

George C. Pope

A Transcription of an Oral Interview

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Interviewed by
Patrick Tyler

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Patrick Tyler: Mr. Pope, could you tell your birth place and birth date
_____?

George Pope: My birth place is right here in Champaign. I was born September
the 30th.

Tyler: Could you give me a little bit about your family background, such as your
grandparents, their name and your parents?

Pope: Well, my grandfather on one side was named George Pope and I believe
he came here from Arkansas, I'm not sure, but he lived here most of his adult life.
My grandfather on the other side, his name was General Lee, and they also were
from the Champaign area.

Tyler: Lee, would that be the same as Albert Lee?

Pope: Albert Lee's brother. Right.

Tyler: So can you remember back as far as your residence?

Pope: The first residence I can remember was 808 North Prairie in Champaign.

Tyler: Where have you stayed since then?

Pope: Well, I've been around quite a bit. I was in the service. I lived in Oklahoma. I lived in Chicago briefly about three or four months and then I came back. Got a job with the Air Force and remained there until I retired.

Tyler: So did you attend the schools here when you _____?

Pope: Yeah, the public school system, yeah, grade school and high school, although I didn't graduate from high school here. I got mine from a program that the military had at that particular time which, I was in the C.C. Camp, and I got that through there, the high school part.

Tyler: Could you tell me the elementary school that you attended?

Pope: Gregory School.

Tyler: Housing? Back when you were coming up as a child, how was it like?

You know, can you remember some of the outstanding things that happened in your life, in your childhood?

Pope: I don't remember anything outstanding but I don't remember anything that was any, would give anybody any heartburn about what happened. Of course, things were quite segregated to a degree, but nevertheless though there wasn't any problem as I grew up. There wasn't any problem that I knew that much about, other than from time to time with people my own age that were Caucasians, you'd have a few problems once in a while, but not, not anything outstanding.

Tyler: So could you tell me a little bit about your employment life?

Pope: Well, I've only been employed, employment as it amounts to anything, I've only been employed two places, and that was a bank in Oklahoma of which I was a teller and assistant cashier, and then employed at Chanute Air Force Base. I started out as a supply inspector and moved up to, when I retired I was advisor to the commander.

Tyler: All right. When you were a supply inspector, what year was that?

Pope: Oh, that would have been between 1951 and '56.

Tyler: How were the job situations back then?

Pope: Well, the job situations, at that time were fairly good because it was right at the time of the Korean War and they needed people. And so if you could qualify, you didn't have much of a problem getting a job at that particular time.

Tyler: I was just curious, the job opportunity, ever since, you know, you can remember as far back and now, how have the opportunities changed?

Pope: Well, now there isn't the demand for people plus, I guess you could say because of high-tech, maybe, that has something to do with it, but there isn't the demand for people now, that is, with the federal government that there was at that particular time when I first started with it. Of course I didn't start then, I started before World War II. I was at Rock Island Arsenal, and I moved from Rock Island Arsenal to Metuchen, to Metuchen, New Jersey, where the Raritan Arsenal was and from there I went back to Rock Island and went into service. So I had government experience before then and at that time they were, they needed people and as I said before, if you could qualify or even had limited qualifications, you didn't have much of a problem getting a job of some sort. I

won't say that you'd get the top echelon-type job, but you'd get a job of some sort.

Tyler: How did the sixties affect you? The things that occurred in the sixties?

Pope: Job-wise you're talking about?

Tyler: Job and personally, personal life, social life?

Pope: Well, job-wise, it had no bearing, no affect on me whatsoever. Some of the other things which you probably already know, in the '60s is when we started to make a move to get, or to receive our places as a, as class-A citizens, and so consequently, there was a big push on, on jobs in the, in the, in all phases of the workforce that in the past had not been open to blacks or people of any ethnic group by in large with the exception of Caucasians, but there was as you know, the Martin Luther King era and of course that had a big effect here in Champaign.

Tyler: The housing area, back then?

Pope: Same thing goes with housing. At that particular time, the housing for blacks was almost non-existent unless you were in a black area and that's really

how this area started and that's how the area just to the east of us, also started by a man named Phillips, Mr. Charles Phillips, started this and also the Dr. Ellis Addition. At that time, if you wanted to buy a house, for the most part, this is where you'd have to buy. Now I won't say there weren't some isolated cases where you could get a house some place else. But for the most part, this is where you'd have to buy. Of course, that's not true now. If you got the money and the, and the economic means of buying, you can almost buy wherever you want to buy. But you couldn't do it at that time, regardless to what you had, with a few exceptions of course.

Tyler: The Dr. Ellis Addition, who's that named after?

Pope: Dr. Harry Ellis. He was a physician here who was here for quite some time, in fact, he died here. He was very instrumental in the health care services and other things concerning black people. He was also, I don't know whether he graduated from the University of Illinois or not, but he certainly was a big force with blacks at the University of Illinois in that he was a chapter advisor for Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity and he did a lot for the students at that particular time.

Tyler: He was black or white?

Pope: Black. Yeah.

Tyler: Do you have any community involvement or organizations that you?

Pope: Well, not, not now. I'm not involved very much with the community. At one time I was the chairman of the Champaign Human Relations Commission, and I was on that commission for about ten to twelve years. Fraternal organizations, yes, I've belonged to those. I don't really affiliate the way I should and of course I belong to the church, Bethel AME Church, which I'm a steward at this particular time.

Tyler: How long have you been at Bethel?

Pope: Well, I was raised in Bethel, but I guess you could say, really affiliating with Bethel as an adult since about 1956.

Tyler: Can you mention anything that went on back then as far as your church was involved in?

Pope: Like what?

Tyler: Like some of the actions that it had, you know, with, say, picketing.

Pope: Yeah, in the '60s. The pastor we had was very instrumental along with other pastors of this community in making an effort to make things better for blacks in three areas: housing, services and employment. And through his effort along with other ministers and along with a few of us who were directly involved, I think that things that you see and enjoy today are probably a direct result of some of the things that happened back then.

Tyler: Do you remember the incident at J.C. Penney's?

Pope: Yeah, I was directly involved in that.

Tyler: Can you tell me what happened?

Pope: Well, the thing that happened, J.C. Penney had made a move to open up a store here in the Champaign-Urbana area which was on Main Street in Champaign where the *News-Gazette* has now moved, and in opening the store, of course, they had to have employees and all the employees by in large, would come from the Champaign community, but they were not accepting or it didn't seem to us that they were accepting black applications for anything other than menial-type positions. So we got together and at that time, we had an organization called the Champaign-Urbana Improvement Association. We also had another organization which was a mixed organization that was the Council

For Community Integration. And these two organizations got together and felt that there were some people here, black, that were eligible for and could do some of the jobs that Penney had open and really, they were just a hair above the menial-type task anyway, such as sales clerk. Well, by in large, sales clerk, but there were other positions also in administrative positions that we felt blacks could be involved in so, a committee met with the, the manager of Penney's to see what could be done about this. And of course they refused to hear what they had to say as it pertained to getting blacks or other than Caucasians jobs, but I won't say other than Caucasians, because it might have been some Hispanic people that they would have hired, I don't know.

But for sure they weren't going to hire blacks. And so after a number of meetings with the management of Penney concerning the same subject, it was decided the only thing to do was to, to set up a picket line the day that they opened, which we did do. But before we set up the picket line the morning that Penney's opened, Reverend Joe Graves, Gene Williams and maybe one or two others and I don't remember who the other two were, they again attempted to talk with the management of Penney's to see if something could be done so that this picket line wouldn't go up. But they again refused, so when they opened their doors at 9 o'clock, the pickets went out on the street in front of Penney's. And I can't remember at this time how many days we picketed, but it wasn't, it wasn't too long, maybe 15 or 20 days, I don't know. I really don't remember how many days, but I do know that after and at the same time, we were wide open for meetings and talks to see what could be done concerning this same subject and

after not too many days, Penney's decided they would hire blacks and did hire a black. And from that thing, it opened the whole town of Champaign-Urbana as far as hiring of blacks is concerned.

And the same kind of a thing happened in housing, only though there wasn't any picketing that I can remember. But there was a lot of discussion and talks concerning blacks moving in other areas other than what were predominately 'black' areas with realtors, with the Chamber of Commerce and a few other organizations to see what could be done about that. And there were several bought newspaper advertisements concerning the problem that blacks were having with housing and employment, and because the newspaper was the main form of media, we thought that this was something that everybody would read. And if I can remember correctly, you probably had a page or a page and a half, at least twice that were filled with names, white and black, that felt that the barriers of segregation should be brought down and of course, as you know, eventually, it was, but that, there was a lot of legwork done to prepare for what we now have today.

Tyler: Can you remember the date and what newspaper?

Pope: Well, there were two newspapers here at that time, *News-Gazette* was one and the Champaign-Urbana *Courier*. And if I'm not mistaken, it probably was

in both of them. But it was paid advertisement, it wasn't anything that was given.
It was paid advertisement.

Tyler: Can you give me the month and year?

Pope: Oh, I don't remember the month or the year. But it was in the, probably the middle to late '60s, probably the middle '60s.

Tyler: When Dr. King died, Martin Luther King, can you remember your reactions when you first heard he died?

Pope: Well, I thought it was a blow, a very serious blow, as far as blacks were concerned and that there was a possibility that things wouldn't continue in the same vein that he had started and that it might fall, the whole program might fall by the wayside. But fortunately it didn't, but, that was the feeling, that was my feeling. I think that was the feeling by a lot of people here in Champaign at that particular time.

Tyler: Well, I had a question, while I'm thinking of it, can you tell me, do you have brothers and sisters?

Pope: Yeah.

Tyler: Can you tell me their names?

Pope: Okay. I have a brother, Cecil Pope, who is in Chicago; a brother, Paul Lawrence Pope, who is here who is on the sheriff's department; have a sister, Carrie Banks, who lives here; a sister, Sarah Potter, in Chicago; and a sister, Esther Scroggins, in New York.

Tyler: The thing that the question _____ is that they were trying to close down 4th Street.

Pope: Yeah.

Tyler: As far as parking in that area. What are your feelings about that?

Pope: Yeah. Well, I don't feel that, that, well, when you ask the question, 'Close down 4th Street,' that's not really what they're trying to do. What they're trying to do is to make 4th Street safe for everybody traveling 4th Street either by vehicle, or walking or riding a bicycle. That's, that's the problem, that's what they're trying to do. I don't think that making 'no parking' I don't know if you said that or not,

but making both sides of 4th Street between probably Tremont Street and back south as far as Vine or maybe Columbia would be the, would be the thing to do. Maybe reducing parking to one side of the street would be, might solve some of the problems, but certainly I don't think it would solve the problem to have no parking on both sides because people would, there's some people that would be taken advantage of in a sense. Or, yeah, you'd really be taking advantage of them by not having parking such as a church that is Macedonia Baptist Church, which is on 4th Street, a funeral home is on 4th Street, and there are a few people who live on 4th Street that might have visitors who would need some parking, so for that reason, I don't think that reducing parking period between this area would be, would serve the best purpose. Maybe reduce it on one side of the street and if I had a choice, the one side of the street would probably be the west side of the street might help, but I don't think that reducing parking on both sides would be the thing.

Tyler: Speaking about crime, how has it changed since you were growing up to now?

Pope: Well, I'm not, not being in law enforcement, not being in law enforcement, I can't really give you any statistical information on crime. I don't see crime much difference now than it was when I grew up. Other than dope, if you want to call it that, or controlled substances are, are, seem to be more prevalent now than they were when I was a youngster. Of course, those things are so strong that they

produce or they provide the element for more serious crimes probably than were available or at least was being conducted at that particular time. So, from that standpoint, I would say, you see a different type of crime now and probably more life-threatening crime at this particular time than you did when I was growing up, because of your dope being whatever you want to call it, marijuana, cocaine whatever. But those things that are, that are controlled are so strong and they're so habit-forming that probably there are more crimes because once people are on them as you undoubtedly know, you have to have more and once it controls you, and you're addicted to it, you have to have some means of getting, getting the substance and the only way you can get it is either through job source or some other source that is illegal. So, that, that has produced quite a bit. But I don't think it's because people are hungry. It's because of this.

Tyler: I have, have one more question. How has the youth changed from your young time to now?

Pope: Well, I don't think youth has really changed that much. What has happened, in my opinion, youth today probably do not realize why some of the things, even dope, if you want to include that, why some of these things are so available now to them and seem so reasonable to have as opposed to when I was a youngster, it wasn't. They don't take under consideration that some of the things that they enjoy and if you could consider enjoying dope one of the luxuries, but some of these things that they enjoy and take for granted now, there

was a lot of legwork, and there was a lot of heartache and a lot of pain that went into providing them with the, well, I won't say the ability, but providing them with the markets that are now open to them. As far as they're concerned, they did not have to fight for, didn't have to ask for, it's just out there. But there's a lot of people that suffered to make these things available for them. I don't mean that they made dope available, but in making other things available this come into existence because like anything else, where there's something good that is done there's also something that is not so good that goes right along with it, so one doesn't necessarily compliment the other, but by the same token, they come, they come along together. And I think that they do not understand that 'Hey, I had nothing to do with, with this and I can't even appreciate why somebody would say that I can't buy a house on or that I can buy a house on whatever street in Champaign or Urbana' because they're wide open, but they don't realize that there, that there was a lot of suffering that went on in order to make this available for them.

Tyler: Okay. That's all that I have right now.

Pope: Okay.