

E R N E S T M c K I S S I C K

and

M A G N O L I A T H O M P S O N M c K I S S I C K

Interviewed by:

Louis D. Silveri

August 2, 1977

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS RESEARCH CENTER

The University of North Carolina at Asheville

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INTERVIEW WITH

Mr. and Mrs. Ernest McKissick
(Magnolia Thompson McKissick)

August 2, 1977, Asheville, North Carolina

Interviewed by: Dr. Louis D. Silveri

Dr. Silveri: I think, in our conversation on the phone, you said you were born in Asheville in 1900?

Mr. McKissick: I came here along in 1901, maybe 1902. I'm not positive. When I came to Asheville I was a small boy.

Dr. Silveri: So, you weren't born here?

Mr. McKissick: I wasn't born here.

Dr. Silveri: Where were you born?

Mr. McKissick: In Kelton, South Carolina.

Dr. Silveri: Kelton?

Mr. McKissick: When I came here my parents were already here, and brother and sister. They left me down in the country to nurse my sister's baby while my sisters worked in the field. Then I came to Asheville. They put a tag on me and put me on the train that brought me to Asheville; so you know I must have been about seven or eight years old. I've been here ever since.

Dr. Silveri: Why did you come to Asheville?

Mr. McKissick: Oh, we came here to make it our home and to stay here permanently.

Dr. Silveri: Why did your parents come to Asheville? What attracted them here?

Mr. McKissick: Well, they came because the conditions down there weren't as good as they thought they were; they thought it would be better somewhere else. So they came here to make a living. It was better than being down there in the country.

Dr. Silveri: Did your father have a job or anything up here?

Mr. McKissick: Well, my father, fortunately, was a Missionary Baptist minister, and it seems somehow or other he, I think he left home and didn't come back. My mother said he left her within twenty-four and a half hours after my birth. We went to Spartanburg, then we left Spartanburg and came on to Asheville.

Dr. Silveri: I see. So your first recollections were as a boy of about seven years old?

Mr. McKissick: That's right.

Dr. Silveri: Where did you take up residence?

Mr. McKissick: Well, when we came to Asheville, we lived on Turner Street; that's in west end.

Dr. Silveri: West end?

Mr. McKissick: With Mrs. Vance's family; old family in Asheville. The Vances. V-a-n-c-e.

Dr. Silveri: In those years Asheville was very small. I think the population was probably fifteen thousand or around that.

Mr. McKissick: Yes, around that, at that time.

Dr. Silveri: Very small city.

Mr. McKissick: That was the old days of the horse and wagon, and the buggy. That's when they drove wagons from the country with oxen. The farmers would come to Valley Street to drive behind the distillery and

get all of the sour mash and take it back to the farm and feed it to their hogs.

Dr. Silveri: Oh!

Mr. McKissick: Yeah, you could smell that! That was on Valley Street where I lived, Black's Distillery.

Dr. Silveri: Interesting. Where did you go to school?

Mr. McKissick: Well, when I first came to Asheville, I went to old Hill Street School, in the first grade. We lived in west end, and we moved two or three places down there on Hill Street. Then back over on Davidson Street, Valley Street, and Eagle Street. We lived several places, and during that time I went up to Catholic Hill School to the second grade, second B. That's as far as I went here in Asheville.

Fortunately, I was associated with some good Christian people, people that really thought, I guess they saw something in me and they wanted to take me in. Dr. J.W. Walker, I worked and stayed with him, and Professor Trent, Dr. Jones, and other influential Christian men and women who were in the city. But my mainstay and my idol was Dr. Walker, because he put me on my feet and started me out. I worked for him driving a horse and buggy. He would go and make visits; I would stay out and hold the horse. My horse's name was George; a pretty buggy and black horse.

Dr. Walker said, "Well, Ernest, I'll tell you." I said, "What?" He said, "I want you to work in the drugstore, the Y.M.I. drugstore; that would be better for you." So he got me a job in the drugstore. I stayed there for years, but I worked from one place to the other: the hotels, bellhopping, then back to the Y.M.I., Young Men's Institute.

They had about four, three dormitory rooms. I lived up there for a while. Then I stayed with Mrs. Hill on Eagle Street for a while. My people were then over in Tennessee, but they came back. I stayed with different people while they were away. Fortunately for me, Dr. Walker told me: "The Club of India of Hopkins Chapel AMEZ Church is having a contest to raise money. Several people are running in it. The one who raises the highest amount of money will receive a gold watch. You might get that watch." Well, my friends helped me. I remember Miss Willie Cline was running, but she turned the money over to me. I raised about, I think, fifty dollars. Mr. McCoy raised over fifty. He had a little more than I did; he won the prize. He got the watch. This was held in the YMI building for the AMEZ Church which I belonged to.

Hopkins Chapel had burned down. During that time we were having services in the YMI. The Rev. S.G.W. Spurgeon was our pastor. Dr. Walker and some others had a caucus; went back in the office somewhere and came back. He said: "Since you didn't win it, tell you what we are going to do. We have decided to give you, each one of us, ten dollars apiece. We are going to raise some more money for you. You work this summer and save all you can, and we are going to send you to Livingstone College. That's what we want to do." I told him, "All right."

Well, I did exactly what they asked me to do and got ready to go to school in the fall of 1913. Yes, '13, and I went to Livingstone College. I had given my sponsors all my money, and they had already sent it down there. It was there waiting for me to get a receipt and get my room. I went to Livingstone College and finished grammar. Then the War

broke out, the first World War. That's my picture up there. I went to the service in the second draft in May, in April, I think, the 29th, 1918.

Dr. Silveri: Did you volunteer?

Mr. McKissick: No, we had the draft during that time. Everybody was drafted. Eighteen to what? Thirty or forty, and from that on. Further on they would get me. They got me in that eighteen to twenty-odd line. I went to Camp Jackson first, then north. From there to Camp Dix, to Camp Merritt, then overseas. I was put in the 349th Field Artillery, Battery F, 92nd Division.

Now there's one thing about this that people didn't know we were doing. This battery of artillery is the first in the history of the United States that Negroes manned. Three hundred forty ninth, 350th was Field Artillery, French seventy five millimeter guns, and they had the hundred and fifty-five howitzer. That's the big artillery shell about that large. We used that. That was our heavy artillery. That's 351st. We served in that and we went on to the front. We stayed on the front until about six, let me see exactly now, October. We were there in October and got situated. We stayed on the front, I think, six months over there. Then we'd go from Issoudun for rest camp (Camp Issoudun) then back to the front, and rest camp, then back to the front. I was very fortunate I didn't get hurt, but I escaped. Oh, I guess God or Providence saved me about four or five times.

One incident I want to tell you about. Now this is not a lie. This is the truth! We were going to the front. They said: 'McKissick, (I came to the rest camp) get ready to go up to the front; [you've]

got to relieve those boys up there." I was in the specialists. That is semaphore wig wags, telephone, fine data, and all that stuff. My group did all that work. The officer over us said, "I want you all to load the caisson with ammunition and go up with it and give relief so the boys can come back here to rest." Well, that did it! That night along about evening when we got up there we were taking the ammunition out and putting it in place for the boys to fire, when the Germans commenced shooting at us. BOOM! That was one! So somebody said, "Man, that ole boy's going to raise sand tonight!" And later on, BOOM! That was another shell. The Germans are very funny, peculiar. (Boom! Another shell.) You shoot one shell at him, and he's going to shoot fifty back at you! Now that's a fact!

That's what they did. That went on. Finally we got to Xon (pronounced zon). That's in French, X-o-n. That's the hill. That's right on top of the mountain. There were trenches all up there. Infantry, 366, 368, and 6 and 7 were all around, all stationed over there near Metz. We finally got up to the front. We made it; put the lines in for the boys to shoot. Some of the infantrymen said, "Man, don't shoot! Please for God's sake! If you do, if you shoot one shell, they are going to shoot a hundred and fifty at us tonight!" Well, we did it anyway. We hated to do it.

That night coming down from Xon, coming down the hill, that's when I thought, oh, I thought they were going to kill five of us: the lieutenant and four or five other men that were with us. As we were coming down they were shooting shells at us but missed us! The shrapnel was falling all around us, but fortunately we weren't hit. Just the matter

that Providence, the Good Lord, wasn't ready for us! They came so near hitting us. I told the Good Lord, I just stopped and prayed on my knees, "Lord if You let me get home safe, I'll live and work for You as long as I live! And He saved us! Then I ran down the hill!

The Germans had shot up all our lines. Next morning we had to go back to repair them. I was going along the side of the camouflage fence and a plane came over. I mistook it and thought it was our plane by the noise. You see, we could distinguish the planes by the way they sounded: American planes or German planes or French planes. But I mistook ours, and man, the shells came a zipping! ZIP! ZIP! ZIP! ZIP! ZIP! ZIP! I fell on the ground and rolled under the camouflage. That was two times right in succession that I was in the jaws of death! I recuperated and went back. Told the lieutenant and sergeant about it. They said: "All right, we'll have to let the line go. We can't repair it. Boys will just have to do without it until we can get up there!"

We got down, finally, to a culvert under the road, and we stayed there until morning. Morning came and we went out and found food in the kitchen, got something to eat. After we got our food we went back to the front. Well, what we'll do, let's see what we can do around here with the other fellows after we see if we can help any of them out. They had been gassed and shot up, and killed. One shell hit in front of a dugout and killed four men, and we thought how fortunate we were. One of them was an old friend of mine that I met in camp, and another friend of mine was gassed.

We went back to rest camp and stayed there until time for us to come back to the United States. We had to march twenty-five miles

from Pont-à-Mousson to Mousson to get a freight train to come home to America. When we came back, we landed in New York and stayed there and had our pictures made and everything: got a welcome back home. Then we were sent to Camp (What's the camp in Virginia?) Camp Lee. It must have been Camp Lee.

Dr. Silveri: You must have taken pictures while you were there?

Mr. McKissick: No, sorry. Then I was mustered out at Camp Lee and came back home. I had already asked my wife, before I left, if she would marry me when I came back. She said, "Yes!" We had met at Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina.

Dr. Silveri: Were you married before you went in the--

Mr. McKissick: No, no, we weren't married. I asked her if she would marry me when I got back, and she said yes. So I came back and took the college course. We have four children: Floyd Bixler McKissick (He's the one that's building Soul City; I'll tell you all about that,); Geraldine McKissick; Frances McKissick, and Jean McKissick. (That's our baby; she has a brand-new home that she just built down the street. She's been teaching in Washington for several years.) We bought a home and a little car and, thank God, we are doing just fine to live at our age. The Good Master has been good to us. We appreciate life and all that has been happening to us.

Dr. Silveri: Let me ask you some questions.

Mr. McKissick: Yes, sir. Go right on.

Dr. Silveri: That experience in World War I, that unit you were in, 349th?

Mr. McKissick: Three Hundred and Forty Ninth Field Artillery.

Dr. Silveri: I see, you said it was a black--

Mr. McKissick: A black outfit. Yes, sir.

Dr. Silveri: Completely? Or did they have white officers?

Mr. McKissick: We had white officers.

Dr. Silveri: That was the general case, probably.

Mr. McKissick: Yes, Company may have had one or two officers, but all of them were white officers.

Dr. Silveri: Did you feel any resentment about that?

Mr. McKissick: No, because at that time, it was just prejudice typical of the South. We knew where we were, and that was the way of life. They knew that was prejudice, and of course some were meaner than others. Lord help me, when I went to camp! They were examining us to find out our IQ and one sergeant said, "How far did you go in school?" I told him, "I went to first year normal." And he got furious. I said, "That's all right; I have. I went to first year normal."

They used an examination, and the poor fellow was sorry. They asked me who wrote The Scarlet Letter. I told them, and answered other questions and put the blocks and things together. That's the reason I was put in artillery; because of the training that I'd had. I had been to school. Otherwise, you couldn't make it in artillery because you really have to know your stuff.

Dr. Silveri: Were there many, when you went, when you were drafted from Asheville, were there many other blacks that went with you at that time?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, about--when we left here. How many coaches were there of them, Honey, that left here that day? You were at the station.

Was it about six coaches, or seven?

Mrs. McKissick: I don't remember exactly, but they were brought up from North Carolina.

Mr. McKissick: All 'round here in the western--

Dr. Silveri: What did you feel about going? What did you feel about Woodrow Wilson, for instance? Did you tell him you wanted to make the world safer?

Mr. McKissick: Safe for democracy. That was it. That was our slogan. That was what we used and what we said, and that's what they told us.

Dr. Silveri: That's what you believed? You believed that?

Mr. McKissick: Well, we tried to make it safe for democracy. We found that we didn't, because democracy wasn't working at all at home 'cause they hadn't done anything for us. We had Jim Crow and all. They tried to put us down in every way: Street cars and buses and everything else, Jim Crow! Jim Crow!

Dr. Silveri: You realized that when you were going over there, going over there to make the world safe for democracy, even back in America, there wasn't democracy?

Mr. McKissick: No. But we went and fought for America right on, regardless of that, and we said, "That's home!" Even at that, after we saw the poor conditions over there, that those people were in, eating and sleeping and begging for food and supplies, and all the things they needed, I said, "My God, I'd rather live at home, regardless of this prejudice and all!"

Dr. Silveri: Yes.

Mr. McKissick: Those were bad conditions, bad shape!

Dr. Silveri: Right!

Mr. McKissick: Yes.

Dr. Silveri: So you spent about a year in the Army?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, just about a year. Lacked about one or two days, but it was close to a year.

Dr. Silveri: You know a lot of World War I veterans said that when they came back from the war they found that Americans didn't really appreciate what they had done. They found it hard to get jobs, and so on, like that. Did you feel that?

Mr. McKissick: Well, that was really true! That was really true! But I didn't hold it, you know, against anybody. I knew the conditions. I took it as it was, and went on. And finally I made it. Had I stopped and tried to fight it by myself I don't know where I'd be today. But, thank God, I went and got through it safe, and here I am.

Dr. Silveri: Another thing is that--you remember that old song, "How You Goin' to Keep 'Em Down on the Farm?"

Mr. McKissick: After they've seen Paris?

Dr. Silveri: Did you think of not coming back to Asheville after the war?

Mr. McKissick: No, I did not! I wanted to come back home to Asheville. Yes, I wanted to come home and talk to the people. During those days I could sing. I was really a singer. What a soloist! My wife can tell you that. I wanted to come back home to be with my people and see them and see what I could do. And I wanted to try to help young people, young boys, and all. A lot of them I've helped!

Dr. Silveri: O.K. Hold there a minute and go back again. What

influence did the church have on you as a person?

Mr. McKissick: Well, the church had a great influence on me. Because they helped me, and they guided me, and they directed me, and they took me up as a boy and put me in the choir to sing. They put me in front of the choir to sit on the side of the older ones because I sang tenor. They used my voice and kept me in there, and I've been singing in the choir since then 'til now.

Dr. Silveri: Are you talking about A.M.E. Zion Church?

Mr. McKissick: A.M.E. Zion Church. Hopkins Chapel. AME Zion Church.

Dr. Silveri: When did you join that?

Mr. McKissick: Well, I joined that church about 1907.

Dr. Silveri: Been with it ever since then?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, sir. Must have been about 1907, because we were having services in the YMI then. Our church had burned, and it was re-built in 1910. So, it took them from about 1907 to 1910, three years, to complete it. We had services in the YMI until we could get the church completed. We had services in the basement until the main auditorium was completed.

Dr. Silveri: O.K. Were you married shortly after you came back from the war?

Mr. McKissick: We got married October 8, 1919. That's been about 58 years with this lovely wife here of mine, who has stuck by my side and made me what I am today. If it hadn't been for her I couldn't have made it. You see, we had four children and we educated all of them. The one down here has her Master's in English and is teaching at Owen High School. She has two children. One's teaching in Philadelphia,

and she has three children. Floyd has four, and Frances has two. All of them finished college, and made good. So you see, God has blessed us. We have no regrets.

Dr. Silveri: And one has a national reputation, too.

Mr. McKissick: My son you know about. You've heard of him. I'll tell you about him a little later.

Dr. Silveri: What did you work at when you came back from the war?

Mr. McKissick: Well, when I came back from the war I went to work in Hendersonville at the Carolina Hotel.

Dr. Silveri: That's an old hotel. Not up any more.

Mr. McKissick: No, I think they tore it down and built something else up there [or] it burned down.

Dr. Silveri: Did you live there then?

Mr. McKissick: Well, I had a sister over there. I was living over there and coming back and forth, coming back and forth from Hendersonville to Asheville.

Dr. Silveri: How long were you there at that hotel?

Mr. McKissick: I just worked that summer over there. Got married in the fall, and then that winter I left my wife at home and went to work in Florida. I had to go to Florida in winter, come back and go to the hotel here in summer, and then go back to Florida. [They laugh]

Dr. Silveri: This was in 1920 when the big Florida boom was taking place?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, that's right, when the boom was taking place.

Dr. Silveri: So you kept your home here?

Mr. McKissick: Oh, yes.

Dr. Silveri: But you went off periodically to earn money in Florida?

Mr. McKissick: That's right, in the winters, see, money here in summer is plentiful, lot of work in hotels. That's what I did, bellhop, go down there and work in the winter in hotels, with some of my friends down there. Sam Wynn was head bellman down there. I worked at Don Cesar hotel in St. Petersburg, Florida, and Brown's Hotel in St. Petersburg.

Dr. Silveri: So it was really difficult to get work in the winter here?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, it was.

Dr. Silveri: So, how many years did you do this?

Mr. McKissick: Well, I worked in hotels, you know, I'm telling you the truth, practically all my life. I worked in hotels until I resigned from the George Vanderbilt in '43 and I started working for the government in '43; working for the government in Postal Accounts. Decentralization had come to Asheville. They had all the accounts of the United States at Postal Accounts. I started as a Junior Laborer. I ended up as a CPC-3, which may have been a big thing then, a chief messenger for the entire organization. I had worked up to that. My supervisor called me to the office and said, "Listen, McKissick, we've been watching your work, and what you have done and are doing. You've been training these fellows." I learned all about accounting, the cards of the machinery, punch cards, and so forth. They said, "I want you to train these fellows, tell them what to do and how to do it." So I showed them. Later my supervisor said, "I'm going to have a little talk with you. What we want to do is promote you to a paid and issued exam."

That's where the paid money orders and issued money orders had to be processed. I knew what to do, and they promoted me and put me in that job. I stayed there until 1953. I had been with them ten years. Counting my service in the Army I had five more years to make, when decentralization came. They said, 'We'll send you to Oteen VA Hospital so you can make your other five years and you can retire at 15-62 service years.' So that's what I did. I retired in '57, the last day of December in '57.

Dr. Silveri: Wow! You've been retired since '57? I'm sure you haven't just sat around in the chair.

Mr. McKissick: No, I've been around working. I've always liked civic work: American Legion, church work, and other civic things.

Dr. Silveri: What happened when the big bust came in Florida, when the Depression hit? And it hit up here, too.

Mr. McKissick: It hit here, too. I was working up here and down there, too. Anyhow, we made it. Yes, I had a hard time here at home during the bust, when it busted. I mean, it was terrible. People lost their homes and businesses and committed suicide here in Asheville. In fact, I lost my government insurance. I couldn't keep it up. I was buying a home on Magnolia Avenue, and I got so far behind I couldn't make it. I couldn't make ends meet. I've seen the time I'd go to the man, and pay the man two, three, four, five, six, or eight dollars, like that, and he would accept it. But I had established a reputation. Mr. Westall held my mortgage. He had a big lumber company. I will never forget him as long as I live. He had two sons. His sons told me later on, "You know what, Mr. McKissick?" I said, "What?" "My Daddy told us you

would be here at that door at a certain time with money whether you had all of it or not. We noticed it, and you were right here. Daddy said anything you want you can get it, no matter what it is!" So, I could call my order any time, and they would send it that day. That's the kind of credit we tried to establish. We tried to have a good reputation of living and doing here in Asheville, setting examples that our children could see, and realize that we were leaving something for them to shoot at. They have done that. They have succeeded.

Dr. Silveri: Do you remember when the Supreme Court decision came down in 1954, desegregation of schools?

Mr. McKissick: Yes.

Dr. Silveri: I was just talking with Lucy Herring this morning. She told me a lot about what happened here in Asheville about that. Were your children in school at that time?

Mrs. McKissick: Oh, no, no. No, my grandchildren were in school in Durham. My son had two children admitted to the high school in Durham.

Dr. Silveri: He was living in Durham at that time?

Mrs. McKissick: He was living in Durham at that time. He had a law practice there.

Dr. Silveri: Where did Floyd go to law school?

Mr. McKissick: University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and also North Carolina Central. Back then they called it North Carolina College. He finished there and also went to the University of North Carolina. He broke the color line there, going there to law school.

Dr. Silveri: He was the first one?

Mr. McKissick: Yes.

Dr. Silveri: What year was that? Do you remember what years he was there?

Mr. McKissick: Fifty-two? No, he finished in '52, passed the bar in '52.

Dr. Silveri: Let me see now, O.K., '52? Now, I'm interested in what you can remember about that decision and what happened in the schools here. Do you remember much about that?

Mr. McKissick: Now Mrs. Herring could tell you more about that, exactly what happened, because that was her field. She can tell you exactly what happened, repercussions, and so forth. As far as we were concerned, we were glad that it happened, because my son was battling then, fighting in the Civil Rights cause. I don't know how many cases they had, but most of the school cases they won.

Dr. Silveri: You had a close association with the YMI, right?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, sir. I've been associated with it for years and years. From, I'd say, 1907 or '08 up until now. From the YMI into the Y.M.C.A.

Dr. Silveri: O.K., the old George Vanderbilt started that, is that right?

Mr. McKissick: Mr. George Vanderbilt, in 1892, built that building down there. The people said he blew up the foundation that was practically solid rock. Now, he didn't give that building to the Negroes of Asheville. He sold it to them. They had a meeting. A corporation formed before it was bought. They were renting from him at first. Fifty members belonged to the YMI. Thirty two of them got together and formed the corporation. Vanderbilt said he'd sell it to them for \$12,000. Mr. Swope was Mr. Vanderbilt's representative. The Negroes told them: "We're

not able to pay that kind of money, because we're domestic servants and we don't make that kind of money. There are not many Negroes in Asheville! But we will give you \$10,000 for it, and pay on installment." Well, we paid on installments, oh, for years. All we did was keep up the interest. Oh, we paid enough interest on it, to be frank, it's no lie, because I helped pay. All we had to pay off was \$10,000. But finally we paid it off in '51, I believe, and there's a picture of the burning of the mortgage. There's Doctor Evans, and Reuben Dailey, and the Reverend Edington. That's where we burned the mortgage.

Dr. Silveri: I think it's somewhat more than incredible that this man who owned, Mr. Vanderbilt, who owned, well, he wasn't around then, I suppose, but his heirs were around. You were paying off his heirs, right?

Mr. McKissick: Oh, yes. We paid it to them. Let's see, he died, and that left his wife and daughter. I knew them. They used to come to the old Battery Park Hotel. I saw Mr. Vanderbilt once. He had on riding breeches then; tall and a moustache, I think. Mrs. Vanderbilt was tall, and their daughter was tall. She would come there during WWI for the Red Cross, and help the Red Cross make bandages to send overseas. See, I know that. I saw them. I waited on them, bellhopping in the old Battery Park. I don't mean the "new" one, I mean the "o-l-d" Battery Park. Have you ever seen it?

Dr. Silveri: The one before they took the hill away? I've seen pictures of it.

Mr. McKissick: Yes. I was going to say I have a newspaper, the 80th Edition of it, with all the pictures around here of Asheville, in the

newspaper. Have you ever seen those pictures?

Dr. Silveri: Yes. Did you ever work at the Grove Park Inn?

Mr. McKissick: No, I never worked at the Grove Park; that was 1913.

I was working at the new Battery Park at that time.

Dr. Silveri: Did you ever know any of the Wolfe family?

Mr. McKissick: I knew Mr. Wolfe. I knew two of them. You see, Mr. Wolfe's brother used to deliver papers all around Eagle Street, in Dixon town. I remember when Mr. Wolfe came home, the last time he was here, before he died. I saw him. Said, "Hello, Mr. Wolfe!" He said, "Hey there, boy! How have you been getting along?" I told him, "Just fine!" I said, "I'm glad to see you!" He said, "I'm glad to see you!" I said, "You come a long way, and we're glad to see you!" He was at the hotel then, at the Langren Hotel.

Dr. Silveri: Did you know his father or mother at all?

Mr. McKissick: I'd see them. I didn't know them, you know, to be intimate with them, but I'd see them. I used to pass the house all the time. I knew them to live on Woodfin Street and Spruce Street.

Dr. Silveri: As you mentioned, you met him just before he died, when he came home. Of course, you know all about his book and what effect it had on the City of Asheville?

Mr. McKissick: Oh, yes it did! They wondered whether he could come back home; the people got mad. They were sitting and talking about him. They were scared he was calling names, you know, around here. But he was telling the truth. I said, "He's telling the truth!" That was why they were scared and mad at him. But finally, when his work was recognized, you know, they got over it.

Dr. Silveri: Did you know any of the people he wrote about in the book?

Mr. McKissick: Yes! He wrote about Henry Pearson. [He laughs loudly.] I knew Him! He was quite a character! He had a restaurant on Eagle Street. I can't think of the other ones now, but he mentioned Henry Pearson. I can't think of the others, though.

Dr. Silveri: How about some other interesting people you met when you were working in the hotels. Can you remember any off-hand?

Mr. McKissick: Well, let me see. I have met some very distinguished people, but I can't think of them now. In the hotels, I made many good friends.

Dr. Silveri: Have you ever met any important people?

Mr. McKissick: No, I don't think so. I was trying to think. I might have, and can't think. I don't think I did. But I'll tell you one thing: I met one man that I never will forget. You see, some of the distinguished people came in those days, and they do now. I remember the clerk rang the bell and I went to answer. He said, "Ernest, take Mr. So and So (he called him by his number) and show him these rooms. That was Mr. Floyd S. Bixler from eastern Pennsylvania. He and his sister were aged people. They had been around the world three times. They came to Asheville to see these mountains. I took them upstairs and showed three rooms. He had a talk with me. He said that he knew several boys that he had helped. He told me if I'd write him, he'd help me. When he left he gave me a dime, twenty cents, rather, and he said, "Be sure and write me!" And I told him I would. He said, "That's not much, but I will think about you later." Well, now that's the way of Mr. Bixler.

"It's not the casket that I prize, but what within the casket lies."

He says, "That's just fine, fine. Where did you get that?"

"Oh, I worded it."

Well, I'll tell you, I wrote him, and to my surprise Mr. Bixler sent me two big boxes (he had a wholesale drygoods and notions house) for my family. He was sending me something every two or three months from that factory (that wholesale house) for my family for--How many years, Mag?

Mrs. McKissick: For ten years, I guess.

Mr. McKissick: Yes, about ten years, and that was a lift. Oh, that was a lift for my family! I was making about eighteen dollars a month and they took out two dollars. That was for my uniforms. That's what I had to feed my family; that's what I had to feed them.

Dr. Silveri: And he would send you--?

Mr. McKissick: --send me boxes of clothes and everything, sheets, towels, pillow cases, blankets, and everything, all for my family. My wife was a seamstress; she could make clothes. So she just kept my kids immaculate. Wonderful! Now when I had a son, my wife and I got to talking. I says, "Honey, I tell you I'd like to name our son after us." But who do you think we named him after? Mr. Bixler. He'd been so good to us for all those years. He had done so much for us until I knew no honor could be any better to bestow on him than to name my son Floyd Bixler McKissick. I sent Mr. Bixler an announcement of it. Oh, he was elated. He wrote Floyd a letter, and I gave the letter to Floyd so he'd have it. He has that letter now.

Dr. Silveri: Very interesting!

Mr. McKissick: Floyd has lived up to his expectations, and mine too. Oh, I only wish that Mr. Bixler was here now, and could see Floyd. I know he would have liked it, both of them. So I have given Floyd all the letters and everything that he wrote. He said, "I want everything you can find about it, all the old letters, Daddy, because I've got to write my autobiography. Later on I'll need it." That's right, I guess.

Dr. Silveri: Oh, that's when the second world war came. You were too old for that weren't you?

Mr. McKissick: Too old for that!

Dr. Silveri: I wonder. You know, I'm very interested in the Depression and what effect it had on this country, and I understand it hit the city pretty bad.

Mr. McKissick: Yes, sir. The Depression was really bad here in Asheville! So many people went down, so many homes were lost, so many lost insurance.

Dr. Silveri: What did you do? Were you employed in any government jobs? Any WPA or any of those programs?

Mr. McKissick: No. But I was still in the hotels, working hotels, bellhopping.

Dr. Silveri: So, you still had that job?

Mr. McKissick: Yes. I kept that job. I did it then until in the '40's. I started working for the government in the '40's, when they moved from Washington in '43. I resigned as head bellman for the George Vanderbilt Hotel to start work for the government.

Dr. Silveri: During all these years, you have been in Asheville all this time. You never thought of leaving the city?

Mr. McKissick: Oh, I thought of it once or twice. I had a buddy named Bamburg who lived with me on Eagle Street for years when we were in our teens. His people moved to Columbus, Ohio, and I wanted to go with them then. Oh, I was head over heels and all excited about going to Columbus, Ohio, to live with them. Now I'm glad that I didn't, because if I had I wouldn't have accomplished the things that I have. So I have something to be proud of: I have a wonderful family, a wonderful family which I'm proud of.

Dr. Silveri: Do you feel that living in Asheville, at least over those years that you were able to raise your children, things have been fairly good.

Mr. McKissick: That's right.

Dr. Silveri: But, like any southern city the blacks have not been treated right in Asheville. Like any other place, right? You know quite often you hear that blacks in the mountain areas of the South had it at least a little easier than other places in the South. Is that true?

Mr. McKissick: Well, now, I'll tell you about Asheville. I'll be frank with you. There are North Asheville, South Asheville, West Asheville, East Asheville. Negroes have lived scattered all over Asheville since I've been here. It's not over across the railroad track. You've heard that Negroes live on the other side of the tracks, but they haven't been that way in Asheville. Ever since I've been here Negroes have lived in all sections of Asheville. And now they're more so. They're crowded in all sections of Asheville now except the exclusive sections. So I liked Asheville, and my wife liked it.

When Postal Accounts decentralized they asked me if I wanted to go to Washington, Philadelphia, Illinois, or Atlanta. I came home and told my wife. She said, "No, Mac, I'll tell you, we have our home here and we would have to go away and make new friends, and I don't want to do that. So, you just let them transfer you out there to Oteen, finish your five years and then retire." So that's what I did. I'm going to tell you one thing: during that time I wasn't making the money that I should have, I thought. I didn't have money in my pocket like I'd make in the hotels. "NO," she said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. You hold on and I'll tighten up some certain things and you stay right on the job working for the government. When you get paid off I'll make some arrangements, re-arrange things so we can make ends meet." I did it, and today I'm just so proud that she made me stay with the government. I'm just proud of her, Mrs. Magnolia Thompson McKissick, that's been a great helper, and I love her for it! If it hadn't been for her we couldn't have accomplished the things we have. Any time your wife will stick by you with four children and say, "I'll go fifty-fifty with you in everything you do," and help educate them, get their Master's and send them out in the world making good, you're lucky.

Dr. Silveri: I know how you feel, because we have six children and my wife, you know, everything seems to revolve around her!

Mr. McKissick: Yes, that's wonderful, wonderful.

Mrs. McKissick: How are they divided?

Dr. Silveri: Four boys and two girls. No! Four girls and two boys. We have them from two and one-half to sixteen years old. No, eighteen. I keep forgetting!

Mrs. McKissick: That's all right! You haven't come to the tough part yet. . . .

Mr. McKissick: We have three girls and one boy.

Mrs. McKissick: . . . that will come--the time when you have two in college at the same time.

Mr. McKissick: Well, we had three, honey. Wasn't it?

Mrs. McKissick: I know. I was telling him.

Dr. Silveri: How did you do that? How did you manage?

Mr. McKissick: My son asked the same thing. You know what he told me not long ago? He said, "Daddy, I don't see how in the world you and Mama put us through school!"

Mrs. McKissick: Well, you see, schools weren't as expensive then as they are now.

Dr. Silveri: Either way, I doubt you were making as much income then as you are now.

Mr. McKissick: No! That's right!

Dr. Silveri: I know when I was going to school my tuition was only \$500 a year!

Mr. McKissick: Now it takes that and much more for one semester.

Dr. Silveri: I mean it was a struggle! I know it was!

Mr. McKissick: Oh, it was a struggle!

Dr. Silveri: What parents had to go through.

Mr. McKissick: It was a struggle.

Dr. Silveri: But I think it is fantastic that it was accomplished. I'm sure the children had to work to make some money too, and I'm sure they had to be determined themselves.

Mr. McKissick: That's right. They did. They worked. They told me, "We'll all work." All of them worked.

Dr. Silveri: And, of course, no children are going to do anything like that unless they get the encouragement and inspiration from the parents.

Mr. McKissick: That's right. That's right!

Dr. Silveri: They have to be shown by the parents that this is something to value, because education makes a tremendous difference in their lives.

Mr. McKissick: That's true!

Dr. Silveri: So, I'm sure you don't want to slight any of your children, but I'd like to talk about Floyd, because he's so well known around. . .

Mr. McKissick: All right. Let's go ahead!

Dr. Silveri: Well, as you said, he was the first one at UNC law school. Then you must have given him a good deal of moral support all the way through on all of his efforts. Right?

Mr. McKissick: We certainly did!

Mrs. McKissick: You'll have to start a little farther back than that. Floyd has worked all his life. When he was a young man he started at Grove Park Inn as a bus boy. Then he was on the railroad dining car. He made quite a bit of money, you know. He went to Morehouse College for three years, then he enlisted in the Army. He wasn't old enough to be drafted, or he hadn't been drafted. Anyway, he volunteered and went overseas. Well, that gave him a little boost to his income.

He married immediately after completing basic training. The year

after he was married he had a child. That meant more military pay.

He really has worked hard, and he's had a lot of support, too.

Dr. Silveri: That's good, very good! What did he do when he finished law school?

Mrs. McKissick: He joined the law office of M.H. Thompson.

Dr. Silveri: In Durham?

Mr. McKissick: Yes.

Dr. Silveri: Did he--Let's see--What years are we talking about now?

Mr. McKissick: I believe it was '49.

Mrs. McKissick: Of course, he lacked a few years (I mean, a few credits) of graduation, see? So, he took law, and while he was taking law he finished these college credits at North Carolina Central, which meant that he graduated from law and college approximately the same time.

Dr. Silveri: I see, O.K.

Mrs. McKissick: The suit came up. North Carolina had filed a suit and Harold Epps [inaudible] was the original protester (I don't know what you call it) or applicant, rather, I should say, to enter Chapel Hill. For some reason Epps[dropped the suit.] They had to have someone to complete this case so they asked Floyd if he would file. He filed, and the decision was rendered in his favor, which made him the first.

Dr. Silveri: The first black to go to the law school?

Mrs. McKissick: Yes. When he was admitted they had other applicants. He was the first.

Dr. Silveri: I see. We're still talking about the period of American history where the law of the land was separate, but equal, and obviously the states couldn't create another law school for black persons. So,

that's where the punch began to be shown. When he finished law school, then, it was in the early '50's. Did he become involved in Civil Rights work right away in Durham? When he began to practice?

Mr. McKissick: Not right away.

Mrs. McKissick: Not right away, but he was very active in the youth movement for the NAACP, and from that he went into CORE. Well, he was so active in CORE that they encouraged him to give up his law practice and come to New York City as director of CORE, Congress of Racial Equality.

Mr. McKissick: Equality, yes.

Dr. Silveri: I remember him through those years, and I never knew much about his background. I never knew he was a lawyer or where he was from.

Mr. McKissick: Yes. He was born here.

Dr. Silveri: I've seen him many times on TV, and kept up with him.

Mrs. McKissick: Oh, boy! He was a tough character then, wasn't he?

[They all laugh loudly]

Dr. Silveri: He certainly was!

Mrs. McKissick: He always was a McKissick! He always says what he thinks, and what he says he always stands behind. One thing about it, HE IS A MAN!!

Dr. Silveri: Yes!

Mrs. McKissick: In every sense of the word!

Mr. McKissick: I don't know if you've seen that. [A brochure is examined] If you haven't, I'll give that to you.

Dr. Silveri: I'd like to have it for my files.

Mr. McKissick: I'd like you to have it for facts you might need to know about Floyd. He's built the first village of Soul City there. Here's something else you may have for your file--reference. Now, any questions you want to ask before I tell you anything else?

Dr. Silveri: Why? Do you have something on your mind you'd like to tell us about?

Mr. McKissick: Yes. I want to tell you about Soul City. They had a program down there, a dedication of the Magnolia-Ernest Recreation Complex. This was held in honor of the parents of the Founder of Soul City, Saturday, May 21, 1977, 11:30 a.m., Soul City Parks and Recreation Association, Soul City, North Carolina. This was named in our honor. My name is Ernest; my wife, Magnolia. Swimming pool, bath house, volley ball, basketball--all in that complex. We went down there for it in a big 707 jet. They had three hundred people there, and the officials from Washington and other places. Want to see that?

Dr. Silveri: How many acres are down there?

Mr. McKissick: Five thousand and some-odd acres. I forget exactly how many, five thousand and something acres.

Dr. Silveri: And where is that located?

Mr. McKissick: Soul City is about sixty miles from Durham and Raleigh.

Dr. Silveri: East?

Mr. McKissick: I'd say northeast.

Dr. Silveri: Northeast? O.K.

Mr. McKissick: It is off U.S. Interstate 85.

Dr. Silveri: How was he able to put together all of that, planning the fitness program?

Mr. McKissick: Well, I'll tell you. Floyd had another friend, a lawyer named Clayton. Floyd told me while he was in Durham. He said, "Daddy, you know I've been looking around." Floyd said, "I want to build something." He took me several places and said, "I want to show you some places." And I said, "Well, you already have a farm, son, down here." He has a farm there about four, five, or six acres or more. I said, "You don't want to build there any more?" He said, "Oh, I want to save that; keep that. I want to build somewhere else. I'm going to look around." He and Clayton were good friends. He told Clayton to look out for him down there in Warren County. Clayton was down there, and looked all around. Floyd had him to buy up some property. He didn't want to alarm the people. Of course, it alarmed the people that a black man was buying up the property. There'd been a lot of fury! They had signs out there on the highway: "THIS IS KLAN LAND!" He just kept on buying it, and buying it, and buying it. They didn't know it 'til 'way late that he had the property, and when they did, it was too late then. [He laughs.] Because he already had all the property. He wouldn't let it be known, see?

Dr. Silveri: Was it farm land?

Mr. McKissick: Farm land? Farm land, yes. Rolling hills, beautiful, beautiful. I mean as far as you could see, Soul City owned all that land! They have a regional water works there that is really wonderful. Now they furnish water for Henderson, Oxford, Soul City, and, I think Warren just got in on it recently. They put up the sewage and water system. We went all through it. Most of the money has been put underground. Of course, everything has been put underground, all the wiring, sewage, and water, and everything. The streets have lights there. Not

all over it, but all around the section where they are building Green Village. That's where the old mansion place is. The old master lived in the house, and they are going to--

Mrs. McKissick: Call it "Duke Green House."

Mr. McKissick: "Duke Green, yes, House." This village is going to be, the first village now, the "Ark of Pines." They have about 12, 13, 14, 15 new homes there now, and building more! They're at peak now. It's a multi-racial affair. Every color, white, black, blue, green, and all. If you have the money, you can get it. They have the people out there, about five or six firms, that will furnish everything for it. You want it. You buy. Now industry--they're dickering for industry to come in, a certain amount. They've had a certain amount down there. No, I don't know just what they have. Some industry is there already in the Soul Tech building, which is a huge thing.

Dr. Silveri: And this takes up all his time, now, doesn't it?
That work?

Mr. McKissick: Yes. He doesn't travel as much as he used to. He used to be gone practically all the time. He's staying home a little more.

Dr. Silveri: Do you see him often?

Mr. McKissick: We've gone down there. When? We were down there when they had that--we were down there then to see him.

Mrs. McKissick: He's been here since then. He came to speak at some kind of affair they had.

Mr. McKissick: And his daughter's getting married the last, sixth of August. We're going down there for the wedding.

Dr. Silveri: I wonder if I could ask Mrs. McKissick some questions?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, sir! You certainly can!

Dr. Silveri: While you are also here, too. Are you a native of Asheville?

Mrs. McKissick: No, I'm not.

Dr. Silveri: Where are you from?

Mrs. McKissick: I was born in South Carolina.

Dr. Silveri: I see. Where?

Mrs. McKissick: In Lancaster.

Dr. Silveri: Lancaster, South Carolina.

Mrs. McKissick: I don't know anything about it, because I left there at an early age. My father was an AME Zion minister. I came to Hopkins Chapel after he was assigned here in 1917. I came in 1918.

Dr. Silveri: Nineteen eighteen was the first time you came to Asheville?

Mrs. McKissick: The first time I had been to Asheville.

Dr. Silveri: What was your maiden name?

Mrs. McKissick: Thompson.

Dr. Silveri: Thompson. That's a good solid American name, right?
[They all laugh.]

Mrs. McKissick: All South Carolinians.

Dr. Silveri: What I meant, McKissick is not a very common name. What is the background on that name?

Mr. McKissick: Scotch-Irish.

Dr. Silveri: So when you came to the Asheville area the first World War was on?

Mrs. McKissick: Yes. My Daddy was pastor of Hopkins Chapel, and

we moved here. He came in 1917. That was in the fall, and we didn't come until after the new year, in 1918.

Dr. Silveri: And then what year were you married, again?

Mrs. McKissick: Nineteen nineteen.

Dr. Silveri: So, it's obvious how you met your husband; because he was a member of Hopkins Chapel.

Mrs. McKissick: No! I met him at Livingstone College.

Dr. Silveri: Oh, that's right!

Mrs. McKissick: We went to college together.

Dr. Silveri: Oh, O.K. You met there, but then when he came home from the war you had finished at Livingstone and were at Asheville.

Mrs. McKissick: I was at home. He wasn't able to finish, he had to leave. I stayed there and finished, and came home. We corresponded while he was in service.

Dr. Silveri: Then you were married shortly after he came home from the war?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, October the eighth.

Dr. Silveri: How long did your father remain as pastor of Hopkins?

Mrs. McKissick: He was in Asheville from 1917 to 1921.

Dr. Silveri: And then, and he moved away?

Mrs. McKissick: Then he was moved away. You know, in the Methodist churches you stay in a place three or four years, and you are moved. He was pastor in most of the larger cities in North Carolina and South Carolina, and he's been in Alabama and Tennessee, and he died in Tennessee.

Dr. Silveri: I bet he would have been a very interesting man to talk with about his experiences in those states.

Mrs. McKissick: Well, I never visited in those states. He went to most of those places after I went to college. The last place I lived with them was in Charlotte. And I went to Livingstone College from Charlotte.

Dr. Silveri: O.K. So, then when he moved from Asheville you were already married, so you stayed?

Mrs. McKissick: So I stayed here.

Dr. Silveri: How many children in your family?

Mrs. McKissick: Four. Three girls and one boy.

Dr. Silveri: Did they stay in Asheville, too.

Mrs. McKissick: Oh, no. I was the only one.

Dr. Silveri: Only one? Where did the others go?

Mrs. McKissick: I have a younger sister that lives in Tennessee. I have an older sister in Baltimore, Maryland. My brother lives in Philadelphia.

Dr. Silveri: Did any of those two in Baltimore and Philadelphia ever tell you that you ought to come up there to live?

Mrs. McKissick: Oh, yes! They often asked me to come, especially to Philadelphia. After I finished school I decided that I did not want to teach, so I took a little refresher business course and I got a job with North Carolina Mutual. I felt that if I stayed here and did a good job I could do just as well in Asheville as I could anywhere else, because I consider, I may be wrong, but I consider a person's success is eighty percent due to that person, regardless of where he lives!

Dr. Silveri: Well, how long did you stay with that job?

Mrs. McKissick: Twenty-nine years, and retired with honors!

Mr. McKissick: That's right. Twenty-nine!

Mrs. McKissick: When I went in C.C. Spaulding was the president. I didn't agree with him.

Dr. Silveri: I've heard of that name. Yes.

Mrs. McKissick: Well, they told me, "This is your penny and this is MY penny, and as long as these pennies don't get together you'll have a job! So HIS pennies were always in place for twenty-nine years!

Dr. Silveri: Very impressive. You must have taken a maternity leave when you had your children?

Mrs. McKissick: Well, my children were all here, then. You see, my youngest girl had just gone to school.

Dr. Silveri: I see. Oh, yes.

Mrs. McKissick: I stayed home as long as they were--I sewed. At that time I used to line and re-line men's overcoats and make women's clothes, you know. I did a lot of that work at home.

Dr. Silveri: How long have you been in this house?

Mrs. McKissick: We came here in 1936.

Dr. Silveri: Wow!

Mr. McKissick: Thirty-six, that's about 41 years, isn't it?

Dr. Silveri: Forty-one years is a long time. Has the neighborhood changed much?

Mrs. McKissick: Very much. Very much.

Dr. Silveri: Did you know Dr. Mary Shuford?

Mrs. McKissick: Yes.

Dr. Silveri: I've had a number of interviews with her, and she said-- I understand she's the one who had a lot to do with the establishment of what is called the Asheville Colored Hospital.

Mrs. McKissick: Yes.

Dr. Silveri: Remember that? Where was that located?

Mrs. McKissick: Yes. Where Jesse Ray's Funeral Home is, on Biltmore Avenue.

Dr. Silveri: So the original structure is all torn down?

Mrs. McKissick: Well, if it's not torn down, it's remodeled so that you wouldn't identify it.

Dr. Silveri: When did you retire from the insurance company? What year?

Mrs. McKissick: Nineteen hundred and sixty.

Dr. Silveri: What are your feelings about Asheville? I liked to ask your husband about race relations in the city. Have you ever seen it improve? Has it improved?

Mrs. McKissick: They have improved to some extent, but there is room for much more improvement as far as employment is concerned. Now, we can't give Asheville credit for what the government has done.

Dr. Silveri: The Federal Government?

Mrs. McKissick: You see, the Federal Government has made employment for many people and created these different departments. But, as far as the local person is concerned, Asheville hadn't made as much improvement as it could have. Unfortunately, when I came here this was really a tourist town and the main support came from people who would come here as a summer resort town. They spent their money freely, and most of the people made their money either waiting on people or other things. As far as professionals, now, we had very few. Now we don't have enough doctors. We are speaking--as far as the Negro is concerned. We have

had three lawyers, but now they seem to be going away. One of them has recently, well, he's retired, I should say, and the doctors who are working, most of them are getting old. It seems that we have a hard time influencing young doctors or young professionals to come to Asheville. I don't know why that is, but we just have that problem.

Dr. Silveri: Well, that's unusual, because it seems to be a fairly nice place to live, here in the mountains. Did you vote for Jimmy Carter?

Mrs. McKissick: I did not!

Dr. Silveri: You didn't vote at all? You did vote, but you didn't vote for Jimmy Carter.

Mrs. McKissick: I voted for Ford.

Dr. Silveri: How about you, Mr. McKissick?

Mr. McKissick: We voted for the same people. We vote the same way.

Dr. Silveri: Why?

Mr. McKissick: Well, I figured he, just as well try him. He could do as good as anybody else.

Dr. Silveri: Who? Ford?

Mr. McKissick: Yes.

Mrs. McKissick: I felt that Ford came in at a very serious time and he really hadn't had an opportunity to show what he could do, you see. At that time everybody was disturbed and, of course, he was naturally not able to do his best because he had to deal with conditions.

Dr. Silveri: I can ask you. The reason why you voted for Ford instead of Carter is that you didn't trust Carter as a Southerner?

Mrs. McKissick: No. I didn't know Carter.

Dr. Silveri: You didn't know Carter?

Mrs. McKissick: I didn't know Carter.

Dr. Silveri: Didn't know him well enough to vote for him?

Mrs. McKissick: No, and I felt that inasmuch as Ford had come in at a crucial time and had done the best he could that he was deserving of a chance to show what he could do.

Dr. Silveri: I see.

Mrs. McKissick: At least, I wanted him to have one term.

Dr. Silveri: I see. You feel that--that was your line of thinking, too, that way?

Mr. McKissick: Yes. That was my line of thinking, too.

Dr. Silveri: Do you have a basic distrust for Jimmy Carter as a white Southerner?

Mr. McKissick: No, I didn't, to be frank. You know, when Truman got in I said to my wife, "You know one thing, honey, I'm afraid, oh, I'm scared to death!" 'Cause he was a Southern man, I was scared. Truman turned out to be one of the best Presidents we ever had!

Dr. Silveri: That's very true! [They all laugh] Let's talk about local politics here. There has been, let's see, I was back here, my first time in Asheville was 1972, and there was a black city councilman. I've forgotten his name. I don't know if you know him. He's a lawyer.

Mr. McKissick: That's Dailey, Reuben Dailey.

Mrs. McKissick: Attorney.

Dr. Silveri: Dailey, Reuben Dailey, I guess. Just last year, or the year before, Dr. Michaels had been elected. Let's see. Is he on the School Board or the City Council? I have forgotten which.

Mrs. McKissick: Which?

Dr. Silveri: Dr. Michaels.

Mrs. McKissick: Dr. Michael. He is a City Councilman.

Dr. Silveri: City Council. Right.

Mrs. McKissick: Dr. Holt is on the School Board.

Dr. Silveri: Dr. Holt. There have been relatively few blacks who have served on the City Council, or the County Board, or the City School Board, I believe. Why is that? Let's see, now, about one-third of the population of Asheville is black, as I understand it. Right? So it seems to me that they could wield more clout in politics.

Mr. McKissick: It looks like every time we want to run somebody for office, I'm sorry to say this, but at the last election, I think, we had three or four running for councilman. Now you know good and well somebody, somewhere, is putting some ink in the water. When it comes to a situation like that, somebody has to bow out. Three ought to bow out and put one man in, so everybody will get behind him. Divided, we're not going to get anywhere. All that stick together, you can't break.

Dr. Silveri: I see.

Mr. McKissick: That's the bad mistake that we made in the last election.

Mrs. McKissick: And the lack of leadership.

Mr. McKissick: And lack of leadership.

Mrs. McKissick: They need somebody to put them together.

Mr. McKissick: Sometimes they're rather reluctant, well, some voters are reluctant to vote black for some personal little old question or thing. Now, you want the qualifications of a person. You can get a white man that is the same way. Not worth a nickel under the same conditions. So there you are!

Dr. Silveri: Have you had much contact, well you must have had quite a lot of contact with the mountain people, the people who live 'way back up in the coves and hollows?

Mr. McKissick: The coves and all? No, we don't. Only when they come to town, unless we happen to go out there. You know, I'll tell you one thing, if you know any of them they're true blue! They'll treat you, you know, just like anyone else. For instance, we have Reverend Wesley Grant here at the World Wide Missionary Baptist Tabernacle. He's a Negro. Now, you'd be surprised, back up in these mountain, coves, from here to Tennessee, they are crazy about Grant. They've come to get him. He will hold revivals for them, I mean the white people, all around here in these mountains, all through Tennessee, and some places in South Carolina and Georgia. They'd send for him to come and he'd preach. He'd preach a hell-fire sermon.

Dr. Silveri: He's still preaching now?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, sir!

Dr. Silveri: What is his name?

Mr. McKissick: He is a fine man!

Dr. Silveri: What is his name?

Mr. McKissick: Wesley Grant.

Dr. Silveri: Wesley Grant?

Mr. McKissick: World Wide Baptist Church. I'd like for you to talk to him.

Mrs. McKissick: He'd be a nice man to talk with.

Mr. McKissick: I'd like for you to talk with him.

Dr. Silveri: Oh, he lives here in Asheville?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, he lives here in Asheville, on Choctaw Street.

Dr. Silveri: He would be an interesting man to meet.

Mr. McKissick: Man, yes. He's fine. He'd tell you, if you want to know, about these mountain people. We're surprised, but they are crazy about him. He sleeps, eats, at their homes, and everything. At one time we couldn't do that. I remember. If you were a black man you better not be caught around there. You'd better get on out. Now it's different. I remember, over in Waynesville and Canton, black man had better get out of there before dark. They won't fool around with you. Used to be terrible. It's different now.

Dr. Silveri: Do you have anything else you'd like to say? I think I've asked just about all the questions that I was interested in.

Mr. McKissick: Yes. Well, I'll tell you about the YMI. Years ago the YMI was the focal point, the center for Negro culture in Asheville, 'way back when we started. It started 'way back when Vanderbilt sold us the building. That institution has been there through the years. We've had barber shops in there. We've had shoe shops in there. We've had drugstores change hands--YMI drugstore changed hands about four or five times. We've had prayer meetings, church, Bible class.

Dr. Silveri: Has it always been the same building?

Mr. McKissick: In that same building. Those things have happened in that building, the YMI on the corner of Market and Eagle Street.

Dr. Silveri: On Pack Square?

Mr. McKissick: No, no. On Market and Eagle Street, up town. The YMI is the Market Street Branch of YMCA. They have it closed now on account of needing repairs and all, condemned. That's where the Negroes met.

In the main auditorium of that building, on every Sunday, we would have what you call "Song Service." We would sing different songs that each one would suggest, and just have a fine time. Some of the finest speakers from all over the country came here. We'd ask them to come and speak on Sunday afternoon. The service was for one hour. The drug-store downstairs would close that hour from five to six o'clock so that there wouldn't be any interference. Everybody went upstairs to song service. We had Madam Hackney here. She trained the chorus. I don't remember all the distinguished men and women. These were distinguished people, the "Who's Who" in North Carolina. They went to speak there on Sunday afternoon. It was really an educational thing. Nothing like it. The people just flocked there.

Dr. Silveri: It was called the YMI?

Mr. McKissick: YMI, Young Men's Institute.

Dr. Silveri: Young Men's Institute. And it was supported by a board of trustees?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, that's right. The Board of Management ran the YMI.

Dr. Silveri: That continued up until just recently?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, continued until about twenty years ago. They haven't had that kind of a meeting there with songs, and all that, for twenty years or more. But they used to have all that, like I said, from 1900 - 1950. See what happened, what social things that went on, and how YMI influenced the Negroes of Asheville.

Now, Mrs. Maggie Jones, she was a graduate of Tuskegee and a seamstress, and she did all the sewing for the high-falutin' people here in Asheville. She did the sewing for all of them. And she formed what you

call a girl's industrial club, and these girls, if they wanted to be servants, were trained to be. She trained them up there. Every Thursday when the "help" was off, cooks, maids, butlers, and so forth, they would meet up there and they would have classes, instructions on what to do. She would instruct them how to wait on people, and so forth, and so on. She was top figure during that time in Asheville until she died. She was part, she formed the Federation, President of the Federation Club, and other things. And she had other women with her that worked with us. The women of Asheville helped to make a YMI, buy that building, because the men alone couldn't have bought it. They would help us in everything we wanted to do to pay for that building. Now I started associating with the YMI connected, as a boy. We paid fifty cents a year to join the YMI, something like the YMCA. We had downstairs shower baths and tub baths. We'd box and wrestle in the basement. Upstairs in the gym we played volleyball and basketball. And that's where, to tell you the truth, I confessed religion. I was baptized in that building. So you see, it's part of me, and I'm the oldest living member today. I'm eighty some years old, and that's part of me. I hate to see it go down, and somebody ought to do something about it. The people of Asheville ought to get behind it and restore it, help build it back, put it on its feet. I feel that's what they should do.

Dr. Silveri: Now, they used to hold religious services in there?

Mr. McKissick: Yes, sir. We used to have religious services. Any time any church didn't have anywhere to go, or a building, or they got burned out or anything, they held services at the YMI.

Dr. Silveri: That's not where Hopkins Chapel is located, it is?

Mr. McKissick: No, we used to have church in there when our church burned. Yes, we just rented from the YMI people. The official, the secretary, would assign a date. We'd all use it at that time. They'd open the building up and have church service, then everybody would leave. The Presbyterians, when they didn't have a church, had service there. We had a week of prayer at the YMI every year. During those times the minister from the different churches would preach every two or three nights until Friday night, when they closed down. I think, Ben Jackson, Holt (that's Herman Holt), and--

Mrs. McKissick: Howell, Raymond Howell's father.

Mr. McKissick: Raymond Howell's father, and myself--at one week of prayer--confessed religion at the Prayer Meeting at the YMI. Then, after that I joined Hopkins Chapel, AME Zion Church. Our church burned and we had services at YMI, and everybody else, when they had trouble where they couldn't get a meeting place. All the schools in Asheville would have their rehearsals and their school closings there in the YMI. Behind it was a high hill. Kids would throw rocks and sometimes break the windows and disturb what was going on. We had to pull down the shades to keep them from seeing in on that side of the building on that hill. They tore down the hill and built a foundry around there.

Dr. Silveri: And the blacks kept this YMI up by themselves? Raise money by your own people?

Mr. McKissick: My own people, and white people, too, when we could. Now the United Fund, up the late years, helped us carry on in membership campaigns.

Dr. Silveri: Would you like to see the building renovated and kept flying?

Mr. McKissick: I certainly would.

Dr. Silveri: Is there a need?

Mr. McKissick: I would like it. There is a need for it. We need it. We really need it. I don't know, you feel like you have something of your own. The older people would like to see the YMI open. We'd go in and play games, like basketball; go in and sit down and play checkers and all different games, and all, and read magazines and read papers.

Dr. Silveri: Does it look like it will happen?

Mr. McKissick: Well, we hope it will. I'm praying that it will. I noticed the morning's paper had something about it this morning. Did you see it?

Dr. Silveri: I saw that.

Mr. McKissick: That's it. Well, what we're hoping, we're hoping that someone will come to our rescue. We hope! We need a new roof. We need a heating plant, a new heating plant, you know; plumbing system. And some re-wiring and other repairs need to be done. If somebody, if the Lord will send a good rich philanthropist along to give us some money to do that, we'd appreciate it! It would be a great boost if the people of Asheville could do it for the YMI. They ought not let that building go down. That building is, it's worth money. It needs some work done on it, but it's worth money.

Dr. Silveri: Your family, your children, have gotten use out of the YMI over the years. It has been very important!

Mr. McKissick: Yes, that's right! Not only mine, but other black

families in Asheville, the older ones that are willing to appreciate it.

Dr. Silveri: I want to thank you for your time. You know, of course, that Mrs. Herring is trying to collect as much information as possible about the blacks in Asheville, and the UNC-A Library is doing all it can to preserve the records, and so on. This will become part of it, and I want to thank you for your time.

Do you want to add anything, Mrs. McKissick?

Mrs. McKissick: No, I think he's just about covered everything.

Dr. Silveri: I can't think of anything now, but maybe after I review the tape there may be some questions I may. . . .[inaudible]

Mr. McKissick: O.K.

Dr. Silveri: Thank you.