mindful of which way the wind was blowing because the water was running and all that. We had to be sure the wind didn't carry the latrine smell from the what-you-call-it into the food area. All of those things we set up so that the water from the latrine area would not drain into the area where they were eating. Because it rained a lot there, and it got real sloppy and messy and mud and all that kind of stuff. So that my duty was to try to watch out for that. As soon as we landed in a spot that we were going to take a rest, I would tend to make everything as near like home— I kept improving, improving. We'd move in some kind of pup tents. Pup tents is where two people were in a tent and slept in a tent on the ground. We'd stay in there for a while. Then, to make it better, we would get the big tent where about four people— Sometimes eight people live in a big tent. It's like a tarpaulin. It covered sort of like a house. Sometimes we'd get to the point of where we'd eventually put floors in it—wooden floors—instead of sleeping on the ground, because of the dampness. We put a wooden floor in it, and that would be still more like a home. And then, eventually, if we got wood, I would put a wall around the thing, have a place like a door. It just had a canopy top on it. See, that was more like a home. You'd have a rail and things in there where you could hang your clothes up and things like that. But in a pup tent you could never hang anything. The other type of tent, you wouldn't hang anything because that

thing came all the way down to the ground. But eventually when we put— We wouldn't have anything but a tarpaulin. You have a rail around there. You hang different things. You even get to the point where you can hang pictures—your girlfriend's pictures and all this kind of thing. So it became more homey.

HENDERSON

Now, how long would it take for the bivouac area to evolve into this finished tent situation? Like a week or two weeks?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. It depended upon several things. Now, we would only be in a place maybe three months for a rest period. You had to do that within that scope. You may be there longer. It depended upon how fluid the battle is and what the needs are. If they needed you, they would call right in the middle of anything. Sometimes we were just getting ready— We haven't set up good yet, and we were just getting down. Then they would call, and we'd have to go move in. Sometimes we'd be in danger. We'd have to move from that spot to another spot. And sometimes we'd just leave. But the idea where we were bivouacking was— This made it crucial. You have to do what you could as quickly as you could do it. Then, before I'd go, they'd have me destroy it. You know, it looked like they'd be able to leave these places for people to live in or do something because they didn't have any places to live in. But we'd have to destroy it and burn the stuff and then run out and get ready to go to another place.

HENDERSON

You mean you'd never repack all these tents?

BANKHEAD

Oh, the tents we would pack and the top. But the wood part and all that stuff—

HENDERSON

That would be burned. Like the floor—

BANKHEAD

Yeah, the floor and everything that's wood. We would try to destroy everything and leave it clean. Because, it would be— In some cases, if people would leave something they'd just leave it a mess. And the order was that you leave a place cleaner or better than you found it. That was one of my responsibilities. Get there and get it set up. And then, when it's time to leave, have it arranged that it be clean.

HENDERSON

Now, burning the place down, would you clean up the ashes after you burned the place down?

BANKHEAD

Oh, no, no. You don't clean up the ashes. No, you put the stuff in a pile and then just set the fire and burn it. Someone would stay till it was out. Then, if you're bivouacking somewhere else, you have to hustle to the next space. Most times you leave there and you may be on the run. You're moving. So that was a continuation. I want to mention this— In the process of moving up behind the front— Now, I had a guy who drove a jeep. Because I was kind of a technical person and had to be the first one into the places— The people weren't used to black people.

HENDERSON

The Moroccans or the American soldiers?

BANKHEAD

American soldiers were used to black people, but I'm talking about the people where we moved from place to place. This is more or less in the Italian arena of Italian influence. They hadn't seen black people. The propaganda from Mussolini was that blacks were this or black were that—blacks had tails. Blacks did all hectic things. They would cook you and eat you. People were afraid. So they gave me a person who was real light-skinned. He's just like white. His name was Rush. I'll never forget his name. Most the time, he drove. So as we were moving up to the front behind the tanks at different— It's a lot of noise and dust and everything. You'd have to have on your face mask, and you have to have on all the paraphernalia. You know, you had about three different hats on. So behind those tanks, it was so dusty and everything, every

now and again you'd take a breather and kind of rest. Relax, you know. So we pulled up to a point and I— The idea was wherever we are in any part of any arenas over there, we'd try to make friends with the people. Give them different things: candy, cigarettes. Throwing out candy to the kids and everything. That was a good way to win the hearts of the people. If the children like you, it's hard to be indifferent. So we were pulling up one day to the front. Man, it was hot and humid and everything. Everybody was taking off the masks and taking off the hats and everything. They had on all that heavy wear. Because it's hot. You wear heavy stuff when it's hot so you can get damp and get cool. So what happened, I pulled off my hat and I pulled off my mask and goggles— There were about thirty people there, and when I pulled that off and they looked at me they just flew!

HENDERSON

They ran!

BANKHEAD

Ran, man! They ran. Everybody but one man. They ran like everything. Nobody knew what they were running for. I didn't know, either. The white soldiers and the black were together there at that particular time, and everybody said, "What's wrong? What's wrong?" So the guy who had lived in Brooklyn, he knew what it was. He said, "They're running from you." They were scared of blacks. Man, they just flew! Men and women, they ran just like chickens. I felt awful when the guy told me they were running from me. He was laughing. You know, he's white. He knew about segregation and all that kind of thing.

HENDERSON

But he had lived in Brooklyn for a while and knew—

BANKHEAD

Yeah, he knew about all the things like that. But he was an Italian, and he also was there in that particular town. So he was talking to us. Because he could speak English and everything. But the populace could not. So he would interpret and tell everything. The minute everybody started pulling this thing off and they saw I was black, they took off. They took off. That was an incident. Now I'm jumping from that incident to another incident which had

the same significant effect. When we moved into an area and wanted to set up to make things homelike, they would have located all the things that were necessary to home living, like wells or springs or food. Anything like that. Someone had checked that out, and they would know where most of these things— They would know where sawmills were—anything pertaining to that. So what happened, we moved into an area, and I was getting ready to set up a bivouac area. On the boats we would have big huge pieces of lumber that were used between bombs and ammunition, so as the ship rocked these metals would not be against metal.

HENDERSON

The bombs would not touch each other.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. They had those big 500-pound bombs, and they had to have them chained. The wood served as a cushion between— It was better than metal, because metal would have been against metal, and maybe [cause] some explosion. But something like wood, it would give and it's soft packing. So that was a thing that they used to ship all that stuff. Even boxes and things—they would use that because of the ability to give. But they would bolt that all together tight, see, and the wood would give and still be tight. But you can't do that with metal. You can't get it so tight. So what happened, they had a stockpile of wood that came off the ship, and they would put it in different places where one could get it and take it and use it. Now, they had many things like that. They had food dumps that looked like a town. You never saw so much food! Piled up high, food. You'd have to take things and lift it off. Like they do lumber here and like they do boxes and things. Cranes and things to lift it and stack it. Some of it had pallets so it wouldn't be damaged. Some of it got damaged. Some of it just wasted. But anyway, in order to get this stuff, you have to have a requisition. A requisition means that you write up something stating what you want and more or less what you'll be using it for. You had to give an account of it. Because the black market is a racket over in those countries. Not only would the black market exist for the people of those places, then the soldiers would take and sell it. [laughter] Some of the guys who had the depots and things like that, they would— You know, the black market was just flourishing. But anyway, so we have to have a requisition to



write up. That was one of the roles that I played in the battalion. Very few people could draw, and very few people could read blueprints. I don't know anybody else in my battalion who could read blueprints. So that gave me a freedom that I always liked the whole time I was in the army. It kind of made me independent, even though I had a lot of repercussions because of that, because I acted independent. I acted independent because of how I was reared. I thought a person was a person. If you said this or said that, it didn't matter to me if it was a officer or not. But I didn't know that they would check you for it. Some of the guys would come to me and I'd say different things, and then they went back to the officers to see whether I'd take it back. I wouldn't take it back. I would just call an ace an ace, a spade a spade. So man, that was tough on me. And I didn't know it. I was just a GI, just got in there.

HENDERSON

Wait. Now, these guys were trying to test you to see if you were a stool pigeon?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. They didn't like me, because I would be about them just like I was about anybody else. I would just tell them what I want to tell them and that's it. I wouldn't agree with them unless I thought I was right. So what happened, I'd made the requisition up for the lumber that we needed in order to do the building. So there were sawmills— In the village they had sawmills. And this place is Dechemo.

HENDERSON

The name of this town was what?

BANKHEAD

Dechemo. D-E-C-H-E-M-O, or something like that. It's in the southern part, out from Naples.

HENDERSON

Oh, so you were in Italy now.

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah.

HENDERSON

I thought we were still in Morocco.

BANKHEAD

Oh, no.

HENDERSON

That's all right. Keep going.

BANKHEAD

I'll tell you how we got to this point. I wanted to relate different events to an event. This is a racial thing, of color. I wanted to capture that kind of—

HENDERSON

Okay, so we're not going in a strict time line.

BANKHEAD

So it's in Dechemo, and the captain and I— The captain knew where the place was. They had a sawmill, and the sawmill was in the back of a yard. Now, it was different— The streets in those places were where all the sewage and everything— The streets were made like this, and they were made out of cobblestone.

HENDERSON

So there was a ditch in the middle.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, in the middle.

HENDERSON

The streets sloped down to the center, and there was a little ditch there.

BANKHEAD

Right. There weren't any vehicles. There were oxcarts and all that kind of stuff. There were big walls around— In the civilized places, a big wall— Have you heard of the Walls of Jericho and things like that? Well, that still exists there. A

huge wall. The walls are made of mud and straw bricks. The wall would maybe be two and three feet thick because of the height. It's got to be sixteen feet high. If it rained a lot, you could see it had been worn down, but they tried to cap them off with straw. In many cases, they found tin and terra cotta to cap them off and protect it from the water. Wherever the gates were, they had a huge gate, and the gates were cut from logs. There weren't any saws. They cut the logs and hewed the logs to something about that thick.

HENDERSON

That's about six inches.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, six inches. Some of them thicker than that. Maybe the thing would be sixteen feet long, a thing like that. They put this together, and that became the gate. And they would get huge arms or huge pieces of metal as a hinge. The hinge would be that long. Maybe that thick. And would have huge bolts in them. The hinge and the bolts would be kind of decorative.

HENDERSON

In a pattern? Cut in a decorative pattern?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. A decorative pattern. Some of the hinges would curve up this way and curve up that way. You find the effects of it in architecture in a lot of homes, English Tudor and things like that. But the origin of it was from those. These metals, they were— They were done by a blacksmith. They were made, you know. In the wall they would have a big thing coming out and sticking up like that. That's the thing it would turn on.

HENDERSON

Like a hinge.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, but it's not like a door hinge. It's like one big knob sitting up there, and then the thing would fold around it and turn. It's not like the hinge that we have there. So what happened— That's where the guy had the— That's why the people might be considered protected. They have those huge walls. All the

way down the side of the street were walls, and people lived behind those walls. And some places you think there's— You go down the street and it would be so stinky and so nasty you'd almost hold your breath. But then when you enter the wall, then you'd see the cleanest places. And some places, you'd see some bad places. So what happened in this case, the guy had a sawmill. The sawmill was in the guy's backyard. When you enter that, you enter something like a country setting.

HENDERSON

A courtyard?

BANKHEAD

Kind of a courtyard. His sawmill was in part of his courtyard, and his house was over there. And he had a little winery where they made wine. All that was kind of a complete thing for living. So what happened, we went in that gate. In order to get in that gate you have to have a certain knock, because you wouldn't get in there unless they knew your knock. That's a little wall that protects them, see. They had a certain knock. A knock would indicate that you were a friend or you knew somebody. So then they'd come and have a peephole. They'd peep out and look at you. Then they'd let you in. So in this case, the captain and I were in the jeep. We went in, and they knew we were coming. They had about ten in the family. They were all standing out looking. The son and two daughters and there on down. They opened the gate and we got in, and they saw me and just ran. Whew, man, they all ran. They ran and went in the house and pulled the curtains down. They pulled the curtains down, and so they said that if they can't see me, I can't get them.

HENDERSON

[laughter] Okay. I've never been through that. Goodness.

BANKHEAD

They ran in the house, closed the door, and then they had a— It was two story, and I could see the curtains coming down.

HENDERSON

At the second floor.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, the second floor. Closing down so I couldn't get them. Because they were still under the same impression as these people that ran from me. They were the second group that's running. So the captain, he couldn't understand why they were running.

HENDERSON

Now, this captain is white?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. He couldn't understand why they were running. He said, "What's wrong? What's wrong?" I mean, the question was whether or not he was going to get what he wanted done. So he asked me why they were running. I was laughing all the time, because it had occurred before and I knew what it was. But he didn't, so I told him. He said, "Why are they running?" I said, "They're running from me!" He was a psychologist, too, to a great degree. But it had never dawned on him about the background of Mussolini and all of this stuff and how the people had been indoctrinated to be scared of Africans. But then what happened— It was the funny part about it— He looked up at me as if to say— He looked at me, and he said— As if he says to himself, "I don't blame them." He started laughing to himself, and he couldn't stop laughing. Every time he looked at me he started laughing. So the guy kind of got to me, you know. But people don't see certain things in you until other people make them recognize them. Now, he'd been around me all of the year. But he had never recognized maybe how peculiar I might look. And what he saw— He kept on laughing— He was thinking that, "Suppose I never knew who he was. I would be laughing, too." That's what he said. And he said, "I'm laughing as it is, just to see blacks act like they act." Because it's funny to him as it is. I knew he thought that. So what he did, he laughed. So the man that ran finally came back. He tried to talk to the man, but neither one of us could speak Italian worth a nickel. And they couldn't speak English, so this was a time. So he told them that— They thought I was African. He told them I wasn't African, and he showed them my dress. I was dressed just like them. They wanted to know why did I have on an American uniform? If I told them that I was an American, they didn't believe I was American. They don't believe you're an American, man. It took them a long time. Some of them never did believe you were

American. Because they said Americans were whites. They didn't know anything about— All the black people they knew were in Africa. So they would catch my hand and rub it to see if they could get that dirt off. They wanted to know why was my hand bianco. Bianco is white. And the black is— Let's see, what do you call it? Black is "nero" or something.

HENDERSON

"Negro" or something like that.

BANKHEAD

Negro or something. But anyway, they would just rub your hand and want to know why this doesn't come off. They told them that we were dirty, and they associated all that black with dirtiness. That was another incident. I don't know whether you would consider that racial or what. But it was just ignorance. So what happened, that same family— I was doing the drawings and telling his father and his son how to cut some material in order to make boards out of it. They never ever had anybody to draw something. They tell you how to do it and then you do it and you come up with a board.

HENDERSON

What? They'd never made boards?

BANKHEAD

No. Not like that. Not from a drawing. Now, you can tell a person. They had their way, but as far as drawing's concerned and telling you how many— "Do this, and do this, and do this, and do this, and do this." And then they'd do it, and it would come out like it did? They thought I was somebody sent from God, almost, because they didn't know anything about that. You had to go to school. Most of them didn't go to school. Sometimes the life span would be thirty years for that area. And the distance they would go their whole life may be thirty miles. So they were real, real— But the other thing about it, Catholicism had spread throughout that whole— Everywhere I went in that area was Catholic, Catholic, Catholic. So much so that any other denomination was not thought of. One of the orders that we had when we entered those places was that if we found any church other than Catholic, that we must pay

strict attention and make sure that we patronized the other churches. Make sure we patronized other churches.

HENDERSON

What was the reason for that particular order? Patronizing other churches?

BANKHEAD

To balance out, see. To help them become more democratic. Because in many parts of the world the churches are still courts. South America and Brazil and all those places. Catholicism is, you know— Whew, man, you don't know how much power the Catholic church does have. You can tell by how they've got [Antonio Manuel] Noriega over there now. He's in the Catholic— But the Catholics had a strong— And they believed whatever Catholics say. That was the thing that was utmost and I appreciated most. The people were real— They hadn't been tainted with Western— Another culture. They just were that. When they found that you were truthful and had some character, you became— Nothing can explain how you felt and how they made you feel. The Americans are afraid to care for one another or really let their feelings be heard, to some extent. Because if you act like they were like, you'd be hurt. The Americans don't know what really feeling is as far as being free to love or whatnot.

HENDERSON

What you're just saying now was in a newspaper article I read last night.

BANKHEAD

Oh, it was?

HENDERSON

Yes, that—

BANKHEAD

Now, we're getting this on tape?

HENDERSON

Let's pause here. [tape recorder off]

BANKHEAD

I built a German stockade.

HENDERSON

You didn't tell me that.

BANKHEAD

After the war was over in Europe, everybody was getting ready to carry everything to the Pacific. So they had stockpiled a lot of ammunition out of Naples, because that was one of the biggest depots there. So we used these German soldiers to move ammunition. Because what they do whenever they capture anybody, they let them do the labor work and whatever. The Italian [prisoners of war] did some of it and then the Germans in prison. They're the ones that did all the— When they were captured, you let them do all that stuff. So the German prisoners were coming in, and I had to prepare the stockade. It took me quite a while to prepare that stockade. They were coming in, and I had been told how to treat them. Because there were about three or four thousand German prisoners [of war]. I built a stockade not too far from the ammunition place where they were going to work. The stockade was a barbed-wire fence about twelve feet tall, and we had lookout towers around different points so you could see. They were real afraid of the Germans. They still were looking for that secret weapon that the Nazis had. They weren't sure, even after thing had been— The war was over, but they was thinking that Hitler still had a secret weapon somewhere. They were still afraid.

HENDERSON

Now, the Americans were still afraid?

BANKHEAD

Yeah! Sure they were afraid. So what happened, I built a stockade with American soldiers. This was in the lower part of a valley. The soil there, if you would travel any length of time, it would become so soft until— You've seen mud that comes up to the axle of the wagon? Well, this is just soft powder-like stuff, and it would come all the way up— You would walk in a hole and it may come up over your head almost. It looked level and everything, but you just didn't know. You had to be careful. So what happened, thought— I would take



days off. You have your day off, day on, day off. So I had two or three soldiers with me—several guys under me. While we were in the camp, there, when I— When they came in, they told me to have a— I had an automatic weapon. I had a tommy gun. I had everything you could ever have. A pistol— They told me to make them say "Yes" and make them to do all these kind of things.

HENDERSON

What, obey you?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, obey me as if I were Hitler. Because they were used to that kind of thing. Unless you did that, they might try to turn on you. Now, the whole time we were there, there were never white men who ever entered that compound. Never. The nearest they got into the compound was they would bring water on the outside and dump it into the storage tank we had for water. They never did come into that place. So while I was there— Well, let me tell you first— I'm getting ahead of myself. The day that they brought the men I was off. That night all the material that we had to put up bivouac areas and put up the place for them to eat and the place for them to eat, mainly— Not for sleep. A place for them to eat and a place for the latrines. See, health purposes always came first. Food and a place for the distribution of the waste. They were the ultimate things of health. So we had lumber. At that time we had shipped lumber from Russia. All the lumber from Russia was this fine lumber. Now, let me see, what was the name of it? It was just loads of it from Russia. Big planks. They would haul it out there for us to make what we wanted to make out of it. We had a lot of gravel and sand and everything to make concrete for this, that, and the other. The night that they brought them in, that day I was off. And the next morning they had taken all that stuff. Because the soil, you don't know about the soil. The soil was fluffy and soft, and you had to dig out a place to lie down. If you just lay down anywhere, you'd be cover up with that mess. So they had taken the shovels and things and dug out places sometimes two feet deep. Mounds of dirt, mounds of that powdered stuff, would be this place and that place, because there wasn't anyplace that they could really put the stuff down. So then they would take it out, and some of them would take the planks, and they'd chop up the planks, and put them on top of it. The next morning I didn't have anything to work with at all. All that pile of stuff that

they had had that night, they took all that stuff and hauled it away. You know, everybody's looking out for themselves. So next morning I got there. When they brought them in, they had selected an English- speaking person out of every battalion, every platoon. They had it set up so that morning when I went in, they would approach me. We were supposed to set up a dialogue and tell how we're going to act, do what we're going to do. So I came in. The thing we were planning to do was to have them build their own dining room and things like this.

HENDERSON

You were going to make the prisoners do their own work?

BANKHEAD

They're going to do their own work. So when I came, there wasn't anything to work with. I was at a loss how to do that. So what happened— All the first sergeants or the sergeants of the— The spokesmen for the group. They all came in. There's about ten of them. I started talking to them about the stuff that they'd taken. They all kind of spoke English. Some of them had been to the United States, knew all about the United States. They laughed because I'm black and I'm coming there to tell them what to do. It was just pure lunacy for me to be coming there telling them what to do. They laughed. So I said, "You've gotta bring this stuff back." They laughed and told me about the little rocks and things. The spokesman said, "We're gonna bring all that stuff back? What are you gonna do with it?" I said, "We'll do what you were supposed to do in the first place." They started cracking jokes kind of at me. I was at a loss. I was mad, you know, because I knew the guy was looking at me because I was a black and a Negro, and they were laughing on purpose. So then I said, "You've got to obey. You've got to obey." So one of them said to me, "How in the world can—? There's three thousand men here. You'd have to go around and tell all of them to 'Do this and do that and do that. Break up that thing. Pick up these rocks here. Pick up this wood here and bring it back and put it in a pile. ' I can't do that.'" So I said, "You can't?" So then I thought about how you handle soldiers. I said, "Discipline." I said, "Discipline." Now, the young soldiers were interested in what I was going to say, but they didn't have knowledge enough to keep quiet about the things that would give the information that I needed. So I said, "Discipline." In Germany, the soldiers back

there, the young soldiers, knew what discipline meant. They started hissing about "Discipline, discipline, discipline, discipline." I said, "Oh, I kind of hit on a note." I said, "I understand that the German army was the most disciplined army in the world." That's what I told them. I said, "I understand that Germany had the finest army and the most disciplined army in the world." I said, "Excluding none." The young ones, man, they listened to that and they said, "Discipline. Discipline." I said, "If you say you can't do that, how in the hell did Hitler have you all doing what you're doing?" I said, "How many men was Hitler?" Then when I said that, the younger guys—the guys who were more reasonable and didn't give a damn one way or another, they just wanted to get out—they started laughing at their own people. And I pushed it. I didn't let it settle. I said, "I understand one man, the Führer— What about the Führer? What happened to him? What happened to Mussolini?" I said, "What happened?" Man, you could hear a pin. Then they started to scatter, and some of them started going back. The ones that were the Nazis, they were the ones who listened to that and were defeated. They were the ones who were affected the most. You could tell them because they were just peeping a look. Stealing a look. But the young guys who came in there didn't know anything else. They were the ones who were good people. The most enjoyable time I had in the whole army was with German prisoners. The Germans, they were disciplined, and they were respectable. When they found out that you were for them, they would do anything for you. They would do anything for you. I played Ping-Pong with them and everything. And they found out— They told me—

HENDERSON

Wait. You could go into the compound at any time?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I could go into the compound. We were supposed to associate with them and try to get them to become more democratized and used to our— We weren't supposed to be mean or anything like that. We were supposed to do whatever necessary to bring them back, into the fold, so to speak, even though they're prisoners. We were supposed to associate with them sometimes. But some of the people didn't want you to do anything with them but wanted to kill them. So they asked me what was I doing with all those

guns. You know, I set the tommy gun beside the thing there, and I'd be leaning up beside there and the gun would be sitting out. Now, I had guys who were supposed to be guarding me—about five people with tommy guns and everything. But they wouldn't— Black guys, they wouldn't. They just don't want to. Some of them would go to sleep or something. They'd been doing something late last night and they're setting over there sleeping with the gun. All that mess. But anyway, they [the prisoners] would laugh and say, "We don't want to kill you." That's what they told me. "We don't want to kill you. If we wanted to kill you, we could have killed you a long time ago." I said, "I know you don't want to kill me. I'm your friend, you know that. Do you think that I would set my gun over there and let that guy over there be sleeping and this guy over here doing whatever—? Do you think that I would do what I'm doing with you if I didn't know? You're my friend. I'm your friend. I'm here to do whatever's best for you. I want to go home. You want to go home. Let's get together and do the thing. Let's all of us go home." The younger ones, man, they liked me so well. Before I left, I got all of that stuff back in place and everything. I was surprised. Man, that pile of that stacked stuff got growing. All that day it was coming back.

HENDERSON

All this wood? Everything?

BANKHEAD

All that wood and all those rocks. It's coming back. They were getting the stones. I was telling them, "Pick it up, rock for rock." And they were out there picking up rocks by hand, putting them on something and bringing them back. All the whole camp. I felt like Goliath or somebody.

## **1.8. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO DECEMBER 29, 1989**

BANKHEAD

The last thing I did before I came back to the United States was with those prisoners. As they built the camp up and everything, I would go back over there and play Ping-Pong with them. One soldier was a millionaire. His father was a millionaire. He owned, probably across the border of Poland and the next country, next to Poland— They're probably across that border. He was an

engineer. He had a book that he had carried all the way through service, and I had a book that I had carried all the way through service. And I told him about a book I had carried all through service—an architecture book [Banister F. Fletcher, *A History of Architecture*]. He said, "I've got a book." He ran—just left. We were talking, and he left and went to his bunk and came out and showed me his book that he had carried all the way through the service. We two were just like— You can't imagine how we felt.

HENDERSON

Brotherhood of professions.

BANKHEAD

Yeah! There's no way to express how I felt about this guy, and how he felt about me. He hugged me and everything. I told him I was going to leave. Man, they just— I didn't want to leave them, boy. I didn't want to leave them. Because I had never felt that good. The feeling that I had over there I never had before and in America you can never have. Because everybody is afraid to trust one another to that extent. You'd be surprised, but it's true. But anyway, I left them that day, and I don't think I knew that I was— I didn't get to tell them goodbye. But there's another incident that occurred while they were in that prison. The ammunition dump got hot, and it started exploding.

HENDERSON

What? Exploding?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Exploding. Those big 500-pound bombs. They were a certain distance apart, and they had dirt pushed up around them. But then after they were lying there so long, the detonation and things became rotten and overexposed. One concussion from one big bomb can set off a thousand bombs. Just a shaking! That's what was occurring. One day that thing started blowing up and for miles you couldn't get near it. We had to leave our camp and everything. They thought the Germans had— They thought it was the secret weapon. [laughter] That's what they thought it was! Man, you talking about afraid. Whew! I couldn't be that afraid of anything. They thought of that secret weapon, because they kept wondering what the secret— Mainly, the

generals and things knew differently, but the mass of the soldiers that I know, and some of the officers, they were still in doubt about what's going to happen to that secret weapon. Because they thought it was something like a— You know, I don't know what the secret weapon is.

HENDERSON

Now, had people heard of the atomic bomb by this time?

BANKHEAD

No, they hadn't dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, because we were getting ready to go over [to the Pacific theater]. They were getting ready to go over there, and they wanted to send me. After all my years over there, about four years over there, I hadn't ever been home. Out of the whole company, everybody had been home but me. And the captain said— In other words, I knew how to protect myself. I didn't have to go out in the mud and all those kind of things, because I was a technician and I handled men. He could see this. He said I could protect myself. So when he was checking us out and examining us and giving us all kinds of tests to go to the Pacific, he told the people who were testing, "Oh, he's fine." He was talking about how fine a condition. They said, "Oh, he's in fine condition. Eyes are good, and this is good, " and I had a good psychological— They knew better than I knew. This Captain Snellgrow, he never did make anything but captain out of all that effort.

HENDERSON

What do you mean, "he never did make anything"?

BANKHEAD

He was a captain when he came to our unit, and he was a captain when I went home,

HENDERSON

Okay. So he never got promoted.

BANKHEAD

Nope. Never did. He was a small guy. He was hardly five feet, but he always growled to kind of make up for it. He was a psychologist. That's why they—

You know. He was indifferent to— Not indifferent with us. He was indifferent to anybody else. Man, he was cocky and crowy. He would rear back—

HENDERSON

He was what?

BANKHEAD

A cock will fight. And a rooster, he's the one that struts around and crows. Ooowww! The little rooster, he crows loudest. You know. So that's my definition. I say "crowy, " but that's just me.

HENDERSON

Okay. I'd never heard that.

BANKHEAD

Me either. It just came out. Crowy. [laughter] But anyway, then I left, and we boarded the ship. When I boarded the ship, aboard the ship were the Japanese[-American soldiers] who were in Germany and who had been badly mauled. Badly mauled. And as we were on our way back—

HENDERSON

Which port were you leaving from?

BANKHEAD

I don't know what the port was. It was the port there in southern Italy somewhere. Naples, I guess. But anyway, we had to come by a French place in the sea and pick up iron ore to give us ballast in the bottom of the ship. Because it was a small ship. Iron ore we picked up from someplace in the middle of the—

HENDERSON

Azores?

BANKHEAD

Azores. Yeah. That's what it was.

HENDERSON

Okay. That's a Portuguese place, though.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. So we picked up iron ore there to give us some ballast in the ship. And they didn't— Our beds were things that were— The ballast was going to be blown in the bottom. Our beds were the next thing above that. So they didn't close that out at all. They just took that iron ore and just dumped it all, and there wasn't anything to keep it from going out in our beds. Just dumped it in there, and it was in there that thick. Just in all the beds.

HENDERSON

That stuff itches, doesn't it?

BANKHEAD

I don't know. But everything we had was just covered with that old red ore. Because it just blew through there, and it was just blowing wherever it wanted to. So what they had to do— They should have made a chute so it could come through and not get out into the— But that's what it did. It just came right through there, and we had iron ore all over. It took us days to get that stuff out. Sweeping it and messing around with it. Sleeping in some of it, you know. Some of us couldn't get back to where we just cleaned the place out. We'd sleep on the floor until we got it somewhat clean. Then after that, all the guys were mad. Man! So what they did, after they thought we were on the way and the thing had settled down, and we got quiet and maybe we got over our anger spell— They'd always have a band play music or telling jokes or something to liven the soldiers up throughout the whole time. But then they've got to keep that up. Some kind of amusement thing like that. Joke telling and wrestling and boxing. All kinds of amusement. So what happened, we had a piano in there, and they had all kinds of instruments. The guys got mad because they did that, so they dumped all the piano and everything in the hold with the coal. [laughter] Dumped all the entertainment equipment— the bandstand, the drums, the horns and everything.

HENDERSON

That's self-destructive, isn't it? [laughter] I guess they weren't thinking.

BANKHEAD



What do you mean, "weren't thinking"? They were thinking, because they were getting back at the authorities. Because the authorities would come down and listen to that music, too.

HENDERSON

Oh, okay.

BANKHEAD

They'd have certain acts they'd be doing, and everybody'd come. The captain and all would come, listen, and see you clown around and all that kind of stuff. Amusement, you know. So when they came down to—

HENDERSON

To see the show?

BANKHEAD

There wasn't any equipment there.

HENDERSON

[laughter] Well, now, what did the men do to get entertainment?

BANKHEAD

They didn't care.

HENDERSON

They didn't care?

BANKHEAD

They somewhat got their revenge, so they didn't care.

## **1.9. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE JANUARY 12, 1990**

BANKHEAD

I think last time we said we would get back to the United States.

HENDERSON

Yes. You were in the army coming back, and you had stopped at the Azores.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, we stopped at the Azores, and they got all that—

HENDERSON

Iron ore.

BANKHEAD

Iron ore in our bunks. On our way back— I guess I'll tell it— Am I too detailed as to what I do in comparison with the rest of the guys?

HENDERSON

Well, you have been a little detailed in sort of the preliminary areas. I want to get into more detail when we get to the architecture areas. But actually, I'm not worried about that. I mean, the UCLA secretaries will keep typing whatever words you say.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I know. But I was thinking about how I compare with other interviews you make—whether or not I was lagging or whether or not I was too detailish.

HENDERSON

We're a little behind, but I'm not worried about that. If we can, I'd like to wrap up today the army experience, and I'd like to get to Los Angeles as soon as possible.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Well, we're right at Los Angeles now, because when I got out of the army I came to Los Angeles. Now we're going to talk about the trip home. We were talking about the [Azores]. Now, while we were on our way— See, I was a barber all the time when I was in the army. That wasn't my what-you-call-it, but they needed barbers, so I made some money cutting hair and things like that.

HENDERSON

Money on the side?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, on the side. While I was on the ship, everybody wanted to look nice when they got to the border. I was the only one on there who could cut hair. I was cutting hair until the sea got so rough we had to stop. Then I was standing on my feet all the time, and I was on my feet quite a bit most of the war. While I was on my way back, I stood up too much and I had hemorrhoids. I developed hemorrhoids while I was in the army. When I got back, I had to go in for an operation, because I stood on my feet too long. Because two things were occurring. Because the ship was so rough— You didn't eat properly, and standing on your feet, too— Everybody had a mess of them. But anyway, now, when I entered the port—

HENDERSON

Now, which port? This is New York?

BANKHEAD

This is in Virginia.

HENDERSON

Oh, Virginia, okay. You came straight back to Virginia.

BANKHEAD

Straight back to Virginia. Let me see, what's the name of that port? It's in Virginia. It's the big seaport there that everything—

HENDERSON

Norfolk navy base?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I think it's Norfolk. There's a big navy base. But anyway—

HENDERSON

This is right at the entrance to the [Chesapeake] Bay.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. We came in. I don't remember the name of the ship we were on, but it was a light ship. That's why we had to put in iron ore, in order to maintain the central— You know.

HENDERSON

It was ballast. They put in iron ore for ballast.

BANKHEAD

Ballast, yeah.

HENDERSON

For balance.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, for balance. We saw several ships out there stranded, and we couldn't help them at all because we were almost stranded ourselves. And we just kept going. They were giving a signal. You know, they give a distress signal. The ship that's in trouble, they give a distress signal. But we couldn't stop because our ship was so small, and we were almost at the same point that they were— same condition. So we kept moving. Because we didn't know whether we were going to get out either. So we succeeded. But when I got to the port— I had been away in these countries a long time—about four years—and I didn't realize I had changed. When the ship got up to the dock, I looked down, and I— Somehow or another I had been used to seeing people all together. [tape recorder off] I looked down, and I saw the signs of segregation. All the group of blacks was over by themselves, and everybody else— The rest of them were by themselves. But I hadn't— I looked, and I said, "Gee, what is this?" I'd been used to seeing people all together, but these were all by themselves. That was one thing that struck my attention. I realized that I'm back here. That was really a blow. But now, the other thing was, when we were getting off the ship, we all had two duffel bags, big bags, you know. Many of the things that I collected during my whole stay in the army were in one bag, and I had got my clothing in the other. As we landed, there was somebody that picked up- All the soldiers had people come on the ship and pick their bags up, and any of them who had relatives or somebody met them there and took their bag and brought them off with them. They were coming off together, you know what I mean? I didn't have anybody. So I was struggling with two bags, plus the fact that my hemorrhoids were— So we got out. Then the other big blow was they had a ceremony when you got off to welcome you home. They had a little place for you to march through and you would get— And you would

become— You were greeted, you know. I'm the only one that had two bags, because I was the only black. There wasn't anything there instead but whites and some Japanese. They had something for the Japanese—the ones that were wounded. They were carrying their things. But I had mine. I was dragging two bags. They had a little turngate that you go through. The girls there would greet you, hug you, and kiss you.

HENDERSON

These were white girls, I guess?

BANKHEAD

White girls. As you come in. Before I got to it, they started turning their back.

HENDERSON

Oh, goodness.

BANKHEAD

I came through that, and they didn't— I don't know whether they even spoke. I will give them that credit, that maybe they spoke or maybe smiled. But the rest of them, they were kissing each one of them. One on one side, one on the other. There was maybe three or four of them. They all welcomed them home, you know. Nobody touched me, and I dragged them bags on through those gates. It was really humiliating. You know, it was humiliating and made me want to go back to where I came from. So from there on we went, and then we had lunch. I'll never forget that. While we were eating lunch, and waiting for lunch, there were some German prisoners [of war] that came here. They were working for the Americans. They started laughing at me and somebody else. They were snickering and laughing. I said, "Now, these guys over here, they're prisoners of the war. We just got through fighting them. Here they're here in America, and they're laughing at us. Laughing at me." I didn't like that. When we got off the ship and we were going to loading in the bus, I forgot that you couldn't sit in the front of the bus. I just got on with those bags. I dropped into the seat almost right behind the driver. There was a lieutenant on there—a second lieutenant—who told me I couldn't sit there. I said, "What do you mean I can't sit there?" He said, "You've gotta sit in the back of the bus." Boy, I was— That was a— I'll never forget. So the white guys

who were on there, who had been with me, they said, "Why does he have to sit in the back of the bus?" He didn't say— They didn't say anything at first. I think the driver was the person that spoke to me about it. So then the soldiers, they took it up. They said, "Why does he have to sit in the back of the bus?" They started raising sin, saying, "What the hell are you talking about? He's been over there fighting with us and over there dying and helping us and everything. Now he's gonna have to sit in the back of the bus?" They were raising sin, you know. So I went on to the back of the bus, because I didn't want to be a part of it. The ones in the front of the bus said, "Well, if he's sitting in back, we're gonna sit in the back." See, the back of the bus is for us, and the whites sit in the front. They all came to the back of the bus right with me and left him in front. [laughter] So that made me feel good. But they were mad, man. They would have torn that bus up. They started talking to the guy in charge—the lieutenant. The only way the lieutenant eased them— They were going to tear that place up, man. They said, "Well, listen. We're gonna do something about this." They said something to that effect. The lieutenant said, "It ain't me." He said, "I'm just put here in charge of this, carrying out orders." He just kind of threw his hands up and showed them that it wasn't him. So then they backed off. But they said, "Well, we're gonna sit in the back." They sat in the back with me until we got off. I'll never forget that. So after we ate, then we stayed that night. I was sick all that night. So next morning I went to check at the doctor.

HENDERSON

This is still on base?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, still on base. They told me they had to operate on me right away—said that I was in bad condition. You know, my hemorrhoids had to come out and everything. They told me to bring my bags and put them in [storage] so I could get ready for the operation. I thought maybe they might have somebody there to help me bring those bags, knowing the condition I was in. But they didn't have anybody bring the bags. Man, I dragged those two bags and put them there, and then I went on in and got ready for the operation. That's when they stole all my stuff. They stole all the stuff that I'd saved throughout my whole European time—the whole period. They stole all that stuff. My Eisenhower

jacket—they stole everything. So when I got through the operation and got out of the hospital and went to pick my stuff up, they had stripped me completely. After I got out of the hospital, I went down and told them I'd like to come home. Because the whole time I was overseas, everybody from the company came home but me. Because the captain said the role which I was playing was a light role. See, because I wasn't lifting all that stuff. And I was healthy. I never was sick. A lot of them had to go to the hospital because they got pneumonia. They exposed themselves. But I never did do that. So I was in pretty good condition. But when I— Now, where was I?

HENDERSON

You had just gotten out of the hospital. You were trying to get home.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I came home. When I came home, I said, "Now, I'm not gonna— I've come home. I haven't been here." I decided I wanted to take some time off. I didn't know that I was supposed to get out at a certain time, a certain period. They wanted me to re-up, you know, but I didn't want to.

HENDERSON

To reenlist?

BANKHEAD

To reenlist, see. They would make me this and make me that, but I didn't want none of that. In the hospital that I was in, it was mainly a kind of recuperating hospital. It was mainly for the guys who were going in service, not the ones that were coming out. I just happened to be one of the old guys that were coming out of the service and was placed in the hospital. All the guys that were in there were the ones that had been hurt training. Some of them didn't know anything about the stuff. They were worried, upset. It was just a bunch of young people. They had several wards. I was in there. So what happened, they had a nurse—daytime nurse, night nurse—and they had a doctor over each ward. The doctor I had was a black doctor, and the nurse was black.

HENDERSON

Oh! Were all the patients in that ward black?

BANKHEAD

No, some white and black in there. I might mention this, too, because it was good. When I was overseas, we had a briefing to go home. They briefed us on what to do and what to expect and what not to expect. They briefed us that "When you go home, don't jump right out of the army and leave everything that you've got. Get everything you can on record pertaining to what happened during your stay. Because you don't recognize it, but you may have something wrong with you you'll never recognize until later. You'd better get something now, because psychologically you've been affected. You don't know it, and you don't think it. You're in such a big hurry to get out. You better be—" He was real—

HENDERSON

Who was giving this briefing?

BANKHEAD

This is before. The officer before we left. Something like a psychologist.

HENDERSON

Oh, okay. Now, this was not on the ship. This was on the base?

BANKHEAD

No, this was before we left the—

HENDERSON

Before you left Europe?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, before we left Europe.

HENDERSON

This was a psychologist that was assigned to do this? Or was this like a general or an officer?

BANKHEAD



Well, regardless, he was a psychologist. He was warning us to be careful. "Just because you want to get out of the army, don't jump up and give up all your rights and whatnot." He said, "Anything that happened to you, make sure it gets on your record. See, you think nothing happened to you, but something happened to everybody that's been overseas, over here for this length of time. You're not the same." I just laughed, because I thought I was, you know. But I found out later that I wasn't. What I wanted to mention, the contrast between that and when I got in the hospital— See, when I got in the hospital the idea was to see how many people you could get out of the army. They had this black doctor, and he was trying to get me out. All the troops that were in the army for a certain time, they were supposed to get out at a certain time or else re-up. But I didn't know that. Four years was the maximum, I think. So what happened'— This guy— They had a record of how quick you can get them out. I was supposed to take treatments—sitz baths—because of swelling. My whole body was strained, you know, because of that standing. I was told to take the sitz baths. Do you know, the whole time I was in there I was never given a sitz bath? They never remembered. So what happened, the guy would come through every morning, and on the foot of your bed you would have your nameplate and everything. He'd look at it and then maybe write something on it. But in the meantime, the nurse would be with him and they'd write things on the chart. So what happened, they would just look at me, kind of look at me, and he'd keep going. He would hardly say anything. Hardly speak, you know. So I got tired of all the attention he was paying to the other guys. They were whining and going on. They were hurt and everything. So I decided that— I knew they weren't treating me right. I decided that— And the nurse, she would come on. Then she would leave and go down to the other wards and visit and mess around and she'd have somebody to check at her desk and let her know if anything went on. In other words, she'd put somebody else in her place, and she's supposed to be there. One night I said, "Well, I'm gonna check and see what in the world they've got on my record." See, because the guy that she'd leave there to check, he wouldn't be in there any more than she would. The thing just was open. The door was standing ajar. [laughter] I went in there and had a look. They had on there that they had been giving me treatments every day, and they hadn't put their hand on me! Man, I couldn't sleep the rest of that night! I wanted to kill somebody. And the time was almost drawing for me to get out of there. The next morning

I was lying there with my eyes halfway closed, and I couldn't keep them closed. I was waiting for that moment so I could explode! He came by my bed that morning and looked at it, then passed on by. And I said— I didn't call him by an officer's name. I said, "Wait. I'd like to see my record." He acted like he didn't hear me. Well, the thing was you're supposed to speak to him in the fashion that you speak—

HENDERSON

Address him as an officer?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, as an officer. And I just addressed him like I thought he was, you know. Because I was mad, man. He finally turned around and said, "Soldier! I'm an officer and so-and-so and so-and-so." The nurse was shocked that I would say something. I said, "What the hell! You say you're who?" I said, "Wait a minute. I want to see my record." So they said, "You can't see the record. Don't talk to me like that." I said, "I'm not a soldier. I'm an officer, too." Because I was a noncommissioned officer. I said, "I'm an officer, too." So he said something. I said, "You see it on my—?" He saw I was an officer. He didn't address me as sergeant. He called me soldier. So I called him right back. So what happened—I told him, I said, "I want to see my record." I said, "I'll walk right down. I can walk right out of here." I knew the colonel, because the colonel was the one who had let me go home. He was talking about how long I'd been there. He looked at my record, and I had nothing on there. He said, "Well, you're more than— You mean to tell me they didn't let you go home?" I said, "No." And he said, "Yeah, you can go home." So he sent me home. When I came back, I was going to stay a while and kind of relax just for a while. Everybody else had been in the hospital and spent all that time, and I had never been in the hospital—never been anyplace to do anything. I said, "I'm gonna stay in here." But I didn't know that they had a limit on it. So then I told this guy that. When they got finished, he told me he wanted to see me in the office. I said, "Okay." His office was right across the hall from the nurse's office. So when they got through, we went in his office. He said, "Now, what is it?" Because I'd raised sin, and he didn't want me to do it before all the other recruits.

HENDERSON

He didn't want you to make this scene in front of all the other patients.

BANKHEAD

I made a scene, man. When I went in his place, he said, "What is it you want me to do?" I explained to him what the officer told us before I left overseas. I told him, "Now, this was a white officer." I said, "Now, you're black, and you are supposed to be looking out for your own people as well." I said, "Here I have been here this length of time and you've got all this record here showing you did this and you did that. You haven't done any of that." I said, "I don't understand." Man, I gave him hell. He said, "The nurse was responsible for it." I said, "No, no. Don't tell me the nurse was responsible." I said, "You and her, neither one, just nothing!" I just told them. I had told him what the other guy said. So he said, "What do you want me to do? What do you want me to put down on the record?" You know. After I told him what the other officer said, he said, "What do you want me to put down on the record?" I said, "Well, I don't know. You put down whatever it is so that I can get a pension." Because now I had just had an operation. The way it was going, he wasn't going to show that on the record, hardly. I said, "You put down—" So one of the things he put down— He looked at me and examined me. On my leg there were scars on there where I got hit when I was on the farm. He put that I had shrapnel wounds on my leg. [laughter] I didn't know he even put that there. But I told him to put whatever down. I said, "I've got an operation, and I've been through all this hell here, and you're gonna ship me out of here with nothing." I told him, I said, "You're less than—" You know. I won't tell you all I said to him. [laughter] But I could afford it right in that room. But anyway, that's what happened with that. Now we'll go to the next—

HENDERSON

I was going to try to move you on to get back home.

BANKHEAD

That's what I'm saying. I think the last thing I want to talk about is that. When I got out of the hospital, I mean I got out of the army, it was twelve o'clock. The clock was striking twelve. I was supposed to get out at that deadline. They had to get me out before twelve o'clock. I didn't know that at that time. So they gave me all of my wraps and things—gave me two bags of stuff. And there was

none of the stuff in there—that I didn't know—none of the stuff was in there that I had. I took those bags home. When I got out of the army, then I came home. I brought all my stuff and came home. So that's the limit of my period until I got out of service.

HENDERSON

Do you remember what date you got out?

BANKHEAD

Oh, it was December 31, 1945. The clock was striking twelve o'clock. [laughter] Just between 1945 and 1946. They had to have me out of there before twelve o'clock. That was the time I was getting out, that time of night.

HENDERSON

This was midnight.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, midnight. I didn't know at that time that we had to be out. But they were racing to see how many people they could put out. Each officer who— You know, how quick do you get— In other words, he was turning you out, getting rid of you. They wanted to see how fast they can get rid of you.

HENDERSON

Was there a little ceremony in putting you out of the army? Did they have to read anything to you or just declare to you that you're out?

BANKHEAD

I think that they said something. I think they did have some kind of period, but I don't remember that. But anyway, I remember that I got out, and so I came home. Now, that's another period. That's my civilian life starting all over. So when I came home, I went back to the place that I had lived before. I was getting myself— I wasn't settled, but—

HENDERSON

This was in Spartanburg [South Carolina]?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. I went back there. I started living there. The place I worked, the barbershop and everything, I hadn't decided exactly what's what. My brother was out here in California, and he had told me when I was in Italy in '45, I think, '45 or '44, how warm it was here. I had planned to go to South America. I didn't plan to come back to America at all.

HENDERSON

South America? Why? How did that come about? I mean, how did you even get the idea to go to South America?

BANKHEAD

Well, this will take me back to my days in the army, if I want to—

HENDERSON

Okay, let's keep going forward.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, okay. I would like to tell— I would like to put that in, but it would take me back.

HENDERSON

[laughter] Okay.

BANKHEAD

I began to appreciate the Brazilians. That's why I wanted to go to Brazil.

HENDERSON

Brazil, okay.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, that's why I wanted to go to Brazil. Because they were impressed— I was impressed by— They were impressed by me. They were connected to our camp for food and everything, because they didn't have food. They would come over on Sundays and see me doing whatever I would do. I would never be going around like other people. I'd be always doing something. Making something. Designing something. All that kind of stuff, drawing plans. They were so excited about that, and they just carried on. Maybe thirty of them

came over to get rations. Everybody else would be gone, and I'd be there. They'd come and talk to me. They said if I went to Brazil, I'd be this and I'd be that.

HENDERSON

Oh, okay. That's where they came from.

BANKHEAD

They made me feel like I never felt before and never since. That's why I was so impressed about the Brazilians. I wanted to go to Brazil. I want to take my family there. But anyway, after my brother talked to me and told me how warm it was here, then I said, "Gee whiz, that's what I want, a warm climate." Because the time when he was writing me, I was in Palermo, Sicily. And it was so warm there. It was warm at Christmas. I remember, at Christmas people— You know, it was warm! Gee whiz, he was telling me about how California was the same way. So when I got home, I wanted to come. He came home, and we walked around and talked. We were making a decision whether we were going to buy property there or we were going to go to California—stay in California. So we made a decision. Our father [John Hayes Bankhead] had sold everything that we had—all the farm equipment and all the farms and everything. He sold everything and moved and bought some lots there in town. We still have the lots. But he had all the money and stuff, and he had all the equipment. He built a little shed or something. All that stuff had been damaged and everything—my mother [Pearl Askew Bankhead]'s picture and everything. So that was kind of a bad scene. Then I decided to come to California. I told my wife-to-be [Mary E. Wright] that I was coming to California to see what it was like. I didn't know whether or not we would— What I would do. So I told her I was coming out here, and I was going to go to school. She said, "Nope, nope." She said, "I've been waiting all this time." But I didn't know all that time that she'd been waiting. I was surprised to hear that she'd been waiting.

HENDERSON

I thought you two maybe had been writing each other?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, we'd been writing, but we didn't say anything about marrying or anything like that. But her attitude was such that that's what made me feel like it, without saying anything. She wrote so regularly. But anyway, I came to California. All my brothers were out here, and they all had been to barber school. The two of them were working. So I went to barber school. I was going to find out whether I could do certain things that would maintain me here. I went to barber school, and I got my master license, and I started working. That's one thing I knew I could do. I could stay here. But the other thing I did, I drew a set of plans. We bought a house.

HENDERSON

When you say "we"—?

BANKHEAD

My brothers and I, four brothers. We bought a house together, because we were paying a whole lot of money for what-you-call-it. I said, "We could buy a house for five thousand dollars." I said, "If we don't stay here but one year, look how much money we'd save." They were paying sixty dollars a week or something and didn't have anyplace to eat or anything.

HENDERSON

Was this in South Central [Los Angeles], off of Central Avenue?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. So I said, "If we stay here, we won't—" We didn't have anyplace to stay, for sure. Staying here and staying there and staying— You know, I just wasn't used to that. Being in the army, riff-raffing and lying in this place— I didn't want any more of that stuff. So we bought the home. I bought all the furniture and everything and furnished it all while I was not working. Then I drew a plan and carried it downtown, and I got a permit. I wasn't thinking about building anything, but I just wanted to see whether or not I had another trade that I could make some money. I got that permit, and I said, [claps] "I'm gonna stay in California!" [laughter] "I'm going to stay in California!" I knew that then.

HENDERSON

This was just a drawing for a speculative building?

BANKHEAD

No, this was an addition to the building we bought. I had to do that, because they couldn't do it on somebody else's property.

HENDERSON

Where was this house that you guys bought?

BANKHEAD

3721 Halldale Avenue. That's just off of— Between Western [Avenue] and Normandie [Avenue]. It's right up the street there. So we all bought that house together—four brothers. It had three or four bedrooms.

HENDERSON

That's unusual cooperation between brothers.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, it was. We bought it together. I talked to my brothers, and I asked them didn't we think we were going to stay? They said, "Yeah." They were waiting for my decision. I said, "We can stay here." That made the decision to stay. So I told my wife. We had agreed to get married before I left. She told me, "I don't want to stay out here a year or go to school or anything like that." So we agreed to get married, I think, in August. But anyway, we got married. I went back there. My father got sick, and I had to go back to see about him. So while I was back there, I just told him and my sister [Sally E. Bankhead]— she was back there. She's a teacher. So I told both of them then I could not be going three thousand miles back- and-forth, back-and-forth. I had hardly started to work. My funds and everything—I bought the home and bought the furniture and everything—were being exhausted. So I didn't want to do that. I told you about my father beating me out here. I think I told you about that.

HENDERSON

Not exactly.

BANKHEAD



Well, what happened— My father— I don't know whether this should be on record or not. My sister and brothers probably wouldn't like this. Or at least my brothers.

HENDERSON

Okay, we can skip that, then.

BANKHEAD

But anyway, my father got angry because all the children seemed to follow me. That came from after my mother died, the lack of closeness. Because they were close to me all the way. They would do whatever I said to them. He found out that we weren't going to come back. He wanted us to buy a place at home and make a homestead there and leave him in it. See, we knew that back in Carolina he just sold all the stuff that we had, and we didn't know where the money went. We weren't about to do anything like that. So when he found out that we had made the decision to stay here, he took all the money that he had made [when he] sold everything, and he went to go with his people up in Norfolk or somewhere up that way. They found out he had the money, and they beat him out of that money some kind of way. I don't know how many thousand dollars it was. Then when he found that they'd beat him out of the money, then he got sick psychologically. He just went off. Somehow or other they got him back there and put him in a hospital. Then they sent for me to come there. That's when I told my sister and my father. I brought him some money. He didn't have any money. I brought him some money. So I told him, "Now, I'm giving you a ticket. I'm gonna give you a ticket." I was trying to get things in order. So I told him, "If you're going to California— Do you want to go to California?" He said, "Yeah." So he took the ticket. I didn't know he was going that quick. A day or two after I gave him that ticket, he got lost in New Orleans. He was coming to California. He was going to make sure that we weren't going to leave him anymore. He's going to die with us! [laughter] [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON

Your father was coming out to California and got lost in New Orleans.

BANKHEAD

So then I said, "Gee whiz, I've got to go down there and try to get him." But then, before I could get set to go down there, they wired me from here that he was here. He got here and was in our home. [laughter] Then that's what created a problem.

HENDERSON

[laughter] Goodness! This was a train ticket? This was how he was traveling, on the train?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. While I was there I got married. My sister and we all packed up and came to California. I came to California, and we had the house. So we all were living in the house. We didn't last long, because one of my brothers had taken all the money from pay sent home and had spent it, too, and didn't save any of it. So that's all my brother had—all his allotment. Then they were feuding and fussing. He didn't stay with us long. But he thought he could take all the property that we had, because it's California law here that if you buy property— It's the people who buy it, you know.

HENDERSON

Wait, what do you mean?

BANKHEAD

He thought because he was the father, anything we got he could have some share in it or he could have something to do with it. But that wasn't the case, see? So he got mad about that. But anyway, the thing that I want to get to is now, at that time, after I got married and everything and I got out here, I realized that Paul [R. ] Williams lived one block from me. He lived on Thirty-sixth Street, and I lived on Thirty-seventh Street.

HENDERSON

Had you heard of Paul Williams before you got to—?

BANKHEAD

I had thought about Paul Williams when I was back in high school.

HENDERSON

Really?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, and in college. He was the only black architect I'd heard about. I'd heard a lot of stuff and seen his picture. I wanted to see him, but I had no dream that I'd ever be living one street below him. That's why I wanted to take my GI [Bill] training out here. See, when you got out here and you wanted to take training, they wanted to know— We had four years of GI training. So they want to know what you want to take. Now, if you took something that lasted one year, then you didn't get any more of that money. That was it, unless you had another related thing that you could go ahead and take. And 90 percent of the black boys, they got one year of training and all that other stuff went back to the federal government and other people got that share of the money.

HENDERSON

Got a full four years of the money.

BANKHEAD

Four years of money, yeah. But I'd been warned, before I left overseas, about the same thing. I didn't take barbering because— They wanted me to take barbering because I had a background in barbering. They wanted me to take barbering because then you don't cost the government that much. But I didn't want to take that. Now, here's where the big— Now, this is my education starting out in California. This is the important part. They did not recognize any portion of my education.

HENDERSON

Wait. What do you mean?

BANKHEAD

The college I graduated from.

HENDERSON

You had told me you had a counselor here, a veterans' counselor.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, but this was before the veterans' counselor. So what happened—

HENDERSON

When you said they didn't recognize any of your education, you mean like the architecture board here?

BANKHEAD

No, no. Not the board. The school here.

HENDERSON

Okay, you were trying to go to a school.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I was trying to get into architecture school.

HENDERSON

At USC [University of Southern California]?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. And they didn't— My school [Voorhees College] was not recognized by the state. Nothing I had taken back there was recognized. I had to take examinations for everything that I attempted to do here and prove myself.

HENDERSON

California didn't recognize Voorhees at all?

BANKHEAD

No. And they still don't. Oh, they might now. Because it's a four-year college now. It wasn't accredited, even though my whole career in the army was based on what I learned at the school. That's why they took me out and put me in this thing before. But anyway, with the background that I had throughout the army, four years in that technical field, they could hardly object to me taking what I wanted. But 'SC [USC] and the other places, they said, "No, no, no. You start back to high school." Something like that, you know. So while I was waiting, I was going to every school I could find that said anything about architecture. I went to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] Extension for one or two years. I went to Otis Art [Institute] a year. I

don't know where else I went. You know, anything that said architecture, I'd be in it.

HENDERSON

But now you were not using up your veteran's benefits to go there?

BANKHEAD

No, no, I wasn't.

HENDERSON

You were very careful to keep that separate.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I was. Well, they hadn't approved it yet.

HENDERSON

You were just paying for this education out of your pocket?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I was paying. For Otis Art, I paid out of my pocket, but this other didn't cost— It cost a little something. You know, extension courses, we're talking about. But anyway, in the meantime I was taking tests. They were giving me tests to see what— So when the school turned me down, I went to the VA— Veterans Administra-tion. They said, "We're gonna give you a test, and if you pass the test, the school can't say anything about it, they have to—" The government said, "That's it."

HENDERSON

They should admit you.

BANKHEAD

So when I took the test, I started taking the test, and they seemed to be in doubt anyway, about— I don't know whether it's being black or what, you know. I didn't care about that. I was going to take the test. So I took the test. I took the test so many times. The last guy who gave me the test said, "Golly! We have never had anybody make this high on this, score this high on the test!" He said, "There's no way in the world—" He wanted to know why I

scored that high. I said, "If you had taken that test as many times as I took it, you'd score high, too!" [laughter] I knew that test like the back of my hand. I knew what they were looking for. Because as they had given the test, I began to analyze and take books and find out about this type of test.

HENDERSON

Now, what were they looking for?

BANKHEAD

They were looking for dexterity about the fingers, was one of the important things. The other thing was whether or not you could work alone. Whether you could sustain yourself in the absence of a lot of bologna. They would ask you about, "How do you like to play football? How do you like to be a cheerleader? How do you like to take care of the baby?" Those are extremes. If you can take care of babies at night, you've got to be somebody who can derive from that and sustain that for any length of time.

HENDERSON

Okay, so this is like an aptitude test.

BANKHEAD

Yeah! Yeah, absolutely.

HENDERSON

Finding out which job you were suited for.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Right. The dexterity and your aptitude. And I scored high. The last time, they just said, "There's no way in the world we could turn you down." That's what this last guy said. "Nobody made this high on this test. We've got to grant it." So I said, "Oh, good." So that's how I got into architecture here. I started to go into— I didn't know whether to go to 'SC or go to— I started going to [Los Angeles] City College. Now, what I was doing, I said, "I'm gonna take the hard courses that I have never taken." I'd take calculus, and I'd take some courses I hadn't taken. I'd taken algebra, and I'd taken some of the things. So I said, "I'm gonna take something different." I was taking the history of architecture.

## **1.10. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO JANUARY 12, 1990**

HENDERSON

You were telling me you wanted to take hard courses, calculus and algebra.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. And I started off pretty good.

HENDERSON

Which school now are you going to? This is City College?

BANKHEAD

City College, yeah. I had a counselor from the government because they were paying for it.

HENDERSON

Okay, veterans' counselor.

BANKHEAD

Veterans' counselor. I was doing bad, you know. I started off pretty good, but then I was doing bad. He thought from the test I made— What happened? So I went on. He checked me next time, and he wanted to find out what I was doing outside of school. He made an analysis of what had happened when I got out of the service. When we met the next time, he said, "You know one thing? You're committing suicide." I said, "What do you mean, I'm committing suicide?" He said, "You know what you're trying to do? Nobody can do what you're trying to do." What I was doing, I was barbering maybe half the night because that's the way I was supporting my family, [laughter] I hadn't got on the GI Bill yet good. And I was going to school, and I don't know, but—

HENDERSON

And you were married.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. The first thing was, I'd just gotten out of the army, and I hadn't been out a year. He said, "The adjustment from the army back to civilian life, most people can't cut it. A lot of people can never get straight." That was one thing I

was trying to overcome. And he said, "Then you get married!" He said, "Most people can't handle that! You've got those two things together!" And he said, "You come from a southern state where there was segregation, and here you're here where it's all white, and you haven't been used to that. That's another problem." He put his finger right on the nail there. Because everything I could think about was how people wanted to be— In that time, they wouldn't sit next to you. They would not sit next to you.

HENDERSON

You mean the other white students would not sit next to you in the classroom?

BANKHEAD

Right. No, in the classroom. I had an experience— At night they'd have a screen—have a show, pictures on a screen—and the thing would be dark. Students would come in. Somebody would come in, and they wouldn't know who they were sitting beside. As soon as that light came on and they found out they were sitting beside somebody black, you'd come back to sit back down and there wouldn't be anybody close to you three or four seats from you on each side. You know, that kind of thing. But you see, it was bad both ways. I thought every white person was segregated, didn't want to be near me. They enforced it by doing what they were doing. So he told me that. There were four things he told me: getting married, coming out of the army, then coming from a southern state to California—those were just what he said. "It's impossible. And you had an operation and all that kind of stuff." He said, "I'll tell you what you do." All the GIs that were graduating and were getting schooling, they were going to a school where you didn't have to compete with the regular students. That's what they were doing. They hardly had any students, any graduates from the army—I mean, people in the army—just go right and jump back into regular school. They had Trade-Tech [Los Angeles Trade- Technical College]. Now, that was a school. He recommended that I go to Trade-Tech.

HENDERSON

L. A. Trade-Tech?

BANKHEAD



Yeah, so I went over to Trade-Tech, and they had a class— Everyone in there was GI. I think even one lady was GI, and the only black guy in there was the guy who was the champion of the Southern California heavyweight boxing. He had just been defeated, and they had recommended that he go to school and take up something other than boxing. He and I were the only two blacks in there. So what happened, he stayed there about a month. He said, "This ain't for me." He autographed his book and gave it to me. I still have it. I've got it here. I don't know where it is now.

HENDERSON

Were you studying architecture at L. A. Trade- Tech?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. In order to get into Trade-Tech, you had to take an examination also. But he told me, "You have to take the examination down there." So they gave me the exam. I had to do some drawing, had to also take a kind of dexterity test and answer a lot of questions. But after that stuff getting past the government, that was stuff that was nothing. But the drawing and things like that— They had us to do several types of rendering, mainly lead and ink and some drawing. I was drawing, and then I looked over and saw what all the people near me were drawing. I said, "My God, I can do this!" My drawing was— I've still got it somewhere. It looked almost natural, because I enjoyed it. I looked at what they had. So when I did that drawing, they said, "Gee, that's nice." I got a hundred on it—passed right on in, see. That's how I started taking that. I stayed there. Everybody that was there taking it was out and gone long before I was, because at that time they needed draftsmen. You'd take it, and you'd earn a living by drafting. Somebody would employ you right away, you know. But I was a black, and I never did get any employment out of that.

HENDERSON

Oh, wait. So what you're saying is that the students that had started the course would find jobs before they finished the course.

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah, long before. No one ever would complete— And I might say this about the segregation there. You know, I was saying about the students— The students at Trade-Tech didn't want to work beside me. They would shift and move about. I'll never forget— But this was at 'SC, after that, though. After I was finished at Trade-Tech, I went to 'SC. I went to 'SC at night. I had finished at Trade-Tech then. But in the meantime, all this time this was going on I had another business. That's my barbering, see. This is what maintained me along with what I was getting. So that's what made me different from them. Because I had to do something else other than what the government was paying me, because it wasn't paying that much. But anyway, that's how I subsisted. So I finished Trade-Tech. There were some students at Trade-Tech that were in the army just like I was. They noted the segregation going on. So there was a group of them who decided that, "We don't care what happens. We're gonna stick by you." Because segregation was still rampant. Some places didn't want you to eat, you know, being the only black. Everybody kind of shied around in the conversation. So these guys said to me, "We're gonna stick by you." That's what they said, "Regardless of what or this— We're gonna stick by you." And they did, see. There were a lot of girls there and everything. When they'd get out and go to lunch they would pair off. Well, there weren't any black girls. There weren't any. Of course, I was married. But the hard part about it was the guys who did a different way in the classroom, instead of being in normal social relations, came to my table and talked like they talked to all those tables— You know, they didn't do that. But there was a group that attempted to do it, and they were looked on as— You know.

HENDERSON

As what?

BANKHEAD

As kind of out. You know, they were looked on as not normal, so to speak.

HENDERSON

So anybody that was talking to you was put into this outsider's group.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. You could tell it. To the extent that they all were came down to— The one would see the other one going out, falling away. They would check, saying, "What are you gonna do?" I heard them make comments like this and that. "What happened to you?" Now, there were two guys in there. One guy was in a wheelchair. The other guy had epilepsy. Those were two guys also from the army. The guy in the wheelchair had had his legs cut off. After a while, nobody would pay him any attention. I was the one pushing his wheelchair all the time. And the one who had epilepsy— They would let everybody out to go to lunch and just leave him sitting up there. He'd bring his lunch, and the guy in the wheelchair would bring his lunch. When they got ready to go out to lunch or go somewhere, I would be the one that would push the guy's wheelchair. So when they detected that I was careful to help the guy with the wheelchair, then the whole group of them started hovering back toward me. They showed they didn't care about me and didn't care about the guy in the wheelchair, either. Then they started to try and help the guy in the wheelchair, and the guy said, "Don't touch it." Because he realized. You know. He said, "No."

HENDERSON

He knew what the deal was.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. He said, "Bankhead's— Take your hand off my chair!" You know what I mean? And the guy with epilepsy was somewhat similar. When my attitude toward them was such, then their attitude changed back towards me. But I knew how far it would go. Because I'll never forget, there were two— They had paired off. So this guy who said that he was going to stick by me said, "We're going out." There were two girls and him and me. He was the last one. Both girls would get on the opposite side of him, and he would be next to me. I'll never forget, the last time— I told him, "Listen, man—" In other words, I was saying to him, "They'll sink you. You know, they'll consider you an outcast." So I told him, "Don't do that. Don't do that." I told him, "We'll sit down and have a chat." He said, "Well—" You know, because he saw that everything else, you know. I didn't want to embarrass the girls, didn't want to embarrass him. So that was the last of that. He left and went to 'SC. See, a lot

of those guys stayed there a while and they found out that UCLA— That wasn't— The credit that they got there wouldn't go to some other school.

HENDERSON

You mean, they'd find out the L. A. Trade-Tech program was unaccredited, and they'd transfer to USC?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right, to some extent. You know, some of them. So some of them just didn't spend the time down there. They just went on to 'SC or some other school directly. This guy was one of them. So finally after about four years, he was at 'SC, and he came in one night, and I was there. He said, "Hey, man! Man, they can't stop you!" He grabbed my hand. Boy, he was so happy. He said, "Bankhead, they can't stop you." He said, "You're in school here?" I said, "Yeah, I'm in school." He was really happily surprised. I was grateful to him for what he tried to do. But I took the courses at Trade-Tech, and I finished. Then after I finished there, I—

HENDERSON

Let me ask this question: L. A. Trade-Tech is a two-year course?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I spent two—

HENDERSON

Okay, so you spent a full two years there.

BANKHEAD

I spent two years there. As a matter of fact, I spent more than two years there. I spent two years there, then I spent an extra year in rendering—watercolor and things like that. I don't know whether the government— Yeah, the government paid for it. Then I started going to USC at night.

HENDERSON

Okay. Now, you had a four-year limit on your education.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right.

HENDERSON

And three of them you had used up at Trade- Tech.

BANKHEAD

Or part of three, anyway. The rest of it I took at— I went over there, and I enlisted up at USC.

HENDERSON

Now, tell me about getting into USC. Was it difficult?

BANKHEAD

No, no. I had no problem at 'SC. I just went over there and told them what I did and where I was and showed them my— You know, they knew I'd been to Trade- Tech. And I registered.

HENDERSON

No problems.

BANKHEAD

No problem there. So I registered, and I went to school there until my GI Bill gave out.

HENDERSON

Which was one year?

BANKHEAD

I think it was more than one year. I think it was maybe one and a half years. But in the meantime, I was drawing plans all the time. I was working with companies all the time when I was going to Trade-Tech. Toward the last at Trade-Tech, I was working quite a bit. And my architectural career— The year I got my first license, I'd been in the architectural field twelve years and they required eight years to get a license. So I'd been—

HENDERSON

Now, when did you get this license? This was the building designer's license?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I think that was in '62, that license.

HENDERSON

Oh. You're talking about the '62 license, okay. I'm thinking that you got a license in the late forties when you first arrived in California.

BANKHEAD

Oh, no. No, I didn't. I was just doing— They didn't require that then. But then they passed a law that if you were drawing you'd have to have a license. That's when they said if you've been in business eight years— In '62, I'd been in my own business for twelve years. [Taking] twelve from '62 will give you what?

HENDERSON

It's 1950.

BANKHEAD

Well, that must be right. Because 1950 is when I was going into business and—

HENDERSON

Let me loop back to something you were saying. You said Paul Williams lived a block away from you. I had asked how you heard of Paul Williams. You said that you heard of him in high school. But when you got to L. A. and you were living on this street, how did you find out that Paul Williams lived only a block away?

BANKHEAD

I met a guy— Now, where did I meet him? He was from Boston. I think I just met him at city hall, and we were talking. We were talking about getting jobs and segregation and things like that. As a matter of fact, his wife was white.

HENDERSON

And he was black?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, he was black. So I mentioned the fact that I had heard of Paul Williams, that Paul Williams lived here. So he said, "Oh, yeah, Paul Williams. I know Paul Williams. I tried to get a job with him." So he's the one who told me where he lived. Because he lived somewhere in the neighborhood, too. Then I attempted to see him, because I wanted to take the GI Bill under him. See, that was before I went to 'SC.

HENDERSON

When you say "take the GI Bill under him, " you mean get in some kind of training program?

BANKHEAD

Training— You could take your training on the GI Bill under somebody licensed. That's what I wanted to do. That was the height of my ambition—to take my training under him. At the same time, I found out that you didn't have to go to school to get an architecture license, see, if you worked under somebody or whatever. If you spent so much time, they gave you a license if you passed. You know that.

HENDERSON

Yeah. If you take the exam. You can take the exam without having gone to school at that time.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. So that's how I knew about it. I tried for a long time to get to talk to him.

HENDERSON

Now, would you go by his house?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I went by his house.

HENDERSON

What I'm trying to explore is that you wanted to talk to him for a long time. You never got to. I'm trying to figure out how he screened people from him. You went by his house. Did the family say, "No, you can't talk to him"?

## BANKHEAD

He had a Chinese house lady. She told me, "No, you can't see him. He's not here." For some reason, you know. So finally I went by there and his daughter was there. She let me in. I told them about how I was interested in architecture. We got to sit down and started talking. He had two daughters and they— I like to talk, anyway, and they liked to hear me talk. We talked and talked, and they said— One of them said, "We're gonna see that Daddy sees you." That's how I got in. So one day they told me to come by there. I went by there, and I was sitting down there talking to them. It might have been both of them. He came down the stairs— I'll never forget—in his house shoes, housecoat, and he peeped at me. He came on down. I was just talking, just like I'm talking. He could tell I knew where I was going and nobody was going to stop me—he or nobody else. He just listened. But he knew because of my color and because of this, that, and the other— And he saw some of my work. He told me he would not employ me. He said, "Because if I had you working in my office, they would have you sharpening pencils and picking up lunch." You know, kind of a flunky. He said, "You wouldn't do that." I said, "Well, you better bet I wouldn't." He said, "I know you wouldn't do that. Anybody with your ambition." He knew how hard I had tried to see him. He knew how I'd worked with his daughters liking me. He saw that he'd better talk to this— I was telling him about my background and things like that. He realized where I'd come from. He said, "Well, I'll tell you what you do. You get yourself a contractor's license and make yourself some money. There's no way in the world anybody can keep you from being wealthy." Something to that effect. I told him, "I don't want to be a contractor." I wanted to tell him about— He wanted to know why. I told him the story about my life in the army and how I'd handled men. That was that whatever country I was in, I had to handle those people, whether they spoke English, some African, some Italian, some German, whatever. Plus our own guys, you know. I didn't want to have to deal with anybody like that again because it was so difficult. That was part of the reason I had my hemorrhoids. Because I had to stand around. I used to build buildings overseas, and I had to try to stand on the roof to try to help the guys work. I'd go on this side of the roof and look and tell them to do something, and go on the other side. Or if I was on the ground on one side, they wouldn't be doing anything on the other side. You know, the GIs, they didn't want to do that. Some of them didn't want to do anything anyway, and the government's



paying them. I had been reared to work and see you get the job done. If somebody assigned me a job, I would see to it that that job got done almost when they said it. The rest of the guys, they wouldn't pay attention to it. There's a period I didn't tell you about in my career overseas, relating to general life. Maybe I won't tell that. Because it was interesting how I was used to being a lone person. I used to go out to all the universities. They all were in high places. I used to be alone and make contact with all the dignified people and how they— Some of the training would let me meet them and meet Italian girls and all these kinds of things. One day the general and everything would meet and talk to Italian girls. He'd have a day set aside when there wasn't any conflict. Nobody would get a chance to talk to the girls but the generals and all the big shots. All the places there that I'd go, because I was an architecture student I liked to go to these cathedrals. Most of the time they were high.

HENDERSON

Up on a mountain?

BANKHEAD

Up on mountains, and I'd always go up there. I'd also be by myself and carry my lunch and everything and take a day off and spend it up there. I found out the advantages would be— I'd be off-limits, anyway. They'd always have somebody, a guard, around there. And the guard, whenever they see you by yourself— I'd go up there and lie down and put my head back and be reading a book. After a while, here comes a guard. The guard wants to know— He couldn't understand why. There's one person up there, and I'm black, too. It's a mystery. So they come in, and most the time they could speak. If they didn't know how to speak, they would always find somebody—a caretaker. Most of the time these cathedrals and these big buildings like this, these educational buildings, they'd have somebody that could speak English. Most of the time, people would live in them. They would go and get a professor. I mean a professor who speaks all the languages, who's been to America, been to Britain, been to Russia and abroad. You know, in bombed-out buildings. They bombed and burned some of the colleges because guys would hide in them. I'd always find those places. When I'd find them, that's when I'd find my goodies.

HENDERSON

Now, what do you mean by "goodies"?

BANKHEAD

I mean, the essence of the society. Upper crust. They would come down. The fact that I was by myself and I was interested in that kind of thing, they were curious to know, "Why are you here by yourself?"

HENDERSON

Yes. You're not here for fun. I mean, you're not just playing around.

BANKHEAD

No, not a regular guy. They would get excited and tell me all about everything and offer me the best of everything. Throughout Europe— I found it out before I left America, and then I pressed it after I got to Europe. There's a whole history on that. Boy, I'm telling you how I would take care of people. I never worried about how the whole community was sick with fevers and things like that.

HENDERSON

Yes, you told me about that. The pills you gave them.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I don't want that on record, you know, because of—

HENDERSON

Oh, don't say anything. I've got the tape recorder on.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. So that's part of the— You want to wind it up?

HENDERSON

Okay, yes.

BANKHEAD

We'll stop it at what period?

HENDERSON

You were going to 'SC night school. You had talked to Paul Williams and wanted to get employment there. He was saying that he can't employ you. Did he say exactly why he couldn't use you?

BANKHEAD

As much as he told me. He wouldn't employ me because they would have me sharpening pencils and getting sandwiches. That's as much as he told me.

HENDERSON

He said they would have you as a flunky.

BANKHEAD

That's what he said. He said they would. I know now what he meant, because he was in an operator's office, a white operator's office.

HENDERSON

Oh, his business manager operated it.

BANKHEAD

Yeah.

HENDERSON

I was about to ask that. It's his office. How come he doesn't assign you to do something?

BANKHEAD

He would assign somebody to operate the office, and they would make all the decisions about who would do what. He knew what they would have me doing. So he didn't want to embarrass me and hurt me. ["tape recorder off]

HENDERSON

I'm ready to wrap it up, but I have just one or two questions. When you were going to USC at night, about what year was that?

BANKHEAD

Oh, I went four years. I came in '46. That must be around— I don't know, maybe it's '60, in the sixties, late fifties or early sixties.

HENDERSON

Okay. I would have thought it had been the early fifties. See, you got here in '46 and then add four years onto that, that's 1950. And then maybe '51, '52.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I went to Trade-Tech about two years. I didn't get in school right away after I got here. Maybe it took a year, I know, before I got in school. But I was going to all these other places.

HENDERSON

Like Otis and—

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. And I was in school, see.

HENDERSON

But we're still talking about the early 1950s, '51, '52. The fifties, before USC. All right. I will come back next week.

BANKHEAD

Okay, next week we'll start before I got my license or after I got my license?

HENDERSON

Just a little before.

BANKHEAD

Okay. I have some of the pictures of the buildings that I did to get my license.

HENDERSON

Okay, I'd like to look at them and maybe get some addresses. I might go take pictures and see if they still exist.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I know they're existing because they were buildings. I was talking to a gentleman the other day [who] wanted to go down and take some pictures. I said I was going to take a day out or something. I never have any pictures of any of my work that I've done.

HENDERSON

You need to have some sort of portfolio. You know, a record.

BANKHEAD

So I've got to go— I should have done this all along, but if you're busy like I am doing now, you never take the time out— And maybe you don't have money and things to do some of the things that maybe I should have done. But now that I've picked my place and everything, I look around and I don't have any pictures and all the stuff. I've got plans. I've got a thousand plans back in back there. I've got them in cans with tops on them because of this— It's trying to protect them. I don't know what for, really.

HENDERSON

You might want to consider donating your papers to UCLA when you close your office. They have a library that collects architectural records.

BANKHEAD

Oh, really?

HENDERSON

I think Golden State Mutual [Life Insurance Company] gave their papers to UCLA.

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah? You mean the drawings and stuff like that?

HENDERSON

Drawings, yes. Plans.

BANKHEAD

Who? Golden State Mutual?

HENDERSON

Golden State Mutual. They just gave a whole lot of papers to UCLA—plans of their buildings, pictures, newspaper clippings. A whole lot of stuff.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Well, I was just thinking architectural-wise, whether they've got—

HENDERSON

S. Charles Lee gave his papers to UCLA, also.

BANKHEAD

Who?

HENDERSON

S. Charles Lee, he did movie theaters. Just keep it in mind.

BANKHEAD

I've got a world of drawings. They're not big buildings, but they tell you what I've been doing. I said, "One day I'm going to paste them on a board and fill that whole court with plans to leave there for when I'm dead." No, I'm kidding about that.

### **1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE ONE JANUARY 22, 1990**

BANKHEAD

I've got some pictures of what I submitted to the department [California State Board of Architectural Examiners] for—

HENDERSON

For licensing? Okay. [tape recorder off]

BANKHEAD

This first building, first apartment house on Washington Boulevard, west of Crenshaw [Boulevard]— It's the first one.

HENDERSON

What year did you do that?

BANKHEAD

[laughter] That's the first one. I can carry you to it and show it to you right now.

HENDERSON

What's the address?

BANKHEAD

I don't keep the addresses.

HENDERSON

You don't keep the addresses, okay.

BANKHEAD

I just took these pictures to get the license. But I don't—

HENDERSON

So they were taken in the sixties?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. See, this was one-of the residentials I had. No, that's an apartment house there. And this here is an apartment house, too, on Twenty-seventh Street. I remember that house. This on Forty-seventh Street.

HENDERSON

Now, this building is interesting because you've got space for symbolic address there, and then the buildings themselves are skewed. They're not straight.

BANKHEAD

No, no.

HENDERSON

They're a little skewed. This shows some creativity.

BANKHEAD

It's got a courtyard in it. I've got the plans here for that, too.

HENDERSON

Okay. I may need to look at that.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I always like screens, screens and plants. I like the greenery and the plants. I don't like walking right into doors and things like that. I like to screen it off.

HENDERSON

Then they could go around here and go in.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right.

HENDERSON

Have they maintained this place pretty well?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. It's just right up here on Washington Boulevard. That's one of the interior. See, I had sliding doors to the side yard. That's right out to the side yard. The side yard has a decorative block, too. That's on Washington Boulevard. [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON

Now, you were sending all these pictures in to get your license.

BANKHEAD

Yeah.

HENDERSON

You had to send in one of each kind?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, one residential, one commercial, and an apartment house. Those were the three types that I sent. You had to have one for each of the eight years.



You had to have a receipt—at least a permit—for each of the eight years that you've been in business. And you had to have the signatures of all those people.

HENDERSON

The owners.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, the owners. So I got all those. And you had to have proof that you really have been in business that long. But I had been in business for twelve years, so it wasn't a hardship for me to get because I had gobs of— Let me show you this. [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON

Are we ready to get started this morning?

BANKHEAD

Now, where were we the last time?

HENDERSON

You had arrived in L. A. You had met Paul Williams. He had told you to get a contractor's license. You had big plans at that point in time.

BANKHEAD

Had we got to Trade-Tech [Los Angeles Trade- Technical College] yet?

HENDERSON

Yes.

BANKHEAD

I think I was talking about how most of the students had finished and gone and gotten jobs, and I didn't get a job.

HENDERSON

Right. We got into that. You told me you spent three years at Trade-Tech.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Then I started going to 'SC [University of Southern California (USC)].

HENDERSON

Now, we haven't gotten into 'SC. I think you told me you had no problems getting into USC.

BANKHEAD

No. I went to USC. I just made an application, told them what I wanted to take, and showed them what I did at Trade-Tech. They didn't say anything.

HENDERSON

Didn't say anything.

BANKHEAD

No. No problems. So I went to 'SC. It was at night, you know. That's when I was taking the classes. This was all on my GI Bill. That's where I took design. I took design at 'SC.

HENDERSON

Now, was this architectural design?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. All the subjects I took at 'SC were design. I didn't take anything else. I took some engineering and some stuff at Trade-Tech. I also took some watercoloring and rendering at Trade-Tech. Now, at 'SC I took design. All design is what I took at 'SC. I went there I guess about a year and a half. Because when my GI Bill there gave out, that's when I stopped.

HENDERSON

They didn't offer you any scholarship? I guess they didn't have scholarships and things.

BANKHEAD

Oh, I guess they did.

HENDERSON

At that time?

BANKHEAD

But no, they didn't offer any scholarship, because I wasn't in the day classes. I was going at night. There were a whole bunch of people going at night, taking the night classes. So I think I went about a year and half. That was really what I did at 'SC.

HENDERSON

Where there any other architects or any other students that became famous architects that were with you at the time at USC?

BANKHEAD

I never heard of them. No, I never heard of any when I was going there.

HENDERSON

You had told me you had a friend at USC that had gone to Trade-Tech with you. You took night classes together. Whatever became of him? What was his name?

BANKHEAD

I think his name was Green. If I can remember correctly, his name was Green. There were two or three or four of them that went on to 'SC. But he was the one in particular that I met after I got to 'SC. He was surprised to see me there. He remembered what a time I had at Trade- Tech—that is, just breaking in and the social aspect of it. He thought I was going to become demoralized and discouraged and quit.

HENDERSON

A lot of people did.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. A lot of them. Now, I would say that the class that I started with at Trade-Tech— I'd say within eight months, the class had completely— All of those guys had got replacements. Some had quit, you know, and things like that. It wasn't what they thought it was. Only two people were there the whole length of time that I was there: that is the guy that had—I think he

had—epilepsy, and the guy that was in the wheelchair. Those were the only two guys who, when I left there, were there.

HENDERSON

Did they ever go on to have an architectural office and do anything?

BANKHEAD

I don't know. I don't know. After I left, I know that they were still there. No, wait a minute. The classes I was taking mainly was two years. But I think I took an extra year because I wanted a rendering class. That's what I took one year, one semester, whatever it was. I took the rendering, the watercoloring and all that. That's why I got that kind of information. That was one of the things I had when I went to 'SC. I had had that. And I took history of architecture at 'SC. I took history of architecture, I took some design courses. No, I didn't take anything there but design, history of architecture, and I believe that's all.

HENDERSON

Okay. One of the lines of my questioning was that when you were graduated from both these places—

BANKHEAD

Where? I didn't graduate from—

HENDERSON

Oh, you didn't graduate from USC, nor Trade- Tech?

BANKHEAD

I didn't graduate, no.

HENDERSON

I thought you had graduated from Trade-Tech.

BANKHEAD

No. See, I just took architectural courses. I really didn't graduate. Because I wasn't taking anything but the— I just took some courses.

HENDERSON

You just took courses. You weren't in a certain degree program?

BANKHEAD

No, I wasn't. Because I didn't take English. Didn't have any English. Let me see now, I'm just trying to figure what they— Did they have a degree in that at that time? Let's see. I don't know whether they had a degree at that time. See, that wasn't Trade-Tech. It was Frank Wiggins.

HENDERSON

It was what?

BANKHEAD

It was the Frank Wiggins Trade School when I went there. It wasn't Trade-Tech. They weren't on the same level as they are now.

HENDERSON

Oh, okay. I know Trade-Tech right now has a fairly good reputation.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, well, this school had a good reputation, but as a trade school. At that time it wasn't on the same level as it is now. It was developing. It didn't have anything like the teachers and the campus. They had two buildings. One building is the site where the old Frank Wiggins was. That's a tall building down— Metropolitan High School is right in front of it. And I think some of the students— That was a business school—Metropolitan High. I think they kind of worked together. But Trade- Tech was a lot of trades. I didn't go to that school. The school where I went was on Georgia Street. That was the art and the architectural part of it. And painting. Things like that. But the trade was back at the other school. And that place I think they were leasing.

HENDERSON

Oh, okay. I wasn't aware of that.

BANKHEAD

They weren't Trade-Tech. They were Frank Wiggins.

HENDERSON

Here's where my line of questioning was going. None of your business and none of your professional contacts came from 'SC and Trade-Tech—those experiences. You built all of your contacts yourself.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Let me see now. I don't understand what you mean about contacts from 'SC and Trade-Tech.

HENDERSON

Well, here's where I'd like to have you start: How you first built up your business and who your first clients were. How you were getting your clients. You were telling me you were getting your clients through your barber business.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right.

HENDERSON

What I'm thinking is that nobody at, say, 'SC that became a famous architect referred any business your way.

BANKHEAD

No.

HENDERSON

You didn't make any friends at 'SC that might have been a joint venture with you at some point.

BANKHEAD

No, no. Now, I went to school with one guy— I went to school with two guys at 'SC. One of them became an architect. His name was Thomas. He died maybe about three or four years ago. He was an architect, and he had an office on Florence [Avenue]. [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON

You were telling me about your friend Thomas. Do you know his first name or last name?

BANKHEAD

That's his last name. I'm trying to figure his first name— Now, he went with me on one job. I worked on a job that was a hospital—the only hospital I worked on since I've been in the business. I've got to find the name of that place, too, because that would be the only actual hospital that I worked on. It was an existing hospital, and the area was originally a hospital, and they were trying to change it to something less than a hospital. It was several buildings. There wasn't one main building. There was several other additional buildings on the site. The client that bought it, his name was Blackwell.

HENDERSON

What's the name of the hospital?

BANKHEAD

Oh, I—

HENDERSON

It was in L. A. ?

BANKHEAD

Yeah! I have to call him to find out where it was and everything like that and tell him what we're doing.

HENDERSON

[laughter] You don't recall what neighborhood that was in?

BANKHEAD

It was in an outlying area. Out southeast. I know it was in the hilly area. The site was way up on a hill. I think I'll call him and get that information from him.

HENDERSON

Well, let me kind of direct you to talk about how you first set up your business and how you got your first clients.

BANKHEAD

Okay, now. Here's how I first set my business up. See, I had a barbershop and I had a business going— barbershop. So what I did when I went into business and I finished with 'SC—I was already in business all through the time that I was in Trade-Tech and 'SC, too—I developed clients. Just after the war, there were a lot of carpenters here that were working with the government in producing whatever in the shipyards and all this kind of thing. But when those things closed down, the thing they went to was the carpentry and construction and remodeling and everything here in the city. Well, most of those people were southerners and none of them could read blueprints. So I found out there was a big open possibility there. I would go to the lumberyards and I would carry some— I first started carrying a card and telling them what I was doing. Now, that was before I got licensed.

HENDERSON

You mean you'd take a business card?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I'd take a business card and go to a lumberyard, all the lumberyards. There was one on Maple [Avenue], and that's Cleveland Wrecking [Company]. Then I'd go to the hardware stores where I'd know that people would be buying stuff. I'd put a roll of plans under my arm. They would actually be asking me, "You do that?" I said, "Yes."

HENDERSON

This would be in the hardware store?

BANKHEAD

Hardware store, wherever. I found out that if I had a set of plans, they would call me an architect. That's all they knew. I did plans for people in these stores and also in the wrecking places. People would say, "Okay, you do the plans." You see, the people that were from the South were carpenters, but they didn't read blueprints. And they had to have blueprints to build.

HENDERSON

Right. You had to do that to file with the city to get a permit.

BANKHEAD



Right. I had about twenty or twenty-five of those type of people. They kept me very busy. There wasn't any question, any contest, about who was going to draw the plans or anything of the kind. There was an open field, and I was kept busy. That's why I didn't ever do anything else. I just couldn't keep up with the demand that was on me. Then I had been in business twelve years when they said you couldn't draw any more plans unless you got your license. They said, "You need eight years of experience."

HENDERSON

Now, this is the license board.

BANKHEAD

License board. So that's when these pictures came about. They asked me to send them. So I wrote to them, and I sent some pictures. They told me that for the quality of work I was doing I just needed to have larger pictures. I had a lot of small pictures that I took myself. They told me to get a real photographer. It so happened that this photographer I had met was just starting in business. I think everything cost me a hundred and some dollars, for all the pictures and things. At the same time, I was working for a organization, and they had about thirteen salesmen. Now, that was plus the other people I had.

HENDERSON

Wait. When you say an organization with thirteen salesmen, what kind of organization are we discussing?

BANKHEAD

This was a contractor. It was the Roab Construction Company. They were on Olympic Boulevard, near Western [Avenue]. I was the architect for that firm. I worked for them for, I guess, as long as they were in business. They had thirteen salesmen, and the salesmen would go out and find jobs. Then I would draw the plans up. I had much work.

HENDERSON

What were they having you draw? A little bit of everything?

BANKHEAD

Everything. Anything.

HENDERSON

Houses? Apartments?

BANKHEAD

Houses, apartments. I did a commercial building for— That's one person I've got to check, too. It was out on Wilshire Boulevard—Beverly [Boulevard]. Had I gotten my license then? I don't recall. I don't think I had gotten my license. But I have the pictures of this lady. I did jobs for different people through that company. Sometimes they would get to do the work and sometimes they wouldn't. Because sometimes the quality of work that people wanted, they wanted to have it [in a way] they weren't able to do really—what they wanted. Sometimes I'd do the plan and I would get paid for the plan but they wouldn't do the job. It got to the point one time where they wanted me to start sharing the money that I was getting from the plans because they weren't getting anything out of it. But the only thing I suggested to them at that time was that I had gone out on several jobs that I didn't get paid for. They relied on me to make a lot of those jobs work, because if you got a good architect, a good design, or whatever— They didn't know anything about the regulations about yards and things like that. They just didn't know about it. When I started working for them, they were just— They were the ones also that helped me file my papers for my new license. They helped. They were big! They were very instrumental in helping me to get those things through, because they didn't want to lose me. They needed someone to continue to draw the plans.

HENDERSON

Now, you would actually go out on the site and make sure that all the regulations were complied with?

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah. Right. They would just go out and find the places. If somebody called in and said they needed something, they would run out there and look at it. The salesman's point was, as soon as they make the sale, they'd get their money. It depended upon my ability to make that job work. Sometimes they would have the money on the job before they knew whether they were going to be able to build it. [laughter] That would be a squeeze. Then I'd come to

find out that they had taken maybe a thousand, two thousand dollars on the job, and they didn't know whether it would work or not. Then when they got caught, sometimes they'd have lawsuits about it. Then they would ask me to go out first and determine whether or not this thing would work. Many times I'd take the address down to city hall, dig in, find all the information. Sometimes I'd run a little sketch during the night and take it down there, find out if it would work. If I got a job this afternoon, I'd be down at city hall and by ten o'clock I would have that permit.

HENDERSON

That fast?

BANKHEAD

That fast. Boy, I'd stay up. I would stay up all night and get that thing out. At that time, I was so happy and so high, because this is where I had been wanting to get for a long time. I had been wanting to get to that point for a long time, especially after I got my first license. I thought I was going to have to quit drawing and everything, then they came up to me— They knew I had got my license. I was high all the time. I had eight barbers and a big flourishing barber business.

HENDERSON

Now, one of the things that I'm confused on is you have an architecture business and a barbering business at the same time. Now, you operated those concurrently? At the same time?

BANKHEAD

Yeah.

HENDERSON

How would you supervise both? Did you have an architecture staff and a barber staff?

BANKHEAD

No, no. At that time, I had a barber that would take care of the barbershop.

HENDERSON

Okay. Like a manager.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Like a manager. I was handling the other part. I had a big glass between me and the barbershop, and I could see what was going on. But in the meantime, I would get draftsmen in there to do the drafting. Sometimes I had three students at one time from Trade-Tech. You know, I'd just go down there. I had a lot of people's plans. It may be two years later before they'd use them, but they wanted to get their plans. Get their plans. People were everywhere. Because through the barbershop and through the church and things like that, everybody was asking me to draw this and draw that. So I was strictly busy. One time I had five— I had about three or four people from Africa. One guy stayed here with me ten years. He got his degree from a school out on Vermont [Avenue].

HENDERSON

Los Angeles City College?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. His name was Hope Tawaya. I showed you his pictures. He was going there. He was one of the students.

HENDERSON

How would you meet these students? Would they come to you? You said you went down to Trade-Tech. Was there an office at Trade-Tech where you could post or say "I've got employment"?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, you can do that now. Because Trade-Tech was a school at that time— Particularly Frank Wiggins, and Trade-Tech, too— Not near as much so now, but it was developed to help people in the community. That was what the school was all about—to get where you can work right in the community here and now. Because the students who finished these colleges, they were out of touch with reality. You know, the architecture—

HENDERSON

It's still that way. [laughter]

BANKHEAD

The architecture and everything, see. That was one thing that David [C. Ralston] liked here. He said that was one thing he wanted to pursue, because he wanted to get a balance. I know plenty of people finish 'SC and all those places who didn't know a two by four from a— To look at it, they wouldn't know a two by four from a four by six.

HENDERSON

That's right. [laughter]

BANKHEAD

So Trade-Tech was a place where you would go and you could get relatively— At the beginning it was more so than now, see, because they got away from it. The interest and everything is not as much. But what happened, at that time it was a community, really. Now they've got other high tech things like computers and all this stuff. Now they don't have the— They used to build a building every year there and move it to different places. They would sell it and things like that. But they cut that out. They used to have a blacksmith there. They used to have a brick mason there. Used to have plumbing there, see. That's the type of school it was. It had sewing and a beauty college and all that kind of thing. Now they have some of those, but the brick mason has been taken away from there. Plumbing been taken away from there. The only thing they have left now, I think, is carpentry, mainly. And sheetmetal has been taken away. Every trade that was in the trade world was taught there. See what I mean? It pertained to building in particular. Shoemaking. And now that isn't the case. But back to how I got my jobs. Now, the people whom I went to school with— See, when I was going to school, they knew I was going to school. I had a drafting board fastened on my chair. My barber chair!

HENDERSON

What?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I had fixed me a thing where I would have my barber chair and I'd be reading. Everybody would come in and would see me— You know.

HENDERSON

This is in your barbershop.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. It wasn't my barbershop then. That was when I was working for another barber, and I was going to school. Now, when I opened up my business, I wasn't going to school then. I finished school. Then they said, "You can't operate anymore." But all that time I was operating in conjunction with my barbershop. People would see me back there and say, "Oh, there's an architect." I was in a little shopping center where they had doctors and lawyers.

HENDERSON

Where was this?

BANKHEAD

On Adams [Boulevard] and Hobart [Boulevard]. That was in the sixties. That was when I got my license. There's a telephone company there now, but it was a medical center there. There were several medical students. While I was there, I did a design on part of the building because they wanted somebody to take care of the lot. They didn't have anybody to take care of the lot. They didn't want to employ anybody, so what they did, they had me design a place for a guy to take care of the lot and also a shoeshine place. And I might just say, our contract in the lease said that nobody could put on the site anything that conflicted with the other things. The people who owned it thought I wasn't aware of the fact that there was some conflict of interest. I didn't say anything when they asked me to put it on. Because I had a shoeshine in my barbershop. I just let them put it on. So when it got on there, then I first mentioned it to one of the guys who was the caretaker. He said, "Well, Mister So-and-so said, 'Do it. ' Go ahead and do it." I said, "Okay, I just want you to know." So then after they got it on, got a permit and everything, then I mentioned it. I said, "You know, that's a conflict of interest." I let the guy know so he could let the owner know. But I never did push it, see. So that was my—

HENDERSON

The way you worked your own little— I don't know what. You got paid for all this, right?

BANKHEAD

[laughter] I got paid for putting it in there. Yeah, sure. Then after that they couldn't pressure me this way or that way like they could anybody else because they could have a lawsuit, and they didn't want to tear the thing off because they were using that as a means of keeping a guy to keep the lot clean.

HENDERSON

Have an attendant, yeah.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, have an attendant. They didn't want to lose that. So I could have messed, you know, but I didn't do it. But I could do it.

HENDERSON

[laughter] Now, tell me now. You were telling me that how you got some of your clients for your architecture was that you had clients that were having their hair cut by you.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right.

HENDERSON

Okay, tell me about that story.

BANKHEAD

Oh, well, that's a big long story. Different people would come in, and I would talk architecture in the barbershop. See, I would lecture and tell them be careful about this, about that. I had one client that came in there, and he had bought two lots or four lots in Watts. They were twenty-five-foot lots. You could not build on a twenty-five-foot lot because of the requirements for passageway. If you were on the exterior corner, maybe you get to it, but if you're in the middle of the block and it takes ten feet to get back to your house, then you couldn't build on them. He was just dying because he was one of those guys that was real smart. He ran down to Watts and bought up some of those lots. I don't know. Maybe he had eight of them or something, and

they were telling him, "You can't use them, can't use them." But he didn't know anything about tying lots together. That's where I came in on a lot of this stuff. They didn't know about tying lots together. They didn't know anything about what is known as nonconforming rights. You buy a building and it's in existence. If it didn't have any parking, as long as you maintain it in the same category it's in, they can't make you have any parking.

HENDERSON

Same category of use.

BANKHEAD

Same category of use. So I told the guy— He was tearing his hair— He wasn't my customer, but the customer at the shop said, "Bankhead might know. See Bankhead, see Bankhead." Every little thing that came up, "See Bankhead." And the churches got— You know, that's why they got to calling me a church architect. Because a lot of this stuff is coming from churches. So what happened, I told him, "Wait a minute. Maybe I can help you." I knew all the time I could help him. I knew you could tie lots together.

HENDERSON

Yeah, you knew all these legal regulations.

BANKHEAD

He said, "Oh, what am I gonna do? I don't know what to do." I said, "Just take it easy. Let me check something out." So I checked it out. When he found that out, man, he was so happy. He paid me extra money. I designed, I think, two houses. I tied the lots together. I designed one house on two lots and the other on two lots- nice houses. In the process of doing that you become known—what you're doing. It's like if you're doing good, they find out. If you're doing bad, they find out. So what happened, that information got going. The plan like these houses here, people just told people about them. Word of mouth, just word of mouth. "Bankhead, Bankhead." The same thing's happening now. I never did have to worry about bidding on jobs. Almost 90 percent of all my jobs I didn't have to bid on. The jobs I get now I don't have to bid on.

HENDERSON



The clients come to you.

BANKHEAD

The clients come to me. And when they come to me, if I look the part of it, it's gone. But there have been times that I didn't look the part and I lost.

HENDERSON

What do you mean "look the part"? You mean, look like an architect?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. At one time I didn't look like an architect, because I just dressed any— I thought if you knew your stuff, that was— I had the same thing in the army. All my life I thought if you knew what you were doing, that's all that matters. But I didn't know about— That's why I got that— I didn't get that book, but I learned it before. Finally I learned it.

HENDERSON

This book is *Dress For Success*?

BANKHEAD

I learned that afterwards, but I learned it the wrong way. I think I told you about this Roab Construction Company. They had one person for each race. They had one salesman in each race. They had a Mexican for the Mexicans. Some of them could actually go across. They had Jews for Jews. Then it depended upon what area that you were in as to how they would look and who they would send to what area.

HENDERSON

But you were doing drawings for all over?

BANKHEAD

I drew all of them.

HENDERSON

But now the salesman had to know— They would match up salesmen of one race with the same race.

BANKHEAD

Right. By the way, they would have a light- skinned man for the black race because the women would go for it. [laughter] They used that psychology no end. They'd get in there and start talking and the women wouldn't pay attention to their husband. [laughter] Then I found it out, and that's when I started dressing, too. Partly, too. But I didn't know that until I struggled my way through. I think I told you about how I used to go to Beverly Hills?

HENDERSON

Right. Go ahead and tell me.

BANKHEAD

We would lose those jobs, because I didn't look the part. I'd run out of the shop. I'd be cutting a head of hair, and I'd be rushing to get this hair cut. I'd run out there with my nails all dirty and no collar on and grab this set of plans and run on out there with the guy. One guy was in Beverly Hills and Hollywood and all the exclusive places. He would talk and he would dress and everything.

HENDERSON

Now, this is a business partner you had.

BANKHEAD

No.

HENDERSON

No, you're meeting with a client.

BANKHEAD

No, this is one of the salesmen. See, I'm telling you how I learned about dress. So I went out there, and every time we went out there most of the time we would lose the thing. I would go out there, and I would sit down. They didn't expect anybody of my complexion to be coming out there in the first place. Now, this goes back to Paul [R. ] Williams.

HENDERSON

Well, now, you were saying— For the record, I'd better say, you said Paul Williams was light-skinned.

BANKHEAD

Yeah!

HENDERSON

And from the pictures I've seen of Paul Williams, he was always dressed real sharp.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. And also, they say he lost a lot of jobs when they found out that he was black. People canceled on him. That's why his jobs were relegated to people like Frank Sinatra and a lot of people who were nonconformists who said, "I don't give a hoot." Just because [the other people] didn't want somebody black to do it, they would be indifferent because they wanted to be indifferent because of the thing. Just like Wright was.

HENDERSON

Frank Lloyd Wright.

BANKHEAD

Frank Lloyd Wright, see, was same thing. See what I mean?

HENDERSON

His clients were nonconformists.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. Paul Williams's people were nonconformists to some extent. You know what I mean? If they knew he was black or something like that, they'd say, "Uh-uh." You know. So that was Paul Williams. Then you can imagine me going out there to those big plush places. This guy would do all that talking. We'd always go in. He would always tell them that I worked for the building department, and I knew all the building [codes]. I didn't ask him, "Why do you tell the people that?" To me, it's just, "You're lying, " you know. I said, "I don't know why—" But it was because he was trying to make up for what I didn't look. See, I had to overcome being black and overcome being dressed

[casually] and we'd just lose. We got a job for a hundred thousand dollars, and here they said, "Is this who you depend on?" The gentleman that went with me would always want to hold the end where you read. You know about that, don't you?

HENDERSON

Not exactly, no.

BANKHEAD

If you ever notice, in most cases in a construction company or anything, most of the time the person who is not literate uses the end that you don't have to read.

HENDERSON

When you say "the end, " you mean he's holding the plans in such a way—?

BANKHEAD

No, no. I'm talking about a tape if you're measuring something. The guy who cannot read always holds the end—

HENDERSON

He's holding the beginning end, and you're holding the reading end.

BANKHEAD

Right. So he'd always want me to hold the end, and he'd read it. He didn't trust himself, so what he would do, he'd read it and say, "Twenty feet. Twenty feet." Sometimes I could see it wasn't twenty feet. I'd say, "Wait a minute." He'd hold it up, but he didn't want the people who were looking on to know that he was dependent on me for true information. It was some time before I realized. But sometimes I could see that this thing wasn't twenty feet. "What are you talking about?" So I said, "What did you say? Check it again." But he always wanted to hold the end that you— The other end that you don't read from has a name for it. If you go out on these jobs in the street and you see guys working, most the time you watch who's doing the reading. You watch who is holding the thing. You may not have known this, but it's true.

HENDERSON

I had forgotten the significance of the reading end versus just the holding end.

BANKHEAD

They've got a name for it. It's a name for the guy who holds the end. It's like being dumb. You see the guy out in the streets holding this pole up high and some other guy is sighting it?

HENDERSON

Right.

BANKHEAD

Same principle. I stated when I was a kid that I would never be the one to hold that thing up. I looked on the highways and saw them doing this on the highways. I watched the guy who was always holding the thing up and the other guy. [I swore] I'd never be the one that holds the thing up.

HENDERSON

When you realized you were in that situation, what did you decide to do?

BANKHEAD

Well, this is what I'm getting to.

## **1.12. TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE TWO JANUARY 22, 1990**

BANKHEAD

So I decided I was tired of going out and having these people act like they acted toward me. Coming from the South, you figure that everything that whites do is against you. When I would go out there and I would put the plans down, the first thing I would do was I'd sit down. And the lady— Most of the time they don't want to sit too close to you. When something like that occurs, it's a big damper on you and you can't talk. You get angry. You get confused. You get hurt. All of this is— Is— Is— You know. Then you can't explain everything like you should have. So what happens, you put your hand on the paper, the white paper. You may have worked on it that night. You put your hand on the paper, and sometimes the prints of your hand are on the paper. And you put your hand— You point this out toward the lady, and she moves her hand on down. You put out your hand, and she acts like a magnet is

pushing her away. [laughter] Pushing away. That just confuses you more and more. You say, "Hell, I want to get up and get out of here." That's what you want to do right away. Get away from there. Because you don't want to say anything that— They can tell you're half angry. And the salesman, he can kind of tell it. It's just a mess. So you'd lose the job. You'd lose it. So finally I said, "I'm tired of going out to these places. I want to try it one more time." I said, "What I'm gonna do, I'm gonna see if this works. I want to put on my best clothes and be sharp and put on all the jewelry I've got." So that's what I did. And the guy came by to pick me up. They always picked me up at the barbershop.

HENDERSON

Oh, by the way, where was your shop?

BANKHEAD

On Adams [Boulevard] and Hobart [Boulevard].

HENDERSON

Oh, that's right. You did tell me that. That was your shop, and you were now working for yourself.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I always worked for myself.

HENDERSON

You told me at one time you were barbering for somebody else.

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah, but I mean afterwards. I worked for somebody else for some time before that.

HENDERSON

All right, so he came by your shop to pick you up.

BANKHEAD

Pick me up. When I went to the car to get in, he looked at me like this [astonished]. And I got in. We'd always have a little fun usually. But he wasn't

saying too much, you know what I mean? I looked twice as good as he looked. [laughter] He had on a kind of a— And his tie was kind of crooked. But I made sure everything I had was spic-and-span. I had that wax on my hair and it was slick. My nails were clean. I had on a black suit and a black tie and a big white handkerchief sticking out of my pocket. My shoes were shiny! So we went on out there. We talked. He teased me all the way out there about me being black and being Negro and that thing. He said all kinds of things. He looked at me curiously and said, "People [will] think I'm your chauffeur!" I said, "You are. You're driving, aren't you?" [laughter]

HENDERSON

Oh, and what was he?

BANKHEAD

He was a salesman.

HENDERSON

I mean, he was white.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, he's white. He was Jewish. He wasn't Jewish [by practice]; he was a Jew [by birth]. He would tell me about all the building and what they were doing. You know, all this stuff about how they helped the Negro and all this mess. So what happened, we went out there. We opened the door, I walked in, and he said, "This is my architect." The lady bounced across the floor and shook my hand and held my hand and led me to the seat. And I was just— [laughter] I sat down. She didn't put a distance between me and her. She sat right down and looked at the plans. She liked it, and we got that job. That taught me a lesson.

HENDERSON

That's probably why you're still dressed pretty sharp right now.

BANKHEAD

Yes. I always did like dressing but just because I always liked it, not in a business aspect. But then when I found that out, I said, "My God, looky here." Then when I found that out, in order to sell to black women in particular, that

was a big asset. But I also found out that if you push that, then you lose the job, because the husband, when you walk in there looking so sharp, the husband thinks you want to play with the wife. He's going to renege on you right from the word go. I found that out, too.

HENDERSON

So how do you dress in the middle ground? How do you dress for both sexes?

BANKHEAD

I dress as sharp as I can get. It depends upon where the client is located as to how I would dress. When I go there, I soon will determine who is who.

HENDERSON

Whether it's the husband or the wife.

BANKHEAD

Who is in control. Some wives want to do whatever they want to do anyway, regardless of what the husband says. They are fully in control. But then I found out the best thing to do if you find out the woman is in control is to build the husband up. Most of them don't care anything about where the husband puts his clothes. All they're concerned about is, "Where am I gonna put my clothes? Where am I gonna put my this? Where am I gonna put my bath? This is my bathroom, this is my that. My dressing room." Then I say— I'll take a chance at losing the job, because there's a chance I'm going to lose it if I don't. So I say, "Where is his? Where will his wardrobe be?" Right away I start pushing. Sometimes he's scared to open his mouth. [laughter] And he's looking— So if I say, "Well, where is his wardrobe?" He soon gets a feel that I recognize that he's somebody, too. See? Then when they both recognize that I recognize this, then they both become on an even keel. I will not let her run off with the wagon without taking him. So that's what I found out. I've had an occasion more than once when the man looked like he was insignificant. The one time, the lady— I can explain things and explain what they can't explain and tell them better what they want. In the process of so doing, they really like it so well sometimes they get kind of giddy. One time the lady was just laughing like somebody crazy. The husband sat there and looked at her. When she started laughing, she couldn't stop. She was laughing because she was enjoying my



talk, and she almost forgot about him. And he knew it. He didn't like that. So then when I got down to quoting the price, then she said, "Oh, I didn't know it would cost that much." He said— [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON

We had stopped. You had a client who—

BANKHEAD

I think we were talking about the clients where I would balance one against the other.

HENDERSON

You had gotten down to the point where the woman had asked for a lot of things and you gave her a price and she said she didn't know that that was how much it would cost.

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah. But she was laughing before then. When that happened, he said— She said, "I didn't know it would be that much." She got serious, you know. And he said, "You were laughing back there. Laugh now. Laugh! Laugh!" He told her, "You were giggling back there. Now what are you giggling at?" He knew she was giggling at me and she was excited. Man, he just roared. You know, I lost that job. She said they got into it because he felt that she liked me. He left that night. After two weeks I called, and she hadn't heard from him. She said he took the card with him—took my [business] card. She said she had no way to call me or anything. So when I called her, she said, "Well, let's just [put it on] hold. Just stop everything because we're never gonna make it." She said he was a very good cook, and she was a nurse. She worked in a doctor's office. She had come here from someplace and she went to school and got an education. And because he was a good man and had a good job they married. But she said he was jealous of all the doctors that she worked with. She said that was the first thing. What had happened, she had outgrown him. The connection was never— He couldn't ever do anything. He couldn't go back to school and become a doctor. When she heard me talking like I was talking, she appreciated it to the extent that she just laughed. She would just laugh, she said, "Because he knows so well exactly what I want."

That's what she told him. But then when I quoted the price, then— You know. So I lost that job.

HENDERSON

Tell me how you got so many contacts with churches. Because you were a member of only one church, right? Which church is that you're a member of?

BANKHEAD

Trinity Baptist Church on Jefferson [Boulevard] and Cimarron [Street].

HENDERSON

How have you been able to make contact with other churches that you—?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, well, that's— I was always— My father was a minister. I was brought up in the church and in the Sunday school and always have been a big talker. I'm always a person who would stand on my own regardless of what the minister or whoever said, you know. I've always been attracted to it. I make speeches. I'll make speeches at the different churches and all that kind of stuff. Through my whole career in school, that was a big thing for me. When I went to high school, there was a minister. When I went to college, there was a minister. So ministers have been a big part of my life. Everybody thinks that I'm a minister to some extent. But I've had all kinds of contact through the barbershop. We talked about the Bible a whole lot in the shop.

HENDERSON

Your clients? They'd come in?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, my clients. I designed churches for people I went to school with. On San Pedro [Street] there's three churches that I— Two brand-new ones I designed. One of them is for a guy who was a barber right along with me. The other one was the guy who was doing the church right here on the corner. He built one of the churches I designed on San Pedro.

HENDERSON

San Pedro and what? What's the cross-street?

BANKHEAD

Well, the new church [Chapel of Faith Baptist Church] I designed on San Pedro. One of them is Eightieth [Street] and San Pedro. I've got the plans right here now. We redesigned, added to it this year. The other one is further out on San Pedro. The other one that I changed from a regular building to a church is about one block from Seventieth [Street] and San Pedro [Street]. There's another church on Seventieth [Street] and Normandie [Avenue] that I changed from a regular store to a building.

HENDERSON

You could list a lot of these.

BANKHEAD

All of them down on Eighty-fourth [Street] and Central [Avenue]. I changed one, and they said, "This is like a new church." And the one right in front of it, I did the same thing with it. So you name it, I've got a lot of those. On Twenty-fifth [Street] and Central [Avenue].

HENDERSON

Now, you were saying you went to school with these people you did the church for. This is—what?—back in South Carolina?

BANKHEAD

No, no. Here. I wasn't going to school with them, but we were going to school at the same time. This guy named Roy [E. ] Williams was taking Bible studies. He was becoming a minister, and I was becoming an architect. See? There were four other guys that would come, and he would cut their hair. And also the president— I mean, the Baptist minister of Second Baptist [Church], which is the most populous church in L. A. for blacks. Now, I cut his hair.

HENDERSON

This is Reverend [Thomas] Henderson?

BANKHEAD

Reverend Henderson. I was sitting in my barber chair drawing. I think I told you about this. He watched me all the time there. Then finally he said one day,

after I got up there and I was coming back on the bus, I think I told you about that. He told me he wanted to go into business with me. Anyway, he's the one that told me about taking this mark off my face. I told you about that.

HENDERSON

You told me part of that information. Maybe you ought to recap that now for the record. Because I think he said you needed to change the mark, and your wife [Mary Wright Bankhead] said, "No, don't change it"?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. He told me to take this mark off my face. Because he realized it would handicap for me to be going in with that mark on my face. [It would] look like I had been in bad company. And it's true, you know. But I never think about it, and the people with whom— My wife told me, "Just keep this." I guess that's one of the things we have in common. Because everybody says they don't see how the two of us got married. All that kind of stuff. But anyway, I told her, and she said, "No." She said, "Because once people know you, they'll forget that." And that was a big— You know. I don't know how she notices so many things, but the things that count most are things she's aware of. She said, "No. Don't do anything. He's got to respect you for some other reason. Why did he respect you before that?" She said, "For the same reason, don't take it off." But he was saying, "It's a gateway to more business opportunities." You know, you have to stumble around like I was stumbling around with the—

HENDERSON

With clothes?

BANKHEAD

With clothes. I could be on my way, but I've got to live that down. [tape recorder off] That is what happened with that client. As time went on, I learned more and more and more about the whole echelon of things.

HENDERSON

Wait. Did you ever do anything for Second Baptist Church? Did you do any of their additions?

BANKHEAD

No. I never did any of their additions. I tell you, places that have got politics in it, I stay away from them. Because you've got competition from the word go. Now, the people who split away from Second Baptist Church, I've been out with them now on about three or four occasions. One of the guys who was supposed to be the mastermind of the split, he has a part of a set of my plans now. See? But when you get into politics— I like to stay away from politics, because people who are smart enough to get into politics, they always want something. In politics, it's always, "You rub my back." But I like to deal with people who are just plain people. They appreciate what you do, and when you get through with it they don't know how to pick out all the flaws. They're happy, you know, unless somebody comes along and beats them down for some reason. Like I just finished a job I did. It's hard for you to do a job right around the neighborhood unless you do them right. Right at the end of my street I did a job. Right on the same street I did a job. They came to find some of the clients—

HENDERSON

This is your house.

BANKHEAD

Right around my house. Right around where I live. The last job that I did was an addition to a house, and the lady had money. I came to find out she had money and was investing it. She knows all the people with money and things like that. This is going back to how you look, too. When I know I'm going to a certain neighborhood, I know what's in that neighborhood. I've got a ring. You've probably seen it. It's a gold ring that sticks way out. It's odd, very odd. And I practice this [raps ring on table]. I get it real clean. Not like here now. It will clean. [rap] I put my hand down on this here. I do it a lot of times at the banks, just to challenge them. You know, the girl at the window, she's working the counter. I put my hand up there and "Aaaah!"

HENDERSON

Wait, wait, wait. What are you doing? You're putting your hand up there to challenge her? I mean, to test and see does she dislike seeing that hand?

BANKHEAD

No, no. This is a focus of attraction.

HENDERSON

That ring.

BANKHEAD

A focus of attraction. You go any which way you want to go after that. And it's a positive one.

HENDERSON

So you're flashing your ring.

BANKHEAD

I flash it. And I go out to places— Now, these Japanese out here in Cerritos. That's where I'm doing a big job. I saw what she had on her hand. So the next time I went out there, I put mine on. [laughter] She was waving her hand up there, talking. So I put my hand up there, and she said, "Aaaah! Where did you get that?" She was startled. Now she forgot about race, everything, because she liked that ring. That ring told her something that we have in common right there.

HENDERSON

Where'd you get that ring?

BANKHEAD

I got it from Bullocks, believe it or not. I thought it was a lady's ring. I looked at it a lot of times before I bought it. Did you ever see it?

HENDERSON

I think I have seen that ring. Because it's an odd ring.

BANKHEAD

It's an odd ring. The jewelers tell me to have diamonds put in it, but I don't care about diamonds. I don't know them from glass anyway, but they do. But I

try things. Since I've experienced things, I try things with people. I'm not telling you I'll try anything with you.

HENDERSON

It doesn't matter. [laughter]

BANKHEAD

But I'll tell you what. You automatically, when you see people and you've been used to that, every person you see and you deal with becomes— What shall I say? I don't want to say somebody you analyze, but in the process of just socializing with people you see things and you expect things. They just happen to you. Everybody. You know, it happens. Just like I met you, and like I met David [Ralston]. There was something about David that was so different. I said, "Gee whiz, it was so fresh, refreshing. So much so I would want to help David. I would work for David almost rather than myself. Because the objective to which he's going is my objective." He is a means— That's a better means of me getting where I want to be. He's a better means. He's a means of achieving what I'd like to achieve.

HENDERSON

It's almost like a surrogate son.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Well now, there's many people like that. Like when I talked to the lady [Regina W. Davis] about him, she was saying the same stuff.

HENDERSON

Yeah, I'm sure she was impressed.

BANKHEAD

She said that she couldn't explain it. When I saw him coming down here riding the bicycle and the bicycle was busted and riding with the tire on his shoulder, and he's carrying another part of it— And he came in smiling. All the resistance with him was physical. It was not mental. If it was mental, he couldn't have done anything like what he's doing. See what I mean? So I know this about people: I know that it's the mental aspect of things that is more detrimental to people than the physical. It's the mental aspect of things that

destroys people rather than the physical. If you enjoy what you're doing, in that proportion, that much of it is taken away from the grind on you. Because I realized when I was in the army, I didn't have to worry about food, I didn't have to worry about clothes and everything. Those were some of the happiest moments in my life as far as that kind of thing. But when you're talking about food and shelter, these things in the real life are a tremendous bridle on people.

HENDERSON

What do you mean? They have to concentrate so much on getting food and clothing?

BANKHEAD

Yeah! Yeah, you have to. And becoming attached to what I call Americanism. I tell all foreigners, "Don't become Americanized." I have a friend who came here. He's an Egyptian. He came here, and I was one of the first people who gave him a job when he got his license. He's smart and everything. He had a whole lot of pictures on the wall about Egypt and all that kind of thing. When I walked in the office, I knew what to talk about. I knew what he thought about America, even though he was doing all the talking. But I had the pictures on the wall to tell me what he thought. So I said, "What are you doing with these pictures on the wall?" He looked at me and kind of laughed. Because he recognized that I recognized that he was in America but his heart was somewhere else. So right away he was on the defensive, because he didn't know whether I was American or whether I was— He said, "Well, you're my brother, " you know. Now, he's an Egyptian. He doesn't care two cents about me, in a way. But he's "my brother." So then I said, "Well, let me tell you one thing." I said, "You've got that picture on the wall. That's gotta be you." But then I saw some of his work over there that he'd been showing, too. I said, "Let me tell you one thing. Don't become Americanized. Don't become Americanized." He looked at me, and he said, "What'd you say?" I said, "Don't become Americanized." He said, "I won't." I said, "Remember, I've got my eye on you." He started off with his prices real low, and every time he got ready to raise his price, I said, "What did I tell you?" [laughter] "Don't become Americanized." Now he's got a cousin who is an engineer, and he's been here for years. He's an engineer, and he's a musician, too. He liked music. On his



application, on things he'd advertise, he's got songs on there he wrote. I said, "Gee, I want to see this guy." I wanted to see him for years, but I never got around to talking to him. So it turns out that's the guy's cousin. So he had the guy— He's not a structural engineer, a civil engineer, he's mechanical and whatnot. So he has a nice attitude about how to talk to people and everything. He has what is necessary for any person that's in business. Sometimes you think about the technical aspect of it, but how to deal with people is probably more important. You can find a technician pretty easy. You don't find that many people that can deal with people. So what happened— That's how he built his clients up. Right away, man. He got to be big right away. Because he had an attitude that you can hardly resist. So what happened, he started doing my plans and he sent out to get people to do everything.

HENDERSON

Wait. He was like subcontracting with you? He would get other people to do work for you.

BANKHEAD

Right. For him. But it's for me indirectly, [laughter] So he got his cousin to do it. His cousin had been trying to get me to do some work for him for years. Because he's right on Wilshire [Boulevard], and I'm right here. We're right in the same area. So he didn't know— The two engineers that he had working— They had two other engineers. One of them I had worked with for a long time. He was from Malaysia. Not Malaysia, but over in the east over there. What is the name of—? Not Hawaii, but the next place. What is it?

HENDERSON

Samoa?

BANKHEAD

No, where the lady [Corazon Aquino] is—

HENDERSON

Oh, the Philippines.

BANKHEAD

The Philippines. There are a lot of Filipinos here. Engineers. It's just full of engineers and nurses and things like that. And they're good, you know what I mean? They've got an attitude— Most Filipinos have got a nice attitude. They've built this nice attitude. The attitude doesn't mean anything to what they're really giving out. The looks in their face, the expression is different from what they really are. Now, I'll give you an instance. You take most Africans, and a lot of black people, their face doesn't read— It's as though they've been under pressure all [the time], and they frown. There you see people that smile all the time. It's a different feeling. The atmosphere and feeling, see. That's why they've got an advertisement using women with a smile and all this kind of thing. So the Filipinos are naturally— That may be because of where they're from and everything. They haven't been oppressed. But Africans, by a long shot, it's not appealing. That's why a lot of them come over here and don't marry other Africans. They like happy faces. You know what I mean? And also, this is my experience, Africans and black people, unless you know them, sometimes they are not as acceptable to the mass as some others. You understand what I'm talking about?

HENDERSON

You mean acceptable to whites.

BANKHEAD

Acceptable to one another to some extent! [laughter] So that's why they want to be white!

HENDERSON

They don't even like themselves.

BANKHEAD

They don't like themselves.

HENDERSON

Oh, my goodness, okay.

BANKHEAD

They don't, you know. But that's one thing I can say, I think, about myself. I have always— I never, I think, disliked myself. And that's a big thing when you

come to talking to people and how you can maintain yourself. If you don't like yourself, and if you don't have the stuff yourself, how can you give out something you don't have? A person can sing a song that somebody else wrote, but till that song becomes a part of them, they don't have anything to radiate. But once you've taken that song to become part of you, then you can radiate something and people know it. The same thing is true with whoever. Now, Africans can be around you for a while, and then you learn that particular person, but at first sight— That's why they employ people who are pleasant looking.

HENDERSON

Yes. You're saying that Filipinos look pleasant.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. They look pleasant. But it doesn't mean that they mean any good. [laughter] I just mean that they're that kind of people. But if Africans look this way or that way, it doesn't mean that they're no good. So that's a big— I don't think that's the— Oh, never mind.

HENDERSON

I was about to say we could— [tape recorder off]

BANKHEAD

Everybody has an outlet of some kind that can be used as the ultimate objective of one's life. Building is one thing, but I think building and designing is an opening to what I really wanted to achieve. The big objective of life is to help.

HENDERSON

I think that's part of the reason why you have the atelier, the school, basically, that you have here. That is, you are working with students.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Right. I think so too.

HENDERSON

I mean, I called it an atelier. You could call it a studio.

BANKHEAD

What did you say? What did you call it?

HENDERSON

"Atelier" is a French word for a master's studio. Like if you are doing paintings or high fashion— An atelier is a fancy name for studio, basically.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Now, that's what this really is. You made me recognize more than I had ever thought about this. But I was just doing what I am doing. Whatever happens after that is whatever happens. That has been my forte. I am not doing this for pictures. I am not doing it for necessarily publicity or things like that, but then I like to do things. I like to invent, break new ground. My thing now is, why do empires fall? Why do empires fall?

HENDERSON

I think empires have a nature life span like people have a nature life span.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, but I don't think empires have to. I think people have a natural life span, but I don't think empires naturally have to have a life span like that. Because I think if you can get youth into places, you can maintain it.

HENDERSON

Here's why I think there's a lifetime to these certain organizations and why it's difficult to get youth into certain positions. When something first starts, a lot of people get positions due to merit. They're smart, they're talented, they're whatever. You'll have a bureaucracy that's led by merit, an organization that's led by people that are talented and merited. Over time, the very leaders, the very ones that got their position by merit, don't want to give it up for their children. That is, they want their children to get their same place, and the children may not be quite as smart. The children— Like you were saying, these generations— One generation will make it—

BANKHEAD

Build it up and the next generation will dispose of it.

HENDERSON

—and the next generation will spend it.

BANKHEAD

Yeah.

HENDERSON

And so what happens is that— The Soviet Union is a good example. The children of, say, Nikita [S. ] Khrushchev may not be as smart as Nikita Khrushchev. But he makes sure that they go to the right schools, get the right kind of training, and then work in the government bureaucracy.

### **1.13. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE ONE MARCH 8, 1990**

HENDERSON

What I wanted to take up today was more about your projects and find out which ones you think are your best, what you like about them, and maybe how you got inspiration for some of those particular projects. What are your most important projects? Do you have plans and photos of them? That's kind of an open-ended question. What's the project you're most proud of and why?

BANKHEAD

I think I'm most proud of the churches I designed.

HENDERSON

Any particular church or just all of them as a group?

BANKHEAD

The [Greater New Jerusalem] Baptist Church on Fiftieth [Street] and Western [Avenue] would be the one that I'm most proud of.

HENDERSON

That's the one you just showed me a photograph of.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. The reason being, if you'd like to know that, in working for minority people that don't have money you design many things that are never completed. Many ministers have big ideas, and when it comes to getting funds to complete the ideas it's never developed. Consequently, those don't please me. I have many designs and ideas and renderings that they hang up in the church, but they never completed them because of lack of funds. So that's one thing. I think one of the reasons I like churches is because I come from a family that was kind of church oriented. [I attended] Sunday school and this kind of thing throughout my life. I've noticed churches, especially when I've traveled abroad in Europe. I visited a lot of cathedrals in Rome and also Saint Peter's [Basilica in Vatican City, Rome]. Wherever I was, I visited cathedrals.

HENDERSON

This was during the war? While you were in the service?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. I carried an architecture book [Banister F. Fletcher, *A History of Architecture*] throughout the whole period that I was in the service. I wore it out dragging it from place to place, because when I knew I was going to Europe I would see these buildings. I wanted to compare what was in my history of architecture with the buildings that I would see. So that's one of the reasons I was quite interested in churches. Churches were some of the greatest, some of the outstanding buildings and designs back in that time, because they were religious.

HENDERSON

Now, do you relate your church designs to inspiration from the ones in Europe directly?

BANKHEAD

Well, no, indirectly. I take something from all church designs, you know what I mean, but I like modern. I'm inclined to like modern more than anything else.

HENDERSON

The church at Fiftieth [Street] and Western [Avenue], from the photograph that I'm looking at, looks kind of like a [Richard J. ] Neutra church. I'm not

saying you design like Neutra, but it's got some nice, clean lines to it. It doesn't quite look like a Frank Lloyd Wright thing. It looks more like a Neutra thing.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I would think so.

HENDERSON

What year did you do that church?

BANKHEAD

It's about six years ago.

HENDERSON

That would be about 1984.

BANKHEAD

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Do you remember the pastor?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. White, Dr. [Lewis S. ] White.

HENDERSON

I remember you told me a story that the church was not sure if they were going to complete the building as drawn. The pastor insisted on doing it.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, he insisted, because he said that he felt that I was a Christian and had an inspiration and he didn't want to change it. Because I felt, after I designed it, that it was a strain on the people. They're bringing dollars and they— It dragged on for a while. Because I liked it and thought it was fitting for the community and also for the function. So I began to realize that my ideas sometimes might exceed the ability to achieve my ideas. That was because, as I told you a while ago, I know what a community needs and I know what they want. The pastors always want something bigger, you know what I'm saying?

He may not have any— But it's just his idea, his concept. I think the ministers, in particular, and maybe some Christians, too, have a conflict between the possibilities of what they dream— They have a funny feeling that "If I start something, God will help me finish it." Or "God will do this and God will do that." But in reality, it is never the same as they dream it to be. [laughter] So most of the time I try to control them in that respect. I have a church right—

HENDERSON

You control them in terms of cost?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, in terms of cost. Because it means that if you tied up with them, there's not a lot of money there. You've got to contend with them until that's completed. I've got a church [United Revelation Church of God in Christ] now on Normandie [Avenue] and Jefferson [Boulevard], which I am earthquake-proofing and turning from a store to a church.

HENDERSON

So you've got to make it earthquake proof?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I've got to have it earthquake proof. Have earthquake-proof plans. And at the same time change the occupation [occupancy classification in Los Angeles Building Code]. Change the, not occupation, but the use of it. See, there's two in one. Most times, the one who has to do with changing of architecture doesn't want to have anything to do with the earthquake, and the earthquake [people] don't want anything to do with the change of the other thing.

HENDERSON

These are city agencies?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. The City of Los Angeles Building [and Safety] Department. But many of the buildings— Most of my clients and most of my development has been with—that's why I mention churches—changing regular buildings to churches, making them officially a church. In so doing, you've got to deal with the



parking and all the regulations that go to make them what they should be. Many of the places have been used for years. Like I have a church that's on Thirtieth [Street] between Western [Avenue] and Middleton [Place], on the corner, which has been used for thirty years as a church. When the earthquake requirement came by and they listed the buildings throughout the city that had to be earthquake proof, that's where they caught up with a lot of these people who were using these buildings that weren't earthquake proof. In the meantime, they were using them as churches and they weren't— Now, as far as Sacramento goes, now they've got legal status as a church, but the building department doesn't know anything about it. They cannot police all these storefronts. Consequently, that's how they get caught many times. Somebody gets hurt or something like that. Then that's when they want to enlarge it. They want to change it to make it look like a church. Stuff like that. This is when it becomes known that the buildings many times they are using don't [pass the] check. They don't know they're not churches as far as the building department's concerned. Masses of them. I would say in 60 or 70 percent of the storefronts they have been using the building for years and they don't know they're not— They think they're legally churches. A lot of my work has been in that vein.

HENDERSON

Upgrading those storefronts to be seismically acceptable for a church.

BANKHEAD

Upgrading them, yeah. Seismic is just a small section of it, but the other part is just making them meet the requirements of a church.

HENDERSON

Like for parking?

BANKHEAD

Parking.

HENDERSON

Restrooms ?

BANKHEAD

Right. Parking, restrooms, health purposes and all that kind of thing, because the building's a commercial building. Windows, ventilation, and all those requirements. That has been the real essence of the community service that I gave. I might say that the fact that so many of these people go down to the building department and have the problem, it becomes known that— That that was kind of a field, and they call me a church architect. That's what they call me."Go see Bankhead."

HENDERSON

So the building department refers clients to you.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Not directly. But whenever they have a problem, they know that they don't have money, so they're supposed to see Bankhead. They know nobody else has time to do this. They don't have the time or the patience. They know I will take time and do this because, mainly, I wasn't the type of architect who had to depend totally on funds coming from that direction. You know, because I had another business.

HENDERSON

Yeah, you had the barber business subsidizing your architecture.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, balancing it, see. So that's how I have been able to maneuver and sustain myself and do things that a lot of other architects didn't do. This doesn't mean I made money, by a long shot, but I would say—

HENDERSON

You've survived.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I survived. I own my building, and I own my office and everything. And I would venture to say that 80 percent or 90 percent of black architects do not. They do not. That's another reason I was able to sustain myself. Because I built this building. See, I was a carpenter before. I have been doing carpentry work and did work on my house and all that kind of thing. I built this building,

literally by my hands—a lot of it. There's doors and things, windows and things.

HENDERSON

Did you pick the carpentry up as you were in the business or did you pick this up at Voorhees [College]?

BANKHEAD

I went to school for it. I took carpentry in high school.

HENDERSON

Oh, that's right. You did woodworking.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, woodworking in high school. That's where I started. So when I went to Voorhees, my major was architecture. Not architecture, but agriculture. I did so much stuff in high school, when I went to Voorhees, they found out— You had to take a little architectural work even if you were an ag[riculture] student, because you have to tell the people what to do on the farms and how to keep their property up and buildings and things like that. On most of the farms, the buildings were inadequate and they needed that kind of a thing. Farming needed it worse than anybody else. I learned how to build log cabins and things like that. I built a log building for my own family. A log cabin. We would go out in the forest and cut trees and build log cabins.

HENDERSON

That, to me, in my mind, takes a lot of skill. Are they complicated to do—log cabins? You know, you have to notch and cut and—

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Well, no, it wasn't complicated. The only thing I would say about it that I didn't like is when you cut the logs then you had to hew them down so they become flat. Then you had to notch them. When you try to make them flat, you can never get it sealed to where the log would be flat enough to seal it. The old-timers used mud to seal those cracks, and after the mud got dry, the mud would— What do you call it when something dries up?

HENDERSON

Shrinks?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, shrinks and contracts. The wood would kind of dry up and the seal would contract. So consequently, you have a bigger hole.

HENDERSON

Yeah, you have wind coming through! [laughter]

BANKHEAD

You have wind coming through there. So then people would try to— The building that we had in my home that I built— My brother and I built this log cabin. We didn't mind that, because we weren't living in it. This was the barn where we had to put corn and all this kind of thing. When it would rain, the water would come down and the curvature of the log would allow the water to go in that crack. So it wasn't like ship lap planks—ship lap keeping out the water. They overlap. Ship lap came afterwards. I always had in my mind that we were going to cut some of the logs thin enough to— But to do all that cutting, you had to cut so thin. Logs, sometimes we'd split them. The oak log would split and we'd cut and make shingles. We'd make oak shingles. I don't know if you've heard of that or not.

HENDERSON

It's like shakes?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, like shakes. That's where shakes came from. Shakes came from this. You'd cut oak trees, and the oak tree would split. Oak is very hard. They'd use that as shingles, and they would cut them about eighteen inches long and they would lap them. So that's where the shake roof— That's where all the shake you see—imitation—came from. But when I was in high school, that's why I wanted to do the log cabin. High school students went out in the forest and cut trees down, and we built a cabin in the forest. What's left of that I don't know. But anyway, I would say if I would consider myself anything it would be what I consider a service architect. I really serve the community and churches,

additions, corrections and whatnot. It was all the cases where there was very little money, but it was interesting. It was entertaining. Because I was doing things that people appreciated, so that was where the feedback came from that would allow me to— I didn't think about other architects and things like that. The organization things like that? I had so much to do on my own. That's still true today. I don't have time to, you know— Like I told you about the church on Jefferson and Normandie. Yesterday we went down and the church— The earthquake part was supposed to have been done. The owner went down to get an extension for the change of occupancy, because he was almost through with the earthquake part. So he went down there. Due to the fact that they had some shakes since they started building that building, the regulations for earthquake requirements are up.

HENDERSON

They're making things tighter.

BANKHEAD

Making things tighter, so there wasn't enough— I can't think of it right now. The stuff that you throw on the bricks to hold them together.

HENDERSON

Gunitite ?

BANKHEAD

Gunitite. Yeah, there wasn't enough gunitite to meet this requirement at this particular point. It was engineered and had a permit on it at first, but, due to the fact they had the earthquake since then and the earthquake requirements changed, they went back and said this wasn't enough. Consequently, we decided that if we were going to do that— Because the building had been hit by a truck [which] knocked half the front off of it— We had made that [out of building] block, so we decided to make the whole front block and make it match. So we went down yesterday. We went down about two months ago, due to the fact that we had a deadline from the building department that we should finish the building in a certain given time—the earthquake part. Then when they went down and said this gunitite doesn't hold, that meant that we had to go back, and that took up time. So one of the guys down there thought

it was such a small pillar—it's a column there—why put them through that? So this guy took the plan. He didn't even charge a fee because it was such a small item. Seemingly, it shouldn't have been stopped anyway. So he took the plan and put it in the drawer. He was going to do it himself, because he's one of the top officials. What happened, he put it in there and he logged it in the book but he never did put the green stamp on the plan. Never did put a green stamp on the plan. But he gave the minister the other half of the green stamp. That's the tag I'm talking about.

HENDERSON

That says you're okay?

BANKHEAD

No, that says that we have your plans and we're going to check them and then we'll call you and you can come back. We'll write you, and you come back.

HENDERSON

Oh, okay, I see what you mean by "green tag."

BANKHEAD

So what happened, they didn't tag the plans, but they logged it in the book. When he went back to pick them up, they were still where they were and never had been acted on. Because the application had never been made out. So consequently, the minister gave them the tag that he had, which I told him he shouldn't have given to them. Because he doesn't have anything to say anything [a receipt]. The official took the tag from him and then he discarded the other tag. That says that we don't know anything about the plans. They haven't logged, but they logged it in and gave it a number. If I had been directing it, if I had been there and he had told me before he told anybody else, that wouldn't have happened. He would have had the green tag. Because some of those guys do things and then they catch themselves in a corner. Consequently, they don't—

HENDERSON

They can't fulfill their promises?

BANKHEAD

They back out of it. So what happened— I don't know whether this should be on the tape or not.

HENDERSON

Well, let me move to another area. You've told me that you don't like doing government work. Are there any building types you avoid, such as government work or multifamily housing or [housing] projects? What do you avoid?

BANKHEAD

Well, I try to avoid anything that requires a lot of technicians. Because unless you are in a position to have people to do the work that you line up from government or whoever, it's wrong for you to take it. If you are not in a position to do a job, even though I'm an architect and I may know, but when it comes to developing it and completing it, then you shouldn't take it. I won't take it, because if I do then this will ruin my reputation even for what I'm doing. I will not take a job that I don't think I'm capable of handling or don't have the necessary people to handle. I won't take it, because that works against you. I must have an idea about what I can complete and maintain myself and not get into legal lawsuits and all this kind of thing. But when you take something—you borrow money from the government or you're doing government projects—you have to have a certain amount of money. You ought to have to have a certain amount of insurance. All those things get involved. The insurance and those things are very expensive. Sometimes it looks like just to keep you out of this particular instance— Also in government projects, in most cases you have to be tied in almost with— Politically, you have to have a surplus of money up front because the government projects, they may come up— If it's government projects and also city projects, they may come and they are funded. If their funds run out, then you are the last person to get paid. They pay you when they want to pay you. You can't say, "We had an— Amount— What-you-call-it said." You can't sue them, because are you going to sue the city?

HENDERSON

Oh, I hadn't thought about that.

BANKHEAD

Going to sue the city? You couldn't win. If you got it on the city, they've got your license— Or the state, they control you. You do something they don't like, you jack them up and— I'm not saying they have to, but that means that you may not get another city project. If that's the means of your living, you've got to be careful in doing it, whether it's the city or whoever. Whoever you're clients are, whether they're big or little, this is true in my business right here. You don't have a boss, but you do. So that's why I've never attempted to get into those big projects. Because if you don't have— And see, by not employing people, like I—

HENDERSON

When you say, "not employing people, " who are some of the technicians that you avoid having? A structural engineer, or—?

BANKHEAD

No, no. I don't avoid having any of those. No, I need those. I have to have them. But what I mean, if I set up a company and I was paying people, then I'd have to have a secretary, I'd have to have a bookkeeper and all this kind of thing. That's a big drain on small businesses.

HENDERSON

That's overhead.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. See, that's a big thing. That's what kills many small people. You've got a secretary sitting up there, and she wants a certain amount of money. And you only have a certain amount coming in. If that part doesn't come in like it should, then the secretary's gone. You get the machinery set up and then, boom, one person goes out and that's a monkey wrench in your whole thing.

HENDERSON

Maybe I'm confused. You don't have a secretary for your own office?

BANKHEAD

No.

HENDERSON



You handle everything yourself?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Yeah.

HENDERSON

Oh! Okay. But now your office is actually fairly small because who you have working for you are independent contractors?

BANKHEAD

Right. Independent contractors. I might say this. A person who comes off the street out there, I don't guarantee them any money. Most people who I've had were people who said, "I'm interested in this trade. I want to learn it. I don't want any money." But as soon as they get here and they start to work, they soon realize that with some improvements on whatever— Whatever I'm telling them, they have an ability— Most people don't know that between what you learn and what is allowed by the board of architecture, you can get a business license. You can make a million dollars a year with nothing but a business license.

HENDERSON

Yeah. You don't need an architect's license to practice, right?

BANKHEAD

No. The [California State Board of] Architectural [Examiners] allows you to do up to four units—four or eight units—without one. If you learn yourself or from somebody to do the engineering, you can do a lot. By the way, last year the person who was going to make a difference in the architecture field in L. A. was a black guy with no kind of license.

HENDERSON

Right. This was Randy Washington.

BANKHEAD

Randy Washington. So that's what I tell guys when they come in. That there's many things that they thought was— Like all the math and all this stuff that frightens everybody away— When you get into it— I recognize the fact that

sometimes you know more than you think you know as far as math's concerned in handling this stuff. But many people are frightened away. Many students start out— I have had more people say that they started out in architecture, they started in on drafting and things like that, but "that math, that math, that math." And they would quit, take something else. But when the students come in and they start working, they soon find out— And I don't hide anything from them. I do contracts right in front of them. Many clients come and say, "Gee whiz, are you gonna let them hear this, that, and the other?" And I say, "Yeah. Sure." Well, 90 percent of the people say, "I would never do that. You're gonna let them hear this?" In most cases, when a student comes in here he has access to any part of it. For a lot of offices, you have to work as a draftsman for years before you even get a chance to look into the design office. They hold that back because this is something that you've got to— It's a goal that you've got to work for. Many of them will try to get in with the head designer and they do all kinds of things— carry their coffee and maybe give them a bottle of liquor. They're trying to build their way up. When they come here, they don't have this from me. But it has its difficulty, too. A guy comes in here, and he wants to start to doing pretty pictures. You've got to keep him from that and let him know that you can't do pretty pictures. You have to have methods of not destroying his ego and let him realize, step by step, how you can get to that particular point.

HENDERSON

Do you have tight control or loose control over your contractors? Over your workers?

BANKHEAD

I have loose control of them.

HENDERSON

Loose control. Now suppose, you know, like you've got this house and they're working on it and they've got it looking like, I don't know, a French palace. Do you tell them, "Hey, you've got to—"? Do you persuade them that they've got to cut back, or can you just tell them, "Hey, cut this off. Cut that off. Change that"?

BANKHEAD

No, I'll tell you what. I have that problem with this guy right here because he was an architect before he came here. All he wants to do is design.

HENDERSON

Which guy is that? Or do you want to name him?

BANKHEAD

Oh, I'll name him. His name is Ben [Benedict Obafunda].

HENDERSON

Oh, Ben. Oh, okay.

BANKHEAD

And the same thing with the guy that came from Ethiopia. He came here with his plans and designs just really good looking. But none of them wants to learn the guts of the building. So what I do with these guys, I talk to them a while, and they get angry because you're telling them— Sometimes I get kind of rough with them. I just carry the [Los Angeles Building] Code book up there— Type 5 [Construction]. "You're not doing it for me, " I say, "Read the code." So that cools them off. I ask them, "What does the code say? Don't be angry with me." But when you tell them, it's like you're their daddy. It's a reflection of your daddy making you do things you don't want to do. This guy here, his brother's an architect and his brother used him like that. So he doesn't want to work for anybody but himself. In doing so, that kind of puts him in a area where he got his— I got him the— He got his business license, so that indicates that he's his own—

HENDERSON

He's independent, right.

BANKHEAD

He's independent, but he doesn't know. He's independent, but he still doesn't know. You understand?

HENDERSON

Not exactly. You mean he doesn't have—? He doesn't have the attitude of deciding things for himself?

BANKHEAD

No, he doesn't know the code. He doesn't know the code, he doesn't know this, doesn't know that.

HENDERSON

So he needs your expertise to guide him.

BANKHEAD

He needs that. You can't jump over and become a big designer, even though you're on your own. Even though he's on his own, he can't become a big architect because he doesn't know the guts of— He doesn't know how to— He doesn't know Type-5 building in the first place.

HENDERSON

Well, do you exercise any aesthetic control over your associates?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Sometimes aesthetically these two guys might exceed me. Because in Africa, Nigeria, where you don't have the government control, you don't have the building department control. This allowed them the freedom that you don't have in America in architecture. You go over there and see some of their buildings, boy, they are wild!

HENDERSON

Have you been to Nigeria? To Africa?

BANKHEAD

No, no. But I know from what they tell me, and I saw some of the designs.

HENDERSON

I saw some photographs they had, too.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. So they know— Aesthetically, I can learn from them. Some of them aesthetically look as good as Frank Lloyd Wright's stuff. Because some of them got information from Frank Lloyd Wright. And because they weren't restricted

like we are here in America. Like in Britain or something. They have the freedom that you don't have. And they've got engineering from different places— Italy. When they go abroad, when you are not restricted by the laws, consequently you can do things that— And some of them are not earthquake-prone places. Consequently, they don't have to contend with that. This is what they run into here. They are not educated about certain things like zoning. Earthquakes either— Neither tornadoes and all those kinds of— See, I'm designing the building now for someplace in Alabama. Well, the structure is completely different than it is here in the earthquake thing.

HENDERSON

Oh, really?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Because the thing you have to design that for is uplift, wind.

HENDERSON

Right. You want to keep the roof on the building.

BANKHEAD

You're going to have to keep the roof on and keep the whole building tied down to the foundation. Consequently, I designed an oversized foundation. I tied all my girders into a hunk of concrete so when the cyclone comes it doesn't lift it up off the foundation. At the top of the plate, I tie the plate to the stud to the extent that you can't pull the plate off. I've got the ceiling joists and the rafters bolted down to the plate so the wind is not going to lift that. Because I've got angles that tie into every fourth rafter. Bolts through the rafters. Bolts down through the plate, and the plate is tied to the— It's never soft, it's bolted to the stud. That stud is bolted to the plate, and the plate— I've got a bolt that goes all the way through the plate from just under the floor all the way down into— I've got some twenty-fourth inch bolts tied all the way through down into the what-you- call-it.

HENDERSON

Into the concrete?

BANKHEAD

In the concrete. And the girders are also tied. The girders, the pairs, they're also tied the same way. When this building's built, I want to learn that a cyclone didn't move it!

HENDERSON

[laughter] I don't think so! Not unless the cyclone comes right dead at it!

BANKHEAD

Yeah, yeah. Even if it came dead at it, I want some part of that to— I want to hear from it, because the guy's going to build it this summer. The plan's in there right now. So that is where you have the freedom. That's where sometimes a person designing in one part of the country and this part of the— When the earthquakes start, then you've got to deal with seismic and— You aren't worried about the building's top blowing off. You're worried about the movement and the falling brick and the engineering and all that kind of stuff. So to answer your question about do I deal with them with— Now, if another group comes in who haven't have the experience— Aesthetics— You have trouble with these guys who've had that, because they always want to do that. They want to design from the word go. That's all they want to do. Then you have other guys come in who don't know anything and they want to draw pretty pictures. I've got a guy right there, he's an artist. He's got a B.S. degree in art. He has a B.S. in fine arts. He walked around the street carrying some of the artwork, and he won some contests. He walked around and he carried it so long some of it's dirty. Sometimes I like to get people like that. He is down, and I caught him. And I'm pulling—

HENDERSON

Pulling him back up.

BANKHEAD

I'm pulling him back up. He tells me, "You changed me. Now I'm coming back up." This is another inspiration you have. When you pick up people who— One considers them nothing and you develop them. That's not only the one aspect— Now, this thing here [a flyer] tells you this right here.

HENDERSON

Is this the information flyer about academic partnership with El Camino College?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. It reads that this is the best type of education you can have. You always have people who are in the field who bring back information to the people who are in the office. I don't care if you are in outer space— They shot all those things up there, but until they got somebody out there and walked up on the moon and brought the information back, they weren't sure. I don't care what field you work in, you've got to go to the guy that's really out in the field. In the medical profession, the guys are always taking a chance that they'll kill somebody and they'll scream about it, but that's the guy that's out in the field. He knows and he can't be too excited about one or two people losing their lives when that medical experience is going to save a million people. That's in the field, see. And you bring it back to the laboratory, and the guy who's sitting in the laboratory who's studying and making experiments, he's in the field, too. They are all out there in the field making contact that has never been made. So it's important that you have that. This is what this is about.

HENDERSON

Now, is it important to you to have this sort of cooperative education program? That is, you've got something like this with Trade-Tech, right?

BANKHEAD

No, I never— Not directly. Indirectly with [Los Angeles] Trade Tech[nical College]. Now, Santa Monica JC [Junior College, now Santa Monica College]— I had the same thing with Santa Monica JC. And the guy who— I've got his name, too. Let's put his name down. Kevin [Lincoln], the guy who had the same program, his name is Kevin. I marked the books. He had the same program. So see, what-you-call-it, lots of schools have them, but it's very seldom that the minorities know about it and make use of it. Now, he [Ben] is getting four units for this.

HENDERSON

Wait. Who is the one that's registered in the class? What's your student's name that's registered in this?

BANKHEAD

It's Ben.

HENDERSON

Oh, Ben. I didn't know Ben was going to El Camino College.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, he's been going there a long time. Kevin was the one that went to Santa Monica JC in the same program.

HENDERSON

What is Kevin's name?

BANKHEAD

Let's see, what's his name? I've got his card. I'll get it.

HENDERSON

Okay. Maybe just the first name will be enough. Kevin is fine.

BANKHEAD

Kevin, yeah. He comes by here all the time. Now, Dwayne Johnson is another one who went to this school here years ago and did the same thing. Now, I'm not saying other architects don't do it.

#### **1.14. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE TWO MARCH 8, 1990**

HENDERSON

What's Ben's name?

BANKHEAD

Ben's name is Benedict [Obafunda]. I can't remember his last name. I thought I had Kevin's card. Anyway, he's got his own business. His mother's working with him. He's doing very well. He still comes by here, and he wants to open up a business. He wants to go into real estate. Oh, well, he's been dealing with



real estate. He's doing real estate appraisal. He's got his own company and everything. His mother's working with him. His sister's working with him. He's the one that went to the JC. He was in architecture then, but he had been a medical student there. He and another friend who was a medical student— The other friend, I used to cut his hair. He was going to Santa Monica JC. He told him about it, and he came on. I started cutting his hair, and he liked architecture. He switched from medicine to architecture. He stayed there two years. In the time that he was here, his family dissolved. He had a divorce, and he didn't know whether he was coming or going. Sometimes they come here, and they don't get just the architecture. It settles you down and gives you some kind of balance. That's what I'm doing with this guy over here [Ennis Gavin]. His father was in real estate, and that's how he backed into it. I said I went to ' SC [University of Southern California], and he was very- impressed. He did well at Santa Monica JC after he started working here. He got himself together. His friend still doesn't know. He's still floundering from one thing to another.

#### HENDERSON

You seem to have a touch with people. I mean, I remember David [C. Ralston] talking about you in a very positive way—that the way you explain things or talk about life, you were talking about more than architecture.

#### BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. Architecture is the source of— The ultimate objective of architecture, anything, is for the development and the service of people. I don't care what field you go into, your ultimate objective should be that. And architecture may be a means of doing this. It may be a means. Like I was talking to a minister, and he was saying that he had studied to be a minister for twenty years and had been a pastor for a long time. He knew more about the Bible than anybody I had ever seen. And he was going around kicking himself because he's not still ministering. But everyday of your life is a ministry. You don't have to pick this or go to a church or something like that. Every aspect of your whatever is geared to making life more pleasant for whoever. See, that's the object of life, in a sense. So architecture— I enjoy it, but when I see people who will take architecture just to make money and take advantage of this person, that person, you know— It's an art, and you enjoy

the development of what you have in your mind, but only 2 percent of the people who have these dreams will be able to develop them. Just a few. Just a small percentage. And those that can develop them, many times— You take Paul [R. ] Williams. He spent this time- But do you think he was rich when he died?

HENDERSON

Most architects are not very well off when they die. He wasn't that rich?

BANKHEAD

No. I'm pretty sure he wasn't. You know what I'm telling you about the money. He lived right above me for a year, and then he moved out there and built his first house. His own house he build right here right off of Washington [Boulevard] in the Crenshaw area.

HENDERSON

Yeah, right off of Crenshaw [Boulevard] and Washington [Boulevard].

BANKHEAD

As far as I know, that's the first house he ever built for himself after all these years. All the stuff he did in Hollywood and all those places. It's like a carpenter—the last home he fixes is his own.

HENDERSON

About when did he do that house? Was that '55?

BANKHEAD

I think it was about '55, yeah. I think it was about that time. But anyway, back to what we were talking about.

HENDERSON

I was talking about your touch with your students.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, yeah. That's the thing that I would consider that— Not only consider a student. Now, right in this community— I go over there and eat, see, and—

HENDERSON

This is at the Trendy Cafe.

BANKHEAD

Trendy Cafe. I go over there and eat. The guys up and down the street here borrow money from me and say they are going to pay me back. Well, I know they won't pay me back. I'm glad to let them have it. So you're buying insurance. A good name. You can buy insurance for five dollars out there and guys will protect you, but if you turn the other way you couldn't stay here. So they think they're buying— If they get five dollars off me, I'm a good man. They say, "I'm gonna pay you back." Every time I see them, I let them know, "Man, don't worry about that. Don't worry about that. We're all living. We're living, and we're here together. I'm just like you are." So when they get to feeling, this guy, what kind of guy is this? The place in the cafe over there, they are writing an article on just— They didn't say what it was, but it's just how you—

HENDERSON

Do they know where it's going to be published? Did they tell you it was going to be in the *L. A. [Los Angeles] Times* or something like that?

BANKHEAD

Oh, no. They can't afford to put anything in the *[Los Angeles] Times*. Shew! They'll get it printed. To get it printed would be good. See, that's what I'm talking about. You think in terms of the *Times*, them putting it in the *Times*. They can't even put it in the *[Los Angeles] Sentinel*. But this is out in the field. This is out down where it is. You say, "Well, I thought he's a architect." But your service is where you are. Booker T. Washington says, "Let down the bucket where you are." That's what he's talking about, too. That's why they didn't run him out of Alabama. See, all these other guys, [W. E. B.] DuBois and all of them that's flirting around and talking this and talking that kind stuff, but how many Tuskegee [Institutes] do you have?

HENDERSON

Yeah. DuBois didn't found a university.

BANKHEAD

A lot of people wanted to go back to Africa and all this jive. You know, it's a dream, but in reality: "Let down your bucket where you are." We're out there. We're out there. But you've got Tuskegee, and Tuskegee is the first school of this type, you might say, in the world. Because before that, that type of education had never been pulled together and considered as legalized to some extent as an education. But when he did what he did, then they began to realize that the development of the mind at any point is very valuable. You don't have to have a B.S. degree or a Ph.D. degree, because sometimes the people that have those degrees subsist off of the mass. And you can't get anything off the mass if the mass doesn't produce. That is probably one of the problems with the minorities, with the blacks. If you are not productive, then nobody can get anything from you because you're not producing anything. As long as the blacks were producing labor—You know, like the Mexicans coming from Mexico now, they serve a purpose. But the blacks decided that they didn't want to work and they were going to gamble and do everything like somebody else. Then you're not serving anymore so you've got to steal. You've got to do dope or do something. See what I mean? So at any rate, architecture or whatever it is, it's a service. I said if my life meant anything, it's as a service architect. I started to put that on my card. I'm a service architect. I'm a poor man's architect. But I said I don't want to get so way out saying this or that as though to draw the spotlight [on myself]. You know, some people get angry with you. My wife [Mary Wright Bankhead] gets mad sometimes because of the same thing. People call me up and ask me for advice, and not just in the architecture field. Just about their life in general. I have more of that probably—My wife gets mad, you know, because, "You're always advising people." She told me one night, "What you talking about?" [laughter]

HENDERSON

You may not want to say all of that.

BANKHEAD

No, no, no.

HENDERSON

Let me ask you another question. Are most of your clients in the black community? Do you have any clients in the Mexican community or white clients?

BANKHEAD

I've had some white clients, and I've had some Mexican clients. I think I remember having two Japanese clients.

HENDERSON

Do you design any differently for them than your black clients?

BANKHEAD

No, no. Because the field in which those people—Here again, it's a matter of service. They can buy a design and things like that. They want a job done, they want a permit, they want to do this, and they want to do that. However, anytime I'm doing a job for anybody, regardless of what status he's in, I design it always my best. I will talk to them and tell them this is best for you. I'll give you an indication of what I'm talking about. I think I told you about how I designed a house—I don't know whether I showed you the pictures or not—in Alabama or Mississippi or somewhere. They had a house which was six thousand square feet. I told you about it. Because it was the biggest house square footage that they had in that community, she had to have a guard to keep them, she thought, from stealing her what-you-call-it. She came here and she lived here and she had money and property here. People tend to want to go back where they came from thinking that "somehow or another I'll feel like I felt when I was young." You go back there, you're still going to be old. But most people want to go back because they think, somehow or another, "When I was young, I enjoyed it. If I go back there, I can pick up some of what I left." But it's them. It's the individual. Many people go back there, and some of them come back [to California]. But then sometimes you're too old. You can't get back. So I designed this house for the lady, and she was saying what she wanted and all the closet space, oh, man! The house is six thousand square feet, and they had a library in it. What's she going to do with a library? But she was trying to outdo the people in the South now. They've built some nice homes back there. She's from California, from Hollywood, so she had to show that "I'm still over you." She went back there and built the biggest house in

the community. When her husband was here he was sick. I could look at him. You know, men die quicker than women anyway. He was sick, and so anything she said was okay. He just wanted to get somewhere and sit down. He was hurting, and I could see it. I could not overlook the fact that here she was robust and everything, and she wasn't thinking about him. So I said to her, "Let's design this building so one day you"—she's sixty years old now—"won't feel like going over this whole house." Big kitchen. The kitchen was probably as big as this room here. So I said, "Let's design it this way so if later you get older, you can have it become a two-family house." I said, "You won't be using the kitchen because probably somebody will be cooking for you. They will use part of the house and you can use the living room and you can use this library room here." I put a wardrobe in it, and I put a bath and everything from the kitchen between the— So what happened, she said, "Yeah, that's good." I made her believe that she was getting something, but the main thing was I would design it for the future. The library was here [pointing to a floor-plan drawing], the garage was here, and there was a passageway. The bathroom was between the the kitchen and the library. The garage was here. As you get out of the library, you'd come in the kitchen or you'd come in here and go in this house. The kitchen came all the way up here, and the dining room was next, and the living room was next. You had a whole house on one side. So whenever they got to the place that they couldn't do it, this would be their room. Their bath. Access to the kitchen. Then they could sit here in the living room, and the other people could have the rest of the house. That's what events are going to happen, see what I mean? All the clothes and things she's got, they'd be still hanging in the closet somewhere. So her husband—Before I could get the plans finished and get them down there, he had to have an operation. Then when he came back—He'd had the operation, he'd recovered from it, and then he felt good and he was in the mood, because he had gone through the operation—he could see that he was going to enjoy it. In the meantime, she couldn't sell the property here that quick. So she ran into a financial bind, because she had started to build down there. But she had, I don't know, ten brothers and sisters down there, and they all had some money. The white people were just looking for her to fold up."You don't know what you're doing building this house," and that kind of thing. But houses don't cost near as much down there as they do here. What happened, they pitched in because they were going to use the house as a general home. A big

house and the porch all across the front and porch all the way across the back because of the sun. Glass here and glass there, and the fireplace right in the middle, and the living and dining room is about thirty feet wide and I don't know how deep. I had glass all in the front so you could look out to the back and all that kind of stuff. But anyway, that's what I'm talking about designing, visualizing the need, according to the age and condition of the people. So the last time they came in, I told him and her why the design was like that. I told her and him too. I said, "I could not forget your husband here was sick. I saw him sick." I said, "The only thing he was saying was, 'Just go ahead and do what you want to do. Go ahead with what you want to do.'" I told her that, and I told him that. He said, "You're exactly right." She sobered up, and she said, "You were right. You're right." So they were happy. She went and built the house and completed it, and she sent me the pictures back here. I've got the pictures somewhere. That's six thousand square feet, a big house. Now, ask me another question.

HENDERSON

Since most of your clients are in the black community and you've been working in the community for some years, how did integration affect your business? Did integration maybe affect competition for your clients?

BANKHEAD

Well, now I read that question, but it sounded like to me it was competition between black architects and the union or a competition between architects.

HENDERSON

Well, I guess I really mean it in two parts. Is there stiff competition between you and other black architects—that's one question—for clients?

BANKHEAD

No. No.

HENDERSON

Your clients are distinctly different from what other black architects are going after?

BANKHEAD

I would say so, yeah. To a great degree. Only in recent years have I bumped into other architects. I've got two jobs here that other architects worked on. The big house I showed you? There was an architect on that job. And I got another job in there also that came to me where there was another architect on it.

HENDERSON

Where is that big house going? That's huge.

BANKHEAD

Cerritos, California.

HENDERSON

Is that one house or some apartments?

BANKHEAD

No!

HENDERSON

That's one house?

BANKHEAD

Eight thousand square feet. Eight to ten thousand square feet.

HENDERSON

Are the clients black?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, the only blacks in that area.

HENDERSON

That's a big house.

BANKHEAD

But they've got one right next to it that's around six thousand square feet. And let me tell you what happened.

HENDERSON



Now? I have the tape machine going.

BANKHEAD

No. I don't want that taped.

HENDERSON

Okay, then let's—[tape recorder off] Well, the second part of my question is—  
No, let me back up a second. I think what you're telling me is right about black architects, because the other architects I've interviewed say most of their clients are government projects: schools, housing projects, what have you. And you don't do any of that.

BANKHEAD

No.

HENDERSON

Okay. How did integration affect your business in terms of you and, say, white architects?

BANKHEAD

It had no effect.

HENDERSON

No effect.

BANKHEAD

No effect on me. Because—I won't say that, because my business—Yeah, it did affect me. Now I remember. It used to be one time I would just pick up plans. People were just calling, and I had people working. Because at that time there was enough money in circulation that the white architects, whatever, didn't have to back up on the crumbs. See, when government projects got all—And after the sixties when everything was all built—See, everything goes in cycles up and down. During the sixties, the money was rampaging, and the building was crazy, and they didn't bother with the little crumbs. In the sixties, what happened, the real estate was booming. Building was booming. But what happened, the government and the interest rates changed that, so there weren't any jobs. The real estate dealers couldn't sell because of the money,

and the builders couldn't build. The contractors couldn't build because of money. Consequently, the contractors and the brokers got together and formed the corporation, because the contractors—The real estate brokers had to do with finance. They had connections with finance. Even though it's a different thing. So the two of them got together, and some of them became contractors and brokers. Many of them became contractor-brokers—see what I mean?—and visa versa. That was because of a lack of finance. That was also moving into my area. See, a lot of the blacks didn't even bother with it. Now, that was the one thing when I was working for Roab Construction Company. That was a Jewish company, but they would build anything. I said, "I'll design anything from a chicken coop on up." So somebody asked me, "What are you designing, a chicken coop?" You know. Just like that. And sit down and laugh. So what happened, they designed anything they could find out of their thirteen salesmen. They were just hunting all over the city and everywhere. They had a salesman for every race. I told you about that. I almost had a nervous breakdown behind that group.

HENDERSON

Goodness. They were working you to death.

BANKHEAD

They worked me to death. But I just got to where I thought I wanted to be, and I was so happy, man. I was high as—I stayed high for—Stayed high. You talk about cocaine! Shoot! Man, I couldn't sleep, man! And I still enjoy designing. You know, I still enjoy designing. I don't care whether your money affects me or not. I'd rather not even think about the money. One of the things that I got in dealing with the people who come in here, I've got something that shows how we operate. I never had it in writing. Any person that comes in here—I call it tutoring. That's the main thing. This tutoring is really what has been down through the ages, tutoring rather than teaching, see.

HENDERSON

This is for your students?

BANKHEAD

For the students. I almost prefer that they don't have money to pay for it. Now, say I charge—Now I'm just saying what I made up. I charge fifteen dollars an hour for tutoring service. I prefer that the system in which they pay is a bartering system. You know what bartering means?

HENDERSON

Trading.

BANKHEAD

Trading.

HENDERSON

Exchange.

BANKHEAD

Exchange. And that can be anywhere from sweeping the floors to cleaning the toilets to whatever. It's a balance. The need is the most important thing—that they can achieve their goal at the same time I'm achieving something, too. That's what I've gotten. You'll see it sometime. But from now on, anybody coming here, I may ask them to sign something like that. It gives the person liberty to not—I told one of the guys that's in here that was a kid—He said, "Well, gee whiz. Who can afford to pay that?" But at the same time, who can afford to go to 'SC? [laughter]

HENDERSON

Yeah, 'SC charges a lot more.

BANKHEAD

'SC charges a lot more, and you aren't learning anything that can be at your fingertips and be of use right now. What I'm teaching, you can go out tomorrow if you learn enough and get a business license and go from there.

HENDERSON

You know, the kind of bartering system you're using tests a person's character and is also character- building.

BANKHEAD

Yeah.

HENDERSON

I remember reading Booker T. Washington's autobiography [*Up From Slavery*]. His entrance exam for Hampton [Institute] was how well he could sweep up a room. He swept that room, going and coming, backwards and forwards. The lady came in there with a white glove and found no dust and she said, "You're admitted."

BANKHEAD

Well, you see, what accounted—? Now, let me ask you this question. What accounted for the likeness of what I have and what he had? For the same people who were employing him—What accounts for me thinking like the person who had the white glove? What accounts for that? The lady who came in with the white glove and told him he was admitted? I use the same technique. What accounts for the likeness? Why do I think like she thought?

HENDERSON

Oh, okay. You were looking to see if somebody has character enough to work hard for their education.

BANKHEAD

Mmm-hmm.

HENDERSON

In terms of values, you want to make sure that they're willing to work and not be afraid of it.

BANKHEAD

Mmm-hmm.

HENDERSON

You want people to not see manual labor as being beneath them.

BANKHEAD

Mmm-hmm. Wait a moment, now, you're not—The question I asked you, what accounts for me asking for the same thing that she was asking for? What

accounts for the two of us asking for the same thing out of the people, out of the person?

HENDERSON

You tell me.

BANKHEAD

Conditions. The conditions that accounted for her requesting what she requested and what we are looking for is the same thing with me. See, time has nothing to do with it. You heard me say that time is nothing. Wherever those conditions occur, they cause one to think like he thinks. If you are in a cold climate, you want to put on more clothes. If you are in a warm climate, you're going to change your clothes. It's the conditions that account for one's thinking like he thinks.

HENDERSON

Oh, so that's it. You're saying that your conditions here make you ask for slightly different but like things, like what her conditions were at Hampton?

BANKHEAD

Right!

HENDERSON

But you bend the task to the condition.

BANKHEAD

No. The thing that I'm talking about is that what accounts for people thinking like they think is the conditions that they're under. That accounts for it. See, she was thinking like she was thinking and saying what she was saying because the conditions she wanted him to act [upon] were there. She wanted those floors clean. So the same thing here. I said, "This guy can clean the toilet." Or he can sweep the floor or whatever. I'm asking for the same things. I'll tell them—This guy that I'm talking about, he did the same thing as Booker T. Washington did, and this is what attracted my attention. I asked him to sweep up this one place, he swept the whole thing out! The guys here say, "We don't want him because he's been doing this, he's been doing that." But I see more than that. I feel him, also. See, I'm pulling and I feel him. It's like catching a

fish. That fish you've got on a hook out there, you don't see him but you feel him. You wind. You're winding. You know if you keep winding you're going to get him.

HENDERSON

You have a lot of faith in people.

BANKHEAD

You've got to have it!

HENDERSON

You know human nature very well.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, you've got to have it. If you have it, it never becomes old. Every day is youth. And you never grow old, in that sense. You may get physically old. But when you know these things here, that's a whole new world out there. The guy who is a scientist, he's looking all the time. He's looking, he's looking. Now they're talking about putting a spy light [satellite] up there. A spy thing up there so they can watch over the whole earth. And the plane [SR-71 Blackbird] that they made to do spy work, they're sending it back to the Smithsonian [Institution]. You heard about that.

HENDERSON

Yeah, I saw that in the newspaper yesterday [*Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1990].

BANKHEAD

Yeah. They put it up, and he flew from here to there. But they don't need it anymore, because what happened, they got—They just turned loose a billion-dollar light [satellite] up there that can detect everything that they made this plane detect. See what I mean? That's partly what we're talking about. But back to what you said—the lady, you know. So I said this is a barter. A barter, because you fit the needs. One of the questions you asked me about was how do you decide your design?

HENDERSON

Right. Where's your inspiration?

BANKHEAD

Function. No, wait a minute. How a thing is made is how it's needed. What's that term in architecture?

HENDERSON

Form follows function?

BANKHEAD

Right. That's the form. That's my criteria. When that is met, then I start to think about the other little cute things, the gingerbread that people talk about. That's the essence of architecture as well as anything else. Form—No, how do they have it now? How it looks follows the function.

HENDERSON

Right. Oh, when you look at it, you should be able to know what it's function is by how it looks.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. How you use it. How you use it will determine the function of it. The function of it is the thing that determines how it will look. Basically speaking, when you talk about a room or you talk about a table height, the function of this height, you know—I have people who are short and people who are tall. I say, "Your countertops—" I looked at the lady and I saw she was short. So why am I going to give her a tabletop for somebody six feet? You look in the diagram, and it talks about how far you can reach this way, how far you can reach that way. That's the primitive concept of design—how you can reach and how far you can bend. Your height and everything, that's function. Your bed is made long because when you lie down you're long. That's function. You don't make a bed a circle. Some of them are circles, but they've got to be long enough to take his length.

HENDERSON

Now, let me ask you this question. This large house that you were doing for Cerritos has a fairly traditional look on the exterior.

BANKHEAD

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Are you not worried about having a house look on the exterior like it's functional? Does that exterior look matter in terms of functionality versus tradition?

BANKHEAD

Now, the house, any house that I design, the function is first.

HENDERSON

Sure. That's the floor plan and how the rooms are—

BANKHEAD

Traffic.

HENDERSON

Traffic and circulation.

BANKHEAD

Right. Now, you're saying, "Do the looks tell you anything about the function?" Is that what you're asking me?

HENDERSON

Right.

BANKHEAD

Yeah! Because if you've got a room and you want a lot of light that spreads across the room, you don't have a narrow window. So when they look at the outside, the bedroom may have a long window. The living room may have a window that drops down. And in the dining room, where you eat, you have windows that definitely drop down because it brings in a lot of light and makes it cheerful. See, I've got sliding doors where you eat from the dining room, sliding glass doors where you can look. You bring in all the light from the height, and that will give you a more cheerful—Now, a window up high



will give you light up high, but it doesn't give you the privacy if you had—If you were in that dining room with that glass part way down, it probably won't be on the second floor or something like that because it doesn't give you enough privacy. And the same thing with the bathroom. I like to design the bathroom where there's privacy between where you take a bath and where you use the commode and where you do other things. I like to have those things. Because if one person is using the toilet, and the other person is taking a bath— Sometimes the husband's taking a bath and the wife is taking a bath. But it all goes back partly to how you live and everything.

HENDERSON

Yeah, that's all culturally determined.

BANKHEAD

Culture has to do with it. So that has something to do with architecture, too.

HENDERSON

Okay. Well, let me ask you this question: Has there been any project that you worked on where you feel the client either totally messed it up or totally did not understand what you were trying to do? They built it, but somehow it was not exactly what you wanted? They changed it a little bit or—? What's the project that you sort of dislike the most?

BANKHEAD

Dislike the most.

HENDERSON

Where the client just totally didn't understand what you wanted?

BANKHEAD

Okay, let me see now. Well, I'll tell you, most of the jobs I did—[tape recorder off] Now, I would say this: That most of my clients who I explain things to, once the thing develops, they're more satisfied with it than they were in the process of talking. Because after they get—See, I had plenty of clients that didn't know what was going on until you got the floor up there, and then they said, "Where is my bedroom gonna be?" And you have to mark on the floor. That's when you find out, some-times, when they really realize what they

want. So if you talk to them enough, they listen to what you're saying and they think they understand. But then they'll be surprised when you get it up there."Oh, I thought my closet was gonna be like this. I thought my closet was gonna be like that." So sometimes I tell whoever is going to do the building, you get the floor and the walls and a few walls as fast as you can up there and mark on the floor with white crayon, "This is the bath." Often I have to do this. You have to measure the room that's the end and make them know what size you're next room is going to be. I often do this even when you deal with people who are just people. This is what I have to do. You have to educate them, and they will have a lot of confidence in you. Then when the thing's complete, they're happy. That's how I built my business.

HENDERSON

Okay, well, maybe let me shift the question a little bit. Is there any project where maybe the client understood everything you wanted but you got the project built and it didn't turn out like you wanted it to be when you saw it?

BANKHEAD

Oh, I've had a lot of that! [laughter] So much so I can say if you do a job and you let a contractor get it and he starts to mess with it, I don't want to go back to see it. Especially if it's a contractor. They are money-hungry. I don't go back. One of the things I tell all people, "I don't draw plans for contractors or anybody else but you and the building department." That's why I get permits on all of my jobs. I don't draw plans and give them to contractors.

HENDERSON

Oh, you go get the permits.

BANKHEAD

I get permits for all the jobs. I don't draw plans and give them to anybody. I've never done that. I learned a long time ago. [tape recorder off] What was it we were saying?

HENDERSON

You were saying you go get the permit. You don't let the contractor get the permit.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. See, two things are the reason I do that. People are subject to sue architects. But if you get a permit, they've got to sue me and the city.

HENDERSON

I didn't know that!

BANKHEAD

Insurance for architectural areas is tremendous. You can't afford it. Minority contractors cannot afford the insurance. Minority people cannot afford the insurance that's required to do any of these things. The minute that they know you have insurance, you are subject to suit after suit. Because they're not after you. But if they know you've got insurance, they go after the insurance company. And they will fall over anything. There are groups set up—Like you build a condominium, you've got several people in it, and they've got an organization for those types of people. Not individuals. They take the class-action suit against the insurance company, not against you. So I stay away from those people, too. See, everybody has got a gimmick. As long as you stay with the small individual—what you call ignorant—they are the truest people to deal with and they appreciate. But the rest of them: contractors, real estate brokers, you name it. Government officials, oh, I don't want to say government officials. But they're all after money whatever way they can get it. And one person is—Well, you think that that guy's just trying to be mean. But one guy's squeezing the next guy, and the next guy's squeezing the next guy, and the next guy's squeezing the next guy. You hear what they're talking about, they're buying up everybody. Buying up one another. Doing all these kinds of things and nobody working. No one's producing. That's why the country's in a predicament. Somebody's always got to be the field man. I don't care how many bums you have and how many this, you've got to have the field inspection man that's going in door by door.

HENDERSON

House by house.

BANKHEAD

House by house. That's the only way you're going to be sure, you're going to know. So I get permits on my plans. When you get a permit and it's gone through enough—I've got a job right here right now. This is an apartment house. This guy was supposed to have an inspection before he nailed the roof on. Now, he's not a contractor, but he's got a guy that's working with him. He does a lot of things himself. Now he's got the whole building up. It's supposed to have two layers of 5/8ths[-inch] plywood and something between it, and he's got one layer. He's got all the studs nailed down and got all the roof on and the roof hasn't been inspected. Now, this is what is known as—The average architect will say, "So be it." But I'll have to spend more time trying to get him cleared out of this thing than probably I spent doing the plan.

HENDERSON

Right. Do you get compensated for all that?

BANKHEAD

I haven't asked him.

HENDERSON

Whew!

BANKHEAD

But this is what he's into. I have never had a case like this before. So I went down to the building department, and I asked the guy what I can do. He said, "Just put another floor in there, put another 5/8ths."

HENDERSON

You mean around the studs?

BANKHEAD

Now, he didn't say how. Well, I don't think we should be taping this.

HENDERSON

Okay. Because this tape is about to end. Maybe we should pick up next time.

BANKHEAD

Okay. We'll cut it off, and then I'll tell you the rest of the story.

### **1.15. TAPE NUMBER: IX, SIDE ONE MARCH 20, 1990**

HENDERSON

Our session today will be about your tutoring and mentoring of students and your vision of where architecture should be going as a profession and a community resource. As we left the discussion last week, you said you were a service architect. I see that as a community resource, and a very good one. Where do you think architecture should be going as a profession?

BANKHEAD

Well, I think that it should be going, as I aforestated, [toward] whatever is necessary for the best of the community and mankind in general. I think that we should have buildings more isolated and not as congested as it has been. If I had my desire, I would put maybe one building in a block. I would probably put one building in a block. This one building is not a single-family dwelling; it is designed for extended families. I do not mean apartments or multi-family dwellings.

HENDERSON

That's financially difficult to do these days.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I know. But I'm just saying where we will go.

HENDERSON

Well, go ahead. Dream to the heights.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. That's what I would do if I had—Now, if you're talking about changing the city as such, then there would be a lot of things involved, as far as that goes, because it's like we've downzoned the city here in the last few years, which eliminated a lot of traffic and many inconveniences that we were going to inherit by continuing to build where the traffic lanes were overcrowded and the sewer lines were overloaded because they weren't built for the number of people or the the load that are being put on them today. I think that was the origin of the concept of the person who did Los Angeles. They didn't want it to

be a high rise like New York, Detroit, all those places where they become infested and lack air and all those things. See what I mean? So I don't know exactly how you would eradicate the conditions other than what they have attempted to do—confine the growth to a minimum. I'm in agreement with that.

HENDERSON

With the downzoning?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Technically, I'm in agreement with the downzoning. Because if it continues, where will we have roads? Or we'll have to tear up all the sewer lines in the city to get the sewer to—It's just overcrowded. But in my way of thinking we're confined to the basin. I notice that in many of the outlying places they're building new communities. I'm kind of in agreement with that, but those new communities are kind of sprawling. I think the individual cannot continue to be as selfish as we have been. Because you've got one person probably living in a house that's two, three or four bedrooms. People need to be educated or become more concerned about the total community in order to control some of the things that we're talking about. Whereas a lot of houses have one person in them, two people in them, a lot of the houses are being built now for one or two people, and before they're built it's out-of-date.

HENDERSON

What do you mean "out-of-date"?

BANKHEAD

For example, they've built some buildings now where the person who's having the building done is probably in his fifties and his sixties, and they've just got to the point where they could kind of help their appetites or their egos. In that way, in another five years they're used to the building and the size of it. You can't even go through it. It's outdated, you know, as far as age is concerned. There's a lot of that happening. Now, I find that many families, because of the cost, are moving back [to central areas] and building additions and maybe—Many places I run into [a situation] where they hope to try to figure some kind

of way to get a new unit into a zone where it's not permissible. With that in mind, I think the new outlet from an architectural point of view should view the areas in which the older people live or the younger people live. There should be some studies made as to what happened to people of certain age and maybe an attempt to change the concept or even study and educate the people to the extent that when you become a certain age, this is what's going to occur, so you won't be left with two people or one person with nobody to help them. This would have something to do with the overloading of the community centers like the—

HENDERSON

What, homeless shelters?

BANKHEAD

Homeless shelters. Also for the people who can afford to pay for these things, the income and everything wouldn't be tied up into the places that they're leaving. Instead, the development would be of such that—And you find people changing, buying smaller houses. But if the thought was involved from a study, then I think that would be better for the total picture of architecture. I think one should take a long view of this—of communities that are being set up. That is, the period in which the children are growing and that same area where the children are growing, they will eventually leave.

HENDERSON

There's a generation cycle to housing.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, to housing. I was looking in that direction. Now, when I made the statement about how I would probably have a house, a building in each block, that would be the new developments. I would have a high rise, and that would depend upon many factors. I would not want a high rise in one block where there wouldn't be sufficient money or whatever necessary to create a harmonious group. That is, one person making fifty thousand dollars a year would not go too well with a person making twenty thousand dollars a year.

HENDERSON

Oh, yes. You'll have jealousy that way.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, see. So what I mean is a study should be made of that. I think what we have today where you have communities with one single-family dwelling, and the next area is multiple-family dwelling and so on and so forth—I think those considerations are well taken. But I would even go further. I would not permit as many houses per acre or whatever. There would have to be a balance. A study would have to be made economically. You have the balance of doing things economically as well as the natural life. And in this area, the area that I'm talking about where this big building would be, there would be even play areas and even gardens. And that means that the air surrounding this neighborhood would have a chance to—

HENDERSON

Cleanse itself.

BANKHEAD

Cleanse itself, see. You have one in one block, one in another block, you know. Have a tendency to clean itself. Definite play areas for children and also for the family. But each person in this unit would have a separate play area for each one. They'd have a separate play area. They might have one general room where they all could meet.

HENDERSON

Like a community center?

BANKHEAD

A community center, a definite community center.

HENDERSON

You know, your description sounds like a model suburb.

BANKHEAD

Well, I'm dealing with that because you can't deal too much with what's already existing. You have to destroy this and destroy that and nobody wants to do that. But if there's a new suburb—And not allow the suburbs to be changed. That's why I'm talking about the economic point of view. Definitely



have play areas and have fun areas. Everybody in that area would have a like income to some extent. This, I think, would have to do with the sewage and also the other things that tend to make communities less habitable. Now, we know that there are some places where you have these communities now where they have cul-de-sac places. Cars are not running through the streets. Also, we have a place here in the city known as Briarwood.

HENDERSON

Off of where?

BANKHEAD

Off of Manchester [Boulevard]. It's on Manchester, west of Crenshaw [Boulevard]. There's a locality which is kind of ideal. You have to have a pass to get in this particular place.

HENDERSON

Okay. It's not the one that's next to the [Great Western-]Forum. It's just a little east of the Forum.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. East of the Forum. Well, and also the one next to the Forum, too.

HENDERSON

Oh, Briarwood and Carlton Square.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, Briarwood. Now, those are communities I like. I've been in there, and I did some work in there. Most of the people living there are single people. They all look—They're working. And they all have a similar salary. It's quiet, and they're not afraid. Nobody can get it there and run through the community and all that kind of thing. It's a nice life and the buildings are of such that they're not that big.

HENDERSON

They're very small units.

BANKHEAD

They're small units, but well-designed and airy. They don't have any play areas. I would be against that for—What I mean, that area I would not consider for children. No play areas. But my version of the future would be on one block to have one building and have all the necessary requirements that you need. Somehow or another we would have each person have a place that he can take his family and do whatever he wants to do and still live in the same building. And have a community kitchen. Instead of going out and running out to a restaurant and all this and crowding the streets and everything, you would have all of this confined to this area. Keep it on a level where it would be desirable. If necessary, you have all the functions that—A cook or whatever was necessary to keep this, but still you have your own kitchen.

HENDERSON

That's interesting because I've read something about communal kitchens and how this could relieve the wife of the burden of cooking every night.

BANKHEAD

And also one of the main things is child care. That would be one of the essential things of this area. And also the care of older people. You will not isolate the older people and throw them out somewhere and have all these old-folks homes and things like that. The thought should be given that the children in the area would as much as possible come in with the older people. Because you find that many of the grandmothers and everything, they get to a certain age—Oh, sorry, cut off that tape.

HENDERSON

Oh, you have to call it off. Okay.

### **1.16. TAPE NUMBER: X, SIDE ONE MARCH 25, 1990**

HENDERSON

We are going to discuss where architecture's going as a profession.

BANKHEAD

I think that there's no end to—There's always more information to be had. There's no question about that. But the question is at what cost. I don't know

whether I should—Because to answer some questions sometimes you have to probably go kind of back in the history and relate how it has so far advanced or occurred. And it's also related to the places and conditions. Like in cold climates you can think in terms of how you preserve heat—just like we have here now—to try to use certain methods of insulation and also certain means of not using too much heat or too much energy. So that would have to do with which way architecture will go. Now, in warm climates you don't need as much, but you still think in terms of cool. Like places where it's hot or where it's cold, the architecture will vary accordingly. In places where it's hot, they have means of cooling. Where it's cold, they have means of heating. So that's relative to what I'm thinking about. As I told you before, if it was up to me, I would put one building in a whole square block, for extended families, not multi-family apartments. I think we went over that before. This would tend to dictate—Because in a high rise, this would tend to dictate how you still have the family structure as we have single houses here now. I think in the future it will be impossible to have single houses like we have here now. It's impossible because of the cost of energy, the cost of labor. In most places, the labor and everything—Labor has a tremendous part. That's why we ship everything here and there and push it around all over the world—to get cheap labor. That gives us a notion of what labor costs.

HENDERSON

But now, the houses still have to be built here in the U. S. Do you think that this—?

BANKHEAD

That will have a bearing on it all.

HENDERSON

You'll have components shipped from cheap-labor countries, and then they'll be assembled here in the U. S. ?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, yeah. That's true, but these cheap-labor countries also become intelligent and thereby you will not be able to get stuff at the price that we are getting it now. Consequently, they're still putting the squeeze on housing. See,

because somebody must do the work somewhere, sometime. [laughter] You know, you can do whatever you want, but that is necessary. Because you find that people from foreign countries—We ship stuff to foreign countries, get it made, and bring it back here, and make a profit on it. Then those same foreign people who we use to make the stuff, they learn. It's an education to them. So they say, "Why not do it right here?" South Korea and those places are an indication of what we're talking about. We ship stuff over there—commodities—and think we're going to have it built—nails, or whatever it is—and bring it back here. This also affects—The housing already is affected. The same people that are there, they're coming here. Of course, this indicates a greater demand in certain specific locations, but eventually that will catch up. It will peter out, because they will also demand. Their demands for labor and for prices for labor will still account for the lack of people to produce where we can afford it. Two things are the cost of labor and the cost of energy. In the last analysis, labor and research all tend to cause it to increase. Now, I'm thinking about some of the things that are available that maybe we have not tested. With engineering and knowledge and new techniques and new means of development making possible new uses of new material, one of the great things I've been thinking about for years is the volcano. See, it has been my view that the technology of developing, of catching this volcano-melted stuff before it consolidates—

HENDERSON

What do you mean? Like ash?

BANKHEAD

No, catch it before it becomes ash. The lava.

HENDERSON

Oh, the lava. I'm not following you. Now, what do you want to do with this lava? Because that lava is hot.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I know, but if we can drill shafts miles to get oil, we can build a shaft into that volcano and it would never explode. And we'd get that molten stuff and

have it come out and have vats in whatever shape we want it to be put in. We don't have to heat it. It's already heated.

HENDERSON

Oh. I hadn't thought of that. And it's rock.

BANKHEAD

And bring it out. It's going to have rock of all types. You've got igneous, generally igneous. But you still have rock of different textures and different degrees. Once you go into that, you'll find a whole new world of stuff that you can use. Also the ash. The volcano ash is light, and that combined with the lava—if you create a mine, if you want to, say, around the foot of these mountains that explode and cap them and don't allow them to explode and then use that for building material—

HENDERSON

It's difficult to get a volcano to not explode—to cap it—but that's an interesting idea you brought up.

BANKHEAD

Well, it's difficult to get it not to explode, but it's not impossible if you have enough openings coming into it.

HENDERSON

You draw out the energy from it before it explodes.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, yeah. You can go all the way around it, see, maybe someplace in the ocean or whatnot. But there will come a time when this is going to happen. It's going to happen. Any thinking person, if they don't make use of the lava from those things, he's stupid. Really, because here's a source of energy. Here's an energy source as well as a building-material source. And if you can go into that, you'll get more. You'll get a lot of energy, and you also will get the lava. And have shapes. As you get the lava out it's hot. Have shapes.

HENDERSON

Molds?

BANKHEAD

Molds. Have molds and you will have the molds shaped as you like them. You can just pull the molds out. You don't have to go up there yourself. But you can develop some of the things that they use in outer space. Heat protection? While the thing is not at its peak, you go in and maybe make an inroad in there and get some of the gases off. I know there's a lot of gases when everything's flowing, and I know they're deadly. But they do explode in the air and dissipate. Whatever effect it has on mankind is, I guess, not known. But this, to me, is the future.

HENDERSON

What do you think about wood products that are coming out now that are sort of hybrid-type plywoods? Maybe like, not chipboard—

BANKHEAD

Pressboard?

HENDERSON

Pressboard.

BANKHEAD

What do I think about that? I don't think too much about pressboard, because once it's wet, the glue in it—And some of the glue that they're using in this stuff, they may eventually find that maybe it's not too good for your health. Because they will eventually come up with some idea about plywood that the glue, to you, may not be—You know, like this other stuff. What is it that they have more trouble with now? They're tearing out of the buildings?

HENDERSON

Oh, asbestos?

BANKHEAD

Asbestos they used for years and years and years without ever knowing that it wasn't too good. Anything you do is going to have some disadvantages. But you've got to weigh it against the advantages.

HENDERSON

What about plastic pipes instead of copper pipes for plumbing?

BANKHEAD

Oh, I don't think too much of plastic pipes, either. I think there's a possibility of them breaking. They do give some, but I'm not—And also, the material of the plastic pipe, it will eventually be found that some of that is not too healthy, either. Some of that plastic is not too healthy. Well, everything has some disadvantages. The copper also has some disadvantages. But I prefer copper because it will bend some, and if you have an earthquake it doesn't probably break abruptly. It will probably give more than other metals. Copper, as far as I know, is still a good commodity because you don't have to add couplings and you can bend it. I think you find that plumbers want to use copper now much more than they used to. Because if you are putting in a bathroom, you can just bend copper any kind of way you want to do it. As long as you don't flatten it. They'd rather use copper now—every plumber I know. If you want to put in something, you don't want to use all those connection things, screwing this way and screwing that way. They just get some copper in there and do it just like you do, almost, conduits on a building. As a matter of fact, in a lot of the places up inside a building they use copper for water pipe. The only reason they haven't used it is because it is expensive. You know how expensive it is. It's very much more expensive than the other stuff. But as far as being used, it's easier to use because you can bend it. Then it doesn't rust. But they use a lot of plastic now because it's cheap to make and it's easy to form. So they use a lot of plastic. I don't care too much for plastic.

HENDERSON

In your office here, do you use any laborsaving devices in the drafting room?  
Like electric erasers?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I've used electric erasers like that. I've got a lead sharpener right there.

HENDERSON

So you have no problems with that kind of automation in an office?

BANKHEAD

No. The only thing I would have against that in architecture is that the machines take away from the originality of the art which people enjoy. And if you keep taking that away, there will be nothing anymore than a—I don't know. They use their brain, I guess, to operate a machine. They use their brain to operate a machine, but the question is, will you always have a machine? Then the person who is low on the totem pole, he will never be able to use the machine that they use. Like, for example, these chips and things that they use now—the Japanese.

HENDERSON

Oh, computer chips.

BANKHEAD

Computer chips and all those kinds of things. Sometimes they make them, and they become cheaper by competition and the simple way they're making them. But like, for example, right here and now, in the minorities, how will they utilize their energy towards what they need? Because if you can't use them, if you can't learn to use those machines and whatnot, then your labor's not worth anything. See, so there must be a place where labor can still be utilized. As I told you before, I think we were talking about the exchange of one commodity for another. What's the type of—? Bartering. I think that will still have to be kept alive and in the forefront, because there's always going to be a need for the individual. I don't care what happens, they eventually have to use the individual to really do it. Like you said before, you can have all the machines in the world and all the outer space guns and everything and kill everybody, but now who wants to kill everybody? But you've still got to go around there and deal with people. So I think the same thing is true in the architectural world and all over the world. The chief thing we talk about when we think about architecture is shelter. But then it gets involved in more than just doing a house—just something to put over you. It's how and where you want to use it. I mean, it's like any other commodity.

HENDERSON

Let me ask this question: have you discussed with anybody computer drafting? I know maybe for your office you haven't envisioned using computers, but



have you talked to people about computer drafting? What's your opinion on that?

BANKHEAD

Well, I've got a friend who has one. He has a computer that does drafting. Now, for a big office I think that's okay. But for an individual who is learning, who is actually learning, I don't like to—I like the thought of having a formula that you can use, but I always want the person to know how to make that formula.

HENDERSON

They have to know what they're doing and not let the computer do everything for them.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, because you put what you're—You feed the computer, but you must know what to feed. I think you must know more than to just look into the book and see what the book says to do and do what that book says to do in relation to the computer. Individually, I think you must know more than that. You must know how the formula was written. And thereby, if you do know that, then you're in the area of inventions and science and whatnot. But when you get above that, then you're not there anymore unless you use it in the method of dealing with the thing that has been an improvement. As a machine, you know. Any person who works with a machine a year, if you don't have somebody improving it or something like that, he's asleep or something. You must have somebody who's about improving, because the energy or whatever it takes to do what you're doing will dictate that. If you use that pencil long enough, you'll say, "Gee whiz."

HENDERSON

"I'm tired of doing this."

BANKHEAD

"What other way can I do this?" Turn this pencil another way, you know. The first pencils they made didn't have ridges in them.

HENDERSON

Oh, that's true.

BANKHEAD

But the reason for the ridges—

HENDERSON

Is that to hold the pencil better with?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, see, if you just had something round you had to grip it all the way—But when you get ridges in it, you don't have to grip that much. You'll notice that.

HENDERSON

So you're saying everything needs to be improved. Everything can be improved.

BANKHEAD

Everything can be improved. We'd leave something off, you know, if we don't carry it to it's limit. Who knows where the limit is? Everything can be improved. And the improvements determine, sometimes—The idea is to determine whether or not you have a tool that can deal with the idea you conceive. Like, for example, I'll give you a good example. I have an idea about this house I designed.

HENDERSON

This is the one for Cerritos?

BANKHEAD

Cerritos. But now I've got to do more than that. I have to have all the mechanics that go with it and how it should work. I have to deal with all the ramifications as far as heat and as far as air circulation and as far as delivering to that particular point and relieving it of such—It's underground, and you have to get the water up out of there. You've got to carry stuff down there, and you've got to bring it back. Plus all the laws that go with it. Like you've got to think in terms of the neighborhood and whether or not there are enough sewer lines there. Whether there are enough adequate roads. Whether the air is adequate. So all those things are—You just have a bright idea, a big idea, but

you've got to make it work. Cerritos is a good example of what I'm talking about. You know, you can dream.

HENDERSON

Yes, that's a big house.

BANKHEAD

That's a big house, but then you've got to make it work. You've got to have people who know how to make it work. I like the idea of thinking about things, but you've still got to have tools to develop it. I may have a big idea, but when it comes to the lay person, how it all goes together—I do have some ideas about that because I was a carpenter. I was a carpenter first. That's what I was in the army. As far as that goes, I built a—I don't know whether I told you about it. When I was in the army, I built lookout towers.

HENDERSON

I don't remember if you told me about the lookout tower. You told me about building a whole camp.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I built a camp. But I built a tower where you look out and watch the place. They were built out of a lot of logs. Out of poles—I want to say poles. You know, some trees grow about maybe eighty feet high.

HENDERSON

Now, this was not in North Africa?

BANKHEAD

No, this was in Italy. I was in Italy, and I had to build towers so somebody could watch the ammunition and watch the people also around there. I also had towers, but not as tall, in the area where I had the stockade. I had towers in those, but they weren't this tall. But the one that was in the ammunition dump had to be real high so you could see for a long ways over the foliage that they had. It's a foliage place, because they had ammunition and they had it hid. People could sneak around, and you had to be high because you couldn't see people low. The higher they were, the more territory they could cover as far as seeing. So I had to design those towers. The first thing I had to

do, I thought I was going to build them—You didn't have adequate things like we have here. I was going to stick one pole in the ground maybe about ten feet, so I made sure it wouldn't fall. I put steps all the way up on that thing to the top. I nailed pieces on. So then I put it in the ground. I was going to take one and build the others around that one. But I had to have it at an angle. So I stuck it in the ground at an angle. But I had to figure out what angle I should put it in order to get the best height. But still, you'd want that as the brace. If maybe you built it this angle, you may never get it together at the top. If you built at this angle, you're not going to get high enough. So I determined what angle I wanted.

HENDERSON

Now, were all four—? I mean, you talk about one post being at an angle. I'm thinking this tower had maybe four posts.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, four posts. But I had to think in terms of that one post first. Because I was going to put the one post up there first, and I was going to put the others up there after I put that one up. So I put that one post up there, and I started to climbing it. I got about fifteen feet, I guess, and that thing was swinging till I couldn't do it. Because if you're going up thirty or forty feet, that thing would be bowing way over. Because it was a tree, it would have the possibility of bending.

HENDERSON

It was flexible.

BANKHEAD

Flexible. It looked like it was stiff when lying down, but when you got up in the air, man, that thing was flexible and you couldn't—It was worse than a bucking [bronco]. So I said, "No, this is not gonna work." Even though the people, the men I had there, would climb anything. But I knew I had to make sure. So what I had to do, I designed them on the ground. I dug a hole, maybe about ten feet for the two of them. I designed half of them. Then I designed the whole thing. But I designed it where the ledge here—I made them square all the way

around and even put the top on there. The top was about eight [feet] by eight [feet]—on top of the whole thing.

HENDERSON

That's the platform?

BANKHEAD

Platform, you know. I did the whole thing. So when I put them in the ground, I dug holes for all four of them. I would take a truck and put one truck at one end and one truck which—One went one way and one went the other way so the thing wouldn't topple over. As one winch would relieve itself, the other would be picking it up.

HENDERSON

Oh, okay. So the trucks pulled the tower up into place?

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Well, no. The winch did. See, the truck wasn't moving. But you had a winch. You know what a winch is.

HENDERSON

A winch on the truck. It's a sprocket-like device that you turn.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. It has a cable. So then I tied the cable to the top of it. I started pulling it up. As it pulled up, it would never have a chance to do this [rotating gesture] because the cables are balancing one another. They would just ease on up and ease on up. But whenever it got up high enough, the thing would start slipping in the hole. Then they'll become slack. Neither truck could control it when it got to a certain height. But it wouldn't definitely go all the way over this way or wouldn't go over that way. But then when it got up there and it started sliding and it dropped down in those holes all four at once, "woom!" Shake! It was just like some of those oil wells. Just whining, whining, whining, all of a sudden it just slipped on in, "boom!" Then I already had the ladder on one of them all the way up. So then I went up on one of them. I went up on one, but still when it got way up there, man, that thing was still just swaying. So I said, "Now, we're gonna do everything that we're gonna do to this thing down on

the ground." We even put a balustrade around it—the thing that keeps you from falling off you put your arms on. So when we got it finished and dropped in the hole, that was it. You really didn't have to go up there, but I sent those guys up there. They'd go up there and stand on it. I did quite a few of those all over that area. I'd see a guard standing up there, you know, guarding [against] robbing the things. And also at night you'd have to have big lights up on it, shining different places. That's another thing with it. Those big huge lights are all over the place. The guard would go up there. And the guard would be there at night, because the trucks would be coming in at night picking up the ammunition, and they'd have to see. If you had a light down on the ground, then the enemy could detect it or something. But anyway, that was some of my architectural life in—I wouldn't say in the battlefield. It wasn't exactly. It's a big ammunition dump. So that was my experience. I had never had that experience before, and nobody was there to tell me how to do it.

HENDERSON

In war sometimes you have to do what you need to do.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. You've got to. At that time, I used to use wood for nails. There's a wood that's known as ironwood that I found over there and they were using. You get a piece of it; you could nail it into other wood. I used wood for nails, and I made cue balls, I made pool tables, sticks [cues] that you, you know—My group made all those things. Dayrooms, and you made everything that you had at home. The only thing that we couldn't make at first was the eight ball. See, the eight ball is heavy. We made everything else, and we didn't have an eight ball. Finally I made one. I took that iron thing and made an eight ball out of it. All the other wooden balls would react accordingly, but—But you could put some English on it. Those guys could make it smooth like glass.

HENDERSON

Well, let me ask a question in a different direction: Where do you think architectural education is headed right now? What is the quality of students that you're getting out of schools now? Is it better, worse, good, bad? Do you see deficiencies?

BANKHEAD

I think they are better if they're allowed to utilize their knowledge. Because I notice a lot of architects now deal with planning, which has a good thing to do with people's lives. It takes in more than just the house—planning how they should plan with automobiles and things in existence. The automobile's just like any other invention that has gone wild. It causes roads and highways and things like that. I'd say we'll see automobiles running through parts of the building, maybe way up in the air. Because as you try to consolidate the use of anything in one particular place, and you've got freeways, and they're up in the air, you— Regarding the tall buildings I'm talking about, I can see them just going into the building and going on through the building. That's another concept that I did—I have already done this in Africa. I designed a hotel for somebody in Ghana. I did it just like I wanted to do it. I had no restrictions. And I have a concept about malls. I think the Crenshaw mall [Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza] missed it. Because in the middle of that mall they should have had a bowl.

HENDERSON

What do you mean "a bowl"?

BANKHEAD

I mean like a bowl where you can have entertainments and everything.

HENDERSON

Oh. Like an amphitheater, a seating place.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, an amphitheater, yeah. They should have had that by all means. [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON

You were talking about the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw mall, that they should have had a amphitheater for performances in there. You were talking about what you would do to make it a better place.

BANKHEAD

I just told you about a place I designed in Africa, but let me talk about this Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza. Now, if right in the middle of it they had had

that amphitheater, they could have booked anybody—entertainers, ministers—Ministers that draw a whole lot, you know, and entertainers that draw. You could book those people, and people would be around there eating. People would like to eat there, look down in the place. That way you could create something that would bring people in. It's already well protected because it's got all those guards walking around there and you've got all that parking. It would have been ideal.

HENDERSON

So you're saying it should have been more of a mixed-use type project than only strictly retail.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. It should have been. Even if it was retail, if it just had that amphitheater in it and seats around where people could come in there and eat and shop—Now, like, for example, the—What's the other building up there named? Not the stadium, the other building.

HENDERSON

Coliseum?

BANKHEAD

That's not the—

HENDERSON

I mean, no, the [Los Angeles] Sports Arena?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, Sports Arena. It's just for sports, right? Is there any shopping? No shopping malls in it.

HENDERSON

No shopping malls. They're trying to build little minimalls all around it, but there's no shopping mall there.

BANKHEAD



In this thing they just built you have shopping malls just like they've got there. And right in the center they had the what-you-call-it I'm talking about.

HENDERSON

The sports arena, okay.

BANKHEAD

No. Not the sports arena. The mall had the what-you-call-it in the middle of it.

HENDERSON

Oh, amphitheater.

BANKHEAD

It had an amphitheater in the middle. Leave it open at the top like it is and have the amphitheater in the middle. It doesn't have to be as big as the Sports Arena. Not that big, because that Sports Arena, if you're down in the middle of it, nobody can really get the warmth in there. It's too full.

HENDERSON

Yes, it's too big.

BANKHEAD

Too big. But if you had it down there where it could be within good range and had some seats around it—not that many—it would be shopping and at the same time somebody would be doing what they want to do down there. Playing basketball or boxing or anything like that. That would have been ideal.

HENDERSON

Now, you designed something like this for Africa?

BANKHEAD

I designed something like this for Africa. The only thing was that in Africa I wanted to do the bowl, but they said they would eventually do it. But let me show you what I did. The first circle story was a grocery market. The next circle story was small stores like they've got over there. This circle was dwellings. Then, on the bottom, would be the bowl. Every person in here—Okay, we have gates coming in like this, so you wouldn't have problems parking. People

would come here and shop, parking all the way around. You could come through here and shop. Then, on the first level, would be grocery stores. The market's on the first level. The next level would be shops. Each level would have a sitting area in front of it. On the level where the stores are, that part could have allotted to each store a sitting area. Each level have a sitting area. That area belongs to that store. You'd have games or whatever you want down in the middle, but each level would have seats where you could see. You could look down in the place and see. So each store would have allotted—He can sell the tickets if he wants. He can have his friends go out there and look at it if he wants to. If he wants to, he can rent it.

HENDERSON

Now, how big is this?

BANKHEAD

Oh, well, you can make it—It would have to be big enough to accommodate that number of stores.

HENDERSON

Okay. I'm sort of asking—It looks like two hundred feet across?

BANKHEAD

Minimum would be two hundred feet. Maybe more, you know. Well, say the bottom was a hundred feet. If the bottom was a hundred feet in diameter, whatever you're going to do, you've got to be—Depending on whatever that is—If you've got basketball in there, you've got to think in terms of width. I don't particularly think in terms of football. But anyway, the first level would be markets, and they would be on— You could walk in there, and— After you come in the level where the market is, you would go down to the bowl. From the market, then would come the store. The store's set back so many feet. The way I did them in Africa, there was twelve feet that was allotted to each one in front of the— But then you'd have another maybe twelve feet where the people could go around and not interfere with the people who are sitting out there. And the same thing on the next floor. So the people who were shopping, they would have plenty of access. But the people who were watching the game and the things, they would be sitting out by the railing

where they could look. And the same thing would be true. The last row on top could be like penthouses. You have your own penthouse on top. You'd still have the same twelve—It's twenty-four feet around, where twelve people, or twelve feet would be where people could sit and look. Then you have the next twelve feet or whatever where people could go around in the shops.

HENDERSON

Now, was this built?

BANKHEAD

I assume they built it.

HENDERSON

Where was it going to be built?

BANKHEAD

In Ghana. I first thought about just having the places where people would come out of the stores and sit. Then I thought about the traffic. You've got to get people around. Then I had a rail between the people that are sitting in front and those that just pass around. They would come out and sit in the seats.

HENDERSON

Why did you happen to think of a circle shape? What was the inspiration for this?

BANKHEAD

The inspiration was that in Africa and most of the places they have big dances in big areas. And they were talking about dancing. I kept reminding them about, "Let's do this this way and do this that way." They reminded me that, "We don't worry about people. People are carrying things. Of all the people in the world, we carry everything." I could never get adjusted to the fact that I'd hear an African talking about other Africans just like they were nothing. You know, they were nothing. I kept talking about conserving this or steps and things like this. They just said, "Forget about that." You know, "Forget about that." I had a time trying to convince them that it would be to their interest to

build this thing like I was talking about. They just wanted to build a big motel-like.

**1.17. TAPE NUMBER: X, SIDE TWO MARCH 25, 1990**

HENDERSON

You were saying they just wanted to build a big motel.

BANKHEAD

A big something like a motel.

HENDERSON

So the quality level they were interested in was low?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, it was low. They were talking about people coming over there visiting. By the way, I just thought about it. We're doing a thing like that in one of the islands now.

HENDERSON

Jamaica?

BANKHEAD

I believe it is Jamaica.

HENDERSON

Because David [C. Ralston] told me about some sort of a multiuse thing. Or this is something else?

BANKHEAD

This is something else. This is a guy that has a brother in one of the islands, and he had a building that was 120 feet long and 50 feet wide. It's just a dance place, see. He said he hadn't made any money on it. I don't know how he got it, but it's a big landmass. It's right on the ocean. Right on the river or ocean or something. So he came in and wanted us to redesign the building. The building now is built out of logs. It's got poles up and some kind of roof on it some kind of way. So he first started talking about building this and building that. So I

said, "Gee, what he's talking about is not—" I didn't want to get mixed up in the poles he's got in the ground and some kind of roof over it now—So I just designed a building 50 feet with a hallway down the middle of it and rooms on each side. He said to just put a shower and a toilet and a face basin between each room for each room. I might show it to you, if you want to. I've got it right in here.

HENDERSON

Oh—

BANKHEAD

You don't have to. That's all right.

HENDERSON

Yeah, I want to keep talking about some things, rather than look at that.

BANKHEAD

Okay. But anyway, I just flipped through the drawing there. We wound up with about eighteen rooms.

HENDERSON

Now, this is turning it into a motel?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, something like a motel. But we have a kitchen in the back. Then I have a place for dancing in the front. A big thing about 20 feet by 40 feet in the front for the dance. And then they have the rooms where the bathrooms could be used separately from the showers. Work on it just finished about—He said he wanted a roof done, so his brother called him and told him to draw that up in—We didn't draw it in metric system. He didn't say. Now his brother calls back and says, "Put it in the metric system." I told them, "Man, we've got to charge you more." There's no laws, no rules in that particular. We were just going by—You know. It's got to be about two feet off the ground because the waters rise up and the river comes and something. I assume there's mosquitoes and everything else there. So I tried to think in terms of those things while I was doing the job. And big windows—But then he came back

and said he wanted sliding glass doors to the river. He wanted sliding glass doors. So we're doing that.

HENDERSON

I wanted to get your opinion again on how education for architecture students is going and what you see are either good trends or bad trends in students that are coming to you out of schools.

BANKHEAD

The students that are coming to me just don't have any idea about real construction. The one even from Trade-Tech [Los Angeles Trade-Technical College] which is supposed to be—They know about two by fours, they know about—There's still a gist of what the thing's about. Then the shortest part of it, I think, is the ability to deal with people. That's the big part. I think they're shorter on that than anything else. They can't deal with people. I think one of the reasons, again, is that in architecture you have to be quiet sometimes. You've got to get quiet so you can think. You've got to be able to keep your mind on what you're doing to the extent that you kind of enjoy the process of doing it and forget about every-thing else. Even forget about the money. Just think about what you're doing and relating to the uses of it and using all the materials that you can imagine to develop the idea that you want. I find that the students that I meet have very little idea about selling themselves or selling the commodity that they have. I find maybe one, maybe two out of ten that's able to do that. Eric [D. Burnett] is one.

HENDERSON

You mean he can find customers and talk to them and deal with clients? Okay.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, yeah. I told him and David that if the two of them would get together there wouldn't be any way in the world for them not to be millionaires if they wanted to. Because they both are cool. David is quite relaxed, and Eric very few people get angry with. He can spend time, like, for example, he's working on this drawing here, and he'll jump from this drawing and work on another drawing. He doesn't get totally upset about working with people. He wants to do it himself. He wants to do everything himself. He wants to have a handle on

every-thing, but he still would listen to you and work with you. But I had one here by the name of—With as much trouble as he gave me, I should never forget him. But then, maybe I should. He was good. This is the guy that did all this rendering that we have hanging around here.

HENDERSON

Oh, you mean Gregory Johnson [now Mathu Ater]?

BANKHEAD

Gregory. Well, I don't know whether I should have said just what I said. But let's say he's the best all-round person I ever met in architecture, but he listens to people the least. He is so talented, he dominates clients. Then I had another guy that was good, is good. His name is Bruce Patton. He was good. The history behind each one of these people is very interesting, tremendously interesting. The reason for them acting like they act is very interesting. I can pinpoint each one of the things that account for them being this or that. That I couldn't find out about David. I'd find something out about David, but I was not with David long enough, and David doesn't open up too quickly.

HENDERSON

This is quite true.

BANKHEAD

He's deep, you know. When I really realized his depth is when I could notice that he appreciated some things I was saying. When I thought I was losing him, he was right there. I said, "God, I really—" We were sitting right there, and we were talking. And he started talking, too. Man, I just—A young man like that, and he's thinking like he was thinking. I could tell that he hadn't just begun to think. So it was really interesting. I really enjoyed him. You can enjoy people when you don't have to talk and they still understand. You know what I mean? He's like that. I often tell the story, and I was always fixing to— What I want to say, this is not quite about architecture, but you remember Miss—I think I told you about this before. President [John F. ] Kennedy's wife?

HENDERSON

Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]?

BANKHEAD

Jackie. You remember she married [Aristotle] Onassis? And Onassis was going with a singer by the name of Callas. You remember?

HENDERSON

Oh, Maria Callas.

BANKHEAD

They were very good friends, and there was concern about how could Mrs. Kennedy take Onassis away from Callas? I mean, I don't even remember the story now.

HENDERSON

I don't know the story.

BANKHEAD

But anyway, it happened. She married Onassis. Kennedy married Onassis. And it puzzled me because I thought they were so different. Onassis was a playboy to some extent, so they say. And I thought Mrs. Kennedy was more reserved than maybe she was. However, it's known since then that they were more alike than I thought. But the thing that I want to bring to mind is that Callas came to the United States, and they had her on a show. What's the name of the guy from England who had a talk show? [David Frost]

HENDERSON

On television?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, on television. A guy from England. He's still on. He's still got a talk show, but he's not as popular as he used to be. So he had her on the show. To be a guest on that show, it means that you've hit some heights. Now, you've got a woman like Callas, she's a world-famous opera singer or whatever she was. He got her on the show, and he was going to talk to her about her life in that manner. So everybody was sitting up there with their eyes open and ears open, trying to wait and see what she was going to say about her and Mrs. Kennedy. He was trying to lead up to that. However, it was truly an effort on



his part. Whether they had it made up or not, I don't know. But anyway, he was moving up and he was asking this and asking that and just mooning around. It looked like he was having such trouble trying to talk about their intimacy. So as if she said, "I'm gonna let you in, " she said, "Oh, are you talking about my relationship with Mrs. Kennedy?"

HENDERSON

[laughter] She just came right out with it!

BANKHEAD

"My relationship with Mrs. Kennedy and Onassis?" And everybody said, "Hah—What's next? What's next?" So she said, "Mrs. Kennedy and I are very good friends." She said she admired her and everything. They thought, "How can this be?" Callas was a friend to Onassis, and then Mrs. Kennedy took and married him, as though she grabbed him away from her. But anyway, she said, "Now, as far as Onassis concerned, we're friends. We're friends." She indicated that it wasn't romance and female and male that accounted for it. She said that he could have any woman he wants, and she indicated she could have any man she wants. She indicated that. So that kind of laid that to rest. She said, "But he's a friend." That has taught me a lesson. A friend is more than a husband or a wife, in a sense. If you've got a wife and you don't have a friend, it's a whole lot missing. If you've got a girl and you don't have a friend, it's missing. But she said, "Onassis was a friend." She said she could call Onassis anytime, anywhere. The fact that she knew that he's there wherever he is, he would call in his voice, it did something to her. There are no words that can explain exactly what that is, but she said, "That's a friend." He could call her anytime. The relationship between the two of them was such that they couldn't explain what each did to the other. It didn't mean that they had to be close—nothing of the kind. But the fact that I know somewhere I have a friend. Money wasn't it. Sex wasn't it. But a friend.

HENDERSON

Straight, clean, simple. That's it.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, and the thing I was relating to David. Things that I'll be talking about, he understood even though I couldn't explain it. And I still can't. There's something between people that is understood whether you can explain it or not. It doesn't have to be tangible. Although we weren't together that long, that was the case with David and me.

HENDERSON

Do you want to pause?

BANKHEAD

Oh, no. But now, what else is—?

HENDERSON

I don't have an agenda.

BANKHEAD

Now, we will talk—Some of the things I don't cover too well, because I get off on something else. You were asking about education.

HENDERSON

Well, you said the students that you're dealing with don't have good people skills.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, right. That's the biggest thing I found with them.

HENDERSON

Do you think that schools are not teaching students anything about professional ethics?

BANKHEAD

I like the term you use about people skills. I like that term better.

HENDERSON

Oh, you like that term?

BANKHEAD

I like that term rather than the last one you used.

HENDERSON

Professional ethics?

BANKHEAD

Yeah, I like the term "people skills." Because I don't think they are. I don't think they have time. Things are moving at a pace that unless you get your hip broken and get in the hospital or get religion or something that stops you long enough to think, the average young person, and minority in particular, they've never had a chance to think. And not only minority. A lot of people have never had a chance to really think. Because it's like getting on a merry-go-round and moving so fast that you can't get off. That's why you find many times that people who come from different places to be in Hollywood and all those places, to be this or be that, most of the time they come from rural places, and they dream of this and dream of that, they get here and they get on the wheel and they can't get off. Just a few of them survive. It's because they get caught up into the movement. Just like you see these cars passing. People in these cars are trying to keep up with thought. With thought. You can't drive a car as fast as you can think. You can't move as fast as you can think. But we're trying to use everything that we can to catch up without thinking. All the time, when you ask anybody when they want it done, they will tell you, "Yesterday." That's about how it is. And they trying to keep up with computers. They use machines to match machines, so to speak, because human minds and human thinking cannot compete with these things that you use for outer space and all those things that they use instruments to determine. The mind cannot fathom or cannot move fast enough or accurate enough to compete with these new gadgets. You cannot count as fast as a computer.

HENDERSON

Let me shift you to a question I've got. What do you see happening architecturally in the minority community or black community in Los Angeles? I'll break the question into two parts. The black students that are coming out as architects, do you see them moving into the black community and being a positive force for that community?

BANKHEAD

No. Not too well. I'll tell you why. In Los Angeles, it's almost a case where minorities are not going to be able to survive in Los Angeles. See, if minorities don't own some property in Los Angeles, they don't even—If they don't own some property where you can up the ante as everything else goes up, it's going to isolate you. Just like older people in homes. The older people have to have a home, they can't keep it up. Eventually somebody gets it some kind of way. This same thing's true with minorities in L. A. Oh, by "minorities," I say you can be black or whatever you want to be. I see in the streets out there right now that the black is diminishing, and it's more Spanish probably than it is black. The only blacks who are going to stay here are the ones who have their homes in this area. As they die out, there won't be any—more. Because the young blacks don't have anything that will maintain them in a place where the cost of what-you-call-it is rising all the time. Cost of living. The cost of everything is rising. The minorities, particularly blacks, will not be able to live in Los Angeles. Only the ones who have made terrific plans—When I say plans, I mean educationally as well as real-estatewise. See, if you're going to keep up with all the information and things that rise according to the demands as people come in and crowd for space and all the—The water lines, the streets, the lights and everything they keep trying to improve. This is caused by the influx of people who have more and are able to spend more and make more than the minorities are. Unless a minority's able to compete and make something, produce something, then there's no way for you to help out blacks. The architects will not even be able to survive off of what blacks have to offer. Even though blacks should concentrate on an area, unless the people in that area are economically able, then it still won't work. See, the problem with minority architects and minorities as a whole, when minorities get to the place that they can afford something, they don't appreciate the area in which they started in. They up the antes and leave and go where they get more and seem to appreciate more.

HENDERSON

The black community is steadily drifting. There's no anchor to it.

BANKHEAD

Steadily drifting, and they don't stop. Because they depend upon the yeas and the nays of people who are productive. While the Spanish and the Mexicans

come in here now, they come from Mexico or wherever they are all coming from, and their livelihoods and their appreciation of what they make is so far above what they left they will run over you doing what's to be done here and think nothing about it. Because the comparison is so much different. Until they learn and they listen to other people, then they say, "They don't pay me enough." They get tired, and somebody says, "Well, you're tired." He may not even think about how he's tired until somebody starts talking about "How tired I am. How tired I am." You keep saying that and you will be tired. See, the essence of maintaining the minorities—If someone has some kind of enjoyment out of what he's doing, this will maintain him. Because half of people's problem in talking about work is mental. It's mental. If you don't want to do what you're doing and have no appreciation for what you're doing, you're working twice. You're working twice. And I don't want to work for anybody twice. That's the only hope we have for minorities. You have to like what you're doing. Your work should become "play." And architects, most of the money that's to be made by architects is made through grants or loans or things from banks and from the federal government.

HENDERSON

Federal projects.

BANKHEAD

From the city, federal projects, and things like that. Very few of them are able to garner enough from the general public that they can compare themselves with what people in these other fields do. See, that's the difference between me and the average architect. I have been able to appreciate what little I do because I probably appreciate the work. I don't like to call it work. I don't make that much money. I never made that much money. But I was able to maintain and not get involved in the rat race, so to speak. Therefore, most of the stuff that I make, I retain it. I don't get into the line of where the AIA [American Institute of Architects]—I'm just using the term AIA, it doesn't mean that—

HENDERSON

You're talking about a particular class of architects.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, yeah. A particular class. I use that term AIA as a general class, and that doesn't pertain to all of the architects. It pertains to everybody who wants to be in a certain—I know people who are AIAs, and they couldn't make a living any kind of way in architecture. I know them. I even had an AIA friend of mine, and he did a church. He had a big name with AIA. So what he did, he did a job, and he didn't tell the people that if you don't have enough parking, you can't—He did the beautiful building and church and everything and then told them it was their responsibility to get parking. And they couldn't use the plan, see what I mean? The contract did not say anything about—He said, "The contract says you provide everything else and I'll do the plan." He did the plan of the building, but they couldn't build the building because it didn't have any parking. That was the end of him when it came to doing architecture as far as churches were concerned.

HENDERSON

That church put out the word on him, not to use him.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. And when they put those words out on anybody, it gets spread around. It affects you. I've had that affect me because they thought I was trying to tell people going up and down the street looking at the churches that weren't really churches [storefront churches]—The officials downtown [Los Angeles City Building and Safety Department] found that somebody was in a church that's not legally a church. So that one of the guys who was working down there, and it was—All the ministers got together, and they demoted him. And they demoted me, too. Because I never got any more work for—You know, I used to get a lot of work by referrals from people working at city hall just because they knew I didn't charge too much and they didn't have time to fool with the minorities who don't know what he was talking about and didn't have any money. It's hard for a person to talk to a person who—You know, they don't know, and most people don't have the patience. And they've got somebody else in line waiting to—You know, everybody standing, looking, waiting, and you try and tell a guy how to—

HENDERSON

How to fill out this form.

BANKHEAD

Teach him his ABCs. He doesn't have time to do that. When you start talking, they want to get rid of you right away. This is like the job that we're doing in Cerritos. People have patience with you when they feel that they can reach you. But when they feel there's no possible—that you need about two, three generations, or two, three people before they can reach you—This guy can reach this guy, and this guy can reach that guy, and finally the—The network is—You know. So that's how I got a lot of work, and that's why they finally called me a church architect.

HENDERSON

Now, here's the second part of my question. I was talking about black architects in Los Angeles. Do you see anybody sort of coming in your shoes, a second generation of your type of architect? Maybe I should rephrase the question. Of the black architects that are coming along now—younger ones or smaller offices—are there any that you particularly like or admire? Say the RAW [Architecture] architects that you've mentioned every now and then. That's what I'm kind of pulling at. Is there anybody on the scene that you think of favorably?

BANKHEAD

To be honest, I don't know enough about the ones today. But individually, I would think that Eric [D. Burnett] would be in the class which I was talking about. I really don't know enough about RAW Architecture. But I had a feeling when you told me that, "I think somebody I can work with—" When you said that? I had a feeling that you knew me. And I appreciate that so much. That you know enough about me to make a decision about who I might fit with, who I might not.

HENDERSON

[laughter] I'll be honest with you. It was not RAW that I called.

BANKHEAD

I know. I know it wasn't RAW. I knew right away it wasn't RAW, because I don't think I'd fit in with them.

HENDERSON

Okay.

BANKHEAD

See, I'll tell you what. How I got my license is not that I did a lot of building, things like that. It's just how all of them got here. I haven't had the connections politically or socially that would give me the chance to have experience in some of the fields that an ordinary architect would have been in. It doesn't make any difference what kind of license you've got. If you haven't had experience with that type of architecture—Like I've got some engineers that are big engineers, and they couldn't engineer a Type-5 building [wood construction for a multi-unit apartment building]. A roof in a Type-5 building is one of the toughest things that you can engineer. A flat roof is no problem, because that's beams. But when you come to this kind of roof here— And one of the most difficult things is to build a chair. I think that you might know that.

HENDERSON

A chair?

BANKHEAD

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Oh, just a regular seating chair?

BANKHEAD

A regular seating chair with spokes in it.

HENDERSON

I've never thought about that as a problem.

BANKHEAD

Well, I had that in school. See, a chair's got a—Because the network and everything depends upon one—You let one spoke get out, almost like a wheel—Well, it's more difficult than a wheel because a wheel is round and it balances itself through. But a chair has got all these spokes in it. You let one of them pull out and the others—One depends upon the other. If you can design a chair and sit in it, the most delicate little stem thing like that and hold



together like straws—And engineer that chair and find out all the forces that's within that chair, whether they're—And in the chair you might find all the forces. Whether's it bending or whether it's doing this or whether it's doing that. So to design a roof truss with a hip roof in a building, most engineers cannot do that.

HENDERSON

I'm surprised.

BANKHEAD

But you ask any engineer, Conway Cook or any engineer. The way they learn about that is through practice. You tell them to design a roof, they will accept right away, but what happens with a roof, you've got a truss from the rafters, and the joists are running the same way. The rafters and the ceiling joists are running the same way, so that forms a truss—a tie—so they mash on one and don't spread out. But when you throw a hip in there, then it starts doing something else on you. And then you start to trying to figure that. On a roof, it's a lot of engineering. But the average, they just don't fool with the roofs. I've got an engineer right now, and he's real good, but I hate to use him because he doesn't know anything about roofs that are hip roofs. He puts all those big beams up in there this way and that way, because it's difficult to know which way the force is going. They try to avoid that by just using beam structure and let the rafters lie on top. This is the beam, and they lay it like that. And it's costly.

HENDERSON

Yeah, that's overbuilt.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, that's costly. But most of them design, and they'll put them together, but they were figuring the ridge is a beam. They figure the ridge is the beam. A hip and a ridge board, those aren't beams. They haven't got it by tying on, like I'm talking about that chair. But once you put a beam in there and put a post under it, then you've just got another beam. That's not hard to figure. Because you figure how simple beams are, whatever. But what you were talking about, this guy I've got on a job now, if you don't know about it you'll never learn,

because you think that it's some way that you're going to figure it out engineering-wise, and that's almost impossible.

HENDERSON

I'll tell you what I have found out in my research on Paul [R. ] Williams. He had one man in his office who was a roof expert and just had him on staff.

BANKHEAD

Yeah. Right. That's necessary, too. Because the average guy cannot do roofs. Every guy cannot do a roof.

HENDERSON

Well, we're having trouble with that roof at Cerritos.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, yeah. And that is a simple thing. Only on that end is where we're getting in a problem. But otherwise, they are all gables and they are tied together. But you try to run the rafters in the opposite direction of the joists. Then if you don't put in the ties just over the joists running in the opposite direction, you've got to tie that building together. Rafters are simple, but when you get a building that's a thirty foot span— Like I've got a job now, I've got to check it out, a guy's got a thirty-six foot span. That's the span of the gable. Now, there are no rafters that are thirty-six feet long. I mean, no ceiling joists. Now, the rafters, you can do it with rafters, but unless you go into truss, you aren't going to find any lumber thirty-six feet long. If you do, the deflection in it is such that you couldn't hold plaster. The deflection would be such that the deflection is one over something [example: 1/8], but the deflection would be of such—And that would be true of floors or whatnot. So you've got to make a truss out of it where you can tie the rafter in. And the one way to do it is you take a plywood—You put two whatever joists together and put plywood and put two rafters together and put plywood all the way from the bottom to the top and it acts as a truss.

HENDERSON

Isn't that a waste of material? I guess that's overbuilding.

BANKHEAD

No. See, if you do that on every four feet—

HENDERSON

Oh, okay. You don't do it for every—

BANKHEAD

Every one, no.

HENDERSON

You don't do every joist that way.

BANKHEAD

No, no, no, no, no. You do it for maybe every four. But you've got to figure out some kind of way to distribute that load between the four and so it acts as a truss.

HENDERSON

That's your truss, okay.

BANKHEAD

When I didn't do engineering and a lot of things that I wanted to, I would make up these plywood trusses. And they wouldn't say anything unless you got into somebody that wanted to be very technical. But they could see right away that if you've got plywood tacked to your rafters, then if between the piece of rafter and the ceiling joists you've got it nailed well, it isn't going to move. So I use that in there.

HENDERSON

Okay, I guess we've taken up a lot of time, and maybe I should wrap it up. Is there anything you might want to say? Because this is getting toward our last interview session.

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah?

HENDERSON

You will see me from time to time, but I won't come back interviewing.

BANKHEAD

Well, let me think and see if I have covered everything pretty well. I think pretty much I have to some extent. We will get a chance to go over this again, right?

HENDERSON

Yes. Yes, you will get copies of transcripts of all of this.

BANKHEAD

Well, suppose you want to add something and delete something?

HENDERSON

That can be added into the text. You will get a copy and you can make changes on it.

BANKHEAD

Oh, yeah. Okay, then. That will be good, and when I get copies of that I can make changes on it. Because some of the things I've said—Some things maybe I'll want to delete or certain things I'll want to add. I know there will always be something to add, because you can never think of what— I like architecture. I like it. It's a science to me. Well, maybe I'm bent in that direction. There's so much to be known. I would like to do some of the bigger buildings. Not just because I just want to do a big building, but because I would like to understand more about it. But I never was inclined to want to get up and be competitive as far as big buildings are concerned. I really think in terms of service. How well does a building serve? That's my essence of architecture. How well do I serve the community? I probably did literally thousands of small, small things. I've got plans back there just—Room additions. When you get into room additions and you're trying to make the whole house work, then you've got something that will keep you jumping. You don't just slap it on there and go through the bathroom to get to this place and go to the kitchen. I take pride in taking things like that and making them work. I kind of have pride in taking things like that and working out something real nice and hearing people say, "Oh, that's so nice." You know, like I did a room addition for a lady not too far from my house. And then she kind of liked me, you know. That has

something to do with it, too. People in architecture—How well do you get along? That's back to what I was talking about.

HENDERSON

People skills.

BANKHEAD

People skills. It's immensely funny that a man, if he looks nice and looks decent—and people like you before they see you good—it has a whole lot to do with the working ability you have throughout the whole [project]. Some people just go on that kind of a thing. They see you and they like the way you look. A lady called me and said, "I just liked you. You looked so solid or something." These people have a sentimental feeling about people who they think look like they're Christians or something like that and they wouldn't cheat them. Then if they feel a little bit—like you otherwise, too—then you've really got it. This lady said one guy recommended me and then she decided to use another contractor and this contractor said, "I've got my own architect." She told this contractor, "I've got my own architect." So I did the job for her. And as small a thing as a shoe rack—

HENDERSON

You go that small?

BANKHEAD

Yeah! I mean, I did the room, but she wanted a place to put her shoes.

HENDERSON

Oh, you did everything.

BANKHEAD

Yeah, she wanted a place to put her shoes. She wanted a place to put her purse, and she wanted a place to put this and that. If you can tell them, "You know, you've got to put this this place, you've got to put that that place. And what about this?" They had things all scattered around. You tell them how to put them, how they could be put away, that's really a part of architecture. Even down to your shoes. One of the things that I've thought about in architecture [would be] in a bathroom, where you have wet clothes, having a

vent that comes all the way up through the floor where air can push up through there and you can put these wet cloths up in a cabinet and a suction carries the odor on out through the roof. A natural suction. So your damp things that may be there sometimes—Probably things are damp from morning to night. If you wash a piece and you want to hang it out, you don't have to carry it all the way outside. You put it in this little cabinet. And it's got a draft that comes up from underneath the house. And the suction. It keeps the bathroom smelling differently. It's natural. You don't have to have an electric thing on. And it's a cabinet.

HENDERSON

That's a brilliant idea.

BANKHEAD

I never have done it, but I've always thought of it.

HENDERSON

Mr. Bankhead, I've got to curtail things because my tape is running out.

BANKHEAD

Okay, well, that's—But the only thing, this lady, I did this little shoe closet for her, and I put in piano hinges. You know the difference between a piano hinge and a regular hinge?

HENDERSON

Piano hinges are almost invisible.

BANKHEAD

They're invisible and they're small. So I put in piano hinges, and I made oak doors of some nice wood. So this guy who built them, he put the hinges on the outside. She called me and said, "Mr. Bankhead, did you intend for those hinges to go inside or outside?" I said, "I intended them to go inside." She said, "That's what my son said. That's the only thing he said about the whole job." She didn't know whether she wanted to take them off or not. What did she want to do? So I asked her, I said, "What is your furniture?" She said, "My furniture is a brass bed."

HENDERSON

Leave it out.

BANKHEAD

Leave it out. I said, "That matches your furniture." Those kinds of things. The guys were nice, and she didn't want to make them take them off. She said, "I guess I'll let them stay." But she really wanted to match. And I did too. So I had to put up with—"What kind of furniture?" She said, "Brass." I said, "Then let it stay. It matches your bed."

---

[Parent Institution](#) | [TEI](#) | [Search](#) | [Feedback](#)

---

*Date:*

*This page is copyrighted*