Kennesaw State University
Department of History and Philosophy
Summer Hill Oral History Project

Interview with: **Justice Robert Benham**
Interviewed by: **Melissa Massey**
Location: **His office at the Georgia Supreme Court, Atlanta, GA**
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Biography: **Justice Robert Benham was born in Cartersville, Bartow County, Georgia on September 25, 1946. He has two brothers, Clarence Benham and Billy Benham. His parents are Clarence Benham, Sr., and Jessie Knox Benham. After getting his undergraduate degree from Tuskegee, Mr. Benham went to the University of Georgia's Law School.**

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(Tape 1, Side A.)

MM: Can you state your name for me?

RB: I'm Robert Benham.

MM: When and where were you born?

RB: I was born in Cartersville, Bartow County, Georgia, September 25, 1946 at 11:16 a.m.

MM: And did you have any siblings?

I have two brothers: Clarence Benham, a Colonal in the Air Force and Billy Benham who was a major in the Army.

MM: And who else did your household consist of?

RB: Just my parents: Clarence Benham, Sr. and Jessie Knox Benham, my mother.

MM: And what did your family do for a living?

RB: Well, we had several occupations. My dad is also a graduate of Summer Hill high school and my mother too. And so were my brothers. My dad was a resident agent for North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company. He was also the park superintendent at George Washington Carver State Park and he and my mother ran Benham's Department Store which was on Main Street in Cartersville, Georgia; my mother was resident agent for Afro-American Life Insurance Company; she also owned Benham's Fine Design which is the boutique and a beauty salon; and she also worked at the George Washington Carver State Park and she was a licensed beautician.

MM: What do you think of when you think of Summer Hill?

RB: Oh, I think about some wonderful experiences where the teachers cared about the students; the teachers lived in our community and we interacted with them, not only in school but in social, civic and religious activities throughout my childhood. Summer Hill brings back only warm and cuddly feelings for me.

MM: Now when and how did your family come to live in Summer Hill?

RB: My family came to Georgia in 1846. We came as the slaves of Willis Benham who had come from Lawrence, South Carolina by way of Connecticut. My great-grandmother was released from slavery in 1865 and she lived on a piece of property in the Mechanicsville community which is a stone's throw from the Summer Hill Community. When my mom and dad married in 1942 or '43 my mom and dad bought a house which, they bought a piece of property which was a piece of property where the Summer Hill jail

is now located. So my mom owned that property, she had bought that property from the Edwards' family after World War II somewhere in 1945 or '46. And we lived roughly a quarter of a mile from the Summer Hill school. I still own property in that community.

MM: Can you describe the home that your mother built on that property that you lived in?

RB: It was my mom and dad, they actually moved into a house that was owned by Dr. Moore's family—Dr. Moore was a black doctor in town at that time in 1946—and they bought his house after World War II and then added to it. When they first bought it was a three room house with an outhouse out back. Then they added three more rooms to it and we lived there from 19—I was born in '46—and lived there for approximately fifteen years or so.

MM: What was the yard like outside?

RB: It was a typical Georgia yard with red clay and that's why you hear the term people use, a swept yard; rather than grass in the yard you would sweep the yard with a broom with a nice, straight design. And back in those days people did not have manicured yards as they have today because you had a swept yard because kids played hopscotch in the yard, they played marbles in the yard and they jumped rope in the yards. So the yard was always bare because that was the place for a lot of activities.

MM: What was your relationship like with your neighbors? Did they visit regularly?

RB: Oh, we visited on a daily basis; we were in and out of each other's homes on a daily basis; the elderly people in the community--if the kids went to the store it was considered an affront not to go by the house of elderly people between your home and the store to find out if they wanted anything from the store. And if they wanted anything from the store you always brought it back for them and you would not charge them anything. In

fact, if they offered you anything you could not accept it. So it was a little cordial relationship with people in the community; we knew all the families in the community; we knew their children, we knew the names of their dogs—I could tell you the names of the pets that they had in the community. There was only one mule in the community and Mr. Cleve Whatley owned that mule and he used him to plow gardens in the community. It was a very close-knit community. We went to each other's churches and visited churches; you had institutions in the community; the Harry's of Jericho; the Eastern Star; the Masonic Lodge, the Knights of Pithius; the Brotherhood Lodge—which is indigenous to Cartersville—so all of these organizations provided the glue to keep the family close-knit.

MM: What was your role in the household when you were growing up?

RB: I was the youngest child. The youngest child has no rights at all. That was during the era when all of the rights belonged to the eldest child and but I was the youngest of three kids, on a day to day basis, my job was to put up the dishes when the dishes were washed; it was to bring in the kindling to go in the stove because we had wood stoves initially; and it was my job to keep paper in the outhouse for whatever purposes were necessary. But those were chores that I had as a kid. And it was to mind all the grown-ups and to my mind my older brothers.

MM: Did your family sit down as a whole for dinner every night?

RB: Every night, every breakfast—my mom and dad worked so they were gone during the day--but family meals were not optional, they were required. A blessing was said at every meal and the children, my two brothers and I were required to say a Bible verse. We could not say the same Bible verse anybody at the table said and we could not use the

same Bible verse during that week, and that was required. There was no television on, and we were the only family in the neighborhood who had a television, but you did not watch TV while you were at the family meal and you engaged in discussion. Daddy would always ask, "Well, what are you going to do today?" And then we knew what was coming next, "What are you going to do for somebody else?" That was at every breakfast.

MM: Was Sunday dinner a special time?

RB: Oh, yes it was. That was, of course, we did not go out to eat for Sunday dinner but we did irregularly. Except when the preacher came, and of course, you might be familiar, well, you're too young to know, but when the preacher came, then the children did not get a chance to eat until the preacher had eaten and usually the preacher would come and bring several people with him and they would sit there and eat. And, of course, they almost always had fried chicken and then after the preacher finished eating then the children were brought in and we could eat but we couldn't eat until after the preacher had eaten. One of the favorites, it was not my favorite but it was something that we always had, was rice pudding. And rice pudding is simply a dish that you use rice, sugar, a lot of sugar, eggs, maybe nutmeg, something of that nature. But that was served almost every Sunday at the insistence of my grandmother who was from South Carolina--Plum Branch, South Carolina is where she was from. She came to Georgia in 1900. But her tradition was to have rice pudding on Sunday. I couldn't stand rice pudding. But it was only later on that I understood the history of that. The history of that was when blacks were slaves in South Carolina, they received rice once a week and they wanted to do something special with the rice and so they used the rice to make a pudding and my

grandmother always thought that that was such a wonderful treat, to have rice pudding. Well, that came on down through the ages and she thought that by insisting that we have rice pudding on Sunday, that it was a treat for us. It was a punishment! But it shows you the role that tradition plays.

MM: How often did the preacher visit?

RB: As a child I hoped he visited as infrequent as possible. [chuckle] But I would say the preacher might visit once every two or three months or so. And that's what the preacher—the preacher would go around from home to home to have dinner with families on Sunday.

MM: What holidays are celebrated?

RB: There were quite a few holidays. Your traditional holidays of Fourth of July; Halloween, Christmas, Labor Day, New Year's. But also in the black community, we also had Emancipation Day which was also January 1 which celebrated the emancipation of slaves. In May we had a May Day celebration which was a big celebration where we planted the May pole. None of that's done in schools now but the schools actually had a ceremony, sort of a May Day ceremony. And Fourth of July was a big celebration, especially in the black community, because we couldn't go to any of the public facilities, none of the public facilities were we allowed to go to. We couldn't go to any of the restaurants in town; there was a special section at the theater, in the balcony where that was the only place we could go; we couldn't go to the drive-in theater--I think drive-in theaters were in vogue then--so we had celebrations in our own community. And one thing that I remember that there was also a water hose battle and the blacks would line up

on one side of the water hose, black men on one side of the water hose and white men on the other side of the water hose and that was the water battle.

MM: And this was for the Fourth of July?

RB: For the Fourth of July, they had the water hose battle. And then we had some of the traditional things like the sack race, the greasy pole, the greasy pig, all of these kinds of things. It was a big celebration, a community celebration. And in latter years, back during the mid-80s, I organized what was known as the Summer Hill festival committee where we re-enacted all of those things and we did it for a period of about four or five years. And we also brought antique cars—I have an antique car—so we'd show those up. But that was a real festive occasion; it was an all day celebration, at least the Fourth of July. Other celebrations were centered around plays and the black community, since we couldn't go to the theaters as such and enjoy ourselves and none of the controversial films were shown in our community, like To Kill a Mockingbird, that was not shown in a local theater because it dealt with inter-racial relationships, those kinds of things. So in the black community you had almost a play every month or so that was sponsored at the local high school and then the principal, through a network that had been created, would rent some of the movies that dealt with black issues and those movies would be shown at the local black high school, unbeknownst to the local board of education. And people from throughout the community came to see some movies like Cabin in the Sky with Bojangle Robinson, all of the black actors. Those kinds of things were sponsored in the black community.

MM: Since it was held at the school, was there a fee for coming to watch the movies, did they use it as a fund raiser?

RB: Well, there was a fee to defray the expense of renting the movie and I think the fee was a nickel or a dime, something of that nature.

MM: What was your first job?

RB: My first job was shining shoes at Bob Cagle's Barber Shop located on Main Street in Cartersville. I shined shoes after school and on weekends. When I first started shining shoes I was making fifteen cents a pair, I think. And my son and I have fond memories now—I have fond memories, he has regrettable memories—when I talk to him about that. I think he still is embarrassed about it. But I told him my brothers and I shined shoes, my mother had this view that if you ever plan to lead people that you must be willing to serve them and there's no more humbling experience than being down on your knees shining somebody's shoes. And she says, "If you do that you won't be full of yourself, you won't be hording everything." And my family was probably much more well off than many other people in the African American community but my mother insisted that we will shine shoes and I did that. That was my first job.

MM: Where did most people work?

RB: Most of the people were maids, janitors, chauffeurs, and the most prestigious job you could have was being a teacher or working for Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company in Cartersville. But all of the blacks who worked for Goodyear Tire and Rubber, worked as janitors or in the kitchen. Most people in the black community were janitors, chauffeurs, maids, and butlers. No blacks worked at any of the factories in Cartersville, nor in North Georgia at all, except in positions of maids and janitors. So in the 1950's, my daddy and mother became resident agents for North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company and Afro-American Life Insurance Company and those were black-owned insurance

companies. And when they were talking—and then my dad went to become the superintendent of the George Washington Carver State Park which was one of the, was the only black state park in the state so people would come from all over the state, African-Americans, to that park up on Lake Allatoona. It's now part of the Red Top Mountain complex. You had a white superintendent at Red Top Mountain; you had a black superintendent over at George Washington Carver State Park. And of course, the black superintendent was always under the white superintendent.

MM: How long was your father superintendent?

RB: I guess two or three years or so. And those were interesting experiences. And then my mom and dad were resident agents for North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance and Afro-American Life Insurance Company and my dad was probably the only black who testified before the Sibley Commission. The Sibley Commission was created in 1960's to deal with the integration of the schools. It wasn't dubbed as a, you know, as to what action this state would take if it got here, and I remember when people came to talk to my daddy about testifying before the commission--because if you testified before the commission people in the black community felt that there would be repercussions, especially if you told the truth about what was going on. And I remember a delegation came to talk to my dad about it because he worked for a black company so he would not suffer any repercussions if he told actually what happened: the fact that black kids lived a mile or two from the school there was no bus transportation to bring us back and forth to school; and when the kids in the white schools finished with books, then those books would be given to the black schools, the black schools did not get new books; and then we would get books that had pages torn out, indexes missing, table of contents missing,

you know, they were throw away books that we were getting. And I think my dad testified about all that kind of thing because he was, you know, he was aware as to what was going on.

MM: Can you just describe the Summer Hill neighborhood for me?

RB: The Summer Hill neighborhood, the anchor was the Summer Hill school and that's the original Summer Hill school that existed until around 1957 or so and still existed after that but then a new school was built down at the bottom of the hill and that school was only constructed because of the Brown versus Board of Education case. And once the Supreme Court said that separate breeds a feeling of inferiority in the race separated and that separate but equal was no longer the law of the state, it was then and only then that the powers that be considered constructing any kind of school. Taking into consideration the fact that this original Summer Hill school, that was not built for or paid for by the state, that was built by the Rosenwald Foundation—Rosenwald was an executive at Sears & Roebuck--that school, the black community raised $2,600 to build that school in 1923. And what the Rosenwald Foundation would do is the local community would have to match the Rosenwald funds and so they matched the funds in the local community to build that original school which was built in 1923. But the school formed the anchor for the black community. Most community activities were held at the school. Cartersville's Summer Hill school was the only black school at the time in north Georgia that even had an auditorium. We were the only school that had a gymnasium which was next to the school and that gymnasium was lost in a fire, coincidentally, right after the Brown versus Topeka case was decided, shortly after that that school went up in flames. How, why, we'll never know. But when I say the school, the gymnasium next to the school went up

in flames and I remember as a kid, though we lived only three blocks away and we went up and watched the gymnasium burn. I don't think there was any investigation as to how, why, what, when, but to answer your original question, what was the role of the school that it played in the community, without a doubt it was an anchor for that community. All of the cultural, civic, social, religious activities took place in the Summer Hill school.

MM: After the 1954 Brown versus Board decision, did you see any other changes besides the building being built?

RB: No, there were really no changes at all; there was open opposition to the Brown case and resistance to the Brown case. There was no real movement to change or dismantle the system of segregation until the late 1960's. So when Brown was decided I was in the fourth grade. I spent the rest of my educational career still in a segregated school and Brown was the law of the land. It was simply not being enforced. And the dual school system was not dismantled until 1969 so fifteen years after Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court.

MM: You mention the powers that be; who were the powers that be?

RB: The powers were all white, and they were all male. The Board of Education, the County Commissioner, the Mayor, the Aldermen, all of the powers were all white and they were all male. And that did not change until the 1970's when my dad was elected to the city council of Cartersville. He was the first black elected official in northwest Georgia, not just in Cartersville and I'm going from Cartersville all the way to the Tennessee line, all the way over to the Alabama line. That whole quadrant of the state there were no black elected officials in any positions whatsoever. And Cartersville was much more

progressive than other areas in northwest Georgia with the school that we had, the doctor we had in town, several of them, institutional approaches to problems.

MM: Were you known by any nicknames growing up?

RB: No nicknames at all. My mother and father were not in favor of nicknames although my older brother had a nickname but my parents didn't like nicknames mainly because they felt that nicknames were used as demeaning terms for African-Americans. And I saw that even when I began practicing law. When an African-American came to court to testify he was always referred to by court officials by the nickname rather than the given name so my parents always believe that that was a way of demeaning that person.

MM: What did you do for fun as a child in Summer Hill?

RB: Well, at Summer Hill . . .

MM: Hm-hm. While you were living there.

RB: During school there was a ten o'clock recess—it was only fifteen minutes but oh, we looked forward to the recess—but then we had a lot of athletic events: football, baseball, basketball, and I must admit my family was not athletically inclined! We were the only school in northwest Georgia, African-American that had a band. We had a band because the parents got together and we had to buy our own instruments and the parents made the uniforms. I remember my mama participated in a sewing bee where they made the uniforms and it started off as a flute band. But my family was still a little more fortunate because my parents owned a boat and we had a ski club, it was called the St. John's Ski Bees and we would perform up at Lake Allatoona at the black park; we would perform down in Florida on the St. John's river and my brothers and I skied, water skied that is, and so we spent a lot of time in water sports during teenage years, I'd say from twelve on

up or so. But there were a lot of activities, recreational activities around. The American Legion, which was an institution in the community, the American Legion once sponsored an oratorical contest at the local high school. They sponsored a citizenship program during the summer where black kids would go, we would be selected and we went down to Ft. Valley College in Ft. Valley to participate in a citizenship program which taught us notions of patriotism, discipline, all of the things that go with a patriotic community as such. We had a drill team, the young men had a drill team, we had a boy scout troop. All of these were connected to Summer Hill school. We practiced at the school for the drill team. We had an oratorical contest at the school; we had the boy scout meetings at the school. The principal of the elementary school, which was Robert Cotton, was also the boy scout master; the assistant principal at the high school, Mr. Morgan, was the assistant boy scout master so . . .

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

MM: …State Park was a hang out; what were the other favorite hang outs?

RB: Well, the boy scout hut, which was behind Summer Hill school. This is the Summer Hill school and right here was the boy scout hut, which also served as a home economics room and I guess you would like this in terms of the educational system. And all of the black schools, the black students were required to take, the girls were required to take a course in home economics. The guys were required to take a course in shop, it was called industrial art. That was only required in the black schools, it wasn't required in the white schools, and that is, the black girls were being channeled into being maids and the

black men were being channeled into doing shop, manual labor types of work. The system was structured in such a way that we were receiving no training, no guidance in terms of being captains or leaders of industry in commerce.

MM: How has the area changed economically over the years?

RB: Well, the school, as we knew it, has gone. Most of the houses were torn down for urban renewal but urban renewal first raised its head as public housing as opposed to home ownership. So you went from a situation to where on Summer Hill eighty percent of the people owned their homes to public housing where only ten percent of the people owned their homes. Now it has changed because after—and public housing came in 19, somewhere around '52 to '54, that's when we had public housing in Cartersville—and it changed in that it was a step up for a black teacher to live in public housing. And then if military officers, like Dobbins Air Force base, were assigned to Dobbins and they wanted to live—well, they couldn't live on post and their income was supplemented for all post housing. And I'm talking about military officers, then they could not even rent a house on the market so I knew of two or three military officers who lived in public housing because that was the only housing they could get because of the extremely segregated system. And that was even after 1947 when President Truman had decreed an end to segregation in the military. Yet black officers couldn't live on post and then the military did nothing to prevent discrimination against them in housing. So I remember when we lived in public housing for a short period of time just two doors up from us was a military officer who was an ensign in the Navy at Dobbins base as such. But that's just an interesting aside.

MM: That's very interesting. Now when you lived there, did you live in the old public housing or the new public housing is what we're calling it.

RB: Well, we lived in the public housing on Bartow Street. At that time it was the new public housing. Have you been to Summer Hill?

MM: Yes.

RB: Okay. We lived at 323 North Bartow Street because when we left the Georgia Washington Carver State Park our old home had been torn down as part of urban renewal. You could not rent a house in the white community. Didn't make any difference how much money you had, you weren't going to be able to rent a house in the white community so the only thing available to us was a public housing unit and we lived there two to three years. And then in 1965 my dad built, constructed a house on Red Comb Drive and I think he was the first African-American to receive a loan from a savings and loan lending institution to build a house. This is 1965. And I remember because I talked with several of the lawyers who handled the loan closing and several of whom are still alive and we were just—I was practicing law then and they were just telling me how difficult it was for that to happen. How they had to go back and talk to the savings and loan people and say, "It's time to do this." [unclear] and these kinds of things. But it's just amazing that the first black person in Cartersville to even get a loan to construct a house was in 1965. But once again, I digress.

MM: When you lived in public housing were you aware of any animosity toward the public housing urban renewal project when it came in?

RB: Oh no, a that time you know, it was considered somewhat of a Godsend because at least you were able to get a house with running water and indoor plumbing as such! [laughter]

And I remember the difficulty that Ms. Cotton, Charlotte Cotton, encountered in even trying to have sewer lines run into the Summer Hill community. She, you know, Summer Hill was the last place in the city to receive sewer lines and water lines. Now the tax was not any different for us on Summer Hill but the services were markedly different. But Ms. Cotton, Charlotte Cotton who lived on Mull Street and Ms. Naomi Henson, who was a white woman, a wife of a local lawyer, I mean, they literally demonstrated at the city to get water run to the black community and sewer pipes installed in the black community. And next to the school, next to Summer Hill school—and I'd have to show you the systematic discrimination that took place—this is Summer Hill school, this is the boy scout hut, there's the city trash pile. Every day the trash trucks would come right by the school and next to the school dump all of the trash from the city and then in the evening they would set it afire and the odor would waft all through the black community. And you know, when a story's told, you talk about the romance of that era and there was a lot of romance, but some people neglect to talk about the problems that attended segregation. Here was a trash pile. Here was the black school. That would not have been tolerated in no white community at any time. But we had no elected officials, no appointed officials, we had no word whatsoever. And another thing that happened, I remember as a youngster in the first grade, the teacher would assign a student to be in charge of killing the rats. We had wharf rats from the trash pile coming into the school. And a student would be assigned to kill the rats during school time. And that's part of the story nobody wants to talk about. But those were some of the evils of segregation and some people wax eloquently and reminisce beautifully about the good old days, about where tradition

held sway and where people enjoyed pomp and circumstance and they forget, deliberately, some of the evils that attended that era.

MM: You mentioned that you couldn't go to any restaurants; could you name some of those restaurants?

RB: I could name all of them! [laughter] I could name all of them because I remember when they were integrated because my brothers and I participated in the integration of those restaurants. At that time, and we're talking the '60s, we were in college at the time and much like my dad, there wouldn't be any consequences for us because we were going back to school, just like there weren't any consequences that we knew of for my dad when he testified before the Sibley Commission. But none of the restaurants downtown would serve blacks except through a back window and there were only two restaurants that even had places where blacks could go in the back door. One was Ross's Café right there on public Square, and the other was Four-Way Café which is right there on the intersection of Main and Gilmon [correct?] Streets. Other cafes, if you went in, you know, if they allowed you to come in, and you ordered something you could not sit down, you couldn't sit at a table, you couldn't sit at a stool, you had to stand, you had to wait until all of the other whites were served and only then would they ask you in their harsh tone, "What do you want?!" And that was a daily activity for African-Americans. And that contrasted to what existed around the turn of the century until 1935 when you had over twenty African-American businesses downtown. And all that came to an abrupt end in 1933 when John Willie Clark was hanged in downtown Cartersville. He was a soldier who was accused of murdering the police chief. He was dragged from the jail and he was hung in downtown Cartersville and this was the only time since the Civil War that

federal troops came to Cartersville. I think it was somewhere between 750 and 1000 federal troops were brought to Cartersville on a train and John Willie Clark was a soldier who was passing through at the time that he was accused, and they brought him back—he was housed in federal pen in Atlanta for safety reasons--he was brought back to Cartersville for the trial in 1930's but for some reason they couldn't have the trial the first day. The local officials assured the command of the federal troops that if they just simply left him there overnight that no harm would come to him. Before the federal troops could get back to Atlanta he was taken out of the jail and hanged in downtown Cartersville. And shortly after that, and I say for various reasons all of which have their genesis in the hanging of John Willie Clark, all of the black businesses were either run out or left downtown Cartersville and then that is when the black businesses moved to what was the Summer Hill area. There were black businesses in the Summer Hill area. There was a doctor's office, Dr. Moore's office, and his office had been in downtown Cartersville; and prior to that there was a black grocery store in downtown Cartersville, there was a theater, there was an ice cream parlor, there were three blacksmith shops; there were at least three to four restaurants in downtown Cartersville; but after the hanging of John Willie Clark, all of those businesses left downtown Cartersville.

MM: Were some of those businesses relocated, was it the Wheeler Shopping Center?

RB: That was the beginning of Wheeler-Moore shopping center but prior to that time it was Dan's Barber Shop located up on Jones Street as such. He owned a barber shop and a delicatessen and it was called the Delicatessen Shop. But those were two businesses there; there were three black tailoring shops in downtown Cartersville, one of them moved to Summer Hill; Willie O'Neal, who had a, they called them pressing clubs then,

who had been a graduate of Tuskegee, he moved his shop to—and I don't think Mr. O'Neal ever got over being required to move out of downtown Cartersville. I knew him and I would talk to him as a kid. I guess I've been old longer than I think. But you know, he still suffered some of the effects from whatever happened in downtown Cartersville. But then Summer Hill was established and there were two cafes; there was a butcher shop; there was a drug store; there was a pool hall; there was a doctor's office; there were several other businesses. Summer Hill was where people came to after they had been run out of downtown Cartersville.

MM: Before, when you said you couldn't go to the restaurants and stuff, were there actually signs that said, "Black only, white only" on the back doors?

RB: They said "white and colored" and those signs were also in the courthouse; there was a colored seating section in the courthouse; there was a colored bathroom in the –and of course it wasn't divided up for sexes as far as, you know, there was just one colored bathroom. There was a men's and women's bathroom for whites but for blacks it was a "colored bathroom". In many courthouses that bathroom was out on the back porch, it wasn't even in the courthouse. But the same was true of restaurants and I'll have to share with you an interesting aside—I have a lot of interesting asides. [chuckle]

MM: You're wonderful!

RB: But I remember in high school there was sort of like a Tasty Freeze or a Dairy Queen, I think it was sort of like a Tasty Freeze, ice cream parlor and I remember a friend of mine who went to the ice cream parlor, and there was a colored window and then there was a regular window. What happened is they would wait on all the other people at what was the white window and then if there was a break in activity they'd come over to the

colored window, “What do you want?!” in that very harsh and abrupt tone. And I remember a friend of mine, you know, we were young, sort of effervescent in the things we wanted to do and we decided that we would test the system. So we went to the colored window and we told the guy we were having a party and we needed fifty hamburgers. Well, you can imagine his eyes just lit up, you know, he was going to sell fifty hamburgers and he was just frying the hamburgers and all those kinds of things, just sort of anticipating the income he would make. So he packed them all and put them together, wrapped them, put them in the box and brought them to the colored window. We walked then to the white window. We said, “We’re ready for our hamburgers.” He said, “I’m not going to serve you at the white window.” I said, “That’s the only way we’re going to pay for these hamburgers. You’re going to have to serve us at the white window.” He took the hamburgers walked over to the trashcan and threw them one at a time, in the trashcan. Fifty hamburgers. He was willing to lose all of his money than to serve us a morsel of food at the white window. And that shows you how entrenched that system was. And people were willing to do anything to maintain that system of segregation. And segregation was an economic hardship for the South. You’re maintaining dual school systems, your maintaining dual water fountains, dual bathrooms, dual everything. And it had it’s genesis in slavery and we’re still seeing some of the effects of that now. But I digress.

MM: No, it’s fine. That brings up another point. I have heard the civic organization, New Frontiers come up and I hear you’re associated with it. Can you tell me about it?

RB: New Frontiers was an organization that was started in the 1960’s and it was an outlet for minorities to participate in the political process. Members of the New Frontiers—I used

to represent the New Frontiers—participated in a lot of the efforts to integrate the schools, to work toward better treatment for blacks in all aspects of life basically and some of the most outstanding men in the community belonged to the New Frontiers. The New Frontiers had its own building; I did the title work for them to get the building.

MM: Where was the building located?

RB: The building is now in the Casgrove community and it's a very nice building, a lot of social civic functions are held at the New Frontiers building and that building has existed for a good thirty years or so.

MM: Now, is New Frontiers still actively involved?

RB: Still active, I'm not sure that it's involved in the political life as it was at one time. At one time a New Frontiers members was assigned to attend the meeting of the city council, the board of education, all of those things, just to make sure people were aware of the needs of the African-American community.

MM: If you don't mind, can you give me the names of some of the other men that were in the New Frontier group?

RB: How many do you need?

MM: Just name them. [chuckle]

RB: All right. Arthur Carter, William Robinson, Walter Johnson, James Tench, L.L. Kelly, William Solomon, Horris Jones, Winston Strickland, I can go on and on but that's just some of the ones.

MM: Thank you. Let's talk about church. You said church is one of the things that kind of held the community.

RB: Yeah, they were the glue.

MM: They were the glue. What church did you attend?

RB: I attended Mt. Olive Baptist Church which is located in the Mechanicsville community and the prominent churches in town at that time were St. Luke Methodist Church, Mt Zion Baptist Church, Alexander Chapel, Mt. Olive Baptist Church and Faith Temple. Those were the five or so main churches in town. Now there were a lot of other churches in the community and right now in Bartow County—and I'm talking about the African-American churches—there are somewhere close to, there's about thirty to thirty-five African-American churches in Cartersville and Bartow County.

MM: What types of things are preached about in the church?

RB: Well, church is different in the black community than it is in other communities. The preachers were also political leaders in the community and politics and religion are somewhat intertwined. But there were sort of like standard sermons in the black church. Now during slavery, and I mention this only to contrast it and compare it, during slavery blacks could not have church unless a white person was present, that was a legal requirement, and that is there had to be a white person present when blacks had church and he had to make sure that each sermon, a reference was made to that portion of Ecclesiastes which says, "servants, be obedient to your masters". Some of the black churches were started as brush arbors and a brush arbor is people simply meet under a tree and several blacks would steal away on Sundays and have a service under the tree you know, so that they could serve their God in their own way and plus so that they could read the Bible because it was against the law for slaves to read or write. So you can imagine what consequences would have attended a service where a black preacher got up and read from the Bible. It's like, you violated the law reading. So those slaves who

could read would steal away to the brush arbor and that was the beginning of many black churches. But the black churches also served as a meeting place not only for church but social, civic and political activities.

MM: So you would say that the churches did take political stances, or would you just say they just kind of directed their members?

RB: No, they took political stances. That's just the long and the short of it. If you will well remember—no, you can't remember that—but in the '60's during the height of the civil rights movement, all the meetings were taking place in churches; Dr. King delivered most of his speeches in churches and that's why the churches were bombed. Most people who have any inkling of a religion would not fathom a concept of bombing a church. It had become a matter of routine for black churches to be bombed and burned because that's where the meetings were taking place. So the black churches were involved in the political life of the community.

MM: Did you see any changes over the years in attendance in the community church, your church specifically, corresponding with world events?

RB: Well, the attendance would wax unwained. Now, church attendance in the black community is at an all time high. There was something rather unique about the black church at that time in terms of attendance. Churches did not meet every Sunday. You had preachers, most of whom were from out of town. And a preacher would have four churches. One he visited on the first Sunday, second Sunday and third Sunday and fourth Sunday and the members from Mt. Olive, let's say if they had their church on the first Sunday, then second Sunday they would go to Mt. Zion and members from congregations went to various churches as such because you did not have meetings every Sunday at the

churches. And then on the fifth Sunday the churches would have a preachers and deacons union meeting and that's where people from all of the churches came to one church on the fifth Sunday and the afternoon of which they would have a note singing—I know you have no idea what a note singing is but it's all do-re-me-fa-so-la--that was called a note singing and you have various groups of black men and women who would spend the day just singing notes. No words, just notes and just tunes. But that was also part of the corporal life of the community. Most of the ministers were firebrand ministers, you know, they would work up a sweat and there were standard sermons that were preached; there is Joshua fitting the battle of Jericho, that was a sermon; there was the eagle stirring its nest, that was a sermon; there was the dry bones sermon—it's been a long time since I've been involved with some of those kinds of things—and so if you called the preacher and it was, you know, unlike preachers being assigned in some churches, most of the churches in the black community, the congregation would go out and look for a preacher. And when a preacher came you would say, "Well, Reverend So-and-so, we want you to preach the sermon of the dry bones." And if you couldn't preach the sermon of the dry bones, then you were wasting everybody's time. [chuckle] There was standard protocol and procedure and there was a . . . I've always been amazed that you go to a function and if you are the only one of a few African-Americans there, if it's a white function and you're one of the few, they'll ask you to say the prayer. And most of the black men learned to pray in the church because before the actual main service began, we had what was known as the prayer meeting and the prayer meeting involved singing old hymns. "Down by the River Jordan", all of those, "Amazing Grace", these are still standard songs. You could be pretty much assured that one of these songs would

be what they sung and you were expected to know the words. And also deacons learned how to pray then and to pray extemporaneously. But those were some traditions of the community.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

RB: . . . that the church is playing, let me give you an example.

When I left for college and my brother, older brother, he was the first one of my church that even graduated from college--and he graduated from college in 1964--because you have a whole community of maids and janitors and butlers and chauffeurs. I remember when I went to college in 1963 and I remember the deacon—and I mention this just to show the role of the black churches—I remember Deacon Bradley Wise got up in front of the congregation and he says, "Well, you know, Clarence and Jessie's baby boy is going off to college and we know that they need some help." And mind you, that the average person in my community in 1965 made less than $35.00 a week in the black community. And so he says, "They haven't asked for any help but we know that three boys in college, they're going to need some help." And I remember his passing the basket around and people put money in it and then when he counted it all out if was a little over $25.00 and then he took out his handkerchief--and I remember because I kept that handkerchief for a number of years--and he put the money in a handkerchief and tied it in a knot and he handed it to us and he said, "Go out and make us proud." And I put that in my pocket and when I got to college I kept that handkerchief and you know, when times weren't so good in college I'd pull out that little handkerchief and I'd say, "I can't go home because I'd have to pay $25.00." [laughter] But you know, that church invested in me and that

was a lot of money. That was more than, almost more than any person in that church, other than my parents, took home a week for working forty to sixty hours a week. It was less than they took home a week. But they were willing to invest in our future and I'm sure that was not the only church, there were many churches with kids that maids and janitors and butlers were putting kids through college on meager, meager incomes. And you know, I've always been active in my church and took a great amount of pride in it.

MM: Tell me about your college experience.

RB: Oh, it was, of course, that was a time in the 1960's all the colleges were segregated; you couldn't go to the University of Georgia. I was the only black in the law school at the University of Georgia. 600 students, one African-American, you know, in law school. But I had gone to undergraduate school at Tuskegee and my brothers were at Tuskegee, all of us were there together. And once again, life in the black schools, it was a supported environment where people told you could be somebody whether you had an opportunity to be in a leadership position. There were teachers who wanted to see you succeed. There people told you the importance of developing your intellect rather than developing your hands. We would hear it all the way through school to be somebody's maid, butler, chauffeur, brick mason and my dad has brick masonry skills—I have masonry skills because my daddy taught me—but the college days they were wonderful. We belonged to a fraternity and a sorority and education was important; we were told that we were being trained to be leaders and teachers believed we could be leaders. The same teachers who taught us in our classrooms in college we saw at Sunday school at the Chapel, we saw in the evening in Vespers and in the church we interacted with them and many of the

social civic charitable functions and it was a very supportive and cooperative environment.

MM: Okay. Let's go back to Summer Hill school. What were your favorite subjects?

RB: I liked geometry; I was a history buff; I loved French; and I was a student library assistant which meant I spent a lot of time in the library and of course, we didn't have a lot of books that they had over at the white school. I remember Ms. Beasley tells of this often and I didn't think it was that momentous of a decision on my part but I guess it turned out to be: I was also editor of the newspaper, the Slag newspaper which was a school, student library assistant of Georgia newspaper and we were preparing the newspaper and—we called it a newsletter at the time—and we used an old mimeograph machine. I know you have no idea what it is but it's a kind of a roller where it almost looked more like a printing press.

MM: Okay, I do know what you mean.

RB: Yes. It's called a mimeograph machine and they use a stencil, you put the stencil on there, it's coated with some black, gooey, sticky ink and you roll them out one at a time. Well, we had prepared a newspaper and the mimeograph machine broke and I went to Ms. Beasley who was over that and I said, "The mimeograph machine is broken. We have to get the newspaper out tomorrow." She said, "Well, there's nothing we can do." I said, "Well, isn't there one anywhere?" She said, "Yeah, there's one over at Cartersville High!" [chuckle] So unbeknownst to her, I left school and I went to Cartersville High and I just walked in and I said—you can imagine the look on people's faces when a black person other than a janitor came in—and I said, "I came over to use the mimeograph

machine." And there was this silence that fell over the place and I says, "Oh, there it is, right there." [chuckle] So I went over and started . . .

MM: Oh my goodness.

RB: I really didn't think it was that momentous. She said they had a mimeograph machine. I don't think I was that familiar with how deep segregation was and how exclusive it was and the consequences of it because our parents had kept us away from it and protected us and we didn't have that much interaction. And I think when I got back to the school the administration was in an uproar because word had gotten to the superintendent's office that this black kid had come over and used the mimeograph machine.

MM: You were able to finish?

RB: Oh yeah. They just stood there looking at me in shock. [laughter] I mean, nobody knew what to do so I sort of filled that void and did what I wanted to do. And there might have been people and I think there were people and as there have always been in the community who felt that what I was doing was the right thing. I think there were teachers and administrators who said, "Hey, here's a student who's printing out a newspaper; their machine is broken, why shouldn't they use our machine?" And I'd like to think that's why they did nothing because they thought it was . . . but anyway, when I got back to the school the superintendent had been called and the principal of the school and the teacher had been called on the carpet for authorizing me to go over to the school to use the mimeograph machine at a white school. And of course, they had to disclaim it, said they didn't know I had gone, nobody knew—and they didn't. I mean, they didn't authorize it. They just simply planted a seed and said where one is. [chuckle] And of course, they had to assure the administration that they had nothing to do with it, I did it

on my own. But there really were no consequences, I mean; I was not expelled from school or anything of that nature so that's just an example of some of the things that happened. But that was my favorite activity, working with the newspaper and, you know, like other kids, I mean . . .

MM: What other clubs and organizations were you involved in besides Slag?

RB: There was no Future Farmers of America, there was the Boy Scout troop which was attached to the school; there was the Brotherhood Lodge, the junior section which was attached to the school and you paid twenty-five cents a year membership for that; there might have been some other clubs but you wouldn't recognize the names because they don't exist in the schools today.

MM: Now, back to the Brotherhood Lodge, junior section; the Brotherhood Lodge itself, where was it located?

RB: The Brotherhood Lodge was really located right next to the school. You've seen the old Summer Hill school, after the gym burned, there is a building there now, a white, square building, that actually is the Brotherhood Lodge. It had been located on the other side of town but a local industry decided that it needed the property and they just took the property. I'm sure they paid them some compensation but of course, private companies didn't have the right to imminent domain but apparently they had the right to insist—and it was a three story brick building that was about a fourth the size of this judicial building. It was a huge building that had been built by the black community. It was created in the 1880's by Billy Tompkins, and I hate for all these asides to come in but . . .

MM: No, they're wonderful.

RB: Well, what happened, see, after the Civil War, no insurance companies would write insurance policies for African-Americans. We could not get insurance, could not get health insurance. So Ben Tompkins started the Brotherhood Lodge and the Brotherhood lodge was designed to care for sick and shut-ins and the burial of people who died. So if you came into the Brotherhood Lodge you also had to have a skill: you had to be a carpenter or a leather maker, tanner, you had to bring a skill because when somebody died you had to build the coffin, all of those things. And then the Brotherhood Lodge, if you were sick and could not harvest your crop then members of the lodge were responsible for harvesting your crop and taking care of your family during your period of illness or bereavement. And as a member of the Brotherhood Lodge you paid a dollar a year, I believe, that was one of the early fees. And then during the time of your disability the Brotherhood Lodge would pay you maybe a dollar a week and that organization still exists although most of the people have died. I was a member of the junior lodge and they taught you principles, hard-working, law-abiding, God-fearing and self-respecting. Those were the principles they taught. And then also located in the Brotherhood Lodge was the Masonic Lodge and of course, that was sort of like a secret society just as the Masonic Lodge is here today and they provided services for the bereaved. But all those institutions were near the black school and had daily exchanges with the school system. And there were three such lodges in Cartersville. Then there was—there was the Brotherhood Lodge and then my distant cousin Austin Benham in 1896, created another lodge and the name will come to me later on, and then there was the Knights of Pithius which was a black organization and I guess you will enjoy this, the Knights of Pithius was located on Tunnel Street in Cartersville. But there was also a white Knights of

Pithius lodge and the reason you don't hear of the black Knights of Pithius lodge now, the white lodge brought a suit against the black lodge to keep them from using the name, Knights of Pithius. And so the black lodge—and there's still one lodge located in Bartow County in Adairsville, it is now someone's garage but I was very familiar with the history and I acquainted him with the history of what that place was and one of the guys said, "I don't think that that's true. I don't think that there was a Knights of Pithius. The old folks say that that was a KP hall." I said, "What do you think KP stands for? Knights of Pithius." [chuckle] But he had a cousin who lived there that just knew that that had been some sort of organization but had never heard the term Knights of Pithius. That was in Adairsville.

MM: I haven't heard that. Who were your favorite teachers?

RB: Well, I had, of course, I had a love for poetry, I loved it, recited it, memorized it, you name it. But I would say Ms. Louise Beasley, who still lives was one of my—I don't think I was her favorite student because I was not a model of discipline at school to say the least—but Ms. Beasley was a favorite teacher, Robert Cotton was a favorite teacher, Laverta Morgan was a favorite teacher, Ethel Shell, and she just died last year, she was right at ninety and she and I would talk every week. She lived in New York and her husband had been the graduation speaker at my high school graduation who recited from that poem "To strive, to sleep, to find but not to yield." I think that was our theme. Alfred Lloyd Tennyson was who that was taken from. But they were all, you know, just favorite—and my teachers were very supportive when I was in school in spite of my less than stellar conduct. Grades were no a problem for me but good conduct was! [chuckle]

MM: Were you given a lot of homework?

RB: Oh yeah. You had homework, but now all of the students didn't have books, you know because we had hand-me-down books from the white schools and so it was very seldom all of the students had books. There was a lot of memorization, broke memory at that time. Much more so than exists now. But those were my teachers and I had many others, I had many others who backed me. And another teacher of mine was Lindsey McDaniel who lives in Cartersville now and he taught algebra and geometry and I liked those subjects. I don't know why but I did.

MM: What did you do after school?

RB: You mean after the school day?

MM: After the school day.

RB: Well, we all had jobs. You didn't have a lot of leisure activity as such. I usually worked somewhere and, just to give an example, this again is another aside unfortunately. There was a man and I think his name was Charlie Walfort and I guess he was distantly related to me and I didn't know it. But Mr. Walfort had this large pile of bricks that had come from a building that had been torn down and they had mortar on the bricks. And so I would go to Mr. Walfort's after school and clean bricks. I'd take a hammer and a chisel and I would take the mortar off the bricks that had been left when the other building was torn down and then I'd stack the bricks. And he gave me two cents a brick. And especially if there was an athletic event taking place that week and I needed money to go to that because allowances didn't exist during that period of time. Families were surviving. And I remember Mr. Walfort said, "You will get two cents for every brick you clean. You will owe me two cents for every brick you break." [chuckle]

MM: Did you make any money? [chuckle]

RB: Well, if you got a hammer and a chisel, I don't know if you've ever done anything with a brick before, if you make the wrong hit then the brick is going to break. So I broke my share of bricks and he paid me for the two cents for each brick I did and he made a notation, "You owe me two cents for this brick and this brick and this brick." And I worked for him for a period of time, and you know, cleaning bricks and breaking bricks. And I remember when I could no longer work any more, he called me and he said, "Come in here." And he started counting out money to me. And I said, "Mr. Charlie what's this for?" He says, "This is for the bricks you broke." I said, "I thought you said I would owe you." He said, "Son, I wouldn't require you to pay me for accidents you had learning how to pay attention to detail." And he gave me two cents for every brick I had broken and that was quite a few bricks. And I think that is indicative of how a community was supportive of you. They knew that you had to learn certain principles but there were consequences for acts and you had to pay attention to detail but it was taught in a non-punitive fashion. As he gave me the money for the bricks I had broken and he says, "In life, you're going to run into some situation where you're going to have to pay for the bricks you've broken but at this age you don't have to pay for them." And that was the kind of job that I had. And another one, incidentally, was when I worked at Bob Cagle's Barber Shop in Cartersville shining shoes and I have to say for the times in the '50s and '60s, Bob Cagle was a very open-minded person. And I can't say, of course, my job was on weekends, I would have to arrive at the barber shop between four and five in the morning; I lived a mile and a half away and as a ten year old boy there I was walking through the night to get downtown to the barber shop. And of course, I had a set of keys, I opened up the barber shop. You didn't know that a ten year old boy opened the

shop. But a lot of times he would be there shortly after I arrived. I would open up the barber shop and you know, make sure I cleaned it in the afternoon and cleaned it in the morning. The farmers would come to town to, they took their baths in town because many farmers didn't have baths in their places and then I would shine their shoes, or in that instance boots, and on Saturdays people were in town all day long going to what we called the picture show then. And I remember, at that time, my dad was the superintendent of the state park and enjoyed a very nice income and when I say nice income, probably in the '50s was making $50,000.00 a year because we not only ran the park but ran the concession stands. And in those days I was sitting on the shoe shine stand and reading a book on boats and I remember this white guy who came in and was getting his shoes shined and he picked up my book and was looking at it and he said, "Who's book is this?" I said, "That's my book." He said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm looking for a propeller to go on my motorboat." He had this strange look on his face and so when he got up off the stand and he walked over to the owner of the barber shop and he says, "That boy must not be in his right mind, the one who shines shoes. Can you believe he thinks he owns a motorboat?" And I remember Mr. Cagle said, "Not only does he own a motor boat but his family probably could buy your family." And I thought that was a bold statement that he would make, of course, this guy never came back to get his hair cut or his boots . . . and Mr. Cagle came over and put his arms around me and he said, "I'm sorry you have to go through things like that." But he was always supportive and there were a lot of people like that. And sometimes when these stories are told, you never get to focus on the cooperative efforts between the blacks and the whites. There's sort of believed that we were at each other's throats all through

the years and there were instances when that occurred but there were many instances where people acted cooperatively. The reason they didn't act more cooperatively, I believe was due to the fact that segregation was institutionalized by law. All of the black codes were actually laws, as such; they weren't just traditions, those traditions from slavery had been codified into law and therefore the state was a major player in perpetuating segregation and keeping the races apart. And that's why now I believe the state has an affirmative duty to put in place the institutions to correct problems and the state has to realize that what existed for 335 years cannot be cured in 35 years.

MM: Hm-hm. Now, what kind of sports was Summer Hill know for?

RB: Well, Summer Hill had an outstanding basketball team and a football team. They won several state championships, regional championships and we were [chuckle] one of the few schools [unclear], well, that's got a football field too. They had a football field and a gymnasium which was right after African-American schools—many of them simply had a building and most of the schools until '57 or so, most of the black schools were in churches, they weren't even in institutions like this. Cartersville had fourteen church schools, yeah, fourteen church schools and it was in 1954 that the Noble Hill school was built. No, I'm sorry, the Noble Hill school was built in the 1920's or so but actually the Caswell school, black school was only built in 1951. Once again, you see what's happening here is that blacks were responsible for their own education, even though the law had been passed in the 1870's for the Reconstruction Era, requiring the state to provide education but yet that was not done in the African-American community. All of the fourteen schools that were there were church supported or Masonic supported and that is they were either in a Masonic hall or in a church building. That's where classes

were conducted up until 1954 as such. And the teachers, the black teachers were paid about one-half what the white teachers were paid at the same time. And that's the dual system as to what was going on. But I mention that so you can see by comparison why Cartersville was a little ahead of other areas: we had an auditorium, we had a gymnasium and we had a football field. We went to play a school, I want to say it was in Lithonia, Georgia—I don't know why that name, because I played a brief period playing football—

MM: Oh really?

RB: Faded time, I must say. But I remember to run a touchdown you had to run across the railroad tracks. The field was situated like the end zone was a railroad track and in order—because this was just some property that they had that they used, they didn't have a real stadium so this is where the black team played on a field next to a railroad track. And so to run a touchdown you'd run across the railroad track. I mean, there were all of these bizarre things that were going on and our school was not unusual in that it was located next to a trash pile. Many of the black schools were located near trash piles, near railroad tracks. All of these hazards that we would shudder in horror at today were considered good enough for black kids. But those were the two major sports: basketball, football and I do remember when Matthew Hill came, who was on the Cartersville School Board, I remember when they constructed a tennis court and I knew we were uptown then, we were really up . . . Now, you saw the Matthew Hill park there that's on the hill now.

MM: Right.

RB: But at the backend of that, that field was sort of like a dog-leg to the right, back to the right was where the first tennis court was constructed and that whole field--to show you

the commitment to athletics also, and a determination and a perseverance of those people--that hill that you saw there up on top of the hill where some recreation facility is now, and that's where that school was located, on the top of the hill, but you saw something that looked like a stadium there on the side of that hill --

MM: Is that part of Slab Stadium?

RB: No, Slab Stadium was a different area altogether, that's different altogether, that was down on Bartow Street. But the side of that mountain was actually dug out by the students. The state contributed nothing to it. The students and the teachers built their own football field by literally cutting the whole side off of that mountain of Summer Hill and they did it with the help of Mr. Ned Wade who used his team of mules, and I even have the names of the people who did it.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

RB: In Cartersville. Actually then what was known as a drag line bucket to put behind the mule to scoop up dirt off the side of the mountain. Most of it was done with pick and shovel but Mr. Wade—and they made the side of the mountain a level field; that's what you see right there, that field, you see the tennis court and all, that was a side of a mountain. And they actually hued that whole mountain down, pick and shovel and a mule and a drag line bucket, and made that football field and later a tennis court. And I talked to some of the kids who were students and who actually did the digging: Rueben Gabe was one of the guys I talked to. And see, all of this happened before I was even born but my interest in history is such that I will just drag it all out of you. And I just

listened to him talk about going over to the water bucket with a decker, you know, and not only taking a drink but pouring some of the water on his head and he talked about, "I was doing whiskey then." [chuckle] But the kind of things they did at the time. And here were kids who were also students who wanted an athletic field so bad they were willing to cut down a mountain to do it. But those are the kinds of things that I think were very important. And none of those athletes that participated in the games, unlike Cartersville High where there is a recorded history, there is no recorded history, there is no recorded history. There is an effort here in Atlanta to bring back some of the history from Washington High and other high schools here in Atlanta but for those high schools outside the metro area, when segregation ended, all of these records were burned, destroyed or neglected and allowed to rot. And so there are a lot of kids walking around now who had uncles and granddaddies who were great football and basketball stars but there are no trophies to show, there are no medals, there are no certificates of appreciation and there's no recorded history. It is now resigned to the folklore.

MM: Wow. I did not know that about that mountain. That is amazing. What year did you graduate from high school?

RB: 1963.

MM: How would you say education affected your life?

RB: Oh, undoubtedly it made a difference. Had I not received an education I would probably have been shining shoes, being somebody's janitor, being somebody's maid. All of those are wonderful professions; they just would not have sustained me. And so education made all of the difference in the world and it was made possible because I grew up in a supportive community, in a community that believes that I had some worth as an

individual and a community that believed that I was deserving of the exercise of discretion in my favor. In other words, when I did something that was unruly, I had teachers who believed I was salvageable rather than a candidate for juvenile court or a candidate for jail or a candidate for a prison system. And I think that is the problem we face now, unfortunately, as far as many of these young kids—and I've represented defendants for a number of years, you know, I've seen good and bad that comes in black, white, red, yellow and all colors of the rainbow—and for many of the minority kids. Even in our educational system there are too many who believe that they are undeserving of the exercise of discretion in their favor. And that is like choking a baby in the crib.

MM: Now do you feel that you received an equal education to that of white students?

RB: Of course, you have to understand that during that era the drop-out rate was sixty-seven percent. So many southerners did not receive an education. And my first—the reason I'm talking circumspectively is to get to a point—so my first ninth grade class had ninety-nine people in it; my graduating class had thirty-three people in it. Sixty-six and two-thirds of the class dropped out. They dropped out to help support their family. I think that any educational system must be supportive of the students in the system. I think the support I received was far superior to the support that many white kids receive. However, while I got a lot of history, a lot of literature, and did get a chance for a lot of math, I did not get the calculus and the trigonometry and those kinds of things. And while I think that the educational system at that time placed a lot of emphasis on memorization—and I had a wonderful memory at the time—it did not put enough emphasis on analysis, the full analytical tools of pulling apart cause and effect comparison and contrast and definition. They were not clearly delineated during the time

that I was in the education system. I think they are delineated, I hope they're being delineated now as the need for analytical tools . . . but I think it was a good education for that era but that was, I guess business people would call that a manufacturing era where people were taught to work with their hands; this is a knowledge era that is dependent more on analysis and cutting edge technology than existed at that time. So I think the Summer Hill education was a wonderful education and I say that considering the time in which it took place.

MM: Do you feel that there's a place for an all-black school in today's society?

RB: I would not say a place for an all-black school but a school that is racially, culturally and ethnically sensitive which means that it would not be a school that would be good just because you've got black people in there. I think what we yearn for now is an educational system that's innovative and creative and innovation and creativity can best take place when you have a diverse population. So if you have an extremely homogenous population racial-wise then you will deprive yourself of the cross-pollination of ideas and you will deprive yourself of the thinking that comes with diversity and the willingness to give any issue a revolving and charismatic analysis in that you are looking at it in various shades of light and from various angles. And I think there is a desperate need for an educational system that recognizes the need for diversity. Unfortunately, this country seems to be going away from diversity in housing patterns, in educational patterns. I shudder when I travel through some of the towns and I see all of the private schools and I sit here—now this is the state capitol, this is sort of the apex of state government—and I can sit here on any typical day and watch busload after busloads of kids disembark for a view of the capitol and I'm shocked at the lack of diversity. And

I'm troubled by what that means for the future of this state in that when there seems to be a deliberate attempt to thwart diversity in our educational system and I think that is the breeding ground. Let me just give you a perspective: the year was 49 B.C. when two armies took the battlefield. One was the Greek city-state of Athens, the other army was the Persian Empire, and it was the most powerful empire on the face of this globe. The Persian Empire's army at that time—and the battle took place at a place called Marathon—was 30,000 strong. The Greek city-state was 9,000 strong. The Persian army had three of the best generals in the world, the most powerful army in the world, the best archers in the world, the best spear bearers, the best tactations in the world. We're talking almost 2,500 years ago. And the Greek city-state Athens was made up of blacksmiths, carpenters, teachers, lay people. When the smoke cleared this small Greek city-state had defeated the Persian army. The difference was that Athens at that time was one of the most diverse cultures on the face of the globe in terms, not only of culture but race and ethnicity and the Persian army and the Persian empire wanted to bring this small Greek city state to its knees. The Persian army was made up of mercenaries, people who are fighting for money. The Greek city-state was made of ordinary men who were fighting to maintain their freedom. And I think that's the crossroads we're in this country and that is we are engaged in a very serious struggle to determine whether this country will be the leader of the world. It cannot be the leader if it is unwilling to embrace diversity. Athens, say what you want about it in terms of decay later on, Athens was the breeding ground, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Thalamus and Alexander the Great. And Alexander the Great's major general was an African. That isn't even taught in the schools and the impression of this great empire; the Greek city-state is that of all white

males. That was not the Athens that existed but that's the Athens that's taught in our schools now. So students sometimes are taught to believe that it all was accomplished by one race in one way but great progress comes about through diversity and that has to be taught. It has to be embraced and it has to affirmatively put in place if we are to maintain our leadership. And that's my concern and that's the only way I can answer your question as to whether or not we should have all-black schools. We have to have schools that embrace diversity and schools that are supportive. And that was the strength of Summer Hill and that is we didn't have the books, we didn't have the money, we didn't have the physical facility, we didn't have the teachers who had finished from Georgia Tech—they couldn't even get in—but we had teachers who believed in us. And for a child to achieve something people better look up to them, have to believe in them and that, I think, has become a serious problem for us. When you visit the schools and you see a school with a minority population of ten percent and you see an alternative school that's ninety-five percent minority, when you see a faculty that is ninety-five percent white and five percent other races and a student body that's fifty-fifty percent. That's troubling to me and it should be troubling to anyone who lives in this country. Where do the role models come from? You know, one thing—and I ask my son this and I was even troubled when I grew up, all of my teachers lived in my community, I went to teachers that many of my teachers attended. Now my son goes to no church where his teachers attend. Luckily some of the teachers live in my community but most of the kids, especially the minority students in the town, none of their teachers live in their community and they are never visited in their homes. And to any educator that should

send up signals that there is a serious disconnect here and unless we can reconnect then our schools will be breeding grounds for our WDC's , our prisons and what-have-you.

MM: Exactly. Now, how did you feel when your school was destroyed, Summer Hill school?

RB: You mean, when segregation ended?

MM: Right, when they razed the building.

RB: The old Summer Hill building.

MM: Yes.

RB: Of course, I think you might realize that I was one of the Nay Sayers and probably stood in the way of the school getting destroyed for a number of years. [chuckle]

MM: Okay. [chuckle]

RB: I was one who believed that you could take the asbestos out of it and—because I belong to Georgia Preservation and Trust, we don't tear down buildings, we renovate buildings. I had a sort of affinity for that building but I think the problem was not in the destruction; the problem was in the neglect. That building was allowed to sit there for years and I raised the issue with several people over the years. Windows were broken out of that building and nobody repaired them; roofs leaked and nobody patched them. That school had a wonderful cafeteria yet we never used it. That school had an infirmary in it and yet it was never used. And when integration came, a fence was put around that building. It's the only school in the system that had a fence put around it.

MM: My goodness.

RB: And that school had survived for years without a fence but suddenly when integration came, there was this big chain-link fence! And locked gates put around this school and for a number of years that was the only school in the system that had a chain-link fence

around it. But being a historian, I think there is something to be said for the facility as it was. Now, I applaud the effort with regard to the facility in an attempt to reconstruct it, but I do find fault in the conscious neglect of that building by the school system for over a number of years. And I think the attempt was never to integrate that building into the school system. The intent was to allow it to waste away and that is regrettable from an historical standpoint and from a cultural standpoint.

MM: Now, the original school, it burned. Is that correct?

RB: No. That one was destroyed.

MM: That one was destroyed.

RB: And they put in a recreational complex.

MM: Okay, so that's why.

RB: Hm-hm. I think I was in college when I came back and found it. Had I been here I would have raised cane! [laughter] But you know, to me that building speaks volumes. I mean, it was a wooden building, it cost $2,600 to construct, I think I might even have the list—I don't have access to it—of the people who contributed to back to 1923. At one time I had access to it.

MM: If you happen to come across it, would you send it?

RB: Because I've rummaged through hundreds of documents. I know one I saw was the Masonic meeting of 1923 or '24 where they raised money for the construction of that building; and then the minutes from 1946 or '47 where they held a function to buy a bus for the school, which was a Bluebird bus, which was the name of the bus for the school, the Bluebird, they called it the Bluebird after the bus company in Ft. Valley which is the Bluebird bus company and they called the bus the Bluebird because it was a blue bus.

But now, I couldn't help but feel a strong sense of nostalgia to read the minutes from the Masonic lodge of 1946 where somebody made a motion that they contribute $25.00 or something like that to pay toward the purchase of a bus for the Summer Hill school. And you know, when you see that building, I mean, you just, I'd like to talk to some people who happen to be still living that played around that tree. I remember they climbed on it, that they had a swing on it and how many swings did they put up that the teachers tore down, you know, "You can't have a swing at school!" and things like that. Those things mean a lot to me but I can understand why a lot of people say, "What's that got to do with this?" I think that's the investment that you make in school, is that when you can appreciate a history of it and know what went into the making. You were a history major?

MM: Yes.

RB: Okay, well, then I think you know.

MM: Yes, I appreciate everything you're saying. [laughter]

RB: Well, now, my wife says I don't know the difference between appreciating history and living in the past but to me there are a whole lot of things, you know, when I look in that building I remember walking up those steps and a little girl whose name was Annrow Anderson asked me if I would go the eighth grade prom. I know what she was wearing and what I was wearing. But if I don't have that, then I don't have that memory because it has been untimely ripped from the history in a certain way. That's what the buildings mean to me. And of course, I can speak fondly of the new building, I really appreciate that but my blood, sweat and tears were invested in the old building. As you walk by this new building over to the gymnasium which is still there you'll see a little bench that's

there; that was contributed by the class of 1957. But I remember Billy Weems and Betty Terhoon sitting—they were girlfriend and boyfriend—sitting on that bench and having an argument. But now those are the kinds of things—and they were older than me and as a youngster I wondered, "What are they arguing about? What was so important about what was going on there?" But that's what history, that's the baggage that history carries and I think that's important. But now I'm fully supportive of this project.

MM: Were you a history major at Tuskegee?

RB: I was a political science major and sociology minor so I kind of had—and then I was deeply immersed in the humanities. I was in a special, an honors program with a heavy emphasis on humanities.

MM: When did your family get its first television, car, telephone and how did they affect your life?

RB: Well, we had the first television in our community; I remember that very well because we would sort of figure out times when different families of the community could come watch the television.

MM: Oh, how neat.

RB: And then it always appeared to me that my dad and mom were too liberal until, you know, I wanted to have something to say, we've got something that nobody else has but it was as if our TV was the community TV! [laughter] But my parents were always like that; they were reaching out, sharing and caring. And I remember my dad's first car would have been like a 1948 Ford, I believe and this would have been like in the 1950's, I would have been four or five years old. And I know I talk circumspectively and you have to forgive me but I remember that car because of an incident and that is as a

youngster I wanted to sail around the world! I just figured I could sail around the world so I set out to be on the boat to sail around the world and I couldn't have been any more than five or six years old at the time. And my parents were working, my daddy worked for the Gilroy family then working in the yard so he was there and my mom was I think attending beauty culture school in Atlanta. And so I was hammering these nails into, we were building my boat. And I had the worst headache, the worst headache I'd ever had and I went into the bedroom and laid down. And my brother came in, you know, I think I was sweating and he came and he looked at me and he said, "What happened to you?" And I said, "What?" He says, "Look at your face." And I put my hand up to my face, nothing but blood, just clots of blood. And in my enthusiasm--I guess I had tunnel vision or what--in my enthusiasm building that boat I had knocked four holes in my head with the claw end of the handle, you know, just drawing back! [laughter] I had knocked four holes in my head! And so you know, being kids, they were like, if I was five or six that made them seven or eight. So they grabbed up to me and we lived on Summer Hill at the time and they ran me over to my aunt's who lived roughly about a quarter of a mile and I'm just dripping blood, I'm just dripping blood coming out of my head. Well, believe it or not, she wasn't home. [laughter] And you know, we were kids, so they decided to bring me back home. [laughter] And then they realized--the phone was real new—we had a telephone! We had a telephone! So they called my dad at the Gilroy's house and he came home, and I guess—that was a mile away—he came home at such a fast rate of speed, turned into the driveway and knocked the whole front porch off the house! [laughter] So it was a 1951 or '52 Ford because the only picture I have of that car was it sitting there with the whole porch caved in on top of it. And you know, my brothers

forgot about me with four holes in my head and they were like, "See what you made our daddy do! He knocked down the porch!" [laughter]

MM: Oh my goodness!

RB: But anyway, that's what history does. History adds meaning to events because you have tangible objects that you can focus on. And to me, the only reason I remember knocking four holes in my head is I remember the car into whole rubble of wood that my daddy had caused when it knocked down the porch.

MM: Oh goodness. Now, tell me about the years of the civil rights movement and what was your reaction to it when you heard what was going on.

RB: Oh, I was, to say the least, I was elated because I just, I felt the time had come and it's too long getting here and my brothers and I were involved, I was involved more so than my brothers at Tuskegee because I was—I marched with Dr. King in Montgomery, I did voter registration in Selma, even went over to Mississippi to participate in demonstrations. And I remember we came back home, it was not my intent to do so, but we integrated the library. That was the first place we integrated was the library.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 3, SIDE A

RB: that black people couldn't go to. We couldn't use the library and we had established across the street from my granddaddy the Moore library and Ms. Beasley will tell you about Moore Day that is celebrated here but it was Dr. Moore's office on Gideon Street—because Gideon Street no longer exists, it was covered up in the urban renewal movement—but it was the Moore Library and it was a wooden building which was a

World War II building that came from up in Oglethorpe, Georgia near the Tennessee border and they dismantled that and brought it down here and put in a library. I know I'm taking too much time doing this.

MM: No, no, it's wonderful.

RB: And it was supported by the black community and Dr. Moore and the professionals, a few professionals. We had our own library. You can imagine, we didn't have a whole lot of volumes and things of that nature and yet there was the city library that had hundreds of volumes and yet black kids couldn't go. And as soon as integration came, that was the first place I went was to the library and there was a lady—she's dead now—but we used to just remember fondly when I walked in that day. And although she's dead, I think she was happier than I was. Here was an elderly—well, she was middle-aged at that time, a white woman—that knew the system was wrong and knew it was holding people back. And when I walked in I expected all kind of resistance, you know, like, "you know, you got to prove you live in Cartersville, you got to prove this, you got to prove that . . .". I mean, no sooner had I walked up to the desk than she whipped out the little card and said, "This is where you sign, put your name here." I mean, she would have written it for me, I believe, she was just so happy, you know, that blacks were now getting to come to the library because she loves stories, she loved history. And over the years until she died, and at that time the library was located right where the new courthouse is located in Cartersville, but every time I would go in the library anybody could be standing at the desk and she said, "This is when Mr. Benham became the first black person to join the library." And she'd pull out that old, worn registration card and she said, "I registered him, I registered him." It was a sense of pride for her. And there

were a lot of more people like that whose voices were hushed during an era of misdeeds. But up until the time she died, I mean, she lived to see me become a lawyer and then you know, back then it was right next door to the courthouse and it just never failed, for whatever reason she'd pull out that card! "This is. . . ." And those were the kinds of days that made a difference. I'm sorry I don't know how I got off on this last tangent.

MM: No, no, that's fine because you brought up a question I have. I had read that people had to pay a $2.10 fee to the library but yet African-Americans couldn't go in the library yet, they had to pay this fee. Is this true? Do you remember that?

RB: When you say people had to pay . . .

MM: Yes. It was included, what I read, it didn't really specify what it was with but it said everyone had to pay $2.10.

RB: I'm sure that there was some kind of fee that was for support of the library. I don't know what it was but I do know that we couldn't go even if we had the $2.10 we weren't going to be able to go!

MM: I thought it was awful that you had to pay for it but couldn't go in it.

RB: Yeah, those were—and the same thing is true of the taxes, I mean, you didn't get a smaller tax because you were black and there were a lot of things that took place then when you shine the light of history on it, you have to say why did people in positions to make change do nothing? A lot of them were scared and sometimes when you have a very repressive system people know it's wrong and they go along just to get along. And I thought one of the most telling examples of that was that for awhile they were doing photos in World War I and World War II, most strikingly in World War II, of people being drafted by the army and Cartersville had, what, a ten percent black population yet it

represented maybe thirty to forty percent of the people being drafted. And the paper had started initially doing the pictures of the people being drafted to go in the Army. And then I noticed the pictures stopped because the pictures were starting to show here are these people being drafted are going on thirty, forty black men and then here are the people being drafted over here, ten to fifteen white men and then I guess they figured, "This is obvious discrimination so we can't show this in the newspaper." And I chronicled a lot of those kinds of things, you know, just when I was practicing law, just looking at things to see how the system was operating and how people started to cover up what was taking place.

MM: Which newspaper were these in again?

RB: The Cartersville paper. And then I noticed that they would just do the names, no pictures as such. But the numbers were staggering. And it all came to a head during the Vietnam War, and mind you, my family is as patriotic as they come; you know, my dad says, "You will, if called upon, serve your country"—no, it wasn't called upon, we all had to volunteer. My brothers and I all of us, were officers but we volunteered, nobody in our family was drafted. I mean, you go sign up for the Vietnam War or whatever. And in the 1970's when I was back here practicing law I represented a draft dodger as such. And of course, you can imagine how that angered members of my family. Members of my family—and I had two brothers in Vietnam at the time and I was a reserve military officer at the time—and I represented a black guy who was accused of draft evasion who had run away to Canada and they brought him back to try him in federal court for draft evasion. You can imagine he had no friends and everybody was saying, you know, "People laying down their life for the country and here you are running to Canada." And

when I was interviewing him he said something that struck me and he says, “I wasn’t going to die in Vietnam. Only blacks and poor whites die in Vietnam.” And here was a young, black man. And I said, “Oh no, you were drafted like everybody else and you should have served your country.” He said, “No, I was drafted because I was black!” I said, “That can’t be the case.” He said, “That’s why I was drafted.” So I’m a lawyer, you know, my training is you dig. And so I started looking at newspapers beginning with World War I and I was looking at the draftees and then they were putting beside their name “COL” which was colored. And I saw the large numbers, I just started seeing the large numbers and I said, “I know what the population is, why is this so large?” And then I looked at World War II, the Black American Legion was Hail Johnson Morgan, that’s the Black American Legion, people who died. And then the number of people who died in World War II and I don’t know what the exact number was but the black population was ten percent yet the percentage of blacks dying was like thirty percent or thirty-five percent. Something was not right here. Then I looked at the Vietnam statistics at that time; we had fifteen people who died in Vietnam and I think five of which were black, that’s one-third, yet we had the seven percent of the population and one-third of the people who died were minorities. And then I did the unmentionable; I filed a petition in federal court to dismiss the indictment against my client. Of course, you can imagine, the federal judge thought I was crazy. He said, “Bob, dismissed, you need to be pleading guilty! He said “he was apprehended in Canada, he had been drafted, he didn’t show up, he ran, what you mean, dismissed?” [laughter] So in order to have the motion here, I subpoenaed the draft board members and I subpoenaed their records. And it all came out. And, of course, they had a system that hey had to use in terms of how you draft, there’s a

federal system, how you draft. And when I started going down it I said, you know, "John Doe was white, is drafted; and then there is Sam Jones, who's black is drafted; and then there's Freddie James who is black, three or four down. And then I've got all of these white guys here who are subject to draft but weren't drafted and then ten names down I've got this black guy who's drafted, then seven or more eight whites who were not drafted and then another black guy is drafted. Then the system, it was systematic in that instance." And of course, that case was, had to be dismissed. And then there was an article in the Atlanta Constitution about it and in the federal judge's favor, then the federal judge appointed me to represented several other black guys, same story. This was not an isolated but in some instances it was systematic. And of all the people I represent and there were four or five of them, I believe, I'm not sure as to how many there were but it was more than two or three, indictments were dismissed against all of them because of the systematic inclusion of blacks in terms of being drafted.

MM; How did global events, like the Great Depression, Vietnam, World War II, urbanization, affect the community of Summer Hill?

RB: Well, starting at the Depression I can only tell you what my dad would tell me. There was no safety net for the black community with the Depression. He tells me about when they walked up and down the railroad track looking for coal that had fallen off the trains to use for heat; he told me about walking up and down the railroad trains looking for polk salad, I think he calls it--it's a kind of green vegetable that you can cook and I understand it's pretty tasty although I'm not looking for any! --but he told me about being jobless and all of these kinds of things so it was much more devastating here in the black community and several of the black businesses were shut down, at least during that

portion of the economic downturn. Although I didn't live during that period of time, even though my kids think I did, those were devastating to the black community. And when you look at the public relief agencies, no blacks were allowed to work for the public relief agencies and so I think in many instances, and I think you want to know what impact did it have on the black community, if none of your people can work in the system, very few of your people will benefit from the system. And that's what happened. Later in World War II, many people left the South to go North to work in the factories. It was a brain drain on the community because a lot of your talented people had to leave the South and it was not just black, it was blacks and whites. If you thought differently, if you embraced inclusiveness and if you embraced diversity, you had to leave the South. There was just no way you could survive. Even Ms. Henson who worked to integrate things, people considered her less than normal as such. Can I digress just one more minute, this is my last digression. Several years ago we created a little award, the Naomi Henson award, and this was the white woman who helped bring sewer facilities to the black community, running water to the black community. And she was the first person I ever saw actually demonstrating in the '50s and she was demonstrating against the trash pile being next to the black school. She was marching up and down in front of that school, up and down. And she had a little dog with her, she had a little dog with her and she was, you know, saying several things and things like, "This is a shame, these are God's children, why do they have to go to school next to the trash? Why do they have to fight the rats?" And this kind of stuff. And although her husband was a lawyer, the whole town thought that she was not normal for being against things like this. Well, being familiar with her history—and I think it was in the mid-'90s—we had a meeting of

black elected and appointed officials, and so we established a recognition certificate called the Naomi Henson Award for people who have fought for inclusiveness and caring and sharing. At that time I located Ms. Henson's daughter who lived in Falls Church, Virginia and she was in her late eighties. I called her and she said, "I know about you, I keep up with the Cartersville newspaper and I worked in Cartersville for a number of years." And when I said, "We want to create an award in your mama's name for inclusiveness and I wanted to know if it would be all right, would you authorize it." You know, sort of like the release that you did, "If you would authorize us to do this." And there was this long silence and she started crying. Here's an eighty-something year old woman crying and I said, "Well, I really didn't mean to cause a problem." She said, "I'm not crying for that. I'm crying because during my mama's life everybody said she was out of her mind for the things that she did but I remember as a little girl . . .". And I think there were two or three of them, and her mama was from Rome, Georgia, this was not, as some people say, some northern liberal coming down here doing this—she said, "I remember my mama sitting us down and saying, 'We aren't going to make any difference in people because of their color. We're going to treat everybody alike." She said it was her mama and her daddy that believed that and she said all during her childhood, some of the things people called us I can't, you know, because I'm still hurt by the way I was done. She said as a little girl she didn't understand why her mama was doing this. Why couldn't she just leave well enough alone? This was the way it was. Why did it have to be her mama that was marching up and down in front of the school? Why did it have to be her mama that did this? And she said she remembered somebody in the black community's house was burned down where her mama would go and get then and bring

them to their house. And she said she was mortified because other little kids would say, "Why y'all got those so-and-so's living in y'all's house?" And all kinds of things. But it didn't sway her mama, didn't sway her one bit. She just kept on doing. Her mama would go to visit black churches and all of those kinds of things and she said as a little girl she didn't fully understand it. She said, "But her mama was where she was in the 1940's where we haven't gotten to in the 1990's." Her mama believed in treating people equally and fairly and as children they paid a terrible price. The names that people called her, the things the neighbors said, the little jokes the kids would make and things like that. She said it was really hard on them as kids. And you know, she was glad that her mama was finally being recognized after she had died, but it was finally taking place. She just wish somebody would have understood while her mama was living.

MM: Right. Other than Ms. Henson's march, were there any major protests or sit-ins that occurred in Cartersville?

RB: Oh yeah, there were quite a lot.

MM: There were?

RB: They weren't publicized.

MM: That's why I'm asking.

RB: They weren't publicized but there were marches downtown, even in the 1980's there were marches downtown when a young man was killed in a police chase, a black man was killed in a police chase, but there were, in integrating the restaurants, there were incidents, I don't think there many violent incidents; I think the city leaders had the common sense to try to avoid any kind of spectacle that was taking place in other towns. But there were, I think the Tribune is scannable and searchable on the Internet now so

you can—and I don't know the extent to which those back issues are covered but there are still people who know of incidents; there were marches to the high school. I think one person who participated is Weldon Dudley who lives in Kingston now. But Arthur Carter in Cartersville knows about some of those marches. A lot of them took place when I was in college but when we came home we just participated in them. And to give you an example, one of the restaurants in town had the—and this was after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, you know, going to these places was not illegal, they just would not let you in. [laughter]—but I remember we called the state patrol and we were called then and we didn't feel comfortable calling the local police because we figured that was not going to be to our benefit. So we called the state patrol and said, "Look, we're going to go to have dinner at so-and-so restaurant." And the reason this one comes to mind, I had a chance to know that trooper when I was practicing law, I think he's dead now, but I do recall and he was the only one from the state patrol station who would come and he came to the restaurant. First we ordered take-out meals and they were willing to do that. Then we decided well, we're going to go in and sit down and eat. They weren't willing to do that. This trooper came and he says, "It's the law. They've got a right to eat here and I'm here to make sure that the law is enforced." And he and I talked about that for a number of years when I practiced law. And he said, "Well, that was just the right thing to do." And I said, "But for you that was a courageous thing to do because you put your promotion on line, you put your job on line, you put your family's safety on line, you know, my family was used to safety and freedom being put on the line but to step out of your security to do this, that was a bold move." And he said, "Yeah, I had to swallow hard to do it."

MM: Which restaurant was it?

RB: I would prefer not to call it a name because it's still in operation, it's still in operation but the person who runs it was not the proprietor then but you know, that's one thing about history is that you know a lot of the players who are still living. It's not like saying this was a dead person that did this; I know a lot of them who are still living, I know the roles that they played, I know who was the leader of the local Klan, all of those things. These are histories that I guess they would be embarrassing to families now but then they were a badge of pride, being head of the local Ku Klux Klan and all of those kinds of things. But that happens when you shine a light on history that you illuminate good and bad things. But all during this I'm trying to think if there were a lot of cooperative white families over the period of time. And the Civil Right Movement, although it was a movement for freedom for black folks there were a whole lot of people who were freed—Jewish people couldn't belong to the country club and couldn't attend various things, Orientals and, you know, I took a great amount of pride in the fact that when I walk down the street of Cartersville now I see a lot of Latino families, Oriental families, Pacific rim families and everything. During the period of segregation that would not have been possible. Where would they go to school? I mean, We knew we kept blacks out, well what are we going to do with Orientals come and Asians come and Native Americans? Segregation was a high-maintenance institution and it took a lot of resources to maintain it and it crippled us as a section of the country. I wish now when teachers taught about that era there would be less emphasis on the flag—you know, a lot of teachers in the classroom now are engaged in education of denial; there are teachers, and my son will tell you, there were teachers who will say that the Civil War was not about slavery that it was

about economic oppression and all of this. I think my son raised the issue with the teacher that was in not such a pleasant fashion. But there's still the denial, much like the holocaust, like it didn't happened. If it happened it really wasn't that bad and if it was bad it was because the slaves have exaggerated what happened. It was much worse than what anybody can ever, ever imagine. And that's something we're going to have to come to grips with and the Civil Right Era is a step in the direction. And I guess some people ask the question now and I hear it all the time, people will say, "Well, I didn't take part in the discrimination. My grandparents, great-grandparents didn't own any slaves, we didn't discriminate against anybody." And that's a very sanitized view of history. And the question you have to ask is did you benefit from it? Did you enjoy any advantage because of that? And there are very few people who can say that they didn't enjoy an advantage because they got to go to school when other people didn't get a chance to go to school. They got a chance to be a supervisor at Goodyear when the most my daddy could be was a janitor. Didn't make any difference what the talents were. They had a chance to live in Goodyear village for $1.00 a week where my daddy had to pay the market value for a place to live. All of those things that people don't talk about but they received benefits from them. And those are things that we have to come--I guess I don't go to a dinner now where I'm sitting at a table and someone will say, "Well, what do you think of Affirmative Action?" This is like the third or fourth question out and I want to conclude with this because I know we've got—oh, it's going on—one o'clock?! But anyway, I was riding, I think I was going to Boston and I was on the court of appeals and there's this guy who sat down beside me and I happened to have a law book and this guy said, "Is that a law book you've got?" I said, "Yeah, it is." He said, "Well, what do you

do?" I said, "Well, I'm involved in government work." He says, "Well, what do you do for the government?" I said, "I help resolve problems." [laughter] I just didn't think this was going to be a fruit for conversation really and I didn't want to get into it really and he said, "Well, what kind of problems do you resolve?" I said, "Well, court problems." He said, "Well, what do you do with court problems?" I said, "Well, I kind of judge a little." He said, "Oh, you're a judge?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Oh, I've been meaning to talk to one of y'all." Now that is a signal that something bad is about to happen, I tell you. [laughter] Something bad is about to happen! And then he said, "What do you think about this Affirmative Action mess?" Well, that's a signal, that's a signal, when they refer to it, as a label "like this affirmative action mess". I said, "Well, I haven't given much thought to it but apparently you have; what do you think about it?" He said, "Yeah, let me tell you about this. I believe that we ought to all be treated equally in this country. That one person shouldn't have an advantage over . . ."

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 3, SIDE B

RB: . . . there was more to the story. And I said, "You wanted to know what I do for a living, what do you do?" He said, "Oh, I'm a businessman. I just have this wonderful business." I said, "Oh, you come from a long line of business people." He said, "Oh, no, no, we were dirt poor." I said, "Well, you just had an outstanding performance in school?" "No, I wasn't your best student." he said. I said, "Well, how did you become so successful?" He said, "Well, you know, when I came out of school I went into the army and then when I came out of the army I didn't have anything. Then I wanted to get

a job but I couldn't make enough on the postal exam but since I was a veteran I got ten extra points on the postal exam and then I worked there for a while. Then I wanted to buy a house and I didn't have good credit so they weren't going to let me have a house but then since I was a veteran I was able to get a VA loan to buy a house." Then I said, "Well, how did you get to be successful businessman?" He said, "Oh yeah, I didn't have good credit but I went to the bank and they weren't going to let me have money to start a business. But then in the back someone said, 'What a minute, there's this special program, SBA, Small Business Administration, I'll contact them and see what he or she can do.' And he contacted SBA and they gave me a loan and I was able to start a business and I had contacts out at the country club and I've just done well." I said, "That's admirable. It's got to be strange, a person like you who is against affirmative action yet you've had it all of your life." And he looked at me and he opened up his newspaper and he didn't say another word on the whole of the trip to Boston. [laughter] Oh if I let him get off the plane, he couldn't help but hurry up and get out of that place. See, he didn't say, "Glad to meet you, have a good day," I mean, he just couldn't wait to get out of there. See, a lot of people don't see affirmative action as they've gotten it all of their life and yet they just make this judgment, well, I'm against this. And yet, they can't see what benefits have come. And when they talk about, well, I want the playing field to be level but only after they've had a chance to play on the unlevel field. But anyway, that's the . . .

MM: You still live in Cartersville, am I correct?

RB: Yes.

MM: When did you actually leave the Summer Hill community? Was that when you went to school?

RB: No, in fact, I came back to the Summer Hill community and I built a house in the Summer Hill community on Mull Street, the street that comes right out in front of the Summer Hill school, I have a house that's on that street and I built a house, bought property there and built a house and lived there until 1983. Then I had purchased some property out on Old Mill Road and that's where I live now and I've lived there for twenty years or so.

MM: Who is the person that has had the most positive influence on your life?

RB: Well, it was my mama and daddy and my brothers. I know you know I went to Tuskegee and of course, that was found by Booker T. Washington and all of those people and while I admire a lot of them, the Booker T. Washington's, the Thurgood Marshall's, the Harriett Tubman's, the Mary McLeod Bethune's, if I have enjoyed some success it is because I had heroes that were local and tangible. I didn't have a bunch of dead heroes and I think that's what troubles a lot of young people now. People can say, "Well, Martin Luther King did this and Thurgood Marshall did this." Well, to these kids, it's just a bunch of old dead people, you know, and I had a daddy who was in business, who was an executive at an insurance company; I had a mama who owned her own business, was an entrepreneur in her own right; I have a brother who was the first black Eagle Scout in North Georgia, was a full colonel in the Air Force heading up the OSI; and another brother who was an officer in Vietnam, who owned businesses and so, I didn't have to look outside to find heroes. I had a mama and daddy in the home who were blazing trails; I had brothers who were blazing trails and so I just followed suit, you know.

[chuckle] I was just trying to keep up with my own family and I think that's important to have local heroes that are tangible, that you can see real-life people who accomplish things and you can believe that you can accomplish things. I attribute—and I had wonderful teachers, supportive teachers, talented teachers. But the key was to have local heroes that were tangible and it made all the difference.

MM: Now, we talked about Slag Stadium very briefly. It was on Bartow Street?

RB: Yes.

MM: Was that a place that drinking was known to take place or are you aware of any of that?

RB: Was known to take place? It was common knowledge that it took place! [laughter]

MM: [laughter]

RB: I like your diplomatic way of putting that: "Was it a place where drinking was known to take place?" Now, let me tell you, there were several establishments there: there was Paul Thomas's place which was more like a nightclub place; then there was the grocery store which was a regular grocery store; then there was the funeral home there, the Curtis', O.W. Curtis Funeral Home, was there; and behind that was Slab Stadium and Slab Stadium was more of a recreational facility for the community and that's at the intersection of Wykle Street and Bartow Street. Here is an entrepreneur, Paul Thomas, who unfortunately the only reputation he has now is one of stealing liquor. But here was an entrepreneur who thrived in the '40's and '50s; bought a converted, actually what was a cotton field into a stadium for entertainment. And at the time you had the Negro baseball league, I'm not sure you're familiar with that.

MM: No.

RB: But there were about twenty or thirty teams that traveled around the country, black—and this was before blacks got in baseball, before Jackie Robinson, all of those kinds of people—and Paul Thomas brought them to Cartersville which was, you had to be a pretty savvy businessman to bring teams that played in New York and Boston and all of those things. And they sell the shirts now at Underground, I think I bought my son two or three and kind of told him the history of these leagues, and for us that was a fantastic opportunity on Sunday to go down to Slab Stadium. And my uncle played, Uncle Jessie. He was a fantastic hind catcher. But he played and of course, the Cartersville team, they had a team, one team was out at Atco, they had two teams, they had a black team and a white team and the black team was called the Wompus Cats. I've got the black team. And another uncle of mine, Uncle Claude, played and these national teams would come here to play our local guys and I mean, there was such a fantastic turnout at Slab Stadium. What is his name? He was assistant police chief in Rome? Hm. I can see him now. But Rome had a team. But we had Slab Stadium. Teams from Rome would come to Cartersville in the black community; teams from Marietta would come to Cartersville in the black community. I mean, there was a traffic jam on Bartow and Wykle Street. And as kids, we got to see some of these legends. Now I never saw Satchel Page but some of these legends came to Cartersville to play and they came to play because here was a black man in Cartersville who had enough business savvy to build his own stadium. And the reason they call it Slab—I guess you know why it was called Slab Stadium?

MM: Hm-hm.

RB: Because it was made out of slabs, pieces of wood. And here was a black man that had thirty or some odd people working for him in operating the stadium, in operating the club, in operating the butcher shop, in operating the grocery store, operating a restaurant and operating a pharmacy. So Slab Stadium had become the center of the black business community because there in that little area it was . . . you had a doctor and you had all of this stuff. Dr. Moore moved his office adjacent to Slab Stadium. And you had all of these things there. And Paul Thomas gained a reputation as a bootlegger but I think that reputation was undeserved because he was doing nothing more than was being done at the country club every day except at the country club they had slot machines, we didn't have any slot machines! [laughter] And they would raid him periodically and of course, you know, actually the run-ins with the law, and all of them were over alcoholic beverages and basically decimated whatever fortune he had, but I think the real story of Paul Thomas and Slab Stadium is one of a thriving black community that had to reconstitute itself after the businesses were run out of downtown and Paul Thomas led the re-establishment of the black community. And he did it without getting any loans from the bank, without any SBA loans, without any membership in the Chamber of Commerce; he did it by the sweat of his brow. I had the pleasure of seeing him and I did not know him because he died in 1964 or '65 in a car wreck up here on Highway 41 after it had just been four-laned, he died along with Willie Maude. Somehow I feel like I was back there. But you know how his story is told, you know, you kind of bite into it. But he was just a fabulous businessman who accomplished a whole lot. I always said that he provided inspiration for a lot of people to open their own business and Paul was able to make it. His son was in a class with my older brother so that's how I knew more about

him and his son was a graduate of the class of 1959 or '60 of Summer Hill and his nickname—he had a nickname, his name was Shag, that was his nickname. But I think that is a real story of Slab Stadium in that it was the mecca of black business from 1946 till probably 1960 and Paul Thomas was the anchor in that business. Brought a lot of economic dollars to Bartow County and that is when these baseball teams came they spent money in Cartersville stores. They couldn't stay in Cartersville hotels but they had their cars repaired; they bought gas; they did all of these things and Cartersville's black community was a real engine for Cartersville's economy. Summer Hill was a big economic shot in the arm. Every year we held the regional tournament in Cartersville which brought upwards of, I'd say 3,000 to Cartersville who were eating food, buying gas, going to various entertainments, a serious economic shot in the arm and I've always asked, you know, when I talk to the Chamber of the Commerce people, think of how many more dollars they could have brought if they'd been able to stay at the hotels, eat at the restaurants, go to the entertainment centers. And that's the thing we look for now; get these conventions in town so we brought people in, Summer Hill brought people in for the plays at the school, the regional meeting for the, what was it called, the Business League, the Georgia Business League which was a league of all the black businesses, met here in Cartersville back in the 1920's. We also had the regional meeting for the Masonic Lodge, for the Herrings of Jericho, for the Daughters of Isis; all of this came to Cartersville bringing dollars, bringing influence and bringing prestige and it came during an era of blatant segregation. Regional meetings of the Masonic lodge were routinely held here in Cartersville because we had a big Masonic Lodge. Those are the stories that just don't get told. Summer Hill was more than just a school; it was the center of

economic, political, social, educational and civic life and it meant the world to a lot of people. That's why people sort of have that nostalgic look when you mention Summer Hill. They think about it maybe in terms of the basketball game or this but it was more to Summer Hill than just that. And for a community, can you imagine what it's like to have 2,000 or 3,000 come to a community for a regional tournament and a community as small as a black community open up for people to sleep in their houses? I remember when we had seven people staying at our house. Seven people staying in our house! They came to attend the basketball tournament and that's what people in a community; they opened up and they stayed in their house, sort of like having international visitors come and stay with you. That was all a part of the Summer Hill lore, as such.

MM: Well, that is it!

END OF TAPE