

ORAL HISTORY T-0024
INTERVIEW WITH THEODORE MCNEAL
INTERVIEWED BY RICHARD RESH AND FRANKLIN ROTHER
BLACK COMMUNITY LEADERS PROJECT
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RESH: This is another in the series of oral history interviews sponsored by the University of Missouri at St. Louis. My name is Professor Richard Resh; I'm being assisted by Mr. Franklin Rother. Our guest today, July 22, is Mr. Theodore D. McNeal, a court reporter, organizer for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, civil rights advocate, and now state senator. Mr. McNeal, could you begin by telling something about your early life? Are you a of St. Louis?

McNEAL: No, I was born in Helena, Arkansas, November 5, 1905 and remained there until I finished high school at age sixteen. I came to St. Louis in 1921, and St. Louis has been my principal place of residence since that time. My father was a farmer-merchant. I say that because he owned farm land which was the principal source of family income, but he also operated a grocery store in the town of Helena, Arkansas. He was a high school graduate. My mother, I think, reached the tenth grade, and the high school education that I received in Helena, Arkansas is the total of my formal education.

RESH: When you came to St. Louis, in the early 1920's, 1921 I believe you said, what kind of city was it for Negroes? Was it a fairly good place for them or was it merely something slightly better from where they came from?

McNEAL: Well, St. Louis had and still has in my thinking, a definite southern exposure. At the time I came here, it was a typical southern town except for the one fact that there was no segregation on streetcars. It's the only place that Negroes were not segregated.

RESH: When you came here, what did you do first? What was your first line of work?

McNEAL: I first took a job with the CB & Q Railroad on their dining cars and worked with them for about a year...

RESH: That was the Chicago...

McNEAL: Chicago, Burlington and Quincy. After that I secured a job with a brake firm here in St. Louis and stayed with them until 1929 at which time I went on as their sleeping car porter for the Pullman Company. And I worked there until 1937 when the union had been organized, and I was requested by Phil Randolph to come off the job and work for the organization. I been with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters as a full-time employee since 1937.

RESH: Could you tell us something about the working conditions on the trains when you

were a porter?

McNEAL: Well, to begin with, the salary was \$67.00 a month, and the average year of monthly tour of duty encompassed about 400 hours, which was some 85-90 hours a week. The men had to depend largely on tips. The conditions were pretty rough in that anybody who was white could fire anybody who was not white. In other words, a pullman conductor, a brakeman, a train conductor could very easily have a sleeping car porter fired just on the basis of his own complaint. There were no avenues of recourse. This is what brought about the organization of the sleeping car porters union. They had started already before I came aboard. Phil Randolph and his group had started in 1925 trying to organize the union. Pullman of course fired everyone who could be identified with the union as fast as they were identified. So it was not until 1937 that the union was first recognized. So there's a twelve year period in which Pullman fired over a thousand men around the country. He fired thirty-two here in St. Louis in one day for being suspected of being member of the union. It was a pretty rough picture.

RESH: The work of A. Philip Randolph is still largely unacknowledged by historians, largely out of ignorance. Could you tell us something about this very remarkable man? When did you first get to know him? What was he like?

McNEAL: Well, I knew him first in 1930. He's studious, mild sort of person, uses the English language, in my opinion, beautifully, a very persuasive speaker, thoroughly honest, and the type of person under whom I worked from '37 until '68 who never gave me a direct order. He just suggested that he thought that this or that would be the proper thing to do. This is the type of personality, but I think that Phil Randolph has made probably the greatest contribution of any single individual toward human rights in this country for all of the underprivileged, workers, or those who are not white, etc. I think his biggest contribution, his basic contribution was the organization of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters which has been a tool that Negroes and other minorities, and those lower level working people have been able to use since its organization. For instance, after the sleeping car porters were organized, Randolph and that small organization preceded to organize negro dining car workers, we helped to organize hotel workers, organize negro firemen, switch men, this kind of thing. When the Second World War came along, it was the sleeping car porters who organized the March on Washington movement which caused President Roosevelt to issue the order setting up the Fair Employment Practices Commission. Randolph's the man who first used that word, 'fair employment practices', which is a common term now. Following that struggle, Randolph and the Sleeping Car Porters Union financed the fight against Jim Crow in the armed services. This kind of effort over the years has been sort of a trademark of Randolph. I think he's almost totally responsible in the almost successful fight in erasing discrimination in writing in the trade union movement. When we first went into the AF of L, over three- fourths of the unions had color clauses in their constitutions. For several years now, not a single union has had such a clause. This is due, in my thinking, to the constant fight within the labor movement that Randolph put up. He was and is, in my opinion, a great American.

RESH: One of his first ventures before organizing the Brotherhood was as editor of the Messenger, which was a very remarkable paper for its time. The first issue coming out in 1917, and Randolph and his colleague. Chandler Owen were the editors. This journal was

extremely critical of the war, critical of all forms of racism in American life. So were some other negro journals at the time, but the Messenger was noted for its vehemence. In the 1920's it was responsible for conducting, in part anyway, the so-called New Negro movement, the striking posture of quality and dignity. Were you familiar with the Messenger in the early '20's? Did it have much impact on St. Louis?

McNEAL: No, the Messenger was still in existence in 1925. It was the organ of this new union there for a while, but I am familiar with the fact that Randolph's publishing and writing in the Messenger caused him to be branded as the most dangerous negro in America during World War I. And those of us who have been close to him over the years think this is also one of the great contributions he made. It was a radical paper.

RESH: In fact, he went to jail.

McNEAL: He was jailed, yes, for protesting against the war.

RESH: Were you involved. Senator McNeal, in any way with the establishing of the St. Louis American?

McNEAL: No, I was not.

RESH: Because this was one of the, well The negro paper that supported the Brotherhood.

McNEAL: Yes, this is one of the two papers in the whole nation that supported us.

RESH: What was the other one?

McNEAL: The Kansas City Call.

RESH: Really? Do you mean the Chicago Defender didn't support you?

McNEAL: No, The Chicago Defender fought us actively in the organization of sleeping car porters until we, who had helped to build up their national circulation by virtue of going in on our work and to different towns and helping them to introduce the paper. We organized a boycott on them; they had a couple of express cars of Defenders returned, and this is when they got off of our backs. But the Defenders was no big exception. The leading negro papers of the nation, including in St. Louis the St. Louis Argus, the Pittsburg Courier, the Amsterdam News, these were papers that the Pullman Company was able to plant articles against the organization of Pullman porters, and then see that on paydays there were stacks of them and each porter had to take one of these papers before he got his check. And the St. Louis American and the Kansas City Call were the only negro papers that were not opposed to us. In fact the Chicago Tribune in the early '20's in an editorial pointed out to the Chicago Defender that they could afford to oppose the organization of the negro porters, but that they didn't think that the Defender could afford it, because they were shooting for the negro readership.

RESH: In St. Louis the Argus was very critical of the Brotherhood and of Randolph, and in a searing article published I believe around 1928, Randolph attacked the editor of the Argus for his criticisms and noted that the same day the Argus had come out very strongly against the

Brotherhood, they had also carried very large advertisements for the Pullman Company, and stated very boldly that there was a very concrete economic reason for the Argus opposition to the Brotherhood.

McNEAL: I was not, am not familiar with the Argus or any of these papers carrying Pullman ads during those days because negro passengers were not welcome on Pullman cars, but I am familiar with the fact that they did carry as news articles written by Pullman and for which I was told that Pullman paid pretty high rates as advertising, but the articles

were carried as news. RESH: Moving ahead now, during the 1930's, were you involved, or was the Brotherhood involved in any way in various campaigns in Chicago and St. Louis and later in Harlem 'don't buy where you can't work' movement?

McNEAL: The Brotherhood was not officially as an organization involved in this movement in that we played no leadership part. But Phil Randolph was involved in it at the national level. He was traveling constantly across the country, up and down it. He never made a speech in those days when he didn't preach this kind of gospel to negroes. In every city where we had a local, by virtue of Randolph's position and constant mentioning of this idea in our union organ, most of the membership of these locals cooperated with these groups. In St. Louis we had what was known then as the Colored Clerks' Circle.

RESH: Oh, yes. Could you tell us something about that?

McNEAL: It was an organization of negro youngsters who are probably being called 'uncle Toms' now, but these young people set up this organization for the purpose of using economic pressure on merchants in the negro area particularly, to try to force them to hire negro help. The campaign centered along the Franklin Avenue business district which was a very busy area in the negro community. Most of the merchants, in fact all of them, are white. And this organization did succeed after a pretty long and bitter fight in forcing all of these merchants to hire negro clerks.

RESH: Who were some of the St. Louis negroes involved in the Circle movement?

McNEAL: Frank Jones was the head of the movement during that period. Dave Grant who is now with the Board of Aldermen did legal services for them, gratis. I'd say that Grant's activities in this area and later in the 1940's with the NOW caused him to lose his political job here as the assistant circuit attorney. These are two of those I remember who were extremely active.

RESH: After the Depression and the beginning of World War II, the mass movement among negroes which had begun in the '20's and accelerated in the 'thirties, moved out into the famous March on Washington movement which was at the start of 1940 and which resulted in the Executive order, the famous 8802, ordered by Franklin Roosevelt prohibiting discrimination in war industries, St. Louis had an active branch in the March on Washington movement, and you were its director. Could you tell us something about your activities in St. Louis during the Second World War?

McNEAL: It all began with the March to Washington, as I recall, really got off the ground as the national movement in early 1941. At that time I was serving in my union as International

Field Organizer, in which position I did a lot of work in arranging meetings and this kind of thing. At the head was Randolph and M. P. Webster who was our first vice-president at the time. I recall that I had gone to the southeastern part of the country, down Florida, Georgia, etc., to arrange a series of meetings at which they were to speak, and then I proceeded out to Winslow, Arizona to try to organize some chair car people out there on the Santa Fe, and when Randolph and Webster got to Atlanta I believe it was, or Savannah, I don't remember which, they telephoned me out in Arizona and asked me to come back and meet them at New Orleans. Since I had last talked with them, Randolph had dreamed up this idea of a massive march on Washington with ten thousand negroes going down Pennsylvania Avenue. They wanted me to remain behind them in the cities as they proceeded on the tour and try to work up interest, definite interest and try to work up negroes to come to Washington for this demonstration. The idea caught on. President Roosevelt ignored it for a long time. Walter White of the NAACP, Granger of the Urban League, and some other national leaders went in to talk with him about it at the President's invitation, and told him that Randolph was pushing for an Executive order that would end discrimination in the plants that were producing war materials. Roosevelt took the position that he would not do anything with a gun at his head, meaning the pending or threatened march on the nation's capital. But he had the FBI and Army Intelligence check it out. Incidentally, I had two representatives of Army Intelligence who had nothing to do but follow me. Both of them were negroes. They reported that Randolph was wrong when he said ten thousand, they estimated that there would be 50,000 negroes there, and this is when the President issued the Executive order. He named a commission; he named a negro who we thought was a weakling to this commission. We didn't like the white people on it, we didn't trust them.

RESH: The commission had no power of enforcement. It was under-financed by Congress.

McNEAL: That's true. Anyway, Randolph advised the President of this and told him we were going to march anyway unless he put some people who were interested in human rights on the commission. This finally resulted in the President issuing the Executive order 8803 under which he placed M. P. Webster on the commission and another person in whom we had some confidence. We had not attempted in that year, '41, to organize local units of the MOW, but it was getting so few results that by the beginning of '42, the decision had been made by Phil Randolph who had to have the local groups to support the national demands. That's when we started to set up local units around the country. We set up a unit here' in St. Louis, and as I recall, we started out by placing ads in the Sunday Post and the Sunday Globe, the wording of which we had great difficulty in selling the people in the advertising department. I think I got a copy of that ad here. They finally agreed to let us run it headed "Negroes of St. Louis, Get Hired, Not Fired." "Join the effort to win your rightful jobs in the local war industries. Register in room 412, People's Finance Building." This was news, so the two papers in which we ran it for two, three days, plus the Star Times which was still in business at that time ran front page stories on it which gave us a lot of free advertising. We didn't have a lot of difficulty in contacting the people in the negro community. We very quickly got off the ground with a couple thousand members and finally built the membership here up to around twelve thousand. We charged ten cents a year, we were not trying to raise money through the membership. We wanted the people committed, and each person signed a pledge to support the program. From that beginning, we started contacting war plants, public utilities, etc. asking for conferences. They were granted, we went in, but none of them would agree to integrate negroes in their forces. We'd follow up these unsuccessful conferences with public

demonstrations which we held at places like Bell Telephone, Laclede Gas, Union Electric, the local bullet plant out on Goodfellow, the torpedo plant down in South St. Louis, the TNT plant at Weldon, this kind of thing.

RESH: In those marches on the plants which were peaceful, were you harassed at all by white men?

McNEAL: The only harassment we had was when Russia became involved in the war, former friends in the Communist Party went against us over night. They sought to discourage demonstrations like the one at the war plant, put out leaflets that there would be violence out there and this kind of thing. But we had no harassment from the police or from the white community as such, our marches and demonstrations were peaceful, not a single person was injured over the years, not a single person was arrested. There was no property damage. In fact the Federal authorities seemed to be more concerned than anybody. They were in constant touch, and we were under constant surveillance. On the night we held a mass meeting at Kiel Auditorium at which the different newspapers estimated the attendance to be between 9,000 and 11,000, I think we had about 10,000 people there, the place was surrounded by troops from Jefferson Barracks, and there was absolutely no trouble at all. But this is the kind of thinking that the Federal authorities had at that time apparently, troops and trucks all around the building. We had no difficulty and no violence. We notified the police department before every demonstration in writing, told them we were going to obey the law and to furnish whatever members of the police force they thought would help keep order among those who were not a part of us. They were always there but they had nothing to do. The citizens of St. Louis didn't molest us, and certainly we didn't violate any law. We did get results. Newspapers here credit this organization with having secured fifteen thousand new jobs in areas that negroes had not been in before in St. Louis.

RESH: And the FEPC came here and held here in St. Louis, that was later in the war, I believe.

McNEAL: Yes, finally we had a fight then with Olin Industries at Alton where they were discriminating against negroes. We had gotten negroes integrated into the plant they operated here in St. Louis, but the home-base plant in Alton was still blatant in discrimination. FEPC finally came in and held hearings in that situation. But those-of who were involved think that it was worth the effort. We finally disbanded the MOW in late '44, as I recall, or early '45 because the war period had passed. We thought that the technique that had been so successful for us had been outmoded, so then we sought to strengthen the local branch of the NAACP. We put on a campaign to elect Dave Grant as president of NAACP. Some of the others of us took offices in it with the intent of using that as the on-going instrument in the fight.

RESH: Aside from the enormous problems in discriminations in employment, negroes in St. Louis also faced the humiliation of not being able to eat at almost any restaurant or cafeterias downtown. The March on Washington movement, I understand, was active in trying to change this. Some of the first sit-ins which became such a popular part of the vocabulary of the '60's actually took place in this period.

McNEAL: Well, the first sit-in that I am actually conscious of occurred here in St. Louis in June, July of 1944, and the March on Washington and I have been given credit that we are

not entitled to in this, in that this campaign had been organized, that is the campaign against the downtown department store restaurant, had been organized by a group of negro women who had a few white women with them, and the department stores paid very little attention to them at first, but when they started talking about coming into the stores and occupying seats in these department store restaurants, the department stores started taking steps against them. Two women, I only remember the name of one, Mrs. Pearl Maddox, was head of this organization. As I recall she was a widow who owned three or four pieces of property here in the negro area but which had mortgages on it, and the other woman was in a similar situation. When they started talking publicly about what they would do, the banks, the downtown banks that held the mortgages on their property, called them in and told them if they didn't shut up, they would foreclose on their mortgages. This caused them to come to me. As head of MOW, March on Washington, and asked if I would take the public posture of directing this effort which I readily agreed to do, but the organization had been by these women, black and white. And so I merely carried out plans that these women had made and permitted myself to be photographed and voted as the person who was directing it. It was not really a March on Washington project, nor a project headed by McNeal. The women were still calling the shots, but we did proceed working with these women to (END SIDE ONE). As I was saying, we worked with these women to the extent that we organized demonstrations at the same day and hour in each of the three large downtown department stores in their main restaurants where groups of negro and white women went in and sat down and were refused services largely, and the result was that all of these restaurants were closed each time that we did this. Finally it resulted in one, well, two of these stores were owned by people of the Jewish faith. Famous and Stix, and Scruggs, Vandervoorts and Barney was owned by people who were Christians. The Christian element, through the efforts of Bishop Scarlett, the ownership rather, opened one of their restaurants, the basement, I believe. The Jewish owned stores, seeing the possibility of this becoming an anti-Semite situation brought in a publicist by the name of Ed Bernays from New York, I believe.

RESH: Nephew of Sigmund Freud.

McNEAL: That's right, it was the first thing he told them when he got here. But anyway, with working with the MOW and the stores, they worked out an elaborate plan for integrating their eating facilities. It looked alright on paper, but it finally developed that they were really intending to buy us out. They offered us money, \$100,000 for other projects that we might be interested in. When I saw these signs developing, we withdrew from the negotiations with I think that this was the beginning of the fight for public accommodations here in St. Louis, and for which I take no credit. These women really did the work.

RESH: There were no incidents to mark any of those demonstration either? McNEAL: No, most of the white customers were a little bit surprised. We passed out leaflets in each instance to the people who came into the store and came out explaining what the situation was. I was surprised with the actual belief that many of these white customers didn't know that we couldn't eat there. It never occurred to them that some of the customers couldn't use the eating facilities. There were others who were opposed to it. There was no bodily contact between us and these people. There were remarks; we were prepared to keep our mouths shut about. Ours was a non-violent technique, so we were prepared mentally to take any remarks anybody made. There were not too many of that kind of thing.

RESH: World War II produced two very incendiary situations, the race riot in Detroit in June of 1943, and a riot in Harlem in August in 1943. St. Louis avoided such incidents. Could this be due to the fact that an inter-racial committee had been established in the summer of 1943? Originally it had been the idea of Mayor William Becker who died in a plane crash, and his successor. Mayor Kaufmann seems to have implemented it. It was a rather large committee in its total membership. In fact I saw a list of how many people were involved, and I was wondering how in the world, if all the members came, they could conduct any business at all. I mean, it was something like fifty or forty people. You were on this committee, that's the reason I asked the question.

McNEAL: I think the existence of this committee did no harm. I don't know how much good it did, but my recollection is that through the efforts made by the black community itself, most negroes in St. Louis had some rays of hope. We were seeing some results here and I would think that this probably had more effect on avoiding violence than did the mayor's committee. I was not aware that Mayor Becker had anything to do with this. I remember very well the Sunday afternoon on which he was killed in a glider. He and two other people told me that they would personally see that I would be drafted into the army despite the fact that I met every qualification for exemption, including age. All three of them fell in that glider. I didn't shed many tears in view of the things they had been telling me. But I am surprised to know that he had thought up the idea of an inter-racial committee.

RESH: One person we interviewed, who will remain nameless, suggested this or implied it. I'm glad to have another viewpoint.

McNEAL: I just don't know.

RESH: I do know from reading the papers in the period, that there was pressure on him to form such a committee, and that he had resisted.

McNEAL: I frankly don't know, but I do know that he was one of the three people including the local head of the FBI who were pressuring my draft board. They were pressuring them into reclassify me, put the greatest possible pressure on the appeals board, and finally I had to go all the way to Hersey to get what I thought was justice in the situation. I was ordered to Jefferson Barracks and decided that I was not going. I regretted that about 7 o'clock the next morning. I was due at Jefferson Barracks at 6 a.m., after talking with some of my fellow officers at the MOW, I talked myself into not going which I thought was a mistake when I woke up at 7 o'clock the next morning. But before they could pick me up, I had a letter from Hersey the same day saying that I should not go. I still think that if I had gone down at 6 o'clock, I would have been a big fat soldier.

RESH: Well, Senator McNeal, I want to thank you for sharing your reminiscences with us. I think these recollections show that long before some of the younger people were involved in the movement in the 1960's and the 1970's, there were many negroes on the state and the national level 'fighting the good fight', and I think you've helped us with your reminiscences to recapture and preserve an important part of black history.

Thank you very much.

McNEAL: You're very welcome.