

The Rev. Thomas Gaskins

A Verbatim Transcription of an Oral Interview

108 West Washington Street
Champaign, Illinois
July 14, 1983

Interviewed by
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Patrick Tyler

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Introduction

The Rev. Thomas Gaskins came to Champaign in 1930 with his mother. He attended Gregory Elementary School and Urbana High School.

In 1942, Mr. Gaskins went into the Army and was discharged in 1951. While in service, the Rev. Gaskins traveled to other countries overseas, including England, France and Belgium. He was shot while crossing the Rhine River in Germany.

At the time of the interview, Rev. Gaskins was assistant pastor at the Macedonia Baptist Church in Champaign. He was ordained at the Pilgrim Baptist Church in Champaign.

This interview was conducted on July 14, 1983, at his home, 108 West Washington St., Champaign. The interviewer is Melinda Roundtree representing the Urbana Free Library Archives.

The Rev. Thomas Gaskins, Oral Interview

Melinda Roundtree: First of all, Mr. Gaskins, could you tell me a little bit about your childhood when you were growing up?

Thomas Gaskins: My childhood. Oh, I don't have much to say, but I went through grade school and high school, that's all I know. I didn't go to college. All my kids, I give them a college education, every one of them. Some of them got good jobs and everything. My part, I just went on through twelfth grade through high school.

Melinda Roundtree: Did you go to school here in Champaign?

Thomas Gaskins: Yes, I went to school here.

Melinda Roundtree: What grade school did you go to, what schools?

Thomas Gaskins: I went to school right down the street there, Gregory School.

Melinda Roundtree: Gregory School?

Thomas Gaskins: Yes, right across the street there on Randolph. Then I went to the junior high, and I went through to the twelfth grade.

Melinda Roundtree: What high school did you go to?

Thomas Gaskins: I went to Urbana High School.

Melinda Roundtree: Oh, you went to Urbana? What year did you graduate?

Thomas Gaskins: Oh, shoot, I done forgot now. I'm trying to think. See, that's been a long time. See, I went in the service, I wasn't but 18 years old, and I stayed overseas for nine years. Should've made a career out of it. [inaudible].

Melinda Roundtree: Where did you go overseas? What countries?

Thomas Gaskins: Oh, the European countries, I was all over there, over in England, France, Germany, Belgium, and the last battle, that's where I got shot at, over in Germany. I crossed the Rhine River. That's why I'm on that disability, you see. They give me what you call a Purple Heart disability. As long as I live, the government got to pay me, see, because I got shot. I'm trying to figure out what year did I finish high school, let's see . . . I was 17 or 18 years old and now I'm 54 now. But that ain't the answer what you asked me. When did I finish high school? Let's see, I think it was back in . . . I believe it was 1960, I believe it was when I finished high school. That's about as close as I can get at it. You can put it down like that. In other words, you're recording it anyway.

Melinda Roundtree: What year did you come to Champaign?

Thomas Gaskins: Oh, to Champaign?

Melinda Roundtree: Champaign.

Thomas Gaskins: Oh, that was way back in . . . When we come to Champaign I wasn't nothing but a kid then. I don't hardly know but I can figure it out. I was born in 1929. I think it was nineteen and thirty (1930). That's when my mother moved to Champaign. So I grew up here and went to school here. Yeah, it was in 1930. That's when it was.

Melinda Roundtree: How were the job opportunities in Urbana-Champaign? You know, could blacks get jobs easy?

Thomas Gaskins: Yes, one occupation though was cement finishing. I had an occupation.

Melinda Roundtree: When you first got here?

Thomas Gaskins: No, after I grew up.

Melinda Roundtree: Oh, after you grew up, O.K.

Thomas Gaskins: Cement finisher. Yes, I could read those blueprints, ain't too many people could do that. Any which a way a building supposed to be laid I can do it because I was a first-class concrete finisher. That's what I was. That was my occupation.

Melinda Roundtree: What other kinds of jobs did you do after that?

Thomas Gaskins: That's on construction.

Melinda Roundtree: You did mostly construction work?

Thomas Gaskins: Yes, that's what I did, construction work.

Melinda Roundtree: What year did you go into service?

Thomas Gaskins: I went in the service in 1942. And you can count it from that I was gone for nine years before they discharged me, and then I said I should've listened to the company commander, and made a career out of it, and I never would have to work anymore. But after I come out of service, I went out on construction and went to finishing concrete on those big jobs, and that's the way it was.

So here lately I lost my health. That right kidney went bad on us, so that's why I had to go on that dialysis machine over to the Mercy Hospital. I just come back just a

few minutes ago. I was just about five minutes ahead of you. Didn't you ring my buzzer?

Melinda Roundtree: Yes sir.

Thomas Gaskins: Whoever it was . . . It wouldn't just fly wide open, but the electricity go through and unlocked it. All you got to do is just pull the door to you. That's the way it is. (He talks about the intercom system and the doors.)

Melinda Roundtree: Could you tell me a little bit . . . I know you told us about your job as a policeman. Could you fill me in a little bit more on the experiences?

Thomas Gaskins: About being a policeman? All I know is that I was just a good cop, is all I know. I never did, you know, arrest nobody, beat them up with the blackjacks, because I had authority to do it. All I'd do is just talk to them and when I catch them doing something make them go home. [inaudible]. In other words, I didn't do nothing but scare them off and they break and run. Well, I just circle the block and come right back and wouldn't even put on the red light. I just drive up there and jumped out the car. I said, "What you guys up to?"

They look around, "Oh, that you Reverend?"

"Yes, want to do me a favor?"

"Yes, if we can."

"Get your tools and go home."

That's the way I done it, see. I didn't want to beat nobody up. I didn't want to shoot them. The chief used to tell us don't shoot unless you have to, but let no man get within six feet of you. If you do, they'll kick you in the stomach and get you down and take your gun, and then you're going to lose your job automatically, see. So I never let nobody . . . I wouldn't shake with nobody. I don't care how well I knowed them. I just make them go on home. I said get out of my sight quick as they can. I didn't do like these other cops.

A lot of cops, see, haul off and beat them up on the car, and call in for a backup. And another police sits back there so they won't grab the driver and make him wreck and they'll sit back there and make them be quiet 'til he get him on to jail, put him in jail you see. But I didn't have to do all that. Just use sound judgment and just talk to the guys. That's the way I think. I never took them down. I just gambled, that's what it was. White and colored, I wasn't tough on nobody. So I thank the Lord especially for being a good cop.

But I turned my stuff in after I talked to my mother and asked her what she mean about some "but." She said, "But I don't want you to be no police, Tommie."

I said, "Why? And I ain't bothered nobody."

"Boy you don't know like I know. If you was in Chicago or California or some of these places or Massachusetts, and you riding around in New York, and anybody dislike you they'll shoot you while you riding around in the squad car, and that's what I mean 'but' get you another job." That's what she used to tell me.

I said, "All right. I'll think about it." Finally, I give up and turned my stuff in. You think I'm lying - I can show you all my equipment in there right now. All my uniforms and everything. I'm not lying about it.

Melinda Roundtree: What year did you quit?

Thomas Gaskins: That was back in the seventies? Yes, around '71 up until 1975.

Melinda Roundtree: What was one of the most outstanding experiences that you can remember when you were on the force? One of the best things that, you know . . .

Thomas Gaskins: When you're on your beat one of the best things you got to check . . . Also you drive up there and catch hold to the lock, just like that lock on the door. Make sure the doors are locked, and I had to check all banks, ride around, check every bank, and see if a bank is robbed. See if anybody breaking in. That's one of the most things that I get back out on the street and if I get a call, a lot of times, see, they'll call me for a backup, you may not know what I'm talking about, but I'll explain it to you.

Like some police you know go out to arrest somebody like, if you would have big fights or been in wrecks and all that kind of stuff, well they call in this C.B., you see. Call into the chief for a backup. Well, they call me. Tell me to come to such and such a place. 'I'll need a backup.' [inaudible] . . . C.B. and I said, 'Over. And I'll be right on your taillight.' So I'd go there and help them out, see. That's one of the important things. And that's the way it was.

You can't be a cop, if you can't buy your own uniform and your gun and your blackjack. The only thing the city furnishes is your badge and that walkie-talkie. You know what I'm talking about? You pull it out and pull that aerial out? You can talk on it. You can talk 50 miles on that. And the handcuffs. That's all the city furnish. And everything else you got to buy it yourself. If not, you ain't going to get on the cops, see. That's the way it is.

My oldest daughter, she is a policeman in New York, after she finished college. This one here, this is my youngest daughter back here. She's a surgical nurse in New York. She works directly with the doctors when they operating on people. She's 23 years old. Her name is Victoria Renee. I just call her Vicki all the time, for short name. That's her. See, every time she smiles, she got a dimple coming in each jaw, just like me.

In other words, all my kids, is just like me. Five of 'em. Three boys and two girls. I've got some pictures here. Just a moment, I'll show you.

Melinda Roundtree: I want to ask you. Have you ever been in any life-threatening situations at all on the force?

Thomas Gaskins: Nope. No, I haven't. That's a 'no' answer.

Melinda Roundtree: When you came to Champaign, how was the community? How did the community treat you? Were they nice?

Thomas Gaskins: Oh, yes. They treated me nice. Always did. You know, growing up. Didn't know what it was all about. Was treated nice. Ever since I been here. I can say that when I came here, I was a little, little boy. That was in 1930. So. I growed up, right in this town, like I said. So I told you about, I went to school here. After I growed up, went to grade school and high school and all that other kind of stuff. I didn't go to college. Now, all my kids, I got them a college education because I made that big money out on construction, you see. That's why I was able to give them a college education. My oldest son, the one named after me, Tommy Junior, he is an engineer and all they do is drive these passenger trains. He drives a fast train, seven or eight hours from Chicago to New York and from New York to Los Angeles, California. That's his occupation. He's an engineer. So, now, he's gotten married. He's got a wife and three little boys. Oldest boy is five years old; next one is four; and the youngest one's three. They look just like triplets. You can't hardly tell them apart, when you look at them. He was here not too long ago. Vacation, they only give him, just one day off, see, 'cause he's got to drive them trains, you see. He came down here, and his kids, running all through the house. I can't tell one from the other. They look just alike. Fine looking boys.

Melinda Roundtree: Could you give me the names of your sons and daughters and grandsons?

Thomas Gaskins: Well, my son, he's named after his, his name is Thomas Junior Gaskins. As long as we got the pictures out, Darryl Gaskins and Lula Mae Gaskins

and Victoria Renee Gaskins. That's their names. Unless you want the names of my grandkids? The oldest one, let's see, he's five years old, his name is Keeann. And the one, the four year old, his name Luke. And the baby boy, he's three, his name is Wally. See. And his wife, her name is Pat. See. She's about your size. Patty. He don't like too big a woman, see. I don't know why. That's the way he like 'em, you know. About like you. That's all I know.

Melinda Roundtree: You said you were ordained in Pilgrim?

Thomas Gaskins: Yeah, Pilgrim Baptist Church. That's where I got ordained at.

Melinda Roundtree: How long where you there?

Thomas Gaskins: Oh, I was there at the Pilgrim Baptist Church about eight years, Pilgrim Baptist Church. Now, I'm with Reverend Jackson now, at Macedonia. In other words, he needed an assistant pastor. So he talked me into it. And I left Pilgrim. So I'm an assistant. You know Ed Jackson? Ed Jackson. He's from Decatur. Well, he passed the church here. We had a new church built on Fourth and Tremont. If you ever went up through that way and see that new church coming in. We're supposed to move in sometime this month. [inaudible]. Soon as they get out the way, we're going to move in. [inaudible]. Sometime . . . go out of town. So we first have a morning service, sometime we go to Peoria. Sometime Chicago. Sometime over to Indianapolis, Indiana. About a month ago, Terre Haute. Now supposed to go to

Bloomington this coming Sunday. But I don't know if I'm going to feel like it or not. It all depends on how I feel. So maybe, Reverend Jackson may have to go himself. If I feel like it, I'll go. That's the way it is. [inaudible]. I am the assistant pastor, see. Macedonia Baptist Church.

Melinda Roundtree: Are you a member of any organization or club? A lodge? Never been?

Thomas Gaskins: No. I got a big insurance through Medicare with the government. But I don't know if you know what it is, you're so young. Medicare. That's a good insurance, and it's a big one. It pays so much on my doctor bills and, like if I have to go to the hospital, boy that insurance will pay all the room, which it's \$204. The other day I was in the hospital almost 20 days, and the government has to every bit of that. Then they turn around and pay 80 percent on the doctor bills. And all I have to pay is 20 percent, you see. It comes out of my pocket. The 20 percent don't amount to much money. For 20 days I had to pay out around about \$300. The government took care of all the rest of it. So I don't worry about it. I can go anywhere in the United States. [inaudible].

I've got what you call a Purple Heart disability. They've got to pay me this as long as I live. I get the check. So I don't work anymore. I lost my health. The right kidney went bad. That's why I'm on that dialysis machine. You know what that is? What they do, they put a great big needle in your vein way up here somewhere and it pumps all the blood out of you. They put another big needle down below in another

vein and the blood that's pumping out goes through a machine. It cleans your blood out, you see. You can look at it going up in a plastic pipe, a steady little stream, just like you turn a hydrant on, water hydrant on slow. It goes in that machine and purifies and cleans it out. Then they start the other needle to pump there below. It pumps the blood back into the body. When you get off that machine, you be weak, but the next day you feel good, you see. I ain't going to tell nobody when you first get off of that, you're really weakened down, you know, from pumping all the blood out and putting it back into the body. But it does you a lot of good. I have to either do that or let them operate on me, going through my back to take that right kidney out, so a lot of people ain't got but one kidney. You got to have one. And my left one's good. Nothing wrong with it.

So, they say I have to either get on the machine or else go through a surgeon and let them take that bad kidney out. [inaudible]. I'm getting better all the time. Every time I get on there. I got to get back on that machine again tomorrow. See, tomorrow's Friday. Rest up awhile and then go back again next Tuesday. And the following Saturday. Saturday, I have to get back on it again. I keep on doing that until they get me well. It really makes you feel 100 percent better. I'd rather do that than go through an operation.

Melinda Roundtree: Would you say the community, the black community is more closer now than it was before?

Thomas Gaskins: Oh, yeah. Sure is.

Melinda Roundtree: In what way do you think?

Thomas Gaskins: Well, you know, they really, you know, the economy is a hard thing, [inaudible] to be treated nice. Nobody blows me around. So. I've been treated real nice. People are a whole lot better than they used to be. White and black. Give me a lot of respect. Every which way I go sometimes I get tired of shaking hands. 'Hello Reverend Gaskins. How you doing, Reverend?' We have a lot of white people belong to our church. [inaudible]. And that's the way it is. Sometimes I'll be called out to preach to a white church. I've got to go, see. That's my occupation. I get a call. I get going. I don't never say no. The answer always be yes. I find I like it. I've been doing this for the last 10 years. I got ordained ten years ago. I could show you my license if you want to look at it.

That's about all the questions. That's the only part of the questions I know to answer, what you asked me. I don't know nothing else. In other words, that's what you're doing now.

Melinda Roundtree: What are the things you would like to see the community do in the future?

Thomas Gaskins: The community what?

Melinda Roundtree: What things would you like to see the community do? How you want it to improve? How could the community improve in the future? You know, things to make it better for the people.

Thomas Gaskins: Well, [inaudible]. you see what I mean? They go to Chicago or where it's going to be. And they at the big time. [inaudible]. Sometime we'll be gone about a week before we get back to Champaign. So that's nice. In other words, I enjoy it. Being with the people like that. Treated nice. [inaudible].