

John Russell White

A Transcription of an Oral Interview

1212 Dorie Miller Drive
Champaign, Illinois
June 18, 1985

Interviewed by
Patrick Tyler

Champaign County Historical Archives
Urbana, Illinois
2001

Introduction

This interview is with Mr. John White, a former instructor at the Chanute Air Force Base. Mr. White was born in Faunsdale, Alabama, June 27, 1920, and moved to Champaign-Urbana in March 1951. The interview was conducted at Mr. White's home, 1212 Dorie Miller Drive, Champaign, on June 18, 1985. The interviewer is Patrick Tyler, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department.

Patrick Tyler: Okay, John could you give me the date and place of your birth, and you know, the year and the month?

John Russell White: Okay, I was born in Faunsdale, Alabama, June 27, 1920, which is a rural community.

Tyler: Okay. And could you give me the year that you came to Champaign-Urbana?

White: I came to Champaign-Urbana in March of 1951 to be employed at Chanute Air Force Base as a technical instructor.

Tyler: What was your first residence?

White: Here in Champaign?

Tyler: Yes.

White: My first residence was over on West Ells Street with a Mrs. Jamerson, which has long since passed, but you may know her son, Les Jamerson, who was very active here in the community for many years and of course, he's passed now. And then also his wife, Pauline, who recently passed about two, three months ago. At that time, I had a little apartment with his mother there on

208 West Ells Street. I think we lived there for what? Three years? Yeah, the better part, the better part of four years, because we moved out here in '55, so we were there a little better than four years with Mrs. Jamerson.

Tyler: Could you tell me a little about your family background?

White: My daddy was a farmer, he, I think finished elementary school, I believe, back in that day. And my mother only finished elementary school, and this is down in Faunsdale, Alabama. He passed in '52 and of course my mother just passed last year in '84. But my dad was a . . . Let's see, I think his family had about nine children, if I remember correctly, eight or nine children, four or five boys and three or four girls. One of the girls was a nurse, three or four of them, three of them I think were housewives and his brothers, I think three of them were farmers. And what are the rest of them? What kind of field they fall in? Well, I don't know because they left the South long before I was really large enough to know what was going on. And my mother, of course, she was a member of the [Russell] family and she had what? Three brothers and four sisters. And I think two of her sisters were school teachers and one of her brothers was a school teacher and the other two were farmers. Of course that generation of people are all dead now. My mother was the last living relative in that family of brothers and sisters.

Tyler: Could you give me your parents' names?

White: My parents, my father's name was John Henry White; my mother's name was Louberta White. Louberta White. And we had, I had one brother, older than I and he stayed with us until we were what? About 18 years of age and then we moved to Birmingham, Alabama. My dad quit farming at the time and went to work for a steel mill called Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company. And of course, after that school year was out I happened to be in high school at that time. After that school year was out, why my brother and I came to Birmingham to live with him and my mother, and of course, both of us went to work for the steel mill there. I worked for Tennessee Coal, Iron Railroad Company for five years, a second time while I was in high school and two years of college. I attended Miles College, worked at night and went to school during the day. And of course, my brother left as soon as he was of age (laughs), and went to Baltimore and lived with one of my uncles and worked there with him for a while, who raised horses and bred horses for riding and stable-type work. And of course, after I had gone to school for a couple of years after finishing high school in '39, I went to Miles College for a couple years and then I got itchy feet and I joined the Navy, so I spent another 3 1/2 years in the Navy. And then I, after coming out of the Navy, I went back to college and picked up a master's degree in education at Uncle Sam's expense actually, being a veteran. And then I married during that time, I think married in '48, and we had had one child by the time I finished college. And we moved to Kansas City and I went to work at the high school in Kansas City, teaching industrial ed. And shortly I got an offer to

come to Chanute and so I came up and looked at the situation and the potential and so we decided to move here. So we moved here in '51.

Tyler: Do you have any children?

White: I have two girls. One girl, the oldest girl is teaching. She's in education, by the way, too. Her major was mathematics. She teaches math at a high school in Chicago. And offhand I can't tell the name of the high school. I know the high school has been very strong in basketball for a number of years. In fact, they used to come down to the state tournaments quite often. And she got her masters in education for teaching for secondary schools in mathematics primarily. My youngest daughter, she attended Purdue University. Of course she was a merit scholar so she could go wherever she wanted to for the four-year scholarship, so she went to Purdue University. She majored in social studies and then after finishing a B.S. in social studies, she went to law school at Chicago University where she got her jurisprudence degree and she's now practicing law out in Los Angeles with a law firm. So those are the. . . We have four grands, we lost one but we have three grands living. They're all boys and they are all boys (laughs).

Tyler: As far as your youngest daughter, the one that's a lawyer, during her high school years with this Merit Scholarship Program, how was she treated or how was things for you as a family with her being black?

White: Well, we got along pretty well, I suppose, fortunately, I never had any problems with either one of the girls in school academically. The oldest girl was not as studious. I never think she worked up to capacity. And I think that was because she liked social life I think a great deal. The youngest girl was much more studious. And she maintained a straight-A average all the way through grade school and high school. In fact, she was the second highest achievement at Centennial High School, in fact, she was in the first graduating class there, so she was an honor student all the way. I think she got in the honor society when she was in junior high school and she remained in the honor society through high school, through college and also became a Phi Beta Kappa at Purdue University. So academically she was very strong and very studious. But as far as problems are concerned, I guess you note few problems when the individual seems to be respected a great deal and I think both of my kids were well-liked in school among their peers. The oldest girl, by the way went to University High School for two years and decided that she wasn't having enough social outlet there, so she asked to come over to Champaign High School where she finally graduated from. And her social life there was far more _____ there than it would be at Champaign High School, simply because there were not many blacks at University High School and of course what little social life and entertainment she had why it was in the so-called white society but I don't recall any of them having any problem necessarily. I guess they were pretty typical average people of the times.

Tyler: What would you say are the changes educational-wise from times past to the present?

White: Well, it's been some tremendous changes naturally since 1951. When I came here, I guess we had roughly about 10 to 15 black teachers in the public school system and that was Unit 4 and 116 combined. And I don't know how many we have now, but I know it's quite a few more and I'm sure the educational system has changed by bringing into the curriculum some information dealing with black studies which is of course the black students to develop a greater appreciation of themselves and so forth. So the system has changed now, how much improvement has been made is really difficult to measure. As I said, my children had no problem seemingly. We transported them to school when they had to go or they walked to school from where we live here in the neighborhood and I don't recall them having any problem, even in the classroom or conflict with the teachers. All their teachers had nothing but praise for them at all times, so they as individuals didn't seem to have much of a problem as far as the integration of school system was concerned. And of course integration is a kind of a thing that, it has to be defined I think. Because you can have white and black in the same classroom and the class subject matter and the teaching process is not integrated so they were sitting in the classroom at all times with, let's say, whites, after they left grade school. But how much integration academically was taking place, and socially was taking place, may be very limited. But there has been some change and I'm sure there's been some

improvement, because after getting more black teachers in the school system and developing clubs and organizations primarily to let's say, educate the black into black history and the appreciation of black contribution to American culture, why, those things have helped the young people.

Tyler: I was curious about your employment history. You say when you first came here what brought you here was a job up at Chanute?

White: Uhuh.

Tyler: Could you give me details about what that consisted of?

White: Ah, yes, you mean what the job consisted of?

Tyler: Yes.

White: Oh yes, well in 1950, there were a limited number of blacks in certain professions. Public school teaching, it was okay in public, in black sections of the country. Engineering – there were a few blacks in engineering and usually they were, you might say the "hand-picked few" academically and personality-wise to let's say appease the public, give the public the impression that this company, this field is integrated and accepts all people, and when in reality they

accepted a very limited number and they were somewhat, let's say, always what you might call the "window-dressing."

Working for the government at Chanute Air Force Base, it appeared to be an integrated institution. The school there at the time had around 1,400 instructors when I came there in '51 and not 1,400 instructors, I take that back, they had roughly about 1,400 civilians and out of that 1,400 civilians, approximately 1,100 of them were instructors. The rest of them were supervisors, managers and training specialists of various positions. Being a school teacher, the time I came in, there were I guess better than 50 ex-school teachers were hired at Chanute to work with the tech-training program. Among that 50, I would say about, 20, maybe 15 or 20 of them were black and most of them had degrees in education with industrial art-type background experience which many of them had a mechanical speciality along with it. Myself, I had a major in electronics in college, so I went into the electrical field and my first position there was teaching military personnel how to maintain the electrical system on the cargo and the bomber-type aircraft, which the Air Force used. In that position, we had a 20-week course where we taught everything from batteries to electronic fuel control system that maintained the aircraft at a constant speed.

I worked in that course, for what, three years, and then I moved over to another branch where they trained instructors having a masters in education and some experience in the mechanical and the electrical field, having spent three years in the Navy as a radio operator, why I fitted in well for teaching teachers.

So I taught in the instructor course for three years and then I was promoted to a supervisor which took me out of that section over to another course and became what is called a block supervisor which is a course-portion supervisor and I remained in that position for one year and Chanute was re-organized and I was fortunate to be among the top qualifiers for a training specialist's slot as an educational advisor and so I became an education advisor in '59. In this position, it's about comparable to a, oh, to a principal in a school in a public school system and I stayed in that position for 11 years. I left that position, took a lateral to the Department of Missiles to acquire and gain some additional experience in curricula work, which was specialized work that I wanted and also hoped it would enhance my chance for promotion. So I stayed in that position preparing curricula material for missile launch and missile refrigeration courses for two years. And I got promoted while there to what is called Chief of the Instruction Measurement section for the Department of Weather. And I spent two years in that job monitoring the quality of instruction in the Department of Weather and the testing program for that department. And I took a lateral out of that position and went downstairs and took a position with the school staff in faculty development, which meant that we had all the responsibility for developing a good faculty on the base. In this position, I was responsible for many of the regulations governing the conduct of an instructor in a classroom, the Measurement Program and also the Incentive Award program for, let's say, for the instructors.

This job also involved making contact and working with outside institutions to get the training that instructors may need to be a better instructor; for example, I had contract arrangements with the University of Illinois, Southern Illinois University – that's Charleston, isn't it? The one down at Charleston? Eastern. That's Eastern, isn't it? Eastern, down at Charleston, and one over at Bloomington-Normal. And of course when Parkland came on board, why they also taught some courses for us. We would, we'd teach them courses in mathematics, we'd teach them courses in, well, these colleges would provide courses in, some courses in electronics, some in biology, some were in administration, anything to enhance the instructor in the classroom. Keep in mind many of our instructors in the classroom were not college graduates – they were people who had acquired that position because of their technical know-how and they lacked much of the educational training that you would normally get in a teacher-training institution. So much of the training that I have to work with for them was getting that additional college-type training that many of them needed and of course, the Air Force paid for it. So I stayed in that position for what? Four years. I guess it's four years. And then I was transferred to what is called Chief of Curricula in the electrical branch. This is due to a school re-organization and re-assignment of a large number of people of I guess just about everybody in the school. Everybody was in the school just about we'll say shifted around and turned upside down, so to speak, and shifted to many different positions. But anyway, I ended up as Chief of Curricula for the electrical branch. It so happened that was just the same branch that I began as an instructor in (laughs).

So I spent about two years there and then I decided that it's about time to retire, so I retired in '78 with 30 years' service – 31 years of service with the Air Force in their Technical Training Program.

Tyler: How about your work with the Urban League?

White: I'm trying to think, I think we started with the Urban League about 1960, if I remember, somewhere around that time. I don't know if you knew a fellow by the name of Alfred Kelker, used to be here. He used to live up there on Eads Street. He moved to Florida. Well, Pete, now Pete, worked out at the field also. He was a training manager at the time, but Don Moyer, I don't know if you know him, he has now what is now known as the Don Moyers Boys Club? He was very instrumental in planting the seed in our minds that we needed an Urban League here in this community. So, Kelker and myself and several others, started meeting and planning how to get an Urban League going here and so we did and of course, I think our first director was named Bowles. I can't think of his first name now, but Mr. Bowles was our first director.

Tyler: Thomas Bowles?

White: No, not this Bowles, not related to Bowles here. This Bowles lived out, well he left and went out to Connecticut. What was Bowles' name? He's been gone probably, maybe around the time you were born, because Barkstall has

been here now, darn near what 10 or 15 years, hasn't he? And he left here long before that and we have had two or three interim directors after Bowles left. But anyway, the Urban League at that time was strictly on a voluntary fund-raising program for needed funds and of course, most of the funds for the operation of the Urban League was given by the merchants downtown, believe it or not. And they provide us the nucleus of urban organization and we kept working with that 'til finally we got in the, at the Urban League into the United Way which gave them a great deal of support financially which was needed. And all during this time of course, I was on the board of directors and even served as president of the board of directors for some time, so. . . We spent a lot of time in working on various social programs, employment programs. Employment, I think was our initial major thrust when we got started, trying to get blacks in different career fields, both men and women and we did have some success in that area. So the Urban League has done, I think fairly well since that time.

Tyler: How was life here during the '60s?

White: During the '60s? Oh, it's hard to describe the life during the '60s. I guess that was a period when many of the, right after the Korean War, and many of the college and the young people became concerned about our foreign policy and the way it was being handled and we had a lot of so-called splinter groups developing with political ideas. These organizations had overtones into the black society as well and of course, you had many blacks, even participating into this

program because they were very much concerned about politics and freedom. And of course, they worked in that area and some of them became, I guess you would call them hippies, radicals, but nevertheless, this city was no different from any other city in terms of what opportunities the blacks had whether it was in Korea, or whether it was in schools, or whether it was at the university or where. That was, I would say a limit to their potential for growth. There was a limit, there was a limit for it. As much freedom as we may think we have had, and have now, how much we think we got when, what was it, in '64, the Civil Rights Acts were passed? We're still trying to fulfill, I would say the goals that were set up for the Civil Rights Act, has been expressed in many ways but it hasn't, I don't think the goals have changed any. Some of the progress, I feel has been stymied and sometimes I think we are regressing rather than progressing in this area. So that's about the way I feel about it.

Tyler: How about housing? Like when you first came here and now, the difference in housing as a whole?

White: That was interesting. Very interesting. It appeared at that time in the early '50s, 'cause I bought out here in '55. In the early '50s, all the way through, I would say, well, all of '50 basically, there seemed to have been a plan among the Realtors and the business people to keep or restrict all the blacks north of University, apparently. There was, now this is one of the areas I worked with the F.O.R. for a while, 'til we found that the Urban League had made some impact on

integrated housing. Techniques they used to keep blacks out of certain areas were ridiculous. At one time, they had whole geographical areas earmarked for a type of loan that one was able to secure in that area and this is based on normally the economic income of the individual, and of course this always covered all the blacks and maybe very few whites and you'd go to buy a house, all kind of stories was told. Sometime, they'll tell you, when you go down to the Realtor that "that house was sold yesterday." I've had that experience. I've had experience where I knew a house was up for sale. I went to the owner of the house, he wouldn't even show me the house. Wouldn't let me look at it. And one interesting incident over there where I lived on West Ells with Mrs. Jamerson, which was an integrated neighborhood, a house went up for sale on the opposite corner on Ells Street. And the white lady who owned the house wouldn't even let me look in the house. You follow? I bought out here after searching and searching for something that I could handle and I finally bought out here in the Carver Park Addition. You might say at that time, about the only place that I could buy that I wanted. Now since that time, of course, it appears, that you can buy anywhere you want to buy, if you got the money. And of course techniques such as "block-busting" came into being and of course some of that still exists. Of course now it becomes, looks like, a black moves in and white move out, so we still have some problem with residential integration.

Tyler: How about your involvement in politics?

White: I've never been involved in politics. Largely because, well, first of all, I'm not politically minded, personally. Second, being a federal employee, we were not allowed to participate in most politics, just a very, shall we call it, "community-type political programs" could we participate in. Most of our activity could not be involved in politics, was to work for the government. I guess you'd call that a conflict of interest. (Laughs.)

Tyler: Can you, in looking back, maybe when you first came here some of the segregation in the theaters and restaurants, if there were when you came here?

White: Not in the theaters, because if I recall when I came here, you could go to the theaters and sit among any of the, let's say, patrons of the theater. There were a large number of restaurants that you could go in but you were not necessarily welcomed from the way you were treated and then there were many you could get service in without any problem.

So I didn't have much need for public service. Socially, I didn't have too much of a need. What social, let's say, entertainment I needed, I found it with my lodge, I went to work with the Masons. I joined the Masons' organization and I developed some fraternal spirit there as well as friendship and most of my social life let's say revolved around the activities that the Masons sponsored.

Community-type activities, the Urban League, provided me an outlet, freedom of residence movement provided me an outlet there to contact and make some contact with the community and also my church, Salem Baptist Church. I was

very active in the church for a number of years. I taught Sunday School, and participated in many of the church programs, so I didn't have a great need for a social life here in the city. Working at Chanute, you spent all of your time there and a large number of my close friends were people of contact that I worked with on Chanute and only people that I made much contact with here were people I met through some organization. So now as to where you could go and be treated welcome, I didn't encounter much of that; however, I know some of it existed. Any services I needed, such as barbershop, dry cleaning, tailoring, and those kind of personal services, why I was able to get them in the black community and primarily people who provided them for me were people either in my church or in my fraternal organization. I guess as nature would have it, why you try to go where you're known and where you get the kind of people who you think would give you a good job.

Tyler : What were your reactions when you were named Illinois _____?

White: Hum. . . Quite gratifying. (Laughs.) Quite gratifying. I was very active at that time in the Masonic organization and I had, I didn't have an aspiration necessarily, for going up in the organization to become grand master. I just enjoyed Masonic work and fraternal fraternization and of course, to be recognized and honored as a Mason of the year, why that was quite an honor. It was quite an honor. And I appreciate it and will forever remain grateful for that. I'll show you that plaque in there sometime, okay? During that process, I did

travel around the state and visited other Masonic bodies and met some influential people and some very outstanding Masons and some very dear friends. Some are still appreciated and are still close to. Talking about that, Dexter was the mayor of the city at that time, we had a "mayor council form" of government, if you remember, and he surprised me by giving me a key to the city. It's a coincidence, this household has two keys to the city. My daughter has one and I have one. So, I think that was something to be proud of.

Tyler: In final, I have just one more question. I was just curious about the incident that happened at Salem.

White: (Laughs.) Well, it was comical. And crucial situation was developing. The minister at that time _____. The minister at that time had some very peculiar ideas and was very dictatorial about what he wanted the church to do and how it was to do that and that included conducting their business as well as the service and what have you for the church. A very intelligent man, the minister was, and he was a good speaker, very intellectual, but however, he was a, I think, very, shall I say greedy for self-achievements and recognition. And after many things happened in the church, why some of us decided that we were going to ask him to leave. Mindful at this time, I was not a deacon but I was active in the church, I was a Sunday School teacher and I participated in many of the other programs. So a bunch of us banded together and met with the minister and asked him about certain things that we would like to see some changes in,

but he wouldn't yield one iota, so then we proceeded to take steps to how to get him out of the church. Let's say from the church constitutional standpoint or from a legal standpoint and of course this went on for a number of months, I guess better than a year. We tried to have church meetings, he wouldn't even allow us to have a Democratic church meeting. We couldn't even have meetings without his say-so and his calling of the meeting. Well, we thought this was absolutely a little bit unnecessary. So, the group that I was working with, we decided one Sunday morning that we would bring to the church, all the things that we felt was wrong in the church and let the church decide whether we wanted to keep the reverend or whether we wanted to attempt to discharge him. And that particular morning, he assumed that effort would be classified as a disorderly conduct act in interrupting church service, and of course I was the leader of it. So when I approached the podium to address the audience, the police walked in the building, which tells me they were standing by expecting this. We'd had a "leak" from my group, okay? (Laughs.) So when I walked up to the podium, why a couple of people on his side physically took the mike away from me and by that time, my group started naturally, you know, sounding off and in walks two policemen and asks me to leave, that I was disrupting church service. So, I was issued a subpoena to appear in court for disrupting church service. The only time I've ever been arrested in my life. It appears to be a little bit ridiculous you get arrested in church. (Laughs.) But that's what happened, I was arrested and well, in fact I wasn't arrested I take that back that night, one of the deputies called me and told me he had a warrant for my arrest for disrupting the church service.

And I told him, well, you can serve it if you want to or I can appear over tomorrow morning at 9 o'clock at the courthouse and take care of it so, he said okay then. I'll leave it up to you, you come in tomorrow morning and sign in. So, I went to the courthouse and it just so happened at the time the county sheriff was a personal friend of mine and so he made a joke of it, having me arrested in church he thought it was a real unique situation. (Laughs.) That situation I signed my own peace bond and that case finally came to court and the judge threw it out, ruling that he had no jurisdiction over a church activity in this nature. Of course shortly after that, the minister did leave, but in the process, I guess the church of about 450 members at that time, many of the members had been driven away. Many of them had been put out of the church, including myself. Many of them had joined other churches and did join other churches and of course it kind of set the church back I guess, a few years. But that lasted for about maybe eight or 10 years. I know I stayed away I think about 15 years and I finally went back to Salem, so my membership is back at Salem now again and I hope we have peace and harmony. Yeah, that was kind of interesting. That the last one?

Tyler: Okay, well, thank you.