Taylor Lee Thomas

A Transcription of an Oral Interview

112 Whitehall Court
Urbana, Illinois
August 16, 1983

Interviewed by
Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler

Champaign County Historical Archives
Urbana, Illinois
1997

Introduction

This interview is with Mr. Taylor Thomas, who was born in Champaign at Burnham City Hospital on October 5, 1911. Mr. Thomas attended Champaign High School, where he participated in football and basketball.

In 1931, he received his bachelor's degree from Tennessee State University and his master's from the University of Illinois.

In addition, Mr. Thomas was the first black teacher to be hired in the city of Urbana, and in 1969, he was named first black to hold an administrative position at Urbana High School. Mr. Thomas also introduced the first sociology classes to Urbana High School, and in 1961, the Rosemary yearbook was dedicated to him.

The interview was conducted on August 16, 1983, at his home, 112 Whitehall Court, Urbana, Illinois. The interviewers are Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives.

Taylor Lee Thomas, Oral History Interview

Side A, Cassette One

Patrick Tyler: Okay, Mr. Taylor, could you tell us about your early life, like your date of birth and your place of birth?

Taylor Thomas: Well, I was born in Champaign, in fact, at Burnham Hospital on October 5, 1911. I attended Columbia School, which was just closed for one year and opened up this year for middle school, but at the time I attended there were only four grades. And at the time I was attending, I was the only black student in Columbia School and now I think it is practically all black, really. That shows the change of population.

But I attended Columbia and then I attended Gregory School. Gregory, of course, is closed now, I think it's the O.C.I., O.I.C. office. Then from there, there was eighth grade. It was at what we call Central School. The building doesn't exist now. It stood there next to the old post office on the corner of Hill, and I believe, it's Randolph. And right across catty-corner from the Robeson's building is the old post office building.

And then from there to Champaign High School which is now, I believe, Edison Junior High on Green Street, corner of Green and Randolph. I always get Randolph and State, State, I guess, confused. All these years I've lived here, Randolph and State Street I get confused. But I attended Champaign High. Well, I participated in

athletics in high school. I played football, and I was out for track one year, for basketball one year, but my senior year I didn't go out for anything but football.

Of course, things were, I imagine you would be interested that things were a little different in high school then, than what they are now. I . . . that's the only thing I could participate in, was athletics. Music program I couldn't participate. In fact, as a freshman, I wanted to play the drums in the school band, and the announcement was made by the instructor that in one of our course classes that students should bring their instruments to school the next day if they wished to join the high school band. Well, the high school band practiced before school, when I was in school. They didn't practice in the regular session. They'd practice from 7 to 8 in the morning. So, I was there at 7 o'clock with my little drum, and knocked on the band door, and the instructor came to the door and looked at me and looked down on me as if I were dirt, more or less, that's the feeling you got. And said, asked me what I wanted. I told him, I said I brought my drum and I wanted to join the band, and he said, 'Oh, we don't need any anymore.'

So I was kind of, I was not as aggressive then, I was kind of timid like, so I took my drum. I laugh at it now. It's a joke because I went back thinking how I was going to get that drum, it was a small snare drum, in my locker. Well, it wouldn't get in the locker, so I had to carry it around with me to class. I put it under the chair, and finally at noon hour some other black students were a little more aggressive, I guess, and said, 'Taylor, what are you doing carrying that drum around?' Of course, they were doing it more in a teasing way, more or less, as we have a tendency to do. I told them

what had happened. They said, 'Well, why don't you go upstairs and put it in the band room?'

I said, 'Okay.'

So they said, 'We'll go up with you.' And we all went up, and opened the door and asked about putting the . . . 'Put it there and pick it up after school.' So I did.

I just mention that to also mention some of the handicaps that we encountered. The fact that we couldn't play in the band. The fact that I earned my letter in sports. My picture was taken with the football team, but there's also a letter club that if you earned a letter in sports. And I wanted to join the letter club, but I couldn't join the letter club. So the letter club picture is in the yearbook, but mine is in there with the football team but not with the letter club because I couldn't join it.

I mean, of course, at the time that I was in high school, see, everything was segregated in the community. As for theatres, we sat upstairs in the Virginia and the Rialto. We sat down front first two rows, which is terrible on your eyes in the Princess, and which is at the Park? I guess it is - across the street from the Rialto. I don't know what it is called now. It is an adult movie now.

Then in the Orpheum we sat in the back and there were only five seats. There was the first seat, I mean the last seat back in the corner, then there were two seats, and then there were three seats in front of that, something like that. You would go to the theatre, and people would be going in, and you'd go up to and they'd say, 'We're filled up.' And I remember the first time that happened to me. I didn't understand because I saw these other people still going in. They meant those five seats were taken. That was all that you were permitted to.

And, of course, I never had a milkshake until I was a senior in high school, and I had that in Louisville, Kentucky. And that was a case of the football team played Male High in Louisville, Kentucky. The day before the team was to go, the coach told me that he didn't know that I wouldn't be able to play football in Louisville, Kentucky, against Male High, or he wouldn't of made the game. A little naive high school kid, I didn't believe it, but I went on and he said, 'But you can go to Chicago to a Bears game or you can pay to go to Louisville. I mean, we'll pay for you to go to Louisville and see the game.'

Well, my mother was pretty strict on me. She wasn't about to let me go to Chicago by myself to see a Bears game, so we had friends in Indianapolis and in Louisville. So we drove to Louisville to - not necessarily to see the Champaign game, but to see Louisville since I had that trip coming, since I couldn't go with the team to play.

We did go by, and the people that we stayed with, the man was Dr. Brockner, asked me if I wished to go by and see the team play. I said, well, I don't care. By the time we got by, the game was breaking up. Champaign had won and everyone was happy, so he took me by the Male High School to see Champaign players. I went in and they were jolly and said, 'That's all right. You'll be with us next week' and all that jive.

And then after we left, I saw my first black football game, Central High was playing someone, and he took me by there. That was quite a experience because I had . . . being, coming from a small town like Champaign, much fewer black students than there are now, being able to see this game of all these blacks was quite an

experience. And then we, after the game he said, 'Well, how would you like to go by the drug store and have a milkshake?'

I'd heard about milkshakes. I'd passed stores, and seen people in there drinking milkshakes and I'd wanted the milkshake. So, we went by and he bought me a milkshake. It tasted so good and when I finished he said, 'Would you like to have another milkshake?'

My mother had always told me, No, you don't take seconds, you know, and I wanted it so bad but I said, 'No, thank you.' But I was saying inside, 'Please let me take another one,' but . . . I mention that because this is all a part of the fact that I was not able to participate in certain things at the high school.

Because ordinarily, I would've been with the football team if I had've, see, because at that time in Louisville you couldn't. It was always an interest to me here a few years ago, a boy by the name of Griffith, I think, who was a star on Male High School basketball team, and then went onto the University of Louisville. From then he's in the pros now, and he was a black student, and he was playing at Male High in Louisville, which would not play blacks when I was there. So, there were no blacks in the school. We felt, well, I guess I felt that, well, that's worse than it is here, because I at least go to school and play on the football team. Where at Louisville, you couldn't even go to the school to play on a football team. But it's a matter of degrees, see, depending on where you are at certain times.

An example, I think, was even between Champaign and Danville. When I was in high school, in Champaign you could swim. The boys could swim in the P.E. classes. In Danville they couldn't. The same is true of the girls. Girls could swim in

the P.E. classes in Champaign; in Danville, they couldn't. But in Champaign, we didn't have any firemen on the fire department. In Danville, they had firemen on the fire department. You see, this thing of discrimination is a peculiar sort of thing. It works in different ways, depending on where you are, and what have you.

So, that's the reason you have to think in terms of having a goal to strive for, and work for that, regardless if you might have to go around, out of bounds, or what have you - all kinds of obstacles to get that goal. Because very easily, because I couldn't participate in certain things you could have laid down and said, 'Ah heck with it, can't do this, can't do that. I'm going to give up.'

But a number of students that I have seen who have realized that, and they have continued on. But getting back I guess to where I started, was that I graduated from Champaign High School.

During the summer there was a man here in summer school from Tennessee State College in Nashville, and he was a football coach. So, he was interested in football players. I don't know how I met him or anything, but he came out to the house, and talked with my parents, and he'd build up Tennessee State, asked me about going back to Tennessee State with him to play football in the fall. In the meantime, a couple of other boys around here were also talked into it, and we did go down. The other boys, they stayed for one season, but I stayed for the four years at Tennessee State.

I didn't intend to. I intended to go and play two years, and then return and finish school at Illinois. But I'll have to admit that I began to get confidence in myself as a result. I didn't have too much confidence in myself after going through high school here. I gained confidence as a result of going to Tennessee State. I felt that I was

capable of doing certain things. And I think partially the reason was that you were denied so many things that you couldn't participate in here, whereas, when I went to State I could participate in everything.

Consequently, I ended up . . . I was president of the freshman class, and I was in the Dramatic Club, and had this leading role in the senior class play. I was captain of the football team, and I was president of a fraternity for two years. I mean, all of that were things that I didn't have the possibility of experiencing. And at the time I was in high school, I was interested in going to some of the other big schools that didn't even play blacks. Notre Dame was one, didn't play blacks at that time. In the Big Ten, there were a few blacks, but very few. You could count them on one hand practically. And basketball was an unwritten law that no blacks played basketball. So, there were no blacks playing basketball in the Big Ten. As far as I'm concerned, very few other places at that time, any of the conferences, as far as basketball.

See, there were only five players on the basketball team, and they knew what was going to happen. After a while, you're going to have an all-black team. You see, that's what happened now, see. But they forestalled that for some time by not permitting blacks to play. As I say, there wasn't a written law, but it was an unwritten law it was an understanding. I recall there were two boys that came here from Chicago who were very good basketball players, and it was about the time I was a senior in high school they went to Illinois, and at that time, there was a freshman rule. You'd go out as a freshman, and you would play, and then they would cut you back, cut back until they maintained about ten players, and they would be carried on to the next year to play with the varsity. These boys were head and shoulders above so

many of the players, but they held them on 'til the last minute, and then they would cut them.

And one reason I know is because I played against a boy from Champaign in high school, who went to the University of Illinois and made the University of Illinois' freshman team and played as a upperclassman. I played against them, and then I played independent basketball with these boys that had come down here from Chicago, and they were head and shoulders over this other boy. And yet, they didn't make it, but he made it. So I did have a direct comparison as far as that was concerned. But, there was, I think, there was one or two boys. One fella, he looked like an Indian, and they called him Indian, who was really very fair but he was a black fella. He was old, and he played football at Champaign High School, and then he went to the University of Illinois, and he did play there a couple of years at least. But it was just a bad time, that's all.

And so my idea was to go to Tennessee State, and enjoy a couple of years there, and then come back here. But as I say, I really enjoyed myself, because I began to get confidence in myself and I was able to participate in everything. So I stayed until I finished. And during that time, of course, my mother became ill. You see, this is during the Depression years, and she was in bed ill. So I had to drop out of school for a while, and come home. I couldn't leave the room where she was for three months. And finally, she got better. She had anemia, Pernicious Anemia, which they had just begun to get medicine to kind of take care of people with that illness at that time. And so I stayed home, and then I went back after she got well, so that I could go back to school and finally graduated.

After I graduated, then I came home looking for a job. Well, I graduated in order to teach and coach. And I wrote, I don't know, I wrote 75 or 100 letters to get a job. I wrote North and South. And some letters, of course, half of them were not even answered. Maybe three-fourths of them weren't answered. And of the twenty-five percent that was answered, maybe fifteen or so you got the impression that they would not hire me in the South because I lived in the North. They wouldn't hire me in the North, because I went to school in the South. These were subtle ways of saying, 'We're just not going to hire you. That's all.'

And not so subtle too, I guess. But anyway, I didn't get hired. And some did have the courtesy to write and say, 'Well, we don't have any openings in this position right now.'

So I did odd jobs. I did whatever I could do. I waited table. I waited table at both the country clubs, and some of the hotels in town, and I would see fellas that did not have as much training as I had that were in better jobs than I was. Basically, these were whites, of course. And then after that I finally, well, I worked, got a job on the campus in a sorority house as a porter waiting table and firing the furnace, and doing odd jobs around the, not the fraternity house - it was the Pi Beta Phi on south Wright Street. It still exists there. I worked there, and after awhile, I, well, actually I quit. And so it was to my advantage that I did, but the housemother, they hired me to pay me so much a month. That was all right with me, and then when they started paying me, they started paying me by the week. Well, if you pay by the week, then you're getting two or three days on them because there're only 28 days if you're paid by the week in four weeks. If you're paid by the month, see, there're 30 or 31 days.

So by paying me by the week, I was getting a little bit more, and it took her I guess three months before she figured this out. And then she said, 'Well, we hired you by the month, and we will pay you by the month.'

I said, 'It's all right with me.' I said, 'I understand that that's okay.'

It wasn't my mistake that they had been paying me by the week, but the thing that I didn't appreciate was that she said, 'We will take out of your future check, the over-payment we have paid you.'

Well, I didn't make the mistake, so I didn't feel that they should take it out of the check. So I waited until I got the first check to see whether they were really going to take it out, and they did. And so when they took it out of the first check I said, 'Well, you won't get anymore. I will stop.' So that's how, the reason I stopped.

However, I didn't leave the job and leave them hanging completely, because, you know, you have to think of your future job when you leave a job. And so it was in the winter time, it was cold, and they had what you call a stoker furnace.

So, I went down and filled the furnace up with coal so that it would last them for 24 hours or so. And then too, I knew that one of the waiters at the house would be interested in working part time on this job, because he was going to school part time. So I told him, I said, 'Well, I'm quitting, so you can see if you can get it.'

So I quit, and they did hire him. And he worked for a while, until they found somebody else.

But after leaving that, then I was still waiting table on the side. A lady that ran the country club cafeteria said that her sister and her sister's husband wanted someone as a houseman, more or less, and would I be interested in the job? I said,

'Yeah, I'll take the job.' I could still wait table extra and work for them. So I started work for a private family, and I worked for a private family for a while. And then I just couldn't take this any longer, I mean these piddling jobs.

And fortunately for me, I had a relative living in Indianapolis, Indiana. So I went to Indianapolis, Indiana, and applied for a job with an agency that used to be here. It was a government agency known as the Farm Security Administration. They made loans to farmers, because the farmers could not get loans long enough whenever they'd have a bad season because of rain or too much heat or what not. And they had been in Champaign. They had moved to Indianapolis, so I applied. I knew there was one black person working because he was working here and he was working with the Farm Security in Indianapolis. But that was all that was working. And so I went to Indianapolis, applied for the job, and they told me that . . . They . . . First I waited a little table in Indianapolis where I was trying to get the job. They said, 'Well, we don't have anything right now, but if you'll come back, we might.'

So, I went back and they said, 'Well, we do have a job. You may not be interested in it, but if you take it, it will be easier. You already will be in the organization. It'll be easier for you to move into another job as soon as it opens.'

And I said, 'What is the job?'

And they said, 'It's night watchman.'

I said, 'Oh, God, night watchman.' So I said, 'Okay, I'll take it.'

Well, that meant that I had to carry a big pistol on my hip and a clock to punch, and I walked all over this building. It was a five-story building that took up almost a half of a block at least, almost three-fourths of a block. And I would have to walk all over,

all floors every hour. So by the time I made my rounds punching a clock to see that I'd been in that part of the building, and got back downstairs the hour was up, and it was time to start back again. I'd walk all on up to the top, and then I'd ride the elevator down. Well, I worked on the job for I think three months, as night watchman.

And then, a job opened up in the daytime, which was a messenger, and that was merely carrying mail all over the building to the different offices - putting mail in their out-box, and taking mail - I mean in their in-box, and taking mail from their out-box, and delivering it downstairs to where we would stamp the mail, and mail it out.

Well, I worked on that for I think a couple of months. And then I got a job as a sorting clerk, where I would sort all of the mail that, all of the material that comes in. In other words, we'd open the letters, stamp together, and send it to the department where it was supposed to go. And then I would sort. We even had a sorting machine where you would put it in alphabetically, and then finally, I had someone, two people working under me on that. And then finally, I moved to a full-time file clerk. Well, there were a number of steps before I got to the full-time file clerk where we would take care of the folders of individual farmers. I had part of the alphabet say like from A to C, or something like that. And all of the farmers' letters that came in, in that set of the alphabet, those letters of the alphabet, those are the ones that I would deal with to see that everything was correct as far as the folder was concerned.

Well, I worked in Indianapolis on the Farm Security Administration, but I also worked at night. When I was working at the Farm Security Administration in Indianapolis, we worked 5 and 1/2 days, and that was great, because most people worked six days, all day Saturday. But we got a half day off on Saturday afternoon,

and this was a great job, see. And during the Depression, too, very few people had a job. And then in the afternoon and evening, Saturday afternoon, and the evenings I worked until 4 or 4:30, it was, on the regular job, then from 6 until 12 at night, I clerked in a liquor store. And I worked in the liquor store for a couple of years, and I worked Farm Security three years.

In other words, two of the three years I worked, I was working on two jobs. Not only that, there were two nights out of the week I was going to school. In other words, I would go to Indiana - it was Indiana Extension University; now it's Indiana Purdue Extension University - on two nights a week from 6 until 9, and then I would go and clerk at the liquor store the rest of the time from 9 until 12 or 1. But on Saturday afternoon, I was off the government job, so then I would go and clerk at the liquor store to make up for the four hours I lost going to school during the week. And so, Sunday was the only day I had off. I also took vocal lessons for one hour a week. (Laughs). Now, don't tell me how I figured it in, but it came in there somehow. And also sang on the radio, nothing serious, just the vocal teacher had me singing around town for different programs, and different churches, and also for Flanner House, which is a social agency in Indianapolis. We didn't have TVs then, it was radio, and so I sang on a radio program.

But eventually, I had to begin to give things up. I was, really, I guess, doing too much and my health began to break down. So, I stopped clerking for the liquor store, and I stopped the vocal lessons, and I just maintained the job at Farm Security. And finally, I came home one weekend, and my mother, my parents said, 'You don't look too good to me. Maybe you better go to the doctor.'

So, I went to the doctor, and the doctor put me in bed. So that was a low point in my life, because here the doctor said I had to go to bed. And it ended up I had a very tenacious illness at that time. They treat it different now, and you don't necessarily go to bed now, they give you a pill.

I had tuberculosis, and I was in bed for four years. Two years in the sanitarium here, and two years in bed at home. And during that time, I took what you call pneumothorax, which is where they put a needle in your side and put air in there to collapse your lung, so that it will heal. And then after it is healed, then they let the lung come back up so you can use it. Now, that was a matter of rest; I mean, you just had to rest during those days. Now, that's not the case. I mean nowadays, they give you a pill or something to take care of it. But I don't know how it is, but imagine it helps to calcify a protection around the area that is diseased, I imagine.

But anyway, I came home from Indianapolis and did go to bed. And when I say everything was gone then, because here I had given up my job. I had to give up my job, gave up my friends - just seemed like the whole world had turned around on you because after my first three months or so in the sanitarium, all the people that I knew forgot me. And it kind of hurt you, you know, inside, it hurt your ego and everything else. And here you're lying up there, and all the people, they don't send you a line or won't come out to see you. They could only come out two days a week, a Wednesday and a Sunday. The sanitarium at that time, was in the building on North Cunningham. It's kind of a rehabilitation of some sort now; on the corner of Cunningham and Perkins Road, or Golfview Road. I don't know whether you know where that is or not. If you're coming in off 45 (Route 45) Cunningham, there's a road map, information map, all

right, it's a building right on the hill from that, is where it was that I was sick for two years up there in bed. And then when I came home I still had to stay in bed for two years.

But as I say, it was a kind of a down period for me because I was still what I consider a young man; I was twenty-nine. Now that's older than you are, but now I realize I was young, see, I was twenty-nine years of age. And when you say 29, 30, 31, 32, take those four years out of your life is what it did, because in the sanitarium I didn't get out of bed for anything. Two years I couldn't get out for anything. I ate in the bed, I slept in the bed, I went to the bathroom in the bed, I was bathed in the bed. My foot didn't even hit the floor for anything for two years.

Now when I came home, I still ate in bed, more or less, I got out of the bed to go to the bathroom, and I'd get out of the bed to wash-up you might say, but then I would go right back to bed. Then after two years of that, well, I have to say that three people were very important to me during that period. My parents, my mother and my father, they were tremendous. They came out to see me everyday that they could, and the third person was my wife. We weren't married then, we were just dating, but . . . (He begins to cry.) They came out to see me.

Mary Thomas: All right, kids, just relax.

Taylor Thomas: Everyday they came out, I mean the two days they could come out. My wife, of course, was working and could only come out on Sundays. At that time she was not my wife.

We married after I had gotten out of this thing, but it was a difficult period. But after a while, I mean after the first few months you kind of get over it to the extent that you know that. Well, I guess maybe the thing out there that made you say, 'Well, I'm going to get over this. I'm going to beat this,' is when you stop losing weight. At that time, you used to lose weight, see, with the illness, and then finally you reach a point where you stop losing weight and say, 'Well, I'm going to make it now.' Then I gained one pound, 'Well, I'm on the way now. I'm going to make it!'

And so after that, and then after being at home for two years, then finally I . . . And I was still going out taking pneumothorax so I was still having air . . . In fact, I took that, oh, for about 12 years. I still went back to the sanitarium and they still kept this lung collapsed. For about 12 years before they let it up and so then I tried to, I said, 'Well, I've got to see about going to work.'

So, I went out to Chanute Field, and applied for a job at Chanute Field. Now first, I asked my doctor if I could go up and he said, 'Yeah, you can try to work now.' He said, 'I think you'll be all right, but you can only work part time.' He said, 'I don't want you to work but part time.'

Well, I went up to Chanute Field, and went through the old hassle again of getting a job because I applied at the Civilian Personnel Office. They said, 'Oh, yes, they want a person to do clerical work in a certain area.'

Well, I went over and the man in charge was, well, it just so happened that he was a Southerner. It could have happened to anybody else. And I was sitting about as far from him, waiting for him, as from here to maybe that wall over there,

(comparing from where he was seated to a wall in his dining room area, approximately ten feet).

And I sat there, and they had informed him, the secretary informed him that I was waiting to see him, and he kept me waiting for at least an hour, and he's not doing anything but shuffling papers around there. And then, finally, I was introduced to him and I told him that I understood that they need clerical work. I was applying for the job. 'Oh, no, no,' he said, 'I don't need anyone.'

Now, he has kept me waiting for all of this time, and then he tells me no, he doesn't need anyone, so I go back to the Civilian Personnel Office. They say, 'Well, he's been asking for help for the past month.'

So it was very evident to me that the reason he didn't want me was because of the color of my skin - just didn't fit into his color scheme.

So they sent me - said that's all right, we have another place to send you - and they sent me over to personnel office, Unit Personnel Office. The man in there said immediately took me . . . Now, I'm not that, I'm not necessarily acquainted with the fact where they lived, but this man was from Maine. He was a Major Curry, and his home was Maine, the state of Maine which is as far north as you can get in the United States. He said, yes. And this was on a Wednesday I think, and I said, 'Well, should I come in tomorrow?'

He said, 'Don't worry about it, just come in Monday.' He said, 'Give yourself a chance to get a little rest and see where you got to work. Go around and see where you have to work here. I'll have someone to give you some ideas to what you'll be

doing.' It was dealing with service records, Servicemen Service Records, and he said, 'Everything will be fine.'

Well, that gave me a little encouragement. So I went home and came back, started on Monday morning and I worked at Chanute. Well, was it one year, honey? Actually, before that time there had been blacks as teachers on the campus, I mean at Chanute Field. There were blacks teaching in the school. There were soldiers and there were black custodians, also. And there were soldiers on the field who were doing clerical work, but there were no civilians from the area doing clerical work until I got this clerical job. Then after that, a number were hired and obtained the job as clerical workers at Chanute Field.

I worked one year, and was in a position to be supervisor of the unit, but they brought in a new lieutenant over the office who was a Southerner, and he . . . That would have meant that my desk would've been right beside his. Consider that the excuse was that they hired another fellow who had been in the Army and they gave the job to him. Well, in this there were soldiers working and civilians working.

Mary Thomas: May I interrupt? You're calling these . . . They're airmen.

Taylor Thomas: Oh, pardon me, airmen, yes. My wife worked at Chanute Field later after that, and she knows that it's airmen and I call everybody a soldier, see. Whether it's . . .

Mary Thomas: Serviceman.

Taylor Thomas: Whether it's servicemen, maybe I should say. And she realizes how important it is to say airmen. I should realize that too, but I have a tendency, I guess. When I came along, it seemed like there were only soldiers, and I called everybody soldiers whether they were in the Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard or what have you, but the airmen. There were airmen working in there, and eventually some civilians.

After a while Douglass Center was built and I was really asked to apply for the job at Douglass Center, so I did because that was my area anyway. P.E., you might say, recreation. I said, 'Well, I wasn't going to go any farther on this job, and here's an opportunity for me to work on another job.'

I decided to, well, I was offered the job at Douglass Center as Director of Douglass Center. It had just been built. I think the USO was in there for one week. USO had been at Lawhead School and the USO moved down there the week that the building was open, but not officially.

Melinda Roundtree: What year was Douglass Center in this community developed? What year?

Taylor Thomas: Oh, this was in 1945. Douglass Center was opened officially in October of 1945. I started as Director of Douglass Center and worked as director of Douglass Center for three years.

Douglass Center, when I was there, was everything to the community that it served, which is basically the area where it was located. We were not only a

recreation center for the students. We brought in orchestras, such as . . . You may not have heard of Dinah Washington, but she used to sing with an orchestra by Cootie Williams; he used to play with Duke Ellington. We also were an employment agency. We tried to get jobs for people and we also tried to help students. We started really the first kindergarten; we had a kindergarten in Douglass Center, which served the youth of the community. In fact, the first chairs I made out of orange crates at Douglass Center for the kindergarten. So the kindergarten seemingly went over quite well. Then eventually the schools put in kindergartens, and that kindergarten moved down to Washington School. Washington School was then eventually built and the kindergarten moved to Washington School, and there was a special room built for kindergarten in Washington School. But it actually started there at Douglass Center.

Then after Douglass, well, in Douglass Center, I also ran for City Commissioner, and you ran at large then; you didn't run from just a particular area. You ran for all over the whole city, so it made it very difficult for a person running. There were 17 people running to be nominated and I ended up in eighth, so there were eight nominated for four positions. It was the first time that a black had been nominated for City Commissioner. Then in the election I moved up to six and then it was ten years later when Mr. Stratton became commissioner before anyone was ever elected commissioner of Champaign. But then it was in an area, you were running from an area see, instead of all over the whole community see.

So that made it a little easier for us to get in, but I fought the city quite a bit trying to get policemen. There were no, well, there was one policeman, Mr. Al Rivers, who had been appointed back about 1936, I believe, but there were no policemen

other than that, and he was appointed during the time there was a political appointment, more or less. Now, what I would ask about the police and they'll say, well, have they taken the Civil Service Exam? Well, anyway I'd battle with the city back and forth on that, and one can look at old clippings in the newspaper. Especially the Courier, which doesn't exist, and there might be some in the News-Gazette, to see how we used to argue back and forth. Of course, I think my wife saved some of that stuff, but I don't know where it is. They came out in the North End trying to raise money to add ten policemen to the police force.

So I was going down through the city saying, 'All right, there should be some black policemen.'

In order to improve, they wanted to know why so they improve their economic system, we need jobs. If for no other reason then percentage-wise and also so that there could be a better understanding between the North End and the police force. But they hired two, and I kept going back after they hired two. No blacks had been hired. Finally, ten were hired and there were more words exchanged in the newspaper between us, between myself and the chief of police and the mayor. In fact, one of the meetings I went to the mayor got so angry, his attorney, the city attorney got so angry he stomped out of the room. But that was the time they tried to get you angry, see, and they tried to get me angry and think I would stomp out the room. So that's when you have to keep your cool. Never get angry. Always stick to the facts and go from there. Don't let something they might say cause you to flare up. It ended up that the city attorney walked out of the room.

[End Side A, Cassette One]

Taylor Thomas: So, I mean after the swimming pool and the police incident, eventually in 1948 Douglass Center had a pretty good basketball team that year and, in fact, some of the boys that were on that team I encouraged to go to school. Some of them had been in school at Champaign High, and Urbana, and they had dropped out of school really. And so there was a friend that I knew who was graduating on the campus and he had a job coaching out East at a black school, St. Augustine in Raleigh, North Carolina, I believe it was.

He was going to be a coach, and he wanted all the players he could get. So I talked with about three or four of the boys I had down at the center, and I said, 'Why don't you go?' I said, 'It's not going to cost you anything. You like to play football and basketball. Why not take advantage of it?'

So they did, well, at least four of them went. And the coach was happy because he had just married, he had a wife, and then he had four football players. My wife and I took them to the train and waved good-bye to them, and so they got on the train. They went out to North Carolina. One boy came back immediately because he had a little girlfriend here, and her family had moved to Colorado, and he didn't want her to get away so he come back and followed her to Colorado. The other three boys stayed, played football, and one of them stayed until three, four years of football, but he did not graduate. He came back here and you might know him, of course, he'd be an old man now, by the name of Bobby Clark. I don't know whether you've heard of Bobby Clark

or not. But he held the broad jump record at Champaign High for a long time, and he also was very good in track.

Bobby Clark went out. Bobby stayed and played football for three or four years. And then two of the boys graduated; one was Claude Burch, who Burch Village was named after his brother. His brother was lost in service, and Burch Village was named after him. The other is Jesse Clements, who was also a star at Champaign High in basketball, and his son works for the P.E. Department on the campus (U of I campus) at the present time. And, in fact, he sent his son back here to play basketball under his high school basketball coach who was Harry Combes, who was coaching at Illinois at the time. And his son came back here and played football instead, and stayed on and worked at the University.

But Jesse Clements and Claude Burch, and Burch works in Indianapolis now, he has a government job in Indianapolis, and Jesse Clements is a head basketball coach at North Carolina State in Durham, North Carolina, which is a black school, but one that's recognized and reputable and has pretty good teams. But those two boys, I mean, those four boys went out to Carolina, and three of them stayed and I think gained a great deal from it. And I was afraid really that if they'd stayed here, they wouldn't have gone to school. It was very easy to get involved, you know, maybe with a job or with a group and then not do anything. But, I don't know where I left off now.

Mary Thomas: You were telling them about Douglass Center and basketball.

Taylor Thomas: I was really telling about what happened to me and I got sidetracked there to a certain extent because I mentioned we had the good basketball team, and those were some of the boys who were on it. Of course, another boy that was on it that's still around by the name of Buddy Holte, who was very good, and I've forgotten who else now. But anyway, the basketball team traveled around in Central Illinois. I mean we played in Peoria, and we played in Decatur, and we played in Danville. And then, there was a county league, of course, of white teams and Douglass Center. We played in that. In fact, we won that league, I think, one year. And yeah we did. We won it one year. And then we also won the city softball championship. These trophies now, at one time were in Douglass Center, but during the sixties when there was so much unrest, the trophies were removed; in other words, so we don't know where they are. You know, some young kids see those trophies, they think they're worth something, because they look as if you can melt it down for metal or gold or something, when it isn't. Those trophies only cost over a couple three dollars at that time, and not much more than that now. See, it's just a trophy. It's not very expensive to buy one, but when they see them they think, 'Oh, boy, that's worth money.'

And so the during the sixties when . . . See, this is not, this present Douglass Center, this is a new building. This is the old building that I'm talking about. And they've kind of tore it up, but all the trophies that we won during those three years I was there are gone as a result of that particular period. But I mentioned the basketball team because we played in Danville, Illinois, and the principal of an elementary school in Danville saw us play and he asked me if I would be interested in coming to Danville. Danville had the eight-four plan then: eight elementary grades, and four grades in high

school. In teaching the eighth grade and coaching the eighth grade. And I said, 'Oh, I don't know whether I would or not.' And we went back to Danville. We played two teams in Danville. We played the white legion team in Danville, and then we played the black legion team in Danville, I think, at that time. And he had seen the boys play both times, and the first time we played the white legion team he asked me about this, and then when we went back, we played the black group he asked me again, and I said, 'Well, I might think about it.'

And I came home, talked with my wife about it, and we decided that that's what I had wanted to do from the beginning when I finished school, was to teach and coach. And so we said, 'Maybe this is an opportunity to get into what I wanted to do in the first place.'

So I took the job in Danville, and in fact, I think each time I took a job. . . Well, I left Chanute field and came to Douglass Center, I took it for less salary than I was getting at Chanute, and then when I went to Danville to teach I took it for less salary than I was getting at Douglass Center first.

In Danville, I got coaching out of my system, because I had to coach everything: girls basketball, boys basketball. Two schools would go together and make a football team, so the coach from the other school and myself would both coach the football. And then you'd have your own track team, you know, you had a girls track team, and boys track team, although they ran the same day. And we had swimming, and volleyball. And Jackson School was an all-black school in Danville, and we tried to participate in everything, but it was only one coach and that was me. So that meant that I taught the eighth grade during the day, and then after school I coached all the

sports, whatever was in at that time. And then too, since I had been at the recreation center here in Champaign, they asked me to help with the Laura Lee Fellowship House in Danville, which is a recreation center.

So two nights out of the week I worked at Laura Lee Fellowship House from whenever I left practice, which would be 5 or 6 o'clock, and I would work during the week, it was on a Wednesday, at Laura Lee Fellowship House until about 10 o'clock. And then, I would work on Friday, since that was a weekend, I would work until 12 o'clock at Laura Lee Fellowship House.

Now, same time I'm living in Champaign, I'm commuting back and forth to Danville all the time. As I say, I got the coaching out of my system because in football, even though there were two of us doing that, two schools together, in six years time we didn't lose a football game. And then the team that I had all by myself, the track team, girls and boys track team, they would combine their scores. We were third three years, I mean two years, and we were second two years, and we were first two years. And then in basketball, we were second three years, and first three years. And so, after that I kind of got the coaching out of my system. I felt that, well, I've enjoyed it.

And then the school, now, we lost the eighth grade, and that meant I was going to have to teach the seventh grade, which I did. And then, we lost the seventh grade, and that meant that I was going to have to teach the sixth grade. I mean we were losing grades, and so even though before I had applied to teach in Champaign a couple of times, but I had no success. I was given the brush-off. So I applied to teach in Urbana, and I was hired to teach in Urbana. To teach junior high in the morning and the high school in the afternoon, and as soon as there was enough room in either

school, I could move to whichever one I wanted to. Well, after two years, I could have moved to either school, and I chose to move to the high school. And so I then taught at Urbana High School.

Champaign and Urbana both neither had black teachers teaching white students. Champaign had some black teachers, because they had teachers first at Lawhead School, and then at Willard School, and then eventually at Marquette and then eventually the junior high and the high school, and finally, throughout the system. Urbana had no black teachers at all. Hays School, which is Martin Luther King School, at first there were a few blacks in it, and then eventually built up 'til it was ninety some percent black, but still there were no black teachers.

And so when I was hired, I taught in Danville from '48 to '56, and when I was hired in Urbana I was . . . It was in nineteen, let's see. I taught in Danville from '48 to '56, that was eight years, and then I was hired in 1956 in Urbana. At that time there had been no black teachers in Urbana, so I was the first black teacher to teach in the Urbana School District.

At the time I was in Danville, I was serving on the Advisory Board to the Champaign School Board. I was living in Champaign at that time. I lived on, well, first we lived on the corner of Columbia and 5th, and then we moved down to the corner of 5th and Vine. I was on the Advisory Board, and I knew at that time that there was a possibility that Champaign was about ready to hire someone in, say the junior high, where they would be teaching white. In fact, before that I suggested to some black teachers about applying to teach at Marquette School. That would have been a step, because Marquette school had about half and half, white and black. But, some of

them were reluctant to even apply that were teaching at Willard or . . . And so after I was hired as I say in '56, I knew it early in '56, say in February or so, that I was going to be hired. And then that same year, I forget his first name, his last name was Bowles, was hired to teach in the junior high in Champaign. He taught at Edison, which was a high school when I was there, but is a junior high now. Now it's a middle school, I believe.

But after teaching at Urbana High one year, I taught World History, and then I introduced Sociology to the high school; they hadn't had Sociology. So I taught Sociology and World History. As far as athletics were concerned, I said I got it out of my system. So at Urbana, all I did was take tickets. I took tickets for basketball games for twelve years, and took tickets for the football games for seventeen years at Urbana High. And then I taught from 1956 to 1968. And from '68 to '72, I was Assistant Principal at Urbana High. And then from '72 to '77, I was Assistant Superintendent of the Urbana School District. And then I was too old and had to retire, and I've been retired from '77 'til the present time. That is, I don't know whether you'd say that's in a nutshell, is what's happened to me. I know I've forgotten a number of things.

I've forgotten some of the experiences I had, such as seeing the Ku Klux Klan march down Neil Street when I was a very small child holding onto my mother's hand. I used to live on North Hickory Street in Champaign, and as I said I went to Columbia School, and I recall vividly the Klan marching north on Neil Street. And my mother took me by the hand, and she was going to go and see what's happening. So we walked down the sidewalk, and they're parading in the street with their robes on or sheets on or whatnot. And we walked on down to where Columbia School is, only we

were on this corner and where Iungerich Park is north of Columbia School. That area was an open area, in fact, all of on that side and then a little further down where the highway is, that was all open space. And that's where carnivals used to set up there and circuses would set up their housekeeping. And they would unload on the tracks, because I lived next to the railroad tracks, and I could see them unload and so forth, and so on.

But we watched them march, and stood across the street and watched them burn a cross and after the cross started burning, well, we left and then they had their speeches and whatnot afterwards. I remember that very vividly. There are just some experiences that you have that kind of stick with you. I guess it's difficult to sometimes tell all of the things that you have experienced because they come to you and you forget them, and you get my age you get so that you forget. And you remember some things, and some things you just have to wait until someone rings a bell and you say, 'Oh, yes, I remember so and so and so and so that happened.'

I am what you consider up in age now, even though I don't feel that way. I feel pretty good. I can't get out. My wife and I used to live in the country. We just moved in town a year ago (directed to his wife) and I realize I'm not eighteen anymore. After living on 5th (Street) and that's another thing, we had problems getting housing when we came up. Again, we think that we knocked on so many doors. It helped open the housing market you might say. We received all kinds of insults and everything else in trying to get housing. Housing was very hard, I mean wherever you wanted to buy it, it isn't that you . . . Sometimes there's a certain house you'd like to have and I don't care where it is, if you could afford to buy it you'd like to get, but you couldn't. We tried to

buy a house just across University Avenue on 5th Street about two blocks down. We couldn't buy it. We tried to buy it across University Avenue in Urbana. No, on Goodwin just a block down and we couldn't get it, solely because we were black.

Also, this house came up. My wife saw it in the newspaper in the country. There were two and one-half acres. The house had only been built for about three years, and it was for sale by the owner. And we went out and saw it and they were willing to sell it to us, and we liked it, but there was always the problem of getting money too, see. It used to be that maybe if you wanted to build, you'd have to find someone to sell you a lot, you'd have to find someone to loan you the money, you'd have to find someone that would be a contractor to build it for you. Well, here we were running into the problem of getting money, so we . . . The man said that he would sell the house to us. We said fine, all right.

Because see, we had run into the problem dealing with real estate dealers. One real estate dealer, when we called him on the phone, they didn't know who we were. They met us at the house and when they met us at the house they got . . . They merely said . . . When we got out of the car they met us on the sidewalk in front of the house. They said, 'Oh, well, if you would have told us who you were over the phone, you would have saved both of us a lot of time.'

So immediately I grabbed my wife's arm and said, 'Let's get away before I hit the man!' I was just boiling. I was just that angry, see. There's no percentage in me letting my anger get the better of me, so we walked off. Another fellow we tried to buy a house from. It was advertised in the paper and when we went to the house, well, he

and his wife showed us the house, and then we said, 'Well, we might be interested in buying it. How much?'

She said, 'Our daughter has a equity in the house and she lives in California. We'll have to talk with her first.'

We said, 'Well, okay you talk with her and we'll call you.'

We called them back and they said, 'Well, daughter didn't want to sell her equity.'

I mean this is another ruse to get around selling it because the house was still advertised in the paper for sale, see. And we mentioned that to him and he said, 'Well, we put it in for so many days and they just haven't taken it out yet.'

Then the next one we wanted to buy a lot some place, and we went to a real estate dealer and he said, 'Well, you have to have some earnest money, you know, you have to put this money down first for the lot.'

We said okay. So we go and draw money out of what little savings we had to put it down and take it back and give it to him. We give it to him about 2 in the afternoon. The next morning in the mail we got our check back saying that, well, the owner wouldn't sell to you. Now the thing that, you see, bothered us about that was that he knew that at the time we were in his office. Why didn't he tell us then, see? But he didn't have the guts you might say, so he just waited. Then you see, we would not have drawn our money out of the bank and took it off of interest. See, we lost interest then, by taking it off of interest. And so, he sent the check back. We did this for, I guess, twelve years after we were married, trying to find a place to live that we would be happy with.

We had lived seven years on the corner of Columbia and 5th in a two-story house. We lived upstairs in a two room apartment, and an apartment across the hall was a two-room apartment and both of us shared the same bathroom. And then there were two apartments downstairs. The house is still there. And then we lived on the corner of 5th, it was two apartments very small, and we had a stove in the front room to heat the apartment.

So finally, this house came up that we thought we would like in the country, and the man said he'd sell it. So we got an option for 45 days. In other words, that meant we had 45 days to get the money. We had to pay something down, and if we didn't get the money in 45 days, we'd lose what we'd paid down, see, a small down payment.

So, we started then trying because we didn't have enough money to pay down. So we kept trying and trying, and we went to every place in town. We went to insurance companies, we went to banks, and we were banking at it was called Trevitt-Mattis then. It's the Bank of Illinois now. My parents had banked there, my parents had banked at the First National Bank in Champaign, and my wife and I banked at Mattis and Trevitt. They wouldn't let us have the money saying that it was out in the country.

Now, I'm not sure as to what the personnel is like in any of these banks now. Over the years sometimes it changes, but still things kind of stick in your craw, and so you have a tendency to draw your money out, if you have any money or a little bit and not deal there anymore. Of course, we had a little bank account in the Bank of Illinois. It wasn't the Bank of Illinois, Mattis and Trevitt bank at that time. And so we still left it there, and we tried everyplace else.

We tried First Federal, and finally, there was an insurance company, Equitable, they were going to loan us enough money to make our down payment, but it was going to take what little savings we'd had. Say five hundred dollars or whatever we had saved, to make it. It wasn't quite enough and we thought we were going to have to rely on them, but we finally went. We said, 'Well, there's one more.' And we'd tried every bank in town except that bank.

And we said, 'Well, we'll try them. We don't think we're going to get it there either.' That was Busey Bank in Urbana. And we went to Busey Bank and they didn't quibble at all. They just said, 'Well, yeah, we can.'

I said, 'Well, you haven't even looked at the house yet, and it's out in the country; everyone else tells me if it's out in the country they won't loan the money.'

They said, 'Oh, that's no problem. After we look at it we might let you have more than that.'

And they did. They went out and they looked at the house, and then they let us have more than that, and that was just fine. Then we didn't have to touch what little savings we had. They had let us enough money, and after we paid part of it off, we decided we wanted to put a couple of rooms on the house in the country. And so we did, we put a couple of family rooms, and another bedroom, and a little larger bedroom I'd say, and made another bath. And when we said we wanted to do that, they said, 'Well, that can easily be arranged. We'll just loan you the money to pay off what you owe us, and then also give you enough to put your addition on and give you a new loan.'

And we said, 'Okay.'

And so we did that, and we've gotten along with Busey fine ever since. We paid Busey off eventually, and we were out there for twenty some odd years, about 23, 24 years in the country in Urbana. We had two and a half acres, and we sold one acre to a family that built next to us. And then we still had an acre and a half, and this family after a while they retired and went to Florida. He was originally from Florida, and they went to Florida, and they sold it to another family who are still out there. And we then moved, well, we decided that we were getting a little too old to handle two and a half acres out in the country.

See, I had been in the hospital a couple of times with pneumonia in the past five years, and my wife had to drive back out in the country by herself. And we don't have any children see, and so we really don't have anyone to kind of look after us. We have to look after each other. People see us walking through town sometimes holding hands all the time, and they remark about it, and I said, 'Well, we're holding each other up.' (Laughter). We don't have children, and so we decided that maybe we ought to think about moving in town, and we did. We looked at a number of places, and then we were shown this by a real estate dealer, and we decided that this was ideal for our purposes because it's a condo; there were only four units; there's no upstairs or downstairs; it's all one floor; and that was just ideal. So we moved in town, and I don't know where I am now in telling this story.

Mary Thomas: Maybe they want to ask something.

Taylor Thomas: Yeah, they might want to ask some more questions. (Laughs.) I don't know. I'm doing all the talking, and I haven't given them a chance to ask me any questions.

Patrick Tyler: I have two questions about the Douglass Center. What was your main, when that first started, what was the main objective of the center?

Taylor Thomas: Well, the center was formed out of . . . There were two groups of people that time. One group of people, black people, were interested in a recreation center that was supported by the people themselves you might say; financed and everything by the people themselves. This other group that started Douglass Center, felt that the center should be supported by taxes. In other words, everyone pays taxes according to what they have to pay taxes on. So they felt that the people in the area pay taxes, so they should have a center that was supported by city taxes.

And once they got that over, that was one of the important things as far as they were concerned. They wanted something that the city was going to have to pay for as a result of taxes paid by the people in the city. They felt that they needed a recreation area, and a recreation center really serves a given area. I mean you put a recreation center, it usually serves that area. Give a recreation center here it serves this area. The only way that it serves other than that is by contact between the two, like we had contact with the YMCA.

At that time, there weren't any blacks in the YMCA, but yet the YMCA came to us and asked us to play them in basketball at Champaign High Gym. Well, it's still

Champaign Gym - it was a junior high at that time - to raise money for the Y for their summer camp or something like that. Well, we took our basketball, and that was the year we had a good basketball team, and played the Y, and they did raise money. Now they got the money - we didn't get any money, see. It was more of a service on our part to a goodwill, you might say, as far as Douglass Center was concerned, and a kind of a showcase for us because we did have a good team and it pinpointed Douglass Center. Some people, perhaps, didn't even know Douglass Center existed.

But, anyway, after it was all over the next week, why the director at that time of the Y, came over and gave me a group of ties, a tie for each boy who was on the basketball team. And that was their way of saying, well, we want to give you something, even though we know it was to raise money for our organization. But we took it and laughed and went on. But Douglass Center, as far as those of us working at the center at that time, I had an assistant who was a secretary, and I had a custodian. Actually, for a while there was one period of about three months when I had neither. The assistant that I had left, I think got married or something, and the custodian left and had another job or something. So for about three months I was assistant and custodian. In other words, that meant I stayed there late at night and mopped the gym floor and everything else.

But the Douglass Center served more purposes than just a recreation center. You see, not only did we work in the park during the summer, but the center itself was used; first, we used it as a kindergarten for two years that I was there, and I think it was the year after I was there that we started the kindergarten. And then it was an employment agency. People would call us to know if we had people interested in

certain jobs, and we would put them in touch with or have the people that were interested put in touch with the jobs that were available. We would also serve as kind of a social agency, you might say, to serve the needs of individuals. They would come sometimes for advice.

We also started a library, but the library was not one connected with anything but Douglass Center. We collected books where we could get books, and we made a small room. We put bookshelves in and made a library out of the room. And the library room, however, was used for all purposes. Sometimes we would have to have meetings in the library when all the other rooms were used. We didn't have that many rooms, and then the gym was always full of activity of some kind, and so you had to use the side rooms for meetings.

And then we used it also as a dressing room for entertainers when they would come. The Sweethearts of Rhythm, an all-girls band played. We had Cootie Williams, and Dinah Washington, and we had a number of, oh, Duke Ellington, Mercer Ellington and his band. Of course, he's the one that directs Duke Ellington's band now. He's Duke Ellington's son, and he was there with his band. We had a number of different entertainers like that, and some of them would have ladies who were singing or something, and so they might have wanted to change, so we'd have to open the library, shut the door, and let them dress in the library.

We also served as a place for - you see this was before there were blacks in the major leagues. It wasn't until I think '48 when Jackie Robinson got in. There was still the all-black baseball teams. I remember one year we had, I think they were called the Cincinnati Clowns. In fact, the big first-baseman, he eventually made the major

leagues. They came over, but those teams used to travel, and dress on the bus and all this kind of stuff. They came over and played the team called, in Champaign, a white team called the Plumbers, which was a pretty good baseball team.

And this guy by the name of Grierson, whose sons played football in Champaign, and he now is an administrator in the Danville School District. But, he had the Plumbers baseball team, and he had a contract with the Cincinnati Clowns to come here and play them up to Champaign field. Well, the guys had to have someplace to dress, so they dressed at Douglass Center. They dressed there and got on their bus and went out and played baseball, and then came back to Douglass Center, took a shower, dressed and got on their bus and went their merry way. So you see, it was used for everything that we needed you might say, where it was not possible to get certain accommodations and services.

We even had two, three funerals in Douglass Center. We had one boy - I've forgotten how he was killed - the Snell boy, was his name Snell or? It was Mamie's son. Anyway, I know we had not only funerals, we had at least three funerals, and I think basically, that we had those funerals because those youths had used the center, and everyone knew them, and the church was not going to be large enough to hold all the people who were coming, and so the gym room was full for the funeral. And, of course, at that time I had complete control over the center at that time and if I said it was all right, then it was all right to have it. And in those cases I felt that it was all right, so we had the funerals.

We also had state lodge meetings such as the Elks and the Masonics - when their state meeting was held in Champaign, they used Douglass Center also. At that

time, I looked at Douglass Center as an all-purpose building really because most anything you can think of did take place there. Not only that we had not only state lodge meetings, we had state church meetings. Jehovah's Witnesses had a meeting there at Douglass Center, their state meeting. I've forgotten, there's another church, too, I think that had their state meeting there. Now that's just in the period of three years, because that's all I was at Douglass Center was three years, and two years we had the kindergarten, so there were quite a few uses.

I don't know how it's used now. I'm sure that they have facilities that are so much better now than we had at that time. But at that time, that was great for us, because we had nothing really, and there was more discrimination at that time than there is now. Now, some of the things that we had at Douglass Center you can get someplace else. You don't have to have it right there, I mean you can go. Of course, we didn't have any swimming pool, but you can swim every place now, but at that time you couldn't swim or anything else. It's changed a lot.

Patrick Tyler: How about the community involvement? Did the community support Douglass Center with much involvement as far as parents and the youth of this community?

Taylor Thomas: Well, the youth were very active, yes. We had softball teams also. In fact, we had our own league a couple of summers where we'd have about four teams in the league playing, and they would play each other and enjoy it immensely because we played just about every night in the week I guess.

I put the first lights . . . They didn't have lights at first at Douglass Center. They took lights down off of someplace else, and I said, 'I'll take them.' And then I got the telephone company to give me some poles, and then I got them to put them up for me, and to wire. So we had lights, so we could play at night. The youth were very active. I know you've heard of Peacock, the high jumper. His father was a catcher for me at Douglass Center when he was 12 years old, and he was playing with boys 16, 17, and 18 years of age, and he was about 12 or 13 at the time; very young, but all the Peacocks were pretty good athletes. His uncle, this Peacock's that high jumps now, his father, and then his father's brothers, I had all down to the center played basketball and softball. And one went to Memphis after he got out of the service. He went in the service. He had, I think, a couple of credits in high school that he went in the service and finished up, and then he went to school at LeMoyne College in Memphis, and then he was coaching in high school in Memphis. Now that's the uncle of this Peacock boy. So I had all the older Peacocks.

Oh, that's right, the war mothers, they used to have their meetings down at Douglass Center. You're speaking about the involvement. Not only did the youth participate in sports activities, but they also had Christmas activities, Christmas plays. And the war mothers met down at the center regularly, and were very supportive. They bought things for the center. These were mothers of boys that had been in military service and came back. The war mothers were very, very great.

Then there was a young women's club. They called it La Femme, and that was a French name for what, the French?

Mary Thomas: The women.

Taylor Thomas: The women, really. And they were really wives, mainly of fellas that had been in service. And the fellas were in service, and so they organized this club so that they could, I guess, have something to do while their husbands were away at war. And when their husbands came back from war, they still were active. And they supported the center and they gave a lot to the center like curtains that we needed. They furnished curtains for the center. Now in that way, those two groups and some other individual adults worked.

But as far as like PTAs, you find so few parents who will attend the PTA meetings, Parent Teacher Association at the schools. You found a lot of the parents. . . But, you have to realize that a lot of these parents have been working all day. Now they can't come to the center while they're working, and when they get home, they're tired. They don't feel like coming out to a center, when they're tired and played out. Now, they did come out in the summer when it was nice to be able to sit outside and watch a softball game. Now they came out then. That was great, see, because we even had bleachers we put out and the bleachers were usually full, weren't they, Mary?

Mary Thomas: Yes, they were really full.

Taylor Thomas: They were very supportive. But when we would try to have activities for the adults, they found it difficult to come and participate in activities in indoor sports. Now they came and observed the basketball games, too.

Mary Thomas: Yes, they really did.

Taylor Thomas: I would have to say, as far as support is concerned it was pretty darn good, considering.

Mary Thomas: It was very good.

Taylor Thomas: What you normally have as far as adults are concerned in supporting something.

Mary Thomas: Another thing, on the holidays the public was there.

Taylor Thomas: Oh yeah, that's right. Yeah, that's true.

Now see, the center in the past few years hasn't been open on holidays or Sundays. During the period from '45 to '48, it was open seven days a week. Sundays, well, at first was for USO, and that is for the servicemen. And then after the war was over, Sundays was opened by request. In other words, if someone wanted to have something on Sunday, I opened the center up. Otherwise it wouldn't be open on Sunday. But it was open six days a week, and on Sunday by request. If you wanted

to have some kind of a program on Sunday, the center was open for you to have it. At first it was open anyhow. I mean, the first year it was open seven days a week. And as my wife has stated, on the holidays, that was our busy time. Like July 4, we'd have two or three softball games.

[End Side B, Cassette One]

Taylor Thomas, Oral Interview

SIDE A, Cassette Two

Taylor Thomas: [remarks joined in progress. Mr. Thomas is talking about the war mothers, and how they used to sell refreshments in the center.] Used to sell it, and then they would use the money that they raised for their organization. Actually, you should turn it all back to the center, and doing things for the center. During the summer it was open, but the building itself was not opened unless there was a special program. Now if it rained, I opened the building. If it rained in the park in the summer, and they couldn't get out in the park, then the building was open for them to come in the building.

In other words, the building was always available, but when the weather was nice we closed it and insisted on them playing in the park. We wanted them to be outside then, when the weather was nice. And we did have the restrooms open. You could go into the building to the restrooms, and you could come to the window and buy ice cream or pop. But the gym and the lounging area, and the meeting rooms were not open. Now, a meeting room would be opened if there was a group that wanted a meeting in it, so it was flexible. There were no fast rules, except that when the weather's nice, play in the park. But we still have the building available for the use of the restrooms, and also if there is a group that wishes to have a meeting in the building, then that room is available for them to meet in.

Melinda Roundtree: I want to talk a little bit about your education, and what I'm interested in knowing is what motivated you to continue your education after high school. Who or what, you know, maybe somebody?

Taylor Thomas: Oh, you mean when I was attending high school, what was the motivation that kept me going. It's difficult to say, to pinpoint. I believe, of course, that basically it was my parents. I think that they always encouraged me to stay in school. They were not able to stay in school. When they came up, both of my parents had to quit school, when they were in grade school. And my father was the oldest in the family. His father died when he was very young, I think maybe about fifteen, and he had to stop and go to work, and help his mother support his younger brothers and sisters. And then my mother, she was next to the oldest in the family, and they had a pretty large family for that time. She had to stop school. They had moved here, my mother's family, had moved here from Louisiana back in the 1880s, something. She was a young woman, young girl really.

She went to school when there were only two buildings. There was a small building called Small Brick, and that was the grade school, and the Big Brick was the High School, and she never got to the Big Brick. Huh?

Mary Thomas: That's in Champaign, isn't it?

Taylor Thomas: In Champaign, yeah, that was in Champaign, because we lived in Champaign. And my father was originally from Paris, Illinois, and his parents had

moved to Paris from Kentucky. My father came to this area to work, and that's how he met my mother. My grandfather had been what you call a park policeman. Westside Park was a park, and he served as a park policeman there back in the 1800s, I guess it was.

I think my desire for school came from my parents. As I say my parents were not able to continue school and they always insisted that I go to school.

Another thing I think that really might have helped too, is that my father cooked on the campus. My father was a cook; he cooked at a fraternity house on campus. Consequently, I used to go over when I was a kid to see him, and I was in the atmosphere of the University. At that time, there was kind of a division between the University and townspeople. If you didn't go to the University to school, you didn't find yourself on the campus for anything. You might go to an athletic contest or something like that. Not as now. Now you see, people are free they go to the campus in the buildings, out of the buildings, everything else. But, you just didn't for some reason.

Anyway, my father cooking at this fraternity house, I would go over, especially sometimes he would get free tickets for football games, and I would go over to get the tickets. But I would sometimes just go over to see dad. When I was young I hardly saw my father because when he went to work in the morning I wasn't up yet; I was still asleep. He went very early, because he walked to work. We didn't have an automobile. And then when he walked from north Hickory Street over on south 4th Street to work, it takes a little time. And so, I would go over on the campus to see him. And as I say, sometimes my mother and I would go over to go to a football game. The fraternity boys, sometimes they'd buy a lump of tickets; maybe they'd come down from

Chicago, alums, and they would come to the fraternity house and that night they would celebrate. And the next day, maybe they didn't want to go to the game, or they had more tickets than they needed, so they'd go out to my father and say, 'Here, Woody. Here's a couple of tickets to the game if you can use them.'

And dad would get on the telephone and call us, and we would jump in the car and then, that was later, we'd jump in the car. Before that, we'd have to walk to get over to his house to get the tickets and go on to the game.

But I think the fact that my parents were what you call patrons or chaperones for a black sorority and black fraternity on the campus. And then they didn't have baby-sitters when I came up, so whenever they went to chaperone a dance or something I would have to go with them. And I'm a little tot walking around, you know, a regular mascot you might say, for the fraternity or sorority. And they're all patting you on the head. Well, these are all students in school, so you see there's an atmosphere around me of school, see, and I felt that's the thing I guess I was supposed to do. I'm supposed to finish high school, and then go on to college. And my mother always insisted, always, 'Go to school, get an education.' And she was very strict about it, too. There was no foolishness as far as me and school was concerned.

But at the same time, she was always there to defend me if she thought I was right, too. I mean, she'd be reluctant about going to the school to find out how I was getting along. And then she would get on me if I wasn't doing what I should do. And then she would question the school as to what was wrong with what I was doing or what not. So I think the strongest influence was really parents in insisting that I go to school.

The next influence was the fact that living in a university town and having contact with students that were in college. And I had a cousin who was dating. She was a senior in high school, and she was dating a fella that was going to University. All this influence, and then mother and father being chaperones of a fraternity and sorority house. And that was the time when they would send the freshmen that they were initiating in the fraternity out to do chores for them, in order to, in initiating them to get into the fraternity. Sometimes, they'd send them out to our house to help us with our spring cleaning, you know, beat the carpets, and wash the windows, and that sort of thing. And all of this I think helped me.

Another thing that helped me is because the fact that I was black, I think helped a great deal for me to go to school because I could see that unless I went to school I was not going to go very far in this world. Because if I had been white, I don't think I would have gone to college. I think I would have stopped, and gotten a job, and worked and climbed the ladder as so many others have done. But I knew I was not going to be able to do that, because of all of the discrimination that was against me. See, when I came along, discrimination was so terrible that I encountered it. Anytime during the day, there was hardly a day that I returned home that I hadn't received two or three insults before I got home. Some of it was subtle; some of it I was not aware of until I was much older, and I look back on it and I say, 'Well, my God, that was an insult, see.'

Because you had been programmed. It had been so ingrained in your system, that this is your place. And so some things would happen to you and you'd just pass it off. And then not only that, I'd come to the conclusion that a lot of little insults, there's

so many that you pass off and don't pay any attention to because there're so many larger ones that are so important. Like I used to see kids that would complain about, would be fighting at school. Black kids would be fighting at school, and I'd say, 'Well, why, why the fighting?' (The kids would say) 'Well, Mr. Thomas, they called me a black so and so, or they called me a nigger.' Or something like this.

I said, 'But they're doing so many other things that are more harmful to you than calling you a name.' I said, 'They can call you a name and you can go on and ignore this, and make sure that they are not doing things to keep you from getting a job; to keep you from advancing.'

I mean those are the things that are important, see. Those are much more important. As the old saying goes, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.' We know that we get angry because we're called names, but some of the names we're called, we call each other constantly and think nothing of it. But if someone other than our race calls it to us, we're ready to fight them, see.

I think that there're so many things that are so much more important, bigger things. The fact that we speak about gaining, improving. I always say to people, 'Right now, we're still not in any position where I would like to see us be.'

First place, we need to get blacks in positions of decision-making and authority. And I mean decision-making and authority, not over other blacks, but over whites. You're not going to be anyplace, until you get in a position where you're making the decision for whitey, see. As long as they're making the decisions, when you just stop and think about it seriously, if every black person in the United States would die right now, today, what would stop in this country? Can you think of anything that would

stop? Nothing. We're not in those positions to make it happen. We need to have people in positions - when I say of decision-making and authority - chairman of the Board of General Motors, chairman of the board of big banks; I mean in these positions that are so important, the high political positions that run the country: chairman of the important committees in Congress that run the country. Now we have a few blacks that are beginning to creep into important positions, but not enough to make any sizable difference.

See, we quibble over these little things of what I'd say name-calling, but we forget the bigger things up here that really make the world go 'round, which really make things happen as far as the country . . . And those are the things you can strive for. You always have to keep striving for a goal to be happy. I mean, if you don't have a goal that you're striving for, pretty soon life becomes unimportant to you, see. You always have to look for something. First, maybe you're striving to graduate from high school, next you're striving maybe to get a job or finish college or to go in service or something; then when you get there, you're striving to climb. Like he's going to service, (talking about Patrick) he should be striving to climb, to get as high a ranking as he can get. And granted he's going to have to do a lot of things maybe that are unpleasant in order to do that, but if that's what it requires, and that's what you're in, that's what you have to do. And then when you get there, then you're in a much better position; he'll be in a much better position when he's sergeant and he's over a group, see, rather than the private, see, because now that the Army is integrated, he's not only going to be over blacks, he's going to be over whites too, see.

And see you have to, not only that, you're setting an example. You're making people learn that you are just like anyone else. It's an individual thing. You cannot classify people by saying, 'All these people are so and so.' You can't say all blacks, all whites, all Jews, all Chinese, all anything, are anything at all. There are some very good blacks, very good whites, very good Jews, very good Chinese, very good everything.

And there's some no-good each one of them: black, white, Chinese, Jews. There's some that are no good, and there're some that are very good. And when you have common interests and common desires, that's when you begin to mesh together, regardless of your color. I mean, if you have common interests and common desires, and mutually desire to associate, well, why shouldn't you? Regardless of what the color is. As I said earlier, color is something you have no control over.

We speak about prejudice. They say, 'I'm prejudiced just like anyone else is prejudiced, but I'm not prejudiced based on color. Color doesn't have anything to do with it.' If you're not prejudiced based on color - I mean that's the thing we complain about. Now you might be prejudiced because a person is unclean. If I'm not a clean person, I don't use any soap and water or nothing else, and you're prejudiced against me because I don't, I can do something about that. If I don't want you be prejudiced to me, then I can get me some soap and water, and wash up and get clean so that you won't be prejudiced. But, if I don't care whether you're prejudiced, I just go on and not get clean. See, something I have control over. So much prejudice is based on color, something over which we have no control. And you see, that works both ways, see.

Mary Thomas: Are you going to get some questions in?

Taylor Thomas: Oh, pardon me honey, I always get to running my mouth, and I forget to . . . She was asking me about my education, and I wandered clear away from it. But I think, basically, the reason I continued education was parents, and the fact that I was black, that's one thing, too. I knew, I think, early that being black without an education would be very difficult. And the fact that living in the university town, I had contact seeing people going to school, going to college and trying to improve themselves. And I saw there were very few here at the time - a few blacks and I happened to know them, and they were striving. I think those are the main reasons, I guess.

Melinda Roundtree: What would you say is the difference between the youth when you were growing up and the youth now?

Taylor Thomas: Well, when I say difference.

Melinda Roundtree: Or similarities.

Taylor Thomas: Yes, differences or similarities. Really youth are not that much different, I don't believe. We hear people talking about, 'Oh, they're so much different now than they were in our time.' Now, the rules have changed. The youth haven't changed, the rules have changed. We have changed the rules. We say, when I came

along, maybe you couldn't stay out after 10 o'clock. Now they say you can stay out after 10. When I came along you couldn't do some things. I'm trying to think of some things that I couldn't do, that you can do now. But it's a matter of rules have changed.

Now there're some individuals that feel that the youth . . . I don't have it, but there is a piece that is written that says something about students, and they're so terrible, and they shouldn't do this and they're just going to the dogs. And you think that it's something that was written maybe today. It was written by Socrates back years ago, the same thing that applied to youth then, apply to the youth today. We find that youth . . . There might be more youth now maybe than there were when I came up, but we had our problems, and we had our good points and our bad points. I think youth have good and bad points today. I think that temptations are the same, except that there might be a few new temptations. But they even existed to some extent, they called it something else I think when I was coming along.

I know they speak about marijuana or I think when I came along, or they'd call it reefers or something. And it was used, more or less, by entertainers seemingly. We would see orchestra individuals who smoked what they called reefers. I believe it was, perhaps, about like marijuana, but it wasn't as common a practice. I mean, you'd find a few individuals, where now, that is a difference. It has spread to more individuals and at a much younger age because they were usually older, at least say in their twenties. There're some things that haven't changed as far as youth are concerned. I think the change is that the youth today are exposed to more things than youth in my age were.

You see, when I was in high school, radios were just starting, and they were crystal sets. Everyone didn't have a radio. Now everybody's got a radio. Consequently, we did not get the news as rapidly as we get it now. TVs, no existence, I was out of college, no TV. And now TV is very common. You see that changes some things, makes things speed up because you're exposed much faster through radio and TV. I would imagine if we had been exposed as fast as you're exposed today to things, there would be no difference, but we were not exposed to it see. Our parents kept things from us.

Now, parents can't keep things from you because you can look at TV, or listen to the radio, and hear or see practically everything you want. But you see, we had blinders on, we couldn't be exposed to it. Now that is a basic difference I think, is the fact that you are exposed to much more than we were. And it's a matter of communication, I mean the method of communication now is . . . And not only that, the method of travel, the speed of travel. Traveling was much slower when we came along. If you had a car, and it went 35 mph, that was speeding, and that was the limit the car was going to run. It finally moved up to 50, was the limit that the car could run. Even the speed of everything now is different. Things did not move as rapidly as it did then.

As far as youth is concerned, see, I say that they're the same in this respect. I think you have good youth today, and you have bad youth today. In our day we had good youth and bad youth. Today youth have feelings, just as they had feelings during the time that I came along. But the main thing is that today you are exposed to many more things than we were exposed to. Consequently, your reactions are going to be a

little different on some things. You have more freedom now, too. I don't know whether I've answered your question or not.

Melinda Roundtree: Okay, still on the subject of youth and education, during the years you were teaching at the high school, did you see many black students trying to further their education by attending college?

Taylor Thomas: I found that when you say many it's hard to say. There were some who tried. There were some who attempted. They really didn't try, they attempted, and after one semester they gave it up. Then we find some who waited too late, because you see they waited until they were a senior in high school before they thought about going to college, and consequently, they had not gotten a very good foundation before. Now that, perhaps, was not all their fault. It was, perhaps, partially the fault of poor counseling when they were younger, to try to instill in them the importance of doing the best you can in the first grade, the second grade, the third grade, on through grade school, so that you will be able to do better in high school. And so when you finish high school you are ready to go to college. But so many were not ready to go to college because their previous years, they hadn't done the work that they needed to do to be prepared. It looks like a big obstacle then to them. 'Oh, my goodness, I can't do this.' And so they give up and say, 'I can't make it.'

Now there are some who, maybe feel they can't make it financially and they can usually find ways around that in order to make it. Either by going to a community college helps like Parkland, or they might work for a year and then go to school. They

might go into service and go to school. They might be able to get a part-time job or something and go to school. But there are so many or at least there were some that didn't have the desire really to go on to school.

After high school they're ready to fold up. Actually, I feel that we shouldn't judge a student by the fact that he has a diploma from high school. They should look at his transcript. I mean if you want to hire a person look at their transcript and it tells you what they have done in school and whether they are capable of doing certain things or not.

Melinda Roundtree: When you were attending Tennessee, what fraternity did you join?

Taylor Thomas: Oh! My social life, huh? I joined the Omega Si Phi; and there were, let's see, the Alpha Phi Alpha was there and I was practically reared in the Alpha Fraternity because I was a little kid, that's who my parents chaperoned. Then when I got into high school around here most of them were Kappas because the first chapter of Kappas is at Indiana University, their Alpha Chapter and their Beta Chapter, second chapter, is here at Illinois, and so the local boys that I knew were interested in Kappas and so I associated with Kappas while I was in high school.

And when I went to Tennessee State. You see, fraternities and sororities are really an interest group wherever you are. When I went to Tennessee State the popular fraternity on the campus were the Omegas. And the boys that I enjoyed their company were Omegas. Now if it would have been Alphas or Kappas, I would

perhaps had of joined one of those, but they were Omegas. Well, of course, we used to always as Omegas brag about the fact that we were a combination of Alphas. We could be Alphas when we wanted to, with the dignified, snooty look, or we could be wild, weird Kappas if we wanted to be. We were in between the two, but it just so happened that the students that I enjoyed their company were Omega and I became an Omega, and served as president for two years at Tennessee State. My wife is an A.K.A., Alpha Kappa Alpha, she made it here. Yes?

Melinda Roundtree: Now, okay let me see. Dr. Young's situation, the churches had been supporting him giving funds for his legal fees and everything. Has this always been? Has the church always been involved in the community?

Taylor Thomas: Well, you see, if you go as far as the black community is concerned, the church has been, you might say, what the black people had to depend on. They had to depend on their ministers because they were the ones that were before a large group. This is the only place you could usually get a large group of black people together would be in the church. We have always over the years, see, depended on hope for the future, and that could only be . . . Not the life that we are having on this continent, it's what is going to come after.

Of course, now you've got a Reverend Ike who has changed this. I don't know if you heard of Reverend Ike or not, but Reverend Ike says, 'I want a little of my glory here on this earth and not wait to the hereafter.' But we have always had to wait to the hereafter because we weren't getting very much of it here.

So the church has always been a pillar of strength as far as the black community is concerned. The first black schools, I think, were started by black churches along with some of the state-supported schools in the southern states. But, bringing you down to Champaign-Urbana at first when there was a great deal of discrimination, the black students had come to the University of Illinois, all had to live at the North End of town. There was no place for them to live on the campus. It wasn't 'til after the forties that they were able to find housing and that was after the Union Building was built. There was no place to eat on the campus. The Union Building opened up and they could eat at the Union Building and then the . . .

[End Side A, Tape Two]

Taylor Thomas, Oral Interview

Side B, Cassette Two

During the process of changing sides of the tape, Melinda asked Mr. Thomas about the Illinois Times, a Black Newspaper during the 1940s to 60s.

Taylor Thomas: They published . . . I've forgotten how many years they did publish it, but Mr. Harris eventually died. I don't know whether they were still publishing when he died or not, because he wasn't too well the past few years before his death. There was an Illinois Times, yes. I was . . .

Melinda Roundtree: You said you were involved in the NAACP? You were president?

Taylor Thomas: Yeah, I, that's when I . . . It was during the time when I was involved with the NAACP. Well, I think that was the time. What were some of the activities that I was doing? (Talking to his wife.) Was that the time I was fighting for the police or was that the time that I opened the swimming pool? I don't know. It was the early part of the forties. I went to the national meeting in the early part of the forties. Let's see, I got out of bed in '43, I guess it was. It must have been '42, '43, '44. It was in Chicago I remember that NAACP, and that's when White was still Executive Secretary, before Wilkins even. But it was in the early part of the forties that I served. That was when I remember I was battling for different things around here. And then I gave up the presidency, and insisted on, I forget now who the young man was, I think it was James

Taylor, to take presidency of it. And I told I'd work with him, if he would act as president, and I still worked for it sometimes.

And in the Urban League, I was on the Ad Hoc Committee and the first board of the Urban League. The Ad Hoc Committee was a committee of us that came together to decide that we wanted an Urban League here, and formed the Urban League. But, the NAACP is kind of, I don't think it's quite as strong as it was. I'm not sure really. I haven't been active in it sometime. I've had my fingers in too many other things that kept me on the go.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember the approximate date that you wrote the article in the Times?

Taylor Thomas: In Times? (Illinois Times) Well, it would've been anywhere from, let me see, it would've been around '42, '43, I imagine. I've forgotten how many of those papers I wrote for, but 'It Seems To Me' was the title of it in the Illinois Times. I'm sure I was still in bed when I was writing because after I got out of bed I just didn't have time to write; I was trying to work and keep my health together. But, it would've been around '42 or '43, I think. You could look anywhere from '42, '43, '44. Forty-four I started Douglass Center, so I know it wasn't then. Forty-four I started Chanute Field; '44, '45 I started Douglass Center, yeah. About '43. It might be '41, but I think you'd find it someplace in there.

Patrick Tyler: What gave you the motivation or determination to go ahead and keep applying for a teaching job in Urbana or Champaign?

Taylor Thomas: Well, I knew that if you apply for something there's . . . If you've come along long enough, you've experienced roadblocks. You find if you're going to stop when you have one roadblock, well, you're just not going to go very far, so you have to just keep plugging away. Over the years as you come up in an atmosphere of discrimination or racism as we call it today, or what have you, you know that. All right, I'll try this. When I was in high school during the summer, I played football, so during the summer we had to get muscles to play football, you know, big and strong. They didn't have these health programs like they have now; the muscle lifting, muscle building. We did it by getting out on a hard job working.

So, I went to the city. In the summer they used to put extra people on the street gang, to work, to dig ditches, and what not. And I would go each morning to see whether they're going to hire anyone. And so, you go one morning you don't get hired, you go back the next morning, you don't get hired, you go back the next morning until finally you get hired. Now maybe I didn't get to work but a month or so, but that was a month I wouldn't have had. And then the same thing, I worked on the section on the railroad. You weren't going to be a member of the regular crew if you're just working in the summer. You're only going to be a part of extra help they put on, so you would go each morning to see if you could be hired.

So I did the same thing on a section hand. I'm in high school now, and so I'd go and wait. I expected to be a water carrier, is what I expected, I think until my junior

year of high school, and I got hired, and I was using a pick and shovel. I thought I was going to be a water boy, but I wasn't a water boy, I was working. And the same thing with digging ditches with the city. I think I started my sophomore year looking for that. And two summers I worked for the city digging ditches. I'd clean this ditch, you know, that runs around through Champaign-Urbana, that Boneyard? I'd clean that whole thing out one summer, just shoveling all this stuff out and making it deeper. A whole crew of us did that. That was our job. I think that was just in my system. I expect to be rebuffed. I've been rebuffed so many times because of the color of my skin. I expect to be rebuffed. Now maybe I shouldn't go with that attitude, but when you've been knocked down so many times, it kind of hard not to say, 'Well, it's going to happen again.'

So, I applied to Champaign, and I wasn't hired. And I applied again to Champaign, and I was sent to a principal and he didn't hire me. So, the next thing I knew, I was applying at Urbana and I got hired. And in Urbana, you see, I was applying to teach in junior high or high school, where there were no blacks. There were blacks in the elementary school in north Champaign, but there weren't any in the junior high school. So, then I applied to Urbana, and I was still applying to teach in the junior high or high school. And fortunately, I got hired. But I think it's just a matter of experience, I guess, and determination that if I don't get hired this time, I'll try again. I'm not going to get the job by not applying at least, and if I don't get hired here doing what I want to do, then I'll get hired someplace else doing something else. You see, it was a long time before I got into what I really wanted to do, and that was to teach. See, I was up in age before I got to teach because I had been on a number of jobs. I

had worked in Indianapolis with the Farm Security Administration, I had worked at Chanute Field, I had worked at Douglass Center, before I ever got into teaching. And then when I got into teaching, I still wasn't in the area I wanted, I was in elementary school in Danville. And then it wasn't 'til, near 'til almost the time for me to retire before I got into secondary school.

I don't regret it. I think I finally came out all right after so long, but I experienced a great deal. I was Vice-President of the Teacher's Association in Danville, but I didn't get to be president. And normally, the vice-president moves up to president, but color of my skin, they blocked me from becoming president. And interesting, I came to Urbana, and I was vice-president, and then president. I moved right up into presidency in Urbana.

And I think another thing that made me feel that, oh, I guess I'd been accepted, was that after teaching at Urbana five years - the fifth year that I taught, that class dedicated the yearbook to me, the graduating class. I started teaching in '56 and the class of '61. Of course, I think partial the reason of that, was that was the first class I taught in Urbana, 1956, 1957, I had them in the eighth grade, and then I had some of them in high school after they came to the high school. Some of those students I had as many as four times. I had them for history and English in the eighth grade, and then had them for world history and sociology in the high school. And so, when they graduated they gave the yearbook to me and it was nice. But I think it's just the determination that of 'Why stop?'

I mean, if you want to get someplace, you can't be rebuffed and then give up; you've got to keep digging. And if you can't make it one way, then try it another way.

There's more than one path to get what you want, and you just have to keep searching until the right one comes along. Anybody can give up, I mean, that's very easy to do. It's difficult to stick at a job and make it work for you, and it can happen. Even being black it can happen.

Melinda Roundtree: What did you study at Tennessee?

Taylor Thomas: At Tennessee State I majored in social studies, history, and minored in P.E. And then when I came back here, I went to the University of Illinois, and got my master's first in education, and then I got the equivalent of another master's, they call it Advanced Certificate in Education, in educational administration. It was a matter of getting some administrative knowledge, too, because I eventually got into administration. And that was my desire to teach and then eventually get into the administrative area because I knew that administrators were paid more. That was as high as I knew I would ever be able to get, because you see, I knew my age was against me. I'm getting older. I mean, students now that are finishing college, are making as much as I made when I finished working, see. And so, I had to get into administration in order to up my salary for retirement.

You really have to have a goal that you're striving for. My goal first was to get to teach. Period. And then after I got to teaching, my goal was to get into an integrated system where I would teach everybody; not just one group. I'd teach all groups. And then once I got into that, my goal was to get into administration. Then it was too late for me to go any further, so I had to retire. As a group, we're usually twenty years

behind on everything simply because we're black. When I say that, I mean that where I was if we'd eliminate the illness - where I was when I retired, I should have been there maybe when I was in my thirties. In other words, no later than my forties. And I look back now, here I was assistant principal - I guess I was in my fifties - and I look back and I see individuals that are assistant principals in their twenties. I mean, they're white, see. Makes a difference. I don't know whether I have talked you out or not. Can you think of anything else? Do you have anymore?

Patrick Tyler: I have one more. I just wanted to know about when did you two get married?

Taylor Thomas: Oh, when we got married? (Laughs.) Oh, we got married the year that - only it was a couple three or four months before it - I started working at Douglass Center. We were married in June, the 20th. (Talking to his wife.) Am I right? 1945. And I started Douglass Center in October of '45. So at the time we were both up to Chanute Field working, I believe. The interesting thing about my wife and I getting married, the way the first time we met, we were in a church play at Bethel Church, but we never had any contact until many years later when we started to date.

We didn't have a church wedding. We went to St. Louis and went into the courthouse and got a license, and met a minister on the steps. A black minister was on the steps, you know, making a few dollars, and he married anybody that came along. And so he took us in the courthouse in a little area, and married us. And my father went down with us. My wife's father died, oh, three months before she was

born. She never really had a father. Our mothers were not able to go. So my father went with us, and we went down and we married and came back.

And at the time it was still hard to get housing, and so we couldn't find any housing, any apartment. So for, I think about the first six months, she stayed at home, and I stayed at home, and then finally we found the little apartment on 5th Street, and moved in and been happy every since, I guess. You've been happy, honey? (Talking to his wife, he laughs).

Mary Thomas: [inaudible].

Taylor Thomas: That's . . . My wife though, went to Urbana High School, and so she's always rubbed that in, because I went to Champaign High. She graduated from Urbana High. Some of the teachers that were teaching with me taught her in school. And she went to the University of Illinois, and that's how come she became an AKA, dear old Alpha Kappa Alpha. I don't know, I guess I've left out a lot of things. It's impossible to tell everything. (Laughs.) After you've gone, I'll think of a number of things that I will feel maybe were important, I should've said to you. Because sometimes I know when I get to talking, I get to rambling. I'll think of one thing, and it will lead me off here, and lead me off 'til I'm way away from the subject. The subject's here, and I have to find myself and come back.

I used to do that even when I was teaching sometimes. I'd get to rambling, and I'd get off someplace. I would tell my students in advance this might happen, and so when I'd got off here someplace they knew me well enough. They'd say, 'Mr. Thomas,

now where did we start?' And I said, 'Okay, now bring us back.' I'd have them to bring me back, bring us back on the connection, see. Tell me how was this connected to this, to this, to this, to get us back where we were, and they'd do a pretty good job of it. 'Well, now we got there because of so and so, we got there because of so and so. Now we'll go from there - we'll go back to where we started.'

So sometimes I do get to rambling off in all directions, and I sometimes leave off some things that I think are important, and I know I've left out some perhaps of my wife. I should've had you to interview her, and ask her some questions. (Laughs.) She's knows me about as well as anybody, I guess, who knows about me.

Mary Thomas: Well, I think that after you live so very long, you feel like you really have something to say, and you want to be sure that you get it all in, and I think that's what happened with you.

Taylor Thomas: And since you mentioned that, I do think of something else I think I should say. I feel good over some of the recognition that I have received. I don't think too much . . . well, I don't think about the fact that there're a number of areas where I have been first, you know, first as far as black is concerned. That doesn't mean too much, but still there's certain recognition that I do feel good about. The fact that I did get to teach, I feel good about it. Not necessarily that I was the first black in Urbana, but I did get to teach. I feel good about the fact that I was the first honorary commissioner for the Champaign Park District. Not first black honorary commissioner,

but the first honorary commissioner, the first person they gave that honor. And I received some kind of plaque or certificate for it.

I feel good over the fact that the Urbana Exchange Club gave me the recognition of their golden deeds award, which they present each year to some individual in the community, not black, just the fact that I received that recognition that different individuals based on their life, they recognized them for that. I mean, I feel good over some things such as that that I have been recognized for. And there're others of which I - as I say I can't think of - I feel good over the fact that the PTA Association made me an honorary life member of the PTA, PTA Association.

And the fact that I have held a number of offices, and the fact that I have worked with various groups such as Employment on America Committee, which is non-existent now, but it was a forerunner of the Community Integration Committee (CIC), which were committees made up of black and whites to try to get jobs for blacks and try to improve all means of discrimination as far as blacks were concerned in the Twin Cities. And that goes back to the forties when we were working on different things.

In fact, when I retired, the black community honored me at Douglass Center and a number of individuals that knew me over the years said a little something about when they knew me. Like one of the first individuals to know me was a lady by the name of Mrs. Pope who knew me when I was knee-high to a grasshopper you might say, and she told things about me at that age. Then one of the, a fellow by the name of Horace Chapman who we came up as kids together, and he spoke about me in that area.

Then another, Les Jamerson spoke about me at a later age and then Paul Hursey spoke because I had Paul Hursey down at Douglass Center when he was a

young man. Then George Hursey said something about me cause I had him at Urbana High School, and then the superintendent of schools at Urbana School District, he had something to say. He knew me working there and somebody else, I forgot who. Oh! Cleveland Hammonds who was assistant superintendent of Champaign School District, he spoke, knew me as professionals together.

So, it was very nice. It was well-attended and was kind of a pleasant surprise. I knew they were going to have something but after they had it was a pleasant surprise, I'll have to say. Then there were a number of plaques given to me. John Lee Johnson gave me one that I appreciated it because he had written a little poem that was very nice. I was quite surprised. I had John Lee Johnson at Urbana High School in a sociology class. He had made a collage of pictures, one of Urbana High, one of Douglass Center, and one of me with the board at Douglass Center, and a picture of a school bus and some kids. Then he had written this little poem about me. It's his own idea, and it was kind of touching.

Melinda Roundtree: I was wondering if any of the students that you taught came back to see you or . . . ?

Taylor Thomas: Well, I'll tell you, the young man by the name David Fields, who is principal of a school in Danville, that I taught in the eighth grade in Danville came over. Another young man that I taught in Danville by the name of Kenny Weaver, who was assistant superintendent of schools in Leavenworth, Kansas, at that time was assistant

superintendent up in Inkster, Michigan, he came down. And then there were some of the local students that were here.

Of course, George Hursey, who is an attorney now in Florida. He came, but he was actually on the program. And a number of the youth that I had had at Douglass Center, who were adults then, see. When you get my age, you've got adults, and adults, and adults, and then the youth, see. (Laughs.) Then there were some I even had coached grade school track meet at Lawhead School. That was when I was actually only about six years older than the kids that were in school. I was about 17 or 18, and they used to have grade school track meet, all the grade schools would have a track team. And some of the kids that I had then who are grown men now, actually are about six years younger than myself.

Mary Thomas: The boy that gave the . . . the young man that gave the address for the . . .

Taylor Thomas: Oh yeah, George Hursey that I mentioned, he gave the graduation address for Urbana High School this year, for the graduation class of Urbana High School this year. See you graduated in '82, this is '83 class. Just this year, he . . .

Mary Thomas: He was the first black young man to do that.

Taylor Thomas: Yes, the first black student to do that, and I heard that it was very good. I didn't get to go. I did get to see him while he was here, but yeah, George

Hursey gave the commencement address for the Urbana High School graduates this year at the Assembly Hall for the graduation. And he came all the way back from Florida to give it. I, perhaps, have left out some individuals but there are some that just immediately come to mind. Usually, I enjoyed a good rapport, you might say, with all the students I had. That's one thing I have to compliment myself on is that, regardless of whether you were white or black or rich or poor, I managed to get along someway with you. And I had the respect of the students, and that was so important to me. I see students now that are adults, and they'll see me, and they'll say, 'Hello, Mr. Thomas.' And I have, of course, my students from Douglass Center. I usually know them, because they'll call me 'TT.' 'Hey, TT.' (Laughs.) And Danville students that I had, they usually say Mr. Thomas or something.

I just enjoyed working with youth, that was all, and I think that's fifty percent of the battle. You have to enjoy your job, in order to really get something out of it. I like youth. I've always worked with youth. Actually, I taught Sunday School when I was twelve years old. (Laughs.) Teaching sixth-graders, and six-year-olds or something like that. And sang in the choir and I enjoy youth.

I had some very severe cases, of course. See I was during the rough sixties and seventies, and I had some cards, I mean, both black and white in school. I don't know, I guess they managed to hit the right nerve or something. Some would start out maybe pretty tough. I was not one of these people who used anything but talk really. I mean, I would try to reason, but I could be very firm. I mean, if you get too far out of line . . . But I'm flexible, I can be firm or flexible. The five things that I followed while working with students: first, you had to be fair with your students. And by being fair

doesn't mean that you treat all students the same because all students are not the same; they're different. So, I tried to be fair always, and firm but flexible. And friendly, but not familiar. And those are the 5 F's that I tried to follow, and it worked pretty good for me.

And, some people have their problems with youth today, and they're difficult times I know, but you have to enjoy them. I don't think all people really enjoy youth. It's like any job, some people are working because they have to be paid, and not because they enjoy what they're doing. I guess it's difficult to always find the job that you really enjoy, but that's what one needs to try to do. Try to find work that you enjoy doing, and if you enjoy doing it, then you're going to be able to give your best. If you don't, then all you're going to do is be waiting for the paycheck, that's all. But, we have too many people like that now. Regardless of what a job is, you want a person that's going to do a good job. If a person's collecting garbage, you want a good garbage man, you don't want someone who's going to throw it all over the yard.

I had a white boy when I was in high school, I mean, when I was teaching in the high school, or rather assistant principal, came to me, he wanted to quit school. He wasn't old enough, he had to be 15, 16, I've forgotten what it is now, before he could quit. He was about three months away from that, and he was cutting class all the time. I told him, I said, 'Why don't you go to school?'

'Mr. Thomas,' he said, 'I don't want to go to school.'

I said, 'Well, what do you want to do?'

He said, 'I want to work.'

I said, 'Work? Do you have a job?'

'Yeah, yeah, I got a job.'

I said, 'What do you do?'

He said, 'I work on a garbage route.'

And I said, 'You enjoy that job, that's what you want to do?'

He said, 'Yeah, I enjoy it.' He said, 'Soon as I'm sixteen, I gonna quit and go on the route.'

And I said, 'Let's strike a bargain here.'

[End Side B, Cassette Two]