

ORAL HISTORY T-0028
INTERVIEW WITH MRS. JESSE ABINGTON
INTERVIEWED BY DR. RICHARD RESH AND FRANKLIN ROTHER
BLACK COMMUNITY LEADERS PROJECT
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This is the third in our series of oral interviews sponsored by the University of Missouri at St. Louis, the Department of History. My name is Professor Richard Resh and with the assistance of Franklin Rother, we are interviewing this morning, June 18, 1970, at the Herbert Hoover Boys' Club, Mrs. Jesse Abington. Mrs. Abington is a prominent social worker and school official in St. Louis and this morning she has agreed to share with us some of her reminiscences.

RESH: Mrs. Abington, where were you born and educated?

ABINGTON: I was born in Jeffersonville, Indiana, which is in the southern part of the state, right across from Louisville, Kentucky, on the Ohio River. I'm the seventh of eight children. I had two brothers, one older and one younger, both deceased; and there are four living members of my family living, including myself. I lost my mother and father, and we lived in what you would call rural Indiana. We lived, I was born, that was called the Clark County seat. But we lived practically five miles from Jeffersonville. I lived in a small place called Cupsville. C-U-P-S-V-I-L-L-E, with a population of about 1500, of 5800 and many of German Background.

My father had many problems, mainly supporting a large family like this. He was sort of a self-styled educated man. We really didn't know any of his relatives except my grandmother, Grandmother Dudley. And his sister. But his own grandparents and all, I doubt very much if he had much experience with them because he never taught us very much about them. He was quite a spokesman and was one of the early Negroes who migrated to the Democratic party and with a great deal of chagrin of the people in our environment, especially the Negro group, of which there were just about 21 families. And at one point, I think, my father had thought it might have been healthier to have left that part of the state because it was unthinkable that you were not a Republican in that day. I really can't tell you my father's date of birth but my mother was born in 1869. So if she were living she would be one hundred and almost one year old. I think her birthday was in January. And she was taken in an auto accident in Indianapolis in 1925. Shortly after I graduated from Shortridge High School.

RESH: What was your father's occupation? What did he do?

ABINGTON: Well, I think my father primarily worked around places like manufacturing plants, but not very steady work)and then I think to help people out in doing different kinds of farm work in the area. We had a nice size, what you call a truck farm. Didn't sell much of the produce but we had enough to really keep the family going. And I would say the thing

that might, if I look back on my own childhood, that might characterize the period that I came up in as a small child as being almost what you call survival society then. And really as much as we speak of poverty in the United States today, very few people are really threatened with out and out starvation. But pre-dating the Social Security Act and the Welfare program and all of this, families like mine had to give a great deal of attention to just pure survival by raising your own food and seeing that it's properly stored and prepared for the winter. And it meant that there was a great deal more dependence on I think this is probably one of the differences in American society today and when I came up; that it was unthinkable to be out of harmony with people that you had to be dependent upon in some way or the other, either to come to your aid if you were ill, or to share some of the things. Our Christmases were really a ritual around my house because we made great preparation for cake baking and wine making and all of this. So not only the family could have this celebration and be able to partake of their own efforts, but to invite, this is one time of year that people assembled house to house and shared what they had, had prepared and put aside and really made sacrifices to have. And this was one of the joys of my childhood. I think we were financially we were considered very poor--but we never were taught that we didn't have, you know. There was always something at our fingertips if we were willing to make a little investment in it. So that this is one of the differences I think--it depends on your feeling about yourself, and your minority identification has a great deal to do with the kinds of families you came from--the part of the country, the integration you had in your own community, the recognition that your family had for its efforts and its participation and this is why I think, I don't feel perhaps as deprived as a person but financially we were very deprived as a family, I dare s there wouldn't be anybody one's neighbor although they may live a mile away. poorer than we were financially in the state on Indiana.

ROTHER: Was this group of black families in your area, were they,

ABINGTON: Well, no, we were spread out very much. Cupsville is sort of, if I call the geographicals I could get, it's out from Jeffersonville and Jeffersonville is out from New Albany which is off of what we used to call the "Big Eddy of Ohio." And I would s}4 that we were so dispersed that we were really closest, our closest friends and families were the Engrans and they were Germans. As little children we were picked up by Consolidated Bus. First we walked a great distance to schools and then we came into a, when we were living in Jeffersonville proper we went to schools, and they were primarily in what you call a Negro neighborhood. But the state didn't have segregated as such in the statutes that you had to be black just to go to this kind of school. But if you lived in certain areas that you would go to this school where there would be more Negro children. But as a child coming up, I don't think that I developed the kind of racial identification that, you know, we were in contact with different kinds of people so we were just sort of part of the total picture rather than just a small minority. And this might be different from someone else who had no other kind of contacts at all except their own minority group, whether it be Catholic or anything else. My father was a Methodist and we all grew up to be Episcopalians, all of my family are, but my mother was not. I try sometimes to really recapture and relive some of our childhood days because we all worked very hard. I remember when I was, and then I didn't work as hard as my sisters because I was the youngest and was sort of protected. But I can remember we always scrubbed everything and my sisters, we papered the kitchen every Friday with newspapers and we had red and white, and blue and white checked table cloths on the table and my mother was quite a stickler for cleanliness, she always had to have everything quite

scrubbed. And we had chickens and we didn't have cattle. My mother would go to Kamer's which was quite a distance from our house and buy skim milk by the five gallon cans. And sometimes she'd bring back a bag of candy and I don't know whether this was some they bought this on credit and when you paid the bill you got a bonus of a box or bag of candy or not, but we would have, she'd bring a bag of candy. But the things that were so small that gave us joy, I think children miss today. The very small little tokens, you know, small tokens of...

RESH: So apparently there was none of that sense of fragmentation that a lot of modern urban families feel?

ABINGTON: Well, I can't know whether my sisters, and if my brothers were living, would have the same impressions of their childhood that I would, but...We moved away from the southern part of the state of Indiana when I was just eight and a half years old. My parents were separated at that time and my mother moved us to Indianapolis and my older sister had already gone, she was married there, and she helped us to find a place in the northeast section of the city. And so, of course then I came up more as a city child after between eight and nine years old. And my experiences probably there in the rural part of Indiana where we lived and reminiscences might be quite different from my sister who lives in Bloomington and I think would be 74, 75 years old. Now she might say it was very much harder to live even then when I came along, you see. Because we really had to make good on the sunshine to see that all the crops were harvested and things were properly, potatoes were all wrapped in newspaper and stored in the cellar, and that the cellar steps were scrubbed every day and this kind of thing. And education was emphasized, that you know, that you must try to get as many skills as you can. We were never taught that you really should expect someone else will help you, but my mother would always say you need to get as much, they referred to it as "book learning," my father referred to it as "book learning." I don't have as many reminiscences of my father as I do of my mother. And we brought him, he died in another part of the state and I'm trying to remember because this would be before 19, this would be about 1930 or '31.

RESH: How old were you then?

ABINGTON: I was born in '7, I was born July the 4th, well, between the 3rd and the 4th, and then I sent back to get my birth certificate when I went, came to Louisville to teach and interestingly enough, my sister who's older than I am has a birth certificate from the Vital Statistics Bureau of Clark County in Indiana, but the year I was born they didn't count the babies, so I had to have the Department of Commerce in Washington to check the closest census to my birth, which was 1913, and my sisters then, we were living in Indianapolis, and they had given certain information when my mother was not available when the census taker came. So that's the way I got my, the closest idea to my own birthdate. But she has her birth certificate and she's much older than I am. So it must have been an off and on kind of an arrangement.

RESH: When did you start making career plans, in high school? Did you decide what you wanted to be when you were in high school?

ABINGTON: Well, I went to School Number 26 when I moved to Indianapolis We lived two

places the whole time I was in Indianapolis. We were never much of a migratory family. If we could find something we liked, my family was very inclined to settle down. And we moved there where my sister helped us to find a house because we were just coming to the community of Indianapolis. And this seemed to us, my brother Bob and I, like a very big city. We had been across the river several times to Louisville, Kentucky, as children, but not nearly as often as you would imagine. Because then it was just really an experience to get to go, and I remember just knowing, hearing Stuart Dry Goods Company, it's a very large store now, and this seemed to be a very far away place. Childhood, my childhood I would say was sort of living on super, I didn't register things so deeply until I was about 13. And I can't really say that you set out to say, "I want to be a nurse," or a teacher or a doctor. My second oldest sister had gone to Indiana State Teacher's. College at Terre Haute, Indiana, with a great deal of pooling of the family resources, so that everybody was in the act, helping to get things together. And she is quite a bright person, she still substitute teaches in Gar public schools at her age, and I know she's over 70. And this seemed to be something very big, that's my second sister, that she was going off in those days which must have been, I place, she will not say, she's very age conscious, but I would place it about 1912. And she's going off to school to get her degree in teaching which she did. And returned in the small area there in the southern part. And this was looked upon as a real accomplishment. We have her picture le-long white dress when she finished from the local high school with a long braid down her back and a big white bow. And this was kind of a cherished picture, it was something that the rest of us wanted to have, something like this. So I can't say that there was definitely a career planning, but it was more an idea that you shouldn't quit school and you should go on.

ROTHER: So your sister influenced you.

ABINGTON: Yes, my oldest sister, or my mother talked it. And my father was a very interesting person, he had a little alcoholic problem, but he was a man who read a great deal and he had a real gift of expressing his own feelings, and this is when he decided it might be time to switch to the Democratic Party, way back when. I think some of my neighbors would sort of see him as an amateur William Cullen Bryant, he had a good deal of speech-making he would do. I don't remember my father going to church, but we didn't live near church either. And we had a very tiny little church called Bethel Methodist Church in Jeffersonville, not very far from the river. And we went there. And we identified with, this was a Negro church we identified with some people that every year when I was teaching in Louisville I would sort of see if some of them were still on that side of the river. And we had some wonderful teachers. I remember a Mr. Oglesby and Mrs. Wolfolk and some of these people that I think had real inflame in not only my life as a youngster coming up, but my sisters and my brothers too. I don't think that I really had thought I was going to be a school teacher even when I entered Shortridge, we didn't have the definitive counseling type thing. But I finished Shortridge in three years without any summer school.

ROTHER: Now that's college or high school?

ABINGTON: That's Shortridge High School. It's one of the really fine and old schools in this part of the country.

ROTHER: That was in Indianapolis?

ABINGTON: Indianapolis, Indiana. And my nephews and all have, my other relatives have finished, my brother and all have finished, that same high school. And if you read, it's a very fine school. It's a highly integrated school. There were about 700, I think, in my class. I still have my annual and all the class day pictures and everything. And that was in 1925.... I get them out and look at them. And Mr. Buck the principal was there for a long time and I used to go back in the summer, even when I was teaching in North Carolina and it was...

RESH: That was an integrated high school?

ABINGOTN: A very integrated high school, yes, all integrated.

ROTHER: Was that unusual in Indianapolis?

ABINGTON: No, Indiana didn't have the segregated school system. So the segregation by and large was on the basis of where you lived more than what school you go to. I think maybe we could have gone to some other schools in the small town there in southern Indiana, but we didn't. And in Indianapolis, now my nephew went to 40, he's an adopted child and my niece and her husband adopted him, they lived in another part of the city in Indianapolis, and he went to an all integrated grade school, depending on...But I lived in the Northeastern part of the city and it was more in the neighborhood of a Negro community. And I don't know whether I don't remember any white students begin at School Number 26 where I graduated from the eighth, you know completed the eighth grade. There may have been. Because as I say, what's very hard for me now and I think many in my own race don't recognize this or have sympathy for) it is that I'm just a person that I'm not very race-conscious of people, I tend to take people more or less on my relationships with them, individual relationships. And I'm not as likely to look under that to see really whether you're discriminating or, I have been terribly discriminated against when I was teaching South with Jim Crow trains and everything. And I've been pretty vocal about it, in fact I was segregated in a bus going to make a little talk at Frankfort 'Kentucky, one time, and I was quite abused by the operator of the bus and I brought suit against the company with the help of one of the local lawyers in Louisville. And I worked very hard in the NAACP.

RESH: When was that?

ABINGTON: That would be, let's see, I left Louisville in '42 so that would be about '39, 1939. And then the reason I filed, became the plaintiff in the suit to equalize teachers' salaries in the city of Louisville because they had the Negro schools classified as B and the white, schools except one classified as A. And I was very active with the NAACP and tie NAACP is the one that brought, is the organization that brought the suit And we carried the proceedings of this suit quietly for two years before it reached the papers and then we won an unanimous decision in the Federal District Court there at which time the teachers got something like an upgrading of maybe five hundred thousand, a half a million dollars or something distributed among the teachers. And...

RESH: What year was that?

ABINGTON: That was in, now let me see, I should know this very well, that, because I have a whole large scrapbook, it was carried in the Courier Journal papers, it was the second or

third case of its kind in the country. I think the first was started, the NAACP was successful in bringing the first case to the courts and that was in Baltimore or somewhere in Maryland. And then, I believe, there was a case in Virginia, and then ours was the third. And interestingly enough, I lived with a physician and his wife in Louisville, and I went there in '31 and this was about '40 because I went back and worked after that, everyone was sure I would lose my job, but the school board did not request my resignation. I went back and worked really until '43 when I left of my own volition because my husband was in the Coast Guard and he was in this area and I had been sort of travelling back and forth and so I decided that I would come and things were a little bit sensitive and I wanted to be a little nearer. And so we were very, very successful with the case, it was very well done. Thurgood Marshall and a young man who I had very close contact with, Thurgood came down, and a young man named Prentice Thomas who was a labor lawyer and has since deceased. But they were the two main lawyers aid with a lawyer who was with our and who has also has died since, and that was Mr. Richardson, I forget the first name, they used to call him Doug Richardson.

RESH: I wonder if we could back up just a little bit and get you in college. Where did you go to college?

ABINGTON: Well, I graduated from high school and then my mother had planned to go to school, to go with me, you know and work wherever I was, but I lost my mother in 1925. I graduated in June and my mother was run down by a car on the streets in Indianapolis, Capital Avenue, and was killed. And my sister was terribly injured and they were crossing the street. And that changed my plans, but my family got together again, as I said, we always rallied around each others' efforts and plans. Aid I went, my first year, to Ypsilanti, Michigan, to what is now Eastern Michigan University. And interestingly enough, after I got there I decided that perhaps instead of going into the straight Liberal Arts course with a specialty in Physical Ed, but a minor in English. And so then I taught, after I graduated from Eastern Michigan University, I was then having to go to work, in fact I worked in between in the summer, and I worked in the winter with different kinds of jobs though the Dean's Office. Because then I had lost my mother and my father was gone and my sisters had families and wherein they made clothing and sent me money here and there, I had to get scholarships and this kind of thing. But the interesting thing about it, it never occurred to me I couldn't, you know I always say that most of the things that I personally had worked, gone out to do in my own life I got them, now whether I put unusual kind, maybe I took for granted I was going to get them. But I finished, and I then taught physical education for quite a long while. My first job was in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and the interesting thing, that's now one place I do feel that there's still a great deal of discrimination on the basis of race. And perhaps race alone, is, in the matter of getting jobs in the integrated community for the teacher, where the children might be in integrated schools because as I look back on it, I don't recall having one Negro teacher at Shortridge High School ever.

And then the Negro parents later on, after I'd finished Shortridge, went to the Board of Education and asked for another type of school and they set up Crispus Atticus which is in the Negro community, a high school. There were some white teachers, I understand, but it was a practically all Negro faculty. Their petition for this school was on the basis that if their daughters graduated and their sons graduated and if they were in the education field, they could not find jobs in the integrated schools with the integrated faculty. And so I do feel that this still--it does persist, and I think something is radically wrong with it because when I left

there, you see to Indianapolis, I went way in the Deep South to work, and whom did I meet there? I met people like Benjamin O. Davis, Junior's present wife Agatha Scott from Connecticut who had come down from the Shenandoah Valley to teach in the South, all those girls from the Eastern seacoast that had to out of their home environments to find a pittance of a job because I think my first check in those days was seventy five dollars and that seemed like a fortune, you know? I was so shocked and so surprised to have all this money that I called my sisters and asked them could I buy a car? This was with my first check. I think I had to pay twenty-five dollars of it for the room and board, or thirty-five, and that left me all that money. And you know, this was--this never happened in school because I worked very hard and had very little left over. Here I had this kind of money and it just seemed like to me hundreds of dollars. I can understand how young people, when they earn their first salaries, how they really don't know what to buy first because it's the one feeling of emancipation that now you're economically solvent and so my sisters were aghast, they said, "Car!" That's the last thing you need!" So, I didn't have a car until after I had taught many, many, many years. Why, I didn't own a car almost until I married, and I was 32 years old when I married. I was carless, I rode on the busses and with other people. But after I left North Carolina, I stayed in North Carolina three and a half years and came home at Christmas time and happened to make contact with a teacher whom I had known was in Louisville who said there was a vacancy in one of the junior high schools in their junior high school system. They had the six-three-three plan there. And would I please apply? So I had, I don't remember, I think I had to go back because I had commitments and you have to give thirty days notice or something. But that's when I started in Louisville, in 1931. I taught more then. I taught also Physical Education there, and I taught some other subjects, too, in science and English. I left there when I married in 1938 and planned to give up teaching for a while, but they asked me to come back, and of course, it was around that time that we were having this law suit anyway, so I stayed there and I finally left of my own volition with, I think, a great deal of goodwill particularly from the teachers. And then there was a sexual difference, sex differential among salaries. So the white teachers then brought suit because they were discriminated against as women and so the Negro woman got not only the inequity removed from salaries, she also got it for being a woman. So she really got more money in the end. And it was a very interesting experience going through that whole procedure of the law suit. I learned a great deal of how this is done, and the secrecy, of course, is the very crux of the whole matter. In fact, no one knew in the place where I lived until it came out in the Globe, in the Courier-Journal, morning paper, that I was the plaintiff. And people I worked with and rode in their cars, in car pools every day, and it was a very interesting thing. And when I left there, I came to St. Louis.

RESH: This was in 1943?

ABINGTON: Yes, '43. My husband was in the United States Coast Guard.

RESH: Mrs. Abington, you came to St. Louis in 1943 during the middle of the war, and some local observers in the black community at that time were rather concerned about changes which they felt were taking place in the city because of the war, the transient population, black population coming in from rural Missouri and from the rural South seeking war work. Some newspaper editorials and columns in the Argus and the American reflected a very grave concern that the streets were no longer safe for black people, that black youngsters were becoming juvenile delinquents, we travelling in gangs. The police department was

concerned about this, various columnists for these newspapers lamented, in their eyes, anyway, the absence of traditional patterns of stability in certain black neighborhoods. Did you see any of this? Did you feel any, hear people talking about it?

ABINGTON: Well, as I stated previously, I was married in 1938 in Lodsville; my husband was working here for the Paul Brown Investment Company families, he worked for all the families until practically all of them died. My husband had one job in 41 years. It's very interesting chapter in my own life about my husband, I'll tell you a little more about him. I had been coming back and forth to St. Louis on occasional weekends and he would come to Louisville or we'd meet in Indianapolis; it was sort of a prolonged honeymoon which I would recommend to anyone. And I can't give the kind of comparative picture that someone maybe who had been here all the while. It seems to me, as I try to look back, that the greatest chats in the community as they affect me even as a person or as a property owner have taken place in the past five years and I've often sort of said to myself as I moved around in my home there, somewhat alone, that I wonder really if my husband would recognize even our own neighborhood, and he's just been gone eight years as of this Fall. So I got the feeling, coming in as I did, having taught in Louisville and pretty well integrated into that community with working in organizations and having a small nudes of friends and enjoying a good deal of comradeship among my colleagues, aid then spending this two years of quiet preoccupation with getting this suit on the road and wondering what's going to happen to it, they had guaranteed your salary in case you were dismissed, but there was so many other things that I was involved, and then just being a bride at this more belated period of your life, there were many things going on with me that kept me quite involved, so to speak. So when I came, my first, this is very personal now, this part of this interview, when I came I thought well I should, since my husband wasn't in the home, and was coming back and forth, he was in the Service, and been in since '42, and getting work. Now, I just wouldn't want to sit there, you see, I had been working practically sine I was 20 years old really, hardly missing a day. And so I went naturally, and I have to inject some of my own personal experience here, because his helps you to get your feet on the ground in the community and it had something to do with the kind of impressions that, it seems to me, that always stem from some very personal day by day experiences. So I went with my credentials and I did hold at the time four life certificates to teach in four states including Michigan and I went to the Board of Education and knew nothing of this unwritten law, which was not legal, that a married woman was not acceptable in he school system here. I was interviewed, I believe, by Mr. John Stone, and I do not remember, recall His real professional position with the Board. But he told me I could teach, he would make arrangements for me, men were being called up and there we vacancies and he mentioned, I believe Sumner High School. He made it so crystal clear, and I remember the terms that he used just didn't strike me too favorably to the extent that when I took, when my husband took his name off of Uncle Sam's role at the time, when he would be discharged, then unfortunately my name would be removed from their roles, that they had this gentlemen's agreement that he didn't refer to as such, that women were married. And of course I told him that I looked upon the state and the institution of marriage as being quite sacred and that I had been married at that time five years, having married in '38, that married teachers were accepted with maternity leave, et cetera in the schools of Louisville and that if it meant that have to make some kind of real sacrifices or denial of my own status as a married woman that perhaps I'd look elsewhere. I was carrying with me, too, at the time a letter from Mr. Julius Thomas who was the Industrial Secretary, or he moved up, he was the Executive Director, Executive Secretary of our

Louisville Urban League. I had this personal letter to Mr. John T. Clark who was in charge of the Urban League here. And my husband, we were in the neighborhood, the same block on Enright Street where we finally moved, on that same block. So my husband knew Mr. Clark, not real personally, but knew him, so I take my letter and go to 3017 Delmar and with an interview appointment and I was employed in the place of a Miss Marie Williams who was leaving the Industrial Relations Department at that time to go overseas with the Red Cross and her term of leave was not stipulated and so I took her position which was to go into the factories and try to make openings for more Negro women to be employed to help these women to take a look at themselves and set up different kinds of primary training programs, a follow-through to see that they were properly upgraded into positions as their seniority and union participation entitled them to and so forth. It was a very interesting thing; and part of this? I went to St. Louis University and under Father Brown there I took a course in Industrial Relations, dealing with management and so forth. I had spoken to some ministerial groups here in the Negro community to help them get over to their communicants how necessary it was for them to try to fit in, to get proper rest and to understand their jobs, to take interest in them. I used to stand sometimes, I remember, at the entrance to the doors to these factories and talk to these people when they came out. And we set up training program at the old Hugh Smith Trade which. was called Washington Technical High School which is now Vashon, for them. The.11Sel Mor Garment Company set up one on par machine sewing. Occasionally I run into some of these people who meet me on the street and say, "You've forgotten me, Mrs. Abington, don't you remember we had such and such a ding and I'm still working at this place or I'm working in this handbag place, sewing vinyl handbags, patten handbags." So it was a period from 1943 to '49 that I did this kind of thing. Now, concurrent to that, I knew that people were coming in because I was dealing with these people. But I didn't get the feeling that their influx was making any particular problems in the community because, as I say, I was new here, too. And I felt this was a fairly stable community when I began to come back and forth here. In fact, I came here in '36 before I was married, when we had the Ohio River flood, we had to leave and I knew my husband then and I came and stayed with a relative of a family which my sister had married, the Hailstocks here. They've since migrated to California. But I like St. Louis, they were cleaning it up then. They had the smoke abatemtn program that Mr. Tucker was involved in. Everything was in the Negro community. I remember very well my husband took me to two places that, one was before I was married and after I had come back and forth on weekends, there was a place at the corner of Pendleton and Enright Street called the Democratic Club. I didn't know whether it had any affiliation with the Democratic Party, but it was called the Democratic Club. It was very lovely, in a very beautiful old home which was later owned by Dr. and Mrs. A. N Vaughn. And the last place we would generally go before I'd go and get on the train to go back to Louisville, we'd go there for supper and my husband would always tell the chef what I liked to eat and then there was some young lady named Veta somebody, they had a little orchestra or something and he would name the songs to play. And one of the songs that I still have the record, and it's by Glenn Miller, that really carried me back as far as my husband and my relationships with him concerns, my early time in St. Louis is the song "That For All We Know We Shall Never Meet Again."

I really can't give a perceptive kind of observation as someone who had pre-dated me coming the first time, which as I say was '36. I felt however, that this migration or rather immigration from other states, South of us or any place else at that time--you know, people were so occupied they were busy with jobs, they were getting, I was very busy helping these people to get into these industries. I was very thorough with this mw experience. Chester Stovall was

in the division. We had a very fine young man there from, oh, what was his last name? From New York that had come, and he was in the department...

RESH: Sidney Williams?

ABINGTON: Well, Sidney Williams pre-dated my time in the Urban League I had met him many times afterwards, but this is, oh, I just can't, his name was Richard and I just can't think at the moment, it's on the tip of my mind, I can't recall, I knew his wife quite well. But anyway, this whole business of getting out, and here I had been in the school room, meeting parents and all, but now I'm getting out to see a little bit more of union and collective bargaining and negotiating and what it really meant for people to have a place in the sun where they could earn their living. And they were buying homes, they were moving into new areas. And I really don't feel that this whole business of juvenile delinquency, my car set than that, this is my own feeling. I think people were too occupied then. There were places for many levels of employment without having all the skills. Industry was so short, you see, of labor they were willing to train people. And they fit in. And I think this other picture that we're seeing now which is sort of a regression of all the things that the Negro has, has lost, he lost some of those gains. And by coming to industry and these new positions he was, didn't have seniority, in many instances he had not acquired the highest level of skills to remain there when the competition got very keen, so he lost. And many of them lost their homes. And I don't think that immigration has stepped up, I think these are many of the same people. I base this on the fact that I rarely take a social history now in the inner city, the five schools where I work, where I find many newcomers. The birth rate is up among the people who have already been here. Almost in every instance I ask them, "How long have you been in St. Louis?" And many of them have gone to school at Vashon and the elementary schools here. Interestingly enough, they're almost the second generation of people whose children are coming to the attention of the court. I'm very closely associated with the court, being subpoenaed there frequently, and in keeping records and giving information to the court even on children that I'm subpoenaed on. So, I think I have a smattering of knowledge about how this whole thing developed. It was that people lost ground. I do feel that many of them were attracted here, and times were pretty good, and then they had other members of their family. I'm always interested in "How did you get here first?" Who, I ask these women that, many of them are unmarried women many of them that were married to their husbands in the South, the husband has gone back. Occasionally you find a case where the family has separated, the mother's gone back and the father's still here with the children. But I'm always interested, "How did you pull up your stakes there in Mississippi or Arkansas or New Orleans?" Who were the first people that came? What were their impressions? Did they own property? Did you live in multiple dwellings? And interestingly enough, these people, I don't care what they, I don't believe statistics will prove if we really had accurate census figures, many times we take the census and we just don't reach these people, they are very migrant, you know mobile, they move a great deal and they don't leave forwarding addresses and so forth. But I think that what the great changes that I have experienced in my own neighborhood and with the children I've worked with now twelve years in the public schools, and here we get a very good cross section of what family life is like, and why they're moving, and whether they're working, whether they have any interest, where they have worked, in what kind of jobs they're most stabilized and so forth. And I feel that the greatest changes in our community are almost dated less than ten years ago. So, I wouldn't see the real breakdown. I would see more

of the building up, the families, the cleavage is there, they had come here, and they were depending a great deal on each other. They did have money. They were buying homes. And one of the things I think would make a very interesting research to see how many of the homeowners in St. Louis have really come here since the war, how many of them have been able to hold onto those homes, how many could tell you that "I was really signing papers here there were second mortgages and many of these secretive kind of clauses that I didn't know in the fine print." And the breakdown has been, these people not working, many of them, of course, were on welfare rolls before they came. They were just simply transferees. But for the most part, I think we'll find that the people of, the children's parents were born here that are meeting the , you know, coming to court and are becoming a statistic. So that my early experiences with St. Louis was a fairly stable community, highly segregated as I recall. Back tracking a little, there was a place on Finney Avenue cane the Ostende Club. They ran a very high class restaurant, I used to love to go there after the movies or if my husband and I went to the Opera. And then the American Theater was segregated, it was Downtown at Market and Seventh Street. You had to literally go to the roof to see a good legitimate play. But this was not any new experience to me. Louisville was segregated, Kentucky's segregated. I think that many of us have just sort of come to take that for granted, this whole business of segregation. And I think the tragedy of it is that how much this feeling of being left out penetrated the personality of some people. If you had enough to offset it in the early childhood of being more of a total participant in your environment, being a part of more than one culture, then it didn't take the same kind of toll on the personality. And I really think that there is such a thing as having real social damage to the person that has been felt, and people feel deeply, and then they begin to see this in terms of what color you are, and identify people's motives with the color of your skin or the texture of your hair. This is in any culture) very debilitating to hue to begin to become suspicious about people and their motives according to the way you look. And I really think this is the crime that this great so-called Christian nation has to face. That there are hundreds of thousands of people who feel they've been so left out that they just cannot feel that they're part of the total picture. One of the things I strive to do day by day in working with, the families that I'm privileged to work with is to give them a feeling of not because you live in the small street or that your house is a hundred years old, but that you really have some place to go, you're going some place. Your children are going some place, and you must speak out, you must say to the school board that "really I can't understand why my child is being placed in the same grade two years" you've got to raise questions; you just can't accept this. If the child needs to be relocated in the curriculum then you have this kind of parental responsibility, to have the parent know that their parental rights, their children's rights, their Board of Education rights. And you have to be able to begin to sense these, rights, identify them and speak up when you think there's any denial of these. rights. But I really can't place, my own observations a feeling that things were going down hill before ten years ago or even more recently. Now whether this was a, what we see now is a culmination I'm sure of all of these factors, but I don't think that I would say and I wasn't in the schools then, I wasn't dealing with the real internal structure of our community which is, the family unit like I' am now. And I see, I don't share many people's views; I see many hopeless young women. I see many hopeless children. But in my case load, they're in great minority? great minority. Most of my mothers that I work with even if they're unmarried women and they have children by different alliances, I think they have hopes for their children. And when you go and say to them, "Look, now, if John could come to school three days out of the week and bring home this kind of report card? let's just try to picture what world it be like if he were there four days a week." And this kind of

positive approach, giving the person himself a feeling that there's really something here, that if I'm willing to put something in it I'm gonna get something out." And not saying, you know, "these people have been mistreating you all these years," I think this was one of the great inimitable things about Dr. Martin Luther King. No matter what he enunciated, I've heard him many times, I've got his lectures, the last always that he, the ending, the final note of his pronouncements were, "but you know, it's not going to be like this all the time, you came out of the length and the breadth of this country, you have shed your blood to protect it and you can have hope because God had brought you this far with very little and there's going to be a brighter future." And if people don't constantly place this before children and people, I don't care what strata of society that you happen to come from, this must be something that everybody's got to know. That I can go some place from this point on. And I think we have too much negativism built into our media, we have too much negativism built into our textbooks, we have too much negativism that these children are no good and you're saying it but I don't believe you really mean it. And if you'll listen to everything that we're printing and talking nowadays, I believe in our history. I really can't say that I *see* this so much in other countries. I mean we really, realistically, we don't know anything about poverty like they have in Calcutta, we don't know anything about the poverty that I saw up in the Andes with the Inca Indians living twelve thousand feet above sea level in cold weather with no sewage, no lights, no gas, no job. Just sort of picking the earth for their very livelihood and dying at early ages. Yet the gentility of the people because they really are not completely hopeless. And I feel that we say too many, we--you hear it in the schools, "What's wrong with these people? There's something wrong with everything." I was listening to all this criticism, I think criticism in a democracy is very necessary, of the President, of the administration, of anything, but just all criticism, you know, it gets terribly lop-sided. And it does something to all of us. It does something to our personal philosophies of life. So St. Louis, like many other parts of the country, is changing because I think that people are strong and will admit that there's a small segment in every generation, in every period of history, and I guess in every nation a small segment of people who it doesn't matter, just seems cannot rise above certain levels of subsistence. This is spoken of all through the Bible, and I think we have to give genuine thought and planning and the placing of resources to these people. Hopefully, we'll raise them up and the next generation will be able to move forward. But there's more going on that's constructive than I think we read about in the printed page. And there's a hard core group, if once we can be able to find many of the persons, I know in the schools we deal over and over and over, we have recorded material to prove this, that the family goes from my district to some other place and the problems go with them. So it's only about ten per cent. The children who don't get to the public schools frequently enough are only about the hard core ten per cent. They utilize a good deal of the professional time and professional skill. And I think it's this ten percent that we need increasingly to take more, a real cognizance of and look at it and try to gird these people to say that. And then there's some people just by raising a birth, you know, we just don't like to say that. We don't want to admit that unfortunately people come not able from the very beginning of their lives to compete in our kind of social order. This is a highly structured social order we're living in in this part of the western hemisphere. Where if a man can't read, he can't travel. I've often said to children, even going out on the, I drove to Cleveland with a friend of mine, and after you leave Indiana, Ohio, you see we got this network of toll roads. And moving into what they call Illinois Toll Way, skirting Chicago, you have to read out of the right end of your, the right side of the right eye, the left side, and if you don't know, these signs are down and up and all, and you can't read at a glance, well, you'll end up no where, you know, you'll just be

travelling, you'll never get off of that network. So just to live and move you have to be able to read. We've almost computerized the nation already with numbers and the children have to have relevant education, relevant to getting, making their way. And I think this is one of the lags. We're still more, we're so traditional in this country that we don't want to say that we are doing something on this side of the fence that is fifty years ago but we expect people to be able to relate to what's happening in nineteen hundred and seventy. And there's great gaps in between. We want people to come up to our own standards and we set certain kinds of standards here. And when they can't, we're very intolerant. We don't have these gradations of standards. We talk about the lower income group or the lower—lower income group, the middle class and lower—'middle class. We have very few stratas of social order in the United States, and we sort of set up these cliches and when people, especially children, don't fit into them, the boards of education and the faculties of schools tend to label these people and get very disconcerted with them. And we go about as professional people, and I refer to now my own colleagues, social workers trying to help people both recognize and deal with all these inimical attributes of people, they're, everyone's so unique that it's very hard to just fit them into these narrow marginal cliches. And this makes problems, too. But I think what's happened in St. Louis since nineteen, since I came to live here in '43, has just gradually been happening all over and my observation would be, these are many of the same people who came here, there has been, you know, but I think the municipal yearbook, St. Louis, and the United States employment security figures, the Social Security data, and places where we'll really find vital statistics, bureaus of municipal government, will indicate that many of the people having the same problems were born right here. And this is sort of a criticism that I want to make, and a comparison that I want to make, I think between the schools that I came out of at the elementary level. I think we placed much more emphasis on citizenship and that part of your government and being intelligent about your government and a participant in your government. I recall as a fifth grade pupil how we went through the Constitution and not just like I talked to some of the pupils here, just learning something, but what was it, what was this great document that gave you certain rights? The relationship it had to you. What this meant to you as a person living in this kind of country, in this kind of city, with this kind of GOVERNMENT And the teacher emphasized this, it wasn't just so you learned a document but you learned it in relation to the self.

And when I interview a woman who went to Vashon High School in the eleventh grade and has ten children, and not anybody ever finishes the eighth grade, well, I'm trying to figure out what was happening to this woman all those years, you know? What has school meant to her that she could pass on to her children. And she doesn't feel any anxiety or chagrin that they don't, that they're not getting an education. So really, what did she really learn that makes it possible for a parent to pass on something to her children other than, you know, just keeping shelter over their heads and an occasional pair of shoes.

RESH: Mts. Abington, thank you very much for sharing your experiences and observations with us.