

# **Mattie Tinsley**

## **A Transcription Of an Oral Interview**

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Interviewed by  
Crystal Green

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Green: Let's see, Mrs. Tinsley. This is the first question to get it started off, so to speak. Can you tell us something about when you moved to Champaign, where you're from, just for starters?

Tinsley: Yes. Yes. I moved from Metropolis, Illinois, which is the southern part of the state in 1919, June the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and I have been here 60 years.

Green: How do you remember the date so well?

Tinsley: Well it stood out in my mind very well because I did write it down, but I could remember it anyway because it was a very hot day in June, and I had three little children with me. My three children – my oldest one just turned eight years old, and I had to buy a ticket after I got on the train. They said I didn't need a ticket for my oldest child, but I got to Carbondale where I had to change trains I had to buy another ticket. And I had to get off the train and go back through the depot to get the ticket. And, oh, it was so hot. I couldn't forget that day.

Green: Well, meanwhile, what did you do? Did you take the children all with you, or what?

Tinsley: Oh, yes I did. I wouldn't dare leave them on the train, and then I had a basket and I left it with a man. And he said if the train would have to pull out, he said he was going to get off in Champaign because he knew my mother and give

her the basket. But the man promised me that he would so I felt very safe about that.

Green: What brought you to Champaign?

Tinsley: My mother had moved here previously in 1913 and, of course, I wanted to come up here and be near her and she said work was good for women. And later on when my children got older and needed more help that I could find something to do, kind of help the family out.

Green: What type of work were you doing then?

Tinsley: Well, I wasn't doing any kind at the time. When the children were small, I never went out from the home until my baby girl went to the school, and then I just did day work. I had a couple of days out – half-days, and then I'd come home. I always believed in being home when the children would come in from school. So that's what I did while they were growing up, just housework.

Green: Well, I have on this list that you only lived in Urbana, that you never moved to Champaign. You know some people live in Champaign a while, and then they move over to Urbana, you know, or vice versa. You know most of the people have lived in both the towns.

Tinsley: Well, when I came here my mother lived in Champaign, at the time, she had lived in both towns, too. But at the time, she was living in Champaign and I just stayed with her. My husband was building a house and he had to finish the house before he could come, and so I stayed with her until I could find a house. In the meantime, my sister and I would go out and look for houses, and couldn't find one, only in Urbana. So I been in Urbana ever since, it just happened that way in all the houses I lived in was over here. And now I like to live over in Urbana.

Green: Well, the house that your husband was building, is this it?

Tinsley: Oh, no. He was building a house in Metropolis. I said he didn't come with me, but he was building a house in Metropolis. And at the time, you see we came, and I stayed with my mother in Champaign, and then I looked for a house in the meantime. We both got here and I found one in Urbana. Houses were hard to find 'cause I tried to find one near the church and the school.

Green: Well, did you live, where at in Urbana did you move to? Did you come say directly to this end of town? What is this northeast end of Champaign they call it?

Tinsley: Well, this is north Urbana, yes. The first house I found was 1206 ½ West Eads, which was then the last street, incorporated street, north. And we

lived there two years rented, and then the house was sold, we weren't ready to buy, and we found a house in the 1300 block of Dublin Street. \_\_\_\_\_.

So we lived there two years, rented two years, and then we wanted to buy. And we lived there 19 years. And then I found this house on Church Street, West Church, 1410 ½ West Church and I like that house and I said well, I won't put anymore money into the house on Dublin Street because it looked like the way circumstances were at the time that if I had to do it all alone, I probably would lose it.

And I found that house and bought it, and I paid cash for it. Then I fixed it up. I got it reasonable, and then my money went into fixing it up, and I lived over there 35 years. So I had to sell then to Mercy Hospital because they wanted that block for the parking lot, and that was in '74. And I found this house because it had an apartment already here and I had put all my money into that house, fixing it up for an income and in the meantime, my first husband had died. And then the second husband had died, and I was on my own. So I had fixed an apartment in the basement over there and it was very comfortable, and kept it rented all the time. And then I had two bedrooms, spare bedrooms, that I could rent out to student girls, and they used my kitchen. And I got along very well, but I bought this house, reluctantly, but I'm making myself pretty well satisfied here because it is handy for me, still in Urbana.

Green: Tell us a little bit more about his Mercy Hospital thing. How did they approach you on that? How were your feelings toward that?

Tinsley: Well, I was very much disturbed, but the first time they came to me was six years previous to that, but the deal didn't go through. They had all of our homes down for about \$9,000 – that's what they had figured our homes for. And so they found out that we wouldn't sell for \$9,000. And something else I guess must have occurred because they didn't come back on us for it until '74. And then they came back and they had to give more than they anticipated, but I said I wouldn't do it. We all did. All but about two families because they were willing to sell because they hadn't put very much in ours, but Mr. Freeman and I had. Mr. Freeman hadn't been there nearly as long as I had because I've been there 35 years. But they had fixed their house up. Well, they said that if we didn't sell, they would condemn them. They had a way of getting them, you know, so they knew that. They told me that. Well, they kind of used me for the mother of block, and they would ask me advice. And I said finally when Mr. Barr, John Barr, was working for the hospital making his sales and he said to me, "Mrs. Tinsley, I'm going to tell you just how it is." He said, "Now, if you don't sell they're going to stop up the street and you won't have any outlet." Well, they couldn't keep me from going out my back, but you know how difficult it would be in winter going out my back up on the railroad track to get out. They knew that, you see. So I told Mr. Freeman when he came home. "Mr. Freeman, we just might as well look for a place to stay because Mr. Barr told me." I had just found out that his teacher had taught me English. I asked him, I said, "Are you related to Doris Barr? Would you be her husband or brother or anything?" He said, "I'm her husband." \_\_\_\_\_ and I let him know that she had taught me English and everything.

In the meantime, I had graduated and had a little teaching job over there at St. Mary's School. So he said, well, and then he told me the facts about it. He said, "That's what they will do." He said, "And then they'll condemn your house." So everybody, we felt terribly hurt, but we were forced, you might say, to give up our property.

Green: How long ago was this?

Tinsley: In '74, the spring of '74. So I've been here, this is my fifth summer.

Green: Yes, so you haven't been here that long.

Tinsley: No. No. Just in this house.

Green: You're still adjusting to this.

Tinsley: Right, right. But I've been right here in Urbana 60 years.

Green: Say about 50 or 60 years ago, can you tell us something about the racial climate?

Tinsley: Well, when I moved here the racial climate was very good. In some places that we would go – they tell me – I didn't go to very many of the eating



places. But they told me it was becoming more prejudiced than it had been. But over in Urbana the contacts that I had to make was always very good because there weren't but a few families over here. I could count the families, the black families that were over here, from my house all the way back and farthest family was this one colored family south of Mildred Allen's home, and I had been trying to think of their names but . . .

Green: Mildred Allen was staying there on Clark Street on Urbana?

Tinsley: That's the home place.

Green: Okay, that's West Clark in Urbana.

Tinsley: Yes, they were living right there when I came here.

Green: So it really wasn't very many black families in Urbana.

Tinsley: In Urbana, right. Then when they begin to come in some, you know, located in Urbana as well as Champaign. But, of course, more of them went to Champaign.

Green: When the people came in – you speak of them coming in – where did they come from, these people?

Tinsley: Well, in meeting them around at the churches and things, they seem to be more from Mississippi than any other state. There were a few that I had met that was from Kentucky, and I would tell them, I said, "Well, I was born in the state of Kentucky," but I said, "I don't remember very much about it. I was three years old when my father died, then my mother moved to Illinois where her mother was." And I let them know quick, you know, as I say putting them at ease I'm in Illinois, because some of them, they seemed to be you know just distant \_\_\_\_\_ people getting acquainted. I said well, I was born in Kentucky but I've been raised in Illinois.

Green: Were there, as a result of these people migrating from Mississippi what changed, or was there any changes? Was there any changes in . . . ?

Tinsley: Now see as I said I went out to do day work and I was treated very nice because I worked with the university people. And they would, some of them, most of them called me Mrs. Murray. I had worked for two families. And the one, I was young and she was older and she had these student professors there and I could see the prejudice in her but she was very nice and talkative and everything, but she would call my first name so they would be sure to know my first name, because she didn't want them calling me Mrs. Murray. I could see that but I would ignore it, you know. Now then later on I worked for some more people and they never called me the name of Mrs. Murray – they never called me by first name, the man nor the wife. So there was a difference in the people over there,

over on the campus then. There was some prejudice in the University of Illinois, but it just depended on the family that you happened to work for to see the difference. But later on there was I learned, a lot more prejudice in the white people toward the Negroes as they came in, in larger numbers.

Green: What about in churches, the growth of the churches? Was there any change in? Which church did you attend?

Tinsley: I've always attended Bethel as a home church, but I was associated with the Free Will Baptist Church because my mother belonged there. And, of course, at night if I went out I usually would go to their services because it was close to home. See I was near the church and she was there. We had our Sunday School in the morning a while and they had theirs in the afternoon, and I would go up there. And, of course, my husband wasn't a churchgoer, and I couldn't walk in there, but what they would ask me to teach the adult class, so I had been associated with them very closely. That's years ago though. I don't know, I don't know a dozen people up there now. See there are new people coming in and just a few of the older ones I know.

Green: What did Champaign have to offer in the way of entertainment for black people?

Tinsley: At that time?

Green: Yes.

Tinsley: Nothing but the churches mostly.

Green. Oh.

Tinsley: They didn't have anything because they had no shows. I mean everything they had to go to was white. They gave a little entertainment, some programs, things in the different churches. They didn't have a library. They just didn't have anything.

Green: Do you know anything about what Shirley referred to as 'Parker's Shacks.' That's what, these little houses that are around Parker's Funeral Home.

Tinsley: You say what about them?

Green: Yes, do you know anything? There's supposed to be a story concerning why they were built.

Tinsley: Oh about the time of the influx, the migration of our people north, they did capitalize on it because they were, homes were scarce and they were allowing it then, that they had little coal houses in the back of some kind of a shed that they would turn into a house and rent it. And Parker happened to be

one that had quite a few of those little things around him, and then he'd bring in more. And they just did commenced to calling the people in Champaign 'Parker's Shacks' because they were shacks. It was terrible.

When I fixed my apartment in my basement, I fixed it nicely as if I were to live there myself. And I told them, I said now I planned it and I was so glad I could have a side door so I wouldn't have to tell people to go to the rear. I had a side door there. This is the side door and that over there is for this side. And the house set up high and it was nice and dry and I put new fixtures and I had the neighbors all come and see what I was fixing. I wanted them to see that I was putting good stuff in there, you know, because it never stayed vacant.

Because of that you know, I knew what was going on and I wanted them because this ain't a basement. Because there were plenty of them over on the campus, but I wanted people to know that it was decent, and I told the man that did the plumbing was black. And I told him, I said, "I want it fixed just as if I were to live in it myself. That's what, I want it to be nice, you know." People was going to pay their money and want it to be good – it wasn't fine, but it was good. I put new bathroom fixtures, shower, and shower curtain, stool. I only had one secondhand thing in the plumbing business and that was the kitchen sink. But it was a good one and it was a large one. So it was – everything was nice.

But they were . . . And the first time I rented it they said it's a shame that you with this \$60 . . . At the time this man said, I had been renting it cheaper because everything had gone up so, but I had to raise it. He said, "Just to think what over there Parker had those shacks with no toilets and no water in the

house, in different ones, there was a few more that had some in the backyard rented for \$60.” And it was in the papers, what they were charging, and people were paying that. And then I had one person move from over in there, then he didn’t want to pay his rent after living in that good basement. And then he went off and left owing me a week’s pay. It was peculiar. He didn’t want to pay in advance. You find folks like that. You know, when they get something nice, then they don’t want to pay for it.

But I was a widow, I guess and they thought I wouldn’t put them out. But Parker would have put them out. But that’s the way it was around there, those conditions. I was glad in a way that they passed a law that you couldn’t fix them \_\_\_\_\_, because it was ruining the community, just ruining the community. You were brought up over there in Champaign, you probably have seen some of them yourself, haven’t you?

Green: I must say I have. Did you rent mainly to students, or did you rent to just, you know, anyone?

Tinsley: The basement I rented to students and working people just like I do now. I rent to working people and students upstairs. I have a working man. Now I’ve had two student girls, white. I’ve had more white students than I had blacks, but I’ve had . . . See I don’t discriminate. The university does not allow you to anyway, and so I don’t know whether you’re white or black until you get here. I kind of detect it in the voice or something, and they don’t know a lot of

times. And some of them like the places, but I can see in their face that they're not used to living with blacks and they'll say, "Well, I'll call you back." See, well, I'm used to that, you know. And I can tell when one is really pleased and don't care, just long as he gets through school and in a decent place. And I've had graduate teachers. See, they're graduate students and they have been teaching and they come back to work on their masters degree, men and women. So I'm very familiar with all of that.

Green: I notice here that you completed your G.E.D. in – she has 19 and she doesn't know what year.

Tinsley: Oh that was '71.

Green: 1971?

Tinsley: Um, hum.

Green: And did you mention that you took a teaching position over here at St. Mary's School?

Tinsley: St. Mary's School, yes.

Green: What is that, adult . . .

Tinsley: Adult education.

Green: Right. Adult education.

Tinsley: Yes. You see they had that adult education over there and I went over for a refresher course because I wanted to go to Parkland, and I didn't get my high school diploma. So I went over there. I studied seven months and Mr. Sutton kept telling me that I was wasting time, he thought I was ready for my G.E.D. And I said well, I was waiting on the algebra to come. I didn't have very much of it. And so when they did come, she saw that I could work it, you know, and she told me, "You don't have to go through all this." She said, "Just work one problem on each page." And that's what I did. Mrs. Gerhart, she taught the G.E.D. class. Well, they called it the G.E.D. class because it was two advanced classes, you know.

I taught on the fifth-grade level because I had to have the slow learners also in there and I had the foreign students. I helped Gail Rice, she's still up there. I was her assistant after I finished Parkland. But I only studied seven months, and I took my examination out to the county and I made the highest grade that had been made up to that time on the constitution. I was 76. I was 76.

Green: You were 76 when you did?



Tinsley: Right, I was 76. See the school year was '71 and '72 you know. But in '71 in that same fall, I went to Parkland. It was still '71. And my birthday was in October, and by me giving my age and the month, Mrs. Brotherson, the teacher aide, she remembered it and she gave me a surprise party. And her birthday is in October too but I didn't know what date until later on. Hers is the ninth, and mine's the fifth. And when I went in that morning they all were kind of singing Happy Birthday, Mrs. Tinsley. And I was going to say, how did they know? And I said, did she say? "Oh, no." And I didn't remember I had to give my age and the date of my month and everything was on my . . .

Green: What did you, what did you, what kind of curriculum did you take while you were at Parkland?

Tinsley: I took the teacher aide program which is a teacher's course. I had English, and psychology, and later I took math, but I took advanced work. See, I didn't – it was a 17-month program, but I know in my age I just \_\_\_\_\_ myself and 12 hours is a full load. Now you can take 12 hours or 17, and I said, I believe I'll take 12. So my counselor and Mrs. Brotherson both said, "I think you're wise to do it." But I saw that I had plenty of time after that when I get out, but I was glad because your know I thought I was being sensible too since I didn't have to, you know. So my class they told me, they said now, "This is your class, if ever we have a class reunion, this is your class." So some of them, they just fell in love with me. \_\_\_\_\_, they were nice, they were younger

than me and everything, but they were not very nice. And they saw that I made good grades too, and that was amazing to them. So when I finished my course I said I want my diploma dated for this time of the year. I knew that the graduation wouldn't come up until June, but I wanted my diploma. They said, Oh, we'll do that. So that what quarter see I finished and then of course when they got the diplomas made it was March – mine's dated March 2 – it's up there.

Well my counselor wanted to know and Mrs. Brotherson wanted to know, can't you think of something else that you would like to take? And they said because graduation is in June. I said well, I hadn't thought about that. And so when I got to thinking about it and then I went to Mr. Gunji. He said, "Well you know Mrs. Tinsley," he said, "The money is up there for two years." He said, "And they tell me you said you couldn't think of anything you wanted to take." I said, "Well, I've been thinking about it." I said, "I've always wanted to take French." And I tried to get in a French class and I couldn't. The man couldn't get enough students. Said it had to have ten, you know, to organize a class. Well, when that \_\_\_\_\_ and so we went on, I never did get in a French class. Well, I took reading – I can't think of the lady's name – I have it in there though, the book in there. She is a teacher over at the university at Randolph, something like that. She had composed a reading book and we used that. I took that and math, modern math, and English 3, advanced courses. So Mrs. Brotherson said to the class one morning, the new class had came in, you know, she said, "Do you know we have a graduate student in the class?" And the others were gone and I was new in this class in the fall, in the spring rather. So she told them that

they had a graduate student in the class. And they just marveled at that, you know, they didn't know that I had finished a \_\_\_\_\_ program and they were just taking it.

Green: How many years or how far have you gone in school prior to . . . ?

Tinsley: My high school work?

Green: Yes.

Tinsley: I was tenth grade.

Green: Tenth grade. Could you tell us what were some of the differences in school or education system there as opposed to the way it is now? Is there any difference?

Tinsley: Well, I'll tell you. I went to a school that was segregated, but it was a good school in southern Illinois. Now the high school, and for the years it has been – they built a new one for all the children to go together to the high school, but the districts are just like here. Some schools are in the colored zone, mostly where the colored people live and then, like the Columbia. But anyway, but it was a good school, and nobody . . . I knew and can remember the first graduates that came here to the University of Illinois. They didn't have to take

any course of grad work, but since I've been here, some have come in here from other towns even Springfield and they had to take post-grad work. They took it right out there at high school, Urbana High. Yes, they did, to get into the university.

As I said, as a curriculum, it was a good school. Now I took bookkeeping in the sixth grade. I took ledger in the fifth and sixth grade, what they called ledger. And that's one step in bookkeeping. Then in the seventh and eighth grade I took bookkeeping. Well, I was surprised when Gail Rice asked me, she said, "Mattie (we called each other by our first names)," she said, "Can you work long division?" I said, "Why sure I work long division." I said, "If I didn't I wouldn't be here." Well, she was having to fill in this G.E.D. class and she taught English. She was a English teacher, but she did have math, too. But that's what she was. She graduated – that was her major, was English. And she said, "Hmm, I don't know." Well, I did a lot of filling in for her, but I wasn't getting anything but teacher aide salary, you know. But she would leave me there and I did her work. Well, I think she was thinking about sending me in there but somehow or the other she never did, but I just looked at her I didn't say anything, because here is the way I felt. Now I can go in there and do that work in this girl's room, but I didn't think it was fair to put that on me and then I was getting but \$2.55, that's what I started out with. The next year I got \$2.85, and that's what I was getting. I was hired for the third year, but see the money didn't come through the school for the aides, then I haven't worked since.

Green: Well, you haven't given up have you?

Tinsley: Well, I haven't worked in the school system or anything else, and I hadn't worked for years. I quit doing domestic work when I was 69.

[End Side A]

## Mattie Tinsley, Interview

### SIDE B

Green: We're still in the living room of Mrs. Mattie Tinsley. And we'll proceed from here. What was? Oh, I think we were talking in terms of the school system and you were telling me, Mrs. Tinsley, about how you felt the children were educated in Champaign or Urbana schools as when you first came here as compared to the way they are now. The problems that we're having.

Tinsley: Now, you want me to answer that. Well, I think they're getting a good education, but I did notice a reading problem and I'd ask the teacher why the children didn't read as well as I thought they should read as children had read at that level when I was in school. And she told me, and they told me too, they says, "We don't read in school." Then I asked the teacher about it. She said, "Well, they don't. They don't read." I said, well I can't understand how the board is going to allow this to go on so long if they expect these children to go out and teach. What can they teach if they haven't had? And I was so glad when I learned when I read and kept up, you see, when the professors over there on the campus was finding fault of the reading. And this lady that put out this reading book and I noticed that they have been dissatisfied about the reading system in school and now is going back to the things that I had, well, years ago. And they're stressing more phonics, and more reading. You know that yourself now that they are stressing more reading. Professor \_\_\_\_\_ about the reading

system. So I think in my time that the education compared has been good to this day and time.

Green: How long have you been teaching, for the record, how long have you been teaching Sunday School?

Tinsley: I taught 59 years.

Green: So you know what you're talking about.

Tinsley: I taught right here 59 years down here at Bethel A.M.E. Church.

Green: At Bethel A.M.E.

Tinsley: Yes.

Green: Okay. And you say that the way that the children were situated through the school system, they went to Hays. Was it Hays School first and then . . .

Tinsley: Right. Well, yes, Hays School first out here, and then to Lincoln, and then Thornburn, and then high school. That's the way it went. See, there was . . . Hays used to go, I think it was fifth grade. That was the highest. In the later,

they added the sixth grade. So they have gone from there to Thornburn was fifth and sixth.

Green: Okay. This is Thornburn or Lincoln?

Tinsley: This was Lincoln.

Green: Lincoln. Okay. Lincoln had fifth and sixth.

Tinsley: It did, and then they would go to Thornburn, was junior high. That was the junior high when my children were in school. It was until they built the new junior high. Thornburn was a junior high and it was the sixth and seventh grade.

Green: Okay. Was this, Thornburn, was this school an integrated school at the time?

Tinsley: There were seventh and eighth grades, that was junior high.

Green: Was this an integrated school or was it predominantly black?

Tinsley: No. All of the schools were integrated. No schools were predominantly black because there weren't but a few colored people over here. Well, white people still live all around up here, out here. They're all white but I don't know



them. I had white neighbors across the street in our block on our side on Eads Street. In my block there weren't any whites, but across the street they were. So this is always been integrated up until a few years ago when they began to die out and the youngsters go someplace else. And then the influx of the colored people, they would find homes out here. No, the Urbana schools have always been fixed.

Green: Good educations, at one time.

Tinsley: Umhumm. I almost started a school.

Green: Well, I think that . . . I don't have any more questions to ask. Do you have anything to tell me?

Tinsley: Well, not nothing, but only that I still think that it's up to the children, too, how much they get out of school is the time you put in it. I think you have to listen to learn. And a lot of times I know the teachers won't because sometimes the children just don't, they're not interested and they let them go on and promote them and get rid of them. And I think the children that have made good in the school system are the ones that put something into their time. I think that goes for anytime that you're a student in anything, I think you got to put something in it to get something out. You agree with me?

Green: I do.

Tinsley: Yes. It's really true because I, as I said, I taught Sunday School for years and years. I was glad to get to teach in the other field because I've always – that was my talent – teaching, that was goal. I married, but my goal was to be a teacher, and so that's what I worked for and I was glad to get a chance to go back to school. And that's why I took the teacher aide program. At my age, I wanted to get out and use it rather than try to work for a four-year degree at that age, you see. I didn't feel that I had that much time left, and that's why I took the teacher aide program. I said I know I won't be getting the top salary but I will be in the school system and doing what I wanted to do.

Green: Well, do you encourage other people, say other senior citizens or other people your age to do that same thing? To go back to school if they can, or . . . ?

Tinsley: I have always taught in my Sunday School class. I always stressed a religious education, and an education is complete without a religious education, but I said, "You must carry God along in your work, but get an education out of school so you will be able to do different things." I've always stressed what I'm doing to other children and of course I felt like . . . I didn't say anything to the older people because I thought if they could see what I did – that – because they might take it the wrong way, you know. But if they could see what I did, that they feel like if they wanted to, they could do the same thing. And I've several in my

church told me that I gave them the incentive to go back to school. And there for a while a different one was popping up saying, "Well, she's going to Parkland." Or, "She's doing this." And they would come to me saying, "Well, how did you get in? How do you go about getting a G.E.D.?" And one of them, Mrs. Hudson, she's a beautician and she wanted some more education, she said she didn't get a G.E.D and she wanted to do something. She thought she was going to go into \_\_\_\_\_ but she finally told me that she really didn't have her high school diploma. She took night courses over here, because her work was in the daytime, you see, I wasn't working. And she got her G.E.D.

And then we had two or three that came to me and told me that I gave them the incentive to go to school. I think Charles Latham went to Parkland for a little while and oh, different ones. \_\_\_\_\_. I don't know whether they finished – no I know he didn't. But they were taking some courses there for a while. But I got to teach several of the older people up there, you know, and they wanted me to go back to teach. Some lady who was here, her name is . . . I almost called her. Now she lives on Grove Street. She's a nice little brown-skinned woman. She has a little daughter. I never can think of her name when I want to. But anyhow she said, "I don't get to go to school much." She has to work, but she said when she was sick \_\_\_\_\_.

Green: Well, Mrs. Tinsley, I'm going to thank you for letting us come into your home and doing this interview.

Tinsley: Would you like to play that for me so I can hear it?

Green: Sure, I would. We'll just . . .

[End Side B]