

SUB: Eugene Hickson

INT: Button Project

PLACE: Arcadia

NOV. 20, 1980

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I: . . . divided up into six sections and each section is focused on a different aspect of black officials. The first section deals with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and it's trying to find out what effect it had. The first question, <sup>this is</sup> is just personal; ~~When~~ did you first register to vote?

H: Good question. When I was 21 years old. When you registered ~~in~~ to vote in that time, ~~you~~ <sup>you</sup> had to be 21 to vote at that time. I'd have to do some figuring back. I'm 45 now so you can figure it back, talking about years. I registered when I was 21.

I: ~~You did,~~ <sup>Mm hm,</sup> okay, so that's twenty-~~three~~ <sup>four</sup> years ago. Okay, was that when you were first eligible? You were first eligible then?

H: Right.

I: And you registered right away. Okay. You were registered by a local registration then, that's right?

H: Yeah, city hall.

I: Okay. Were you ever turned down by a registrar?

H: No no.

I: Have any voter registration drives been held in Arcadia?

H: No more than during election time when they's trying to get the voters to register, the ones that's not registered, they register 'em to vote, and . . .

I: Mostly the candidates?

H: Right, no, the workers mostly get the people that are not registered to go and register <sup>time</sup> for voting ~~in county,~~ make sure that they're . . .

I: But they're part of the election campaign?

H: In, in that aspect, yes.

I: These are held normally before every election?

H: Not necessarily, sometimes they have 'em during the year. <sup>When</sup> ~~the~~ the registration book is open ~~so~~ <sup>would, you</sup> you can ~~try and get as many as you can to~~ go up there and register, the one's that's not registered.

I: Did it happen more in the the <sup>sixties</sup> ~~1960s~~ than the <sup>seventies?</sup> ~~1970s?~~

H: I imagine it did, yeah.

I: Okay, were these voter registration drives very successful?

H: To my knowledge, I think they ~~are~~ have a bearing.

I: Do you think any decided elections?

H: Beg your pardon?

I: Do you think any were the deciding factor in the outcome of the election?

H: <sup>you mean</sup> As far as the black vote is concerned?

I: Yes.

H: Yes, I think so.

I: Are there anythings in your district which prevent blacks from registering?

H: No.

I: No. Not any kind of underlying things that . . .

H: That prevent 'em from voting, <sup>from</sup> registering?

I: From registering?

H: No, no.

I: Okay. In some of the other areas there have been some things that prevent blacks from registering and eventually voting. And, would you rate these as to, if you think they're very important? <sup>?</sup> The first one is economic dependence on whites.

H: You want to know whether that <sup>has</sup> ~~have~~ any bearing?

I: Yes.

H: Or whether it <sup>has</sup> ~~have~~ . . .

I: On whether the black registers.

- H: No no. That doesn't have any bearing.
- I: None at all. What about fear of physical violence from whites?
- H: No.
- I: No? Complicated registration forms? Poor registration hours?
- H: No, I wouldn't say to the certain extent, because the ones that really want to register, they have ~~the power~~. The polls will be open for certain hours, they can go register. After they get off from work if they wanted to.
- I: After they get off from work they can still register?
- H: Usually they stay open some days until 7:00 <sup>to</sup> and give the people that want to register, try and get them to register.
- I: Okay, registration not held often enough?
- H: They have it once a year.
- I: For how long?
- H: Period of time after that, <sup>I don't</sup> ~~can't~~ remember now, <sup>a</sup> ~~the~~ period of time after that.
- I: Do you think that hinders any blacks from voting.
- H: Not necessarily, if they want to vote they <sup>will</sup> put forth an effort to.
- I: Okay, what about indifference of blacks to voting?
- H: That wouldn't have any bearing.
- I: You mean like um, do you think the blacks are interesting in registering in Acadia?
- H: Most of them I'll say that, they're concerned now.
- I: Okay, what about gerrymandering?
- H: Beg your pardon?
- I: Gerrymandering, that's where like one section of town is, say ~~the~~ blacks live in predominantly one section, And the charter sets up the district so that that's divided, meaning that the black vote is split, so that it's effectiveness is really reduced. Is that true of Arcadia?
- H: You mean in sections where you vote at?
- I: Yeah, not the precincts, or do you just have, are you elected at large?
- H: Yes. I voted here.

I: Right, so there are no districts at all, no voting districts?

H: no, not, no. No more than the precincts <sup>that</sup> they go to vote, *yeah*.

I: Okay. Now the next set of questions deals with the election campaign specifically. Were you able to campaign freely?

H: Sure.

I: Nothing, no interference <sup>at all</sup> from anyone?

H: No, um um.

I: Were you handicapped by a lack of campaign money?

H: No, I used my personal money.

I: Okay, why did you decide to run for office?

H: I felt concerned for my community. I thought I could do the city some good

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I: So you had some goals when you started off?

H: Right.

I: What kind of goals were they?

H: Well, to make more things better for the youth <sup>in</sup> the community, which I haven't fully achieved yet. Of course we're working, we've got it in the making that we *will* have these things, facilities complete <sup>for the,</sup> in the black community, for black and whites.

I: What political organization do you belong to?

H: Member chamber of commerce, Masonic Shriner, member of the 

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I: Are you a Republican or Democrat?

H: Democrat.

I: What were the most important issues when you campaigned?

H: Issues . . .

I: Like what was your platform, did you say . . .

H: No we didn't, I didn't have a special platform. I made no promises.

I: So it was just a matter of qualification?

H: Right.

I: Okay. What were the main problems facing blacks at that time?

H: Really there was no, really no problem as far as blacks concerned, ~~No~~ more than usual.

I: What do you, what's usual?

H: To be frank with you, I mean I can't remember, I said usual <sup>but</sup> ~~right~~, I can't remember definitely no problem <sup>among</sup> ~~of~~ blacks between the relationship of the black and white.

I: Now this doesn't necessarily mean the relationship between blacks and whites. <sup>But,</sup> ~~if~~ you go up to a black and say you know, "What would you like done, you know, what's your gripe?" ~~What~~ would they tell you?

H: I haven't had any of that really, I mean, as far as gripes.

I: They're all pretty happy?

H: They seem to be, I mean \_\_\_\_\_ in action.

I: Okay.

H: No more than, you know, an odd or ends or things need to be done in the community likes streets and sidewalks, And <sup>different communities</sup> ~~the community~~ like to gripe on that, but we've really \_\_\_\_\_ on that, had ~~it~~ it taken care of. Most of that.

I: Okay, the next set of questions deals with the conditions that enable blacks to win offices in Florida. You were elected at large, right? How many people are in the district, the city?

H: The city, it's a little bit <sup>over two thousand</sup> ~~under 2000~~ registered voters.

I: Registered, and what percentage of the population is black?

H: It's <sup>of the city,</sup> ~~probably thirty~~ it's about thirty, thirty percent, thirty per cent.

I: Do you know what percentage of the blacks of voting age in your district are registered?

H: That are registered?

I: Yeah.

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I: Just estimate.

H: I'm ~~not~~ going to estimate...

I: Are most of the blacks registered in the county of voting age?

H: Yes, ma'am.

I: Think so. Do you think you got many votes from whites?

H: Yes, majority.

I: A majority?

H: Majority of my votes came from whites.

I: What percentage of the black vote did you get?

H: I got the majority of the black vote. But I was, when I ran there was eight with me, seven whites and one black, ~~And~~ I got the majority of the total number of votes ~~which was~~ <sup>including</sup> black and white. I was the top vote-getter, yeah. In other words, there was a precinct all of 'em were white-black votes. And that's east of town. And I got more votes over there than any of the whites, and it true that I did get more ~~votes~~.

I: Okay, do you know percentage-wise how much you got of the black vote? Did you get like, you know almost all of it, <sup>ninety</sup> ninety-five per cent of it?

H: I'd say ninety, ninety per cent of the black vote.

I: Okay, um.

H: All of them are not going to vote directly you know, some of them are going to have some gripes regardless.

I: So what percentage of the total vote did you get? There were eight running, do you know your percentage of the vote? Did you have over fifty per cent, did you win on the first ballot?

H: Yes, I won on the first ballot.

I: So it was over <sup>fifty</sup> ~~fifty~~, right?

H: Yeah.

I: The next section is probably the most important section. It's , the questions

I: are asked to determine how well the black officials have been able benefit those they represent. In what ways do you think you have helped blacks in your district by holding office, I mean your whole city?

H: In my representation I, in the problems that the black have I've presented them and usually they'll go along with it. I mean, like I say like streets, lights, sidewalks . . .

I: Are you pretty persuasive, pretty persuasive?

H: Yes, that's how I got . . . so far <sup>I'm</sup> ~~I've been~~ pretty lucky.

I: Usually successful?

H: Yeah.

I: Okay, ~~is~~ there any thing that's prevented you from doing a better job in regard to black problems?

H: No.

I: Another little form. (chuckle) Some other black officials have run into problems, and these are the ones like they state most frequently. <sup>Would</sup> ~~Could~~ you rate those? The authority of your office, <sup>you're</sup> ~~your~~ vice mayor, ~~now~~, what kind of authority do you have?

H: Really... <sup>they're both,</sup> ~~The~~ mayor and the vice-mayor serves <sup>as</sup> ~~at~~ pleasure of the city council.

I: So you're not actually a member of the council?

H: Yeah, I'm a member of the council.

I: Oh you are.

H: But the mayor itself serves <sup>as a, as</sup> ~~at~~ the pleasure of the council. In other words, ~~how~~ <sup>house</sup> ~~they~~ elect the mayor, appoints the mayor. In other words, the mayor is not elected by the city officials.

I: He's not a member of ~~that~~ the....?

H: He's a member of the council, but he's appointed by the council, but he doesn't run for office anymore.

I: So you're elected, right?

H: I'm elected to the city council, but the members of the city council appointed me vice-mayor, and appointed him the mayor, as mayor.

I: Right, okay.

H: So he really comes through the council body, the mayor and the vice-mayor, between the five men.

I: Right. That's happening \_\_\_\_\_ . But do you have much authority? Do you . . . ?

H: Not, not, I don't think so . . .

I: Just a regular councilman. ~~Am~~

H: A vice-mayor doesn't have, don't have much say, \_\_\_\_\_ doesn't have too much voice.

I: Are you often outvoted by white officials? Is there any kind of split between white-black?

H: You mean council meetings?

I: Yeah council ~~meeting~~.

H: No, you're really, you're pretty close together.

I: Okay, what about available revenue, does that kind of hinder you in what you'd like to do?

H: To a certain extent. We don't have money to do the things that we really want to do.

I: What about cooperation from the whites, <sup>do</sup> you think you get cooperation?

H: I, so far I have, I think it's very good.

I: What about cooperation from blacks?

H: It seems to be better relationship between the black and myself since I was elected to this office. They seem to rely on me, depending on personal, whatever ~~happens there~~, <sup>I have to say,</sup> I mean, they go along with it.

I: Right, okay. What about state officials? Do you get cooperation from state officials? Do they ever bother you?

H: New services?

I: Yes, like maybe more frequent police patrol or different, more efficient garbage pickup or new centers open more hours, anything like that?

H: Yeah, we have a schedule of the All Family ~~at the youth's~~ recreation department, ~~that's~~ open every day.

I: Is there anything new that's been added since you've taken office?

H: Nothing new, no more than we made it better, more active.

I: Oh so you have, alright . . . What about these areas here, have there been any improvements in these areas? Police protection?

H: ~~We passed~~ <sup>We've had</sup> regular protections <sup>from</sup> in the police department. You know where we bought each policeman a car of his own so that each one can patrol, do a better job.

I: So you have one policeman per car?

H: Yeah.

I: They wear out fast.

H: Huh?

I: They wear out fast.

H: ~~See,~~ <sup>Yeah,</sup> we've been using one car around the clock, and we found out ~~it was~~ <sup>it's</sup> better to give each policeman his own car.

I: Okay, ~~how~~ <sup>what</sup> about streets and roads, ~~you~~ mentioned that before. Have there been many improvements?

H: Yes. Twice a year we do, do pavement, mostly in the city, both black and white.

I: Are most of the streets paved?

H: Yeah, most of 'em are paved.

I: What about housing?

H: Housing has improved. We have a housing project here.

I: You do?

H: Yeah.

I: Welfare? Does the city provide any kind of welfare benefits?

H: No.

I: Federal officials?

H: No.

I: Come into contact with them ever?

H: No, huh uh, not too much.

I: Have you had any criticism or lack of support from the black community?

H: Not as yet I haven't.

I: How long have you been in office?

H: Since '71.

I: Oh, not bad. So they don't believe you're a token black in government or anything like that?

H: Beg your pardon?

I: Token black in government, does anyone have that attitude?

H: Not that I know of.

I: You're a united community, huh?

H: It's a really nice little community.

I: Do white officials treat you any differently than blacks, black officials?

H: <sup>You mean here</sup> In here in this town?

I; Right.

H: I'm the only black elected official in this town.

I: <sup>So</sup> ~~Then~~ do whites then treat you any differently than say you would expect someone else, a friend, to treat you?

H: Really not. I mean, as far as council is concerned, and <sup>not</sup> ~~my~~ being among them, I'm highly respected among the whites. I mean whether you believe it or not, I mean they're . . .

I: Sure, I believe anything you say. These are questions, I'm just asking for an answer. What about services, are there any new services you've provided to the black community?

H: The city don't, ~~The~~ state does, county welfare.

I: What about employment, have there been many projects to provide more jobs?

H: See this is, this is mostly farm, farming area. ~~And~~ <sup>I mean,</sup> if a person want to work, he can work. Citrus and farming mostly is \_\_\_\_\_ in this community. We have a few industries here.

I: Do you know what the unemployment rate is?

H: Here?

I: Yes.

H: I couldn't pinpoint it right at this present.

I: Parks and recreation, you've done, been pretty effective there, right?

H: Yeah, we've done a lot of improvement on that.

I: What about water, sewage and garbage?

H: ~~We~~'re updating our water and sewage now.

I: <sup>Working on it.</sup> ~~Wasn't any.~~ Okay, health and hospitals? Health and hospitals?

H: Hospitals? <sup>?</sup> Yeah we have a . . .

I: Go on.

H: We have a newly built hospital. Last couple three years we've, I think we've done a great job whereas the hospital is concerned. Care for the, talking about the sick?

I: Yes.

H: Yes, we have . . .

I: So that's recent, <sup>huh?</sup> Has that been since you've been in office?

H: No, just before I went in they built a new hospital.

I: What about education? Been any improvements in the field of education?

H: I imagine there has been, but I couldn't say how, in what respect.

I: What about fire protection?

H: We have good fire protection <sup>through</sup> ~~for~~ the city. We cover the county <sup>and the city.</sup> ~~I understand~~

I: Have you had any input into that?

H: Not necessarily. No more than, course the city council controls that large, anything that operates in the city. But me personally <sup>saying--</sup> ~~then~~ have any control of it, but the city council accepts control.

I: Okay, what I'm getting at when I ask these questions is that you, <sup>in</sup> ~~and~~ your opinion on these different fields, ~~say~~ if you have a goal, you want this done, how does that go over in the council meeting? Do you get your way, are you pretty effective?

H: Usually . . . usually anything I present, it'll usually go over.

I: How many people are on your council?

H: Five.

I: Five, okay. And you're the only black, right?

H: Right.

I: Have you gotten any federal funds for your district?

H: I'm pretty sure but I couldn't pinpoint that.

I: Okay. What about new industries, have you had any part in bringing new industries or retail stores?

H: No, not personally I didn't.

I: Have you been able to see that blacks are hired fairly in local government?

H: There's quite a few youngsters, you know, <sup>like on their summer</sup> ~~under some~~ vacation approached me about the job, but had filled it at the time, I helped him. \_\_\_\_\_

I: And what about those, those city, say like the secretaries, the people in city hall? Are blacks represented in employment there?

H: No. Not as yet they haven't.

I: Okay. Have you gotten much federal revenue sharing money?

H: Yes, the city has.

I: Quite a bit?

H: I couldn't tell you how much it is. ~~We~~ we have to go to city hall.

I: Do you know where it's been used?

H: Yes. We're in the process now of building a public safety building.

I: Have there been any black protests, sit-ins, boycotts, or riots in your city in the last ten years?

H: No.

I: None at all. Okay, the next section is to enable us to make an assesment of black politics in Florida as a whole. What is your opinion of (Gov) Askew?

H: As far as I'm concerned . . .

I: In regard to blacks, what do you think <sup>is</sup> of his opinion towards <sup>blacks?</sup> ~~that?~~

H: I think he's a good governor. I mean, he's fair, as far as I'm concerned.

I: Do you have any opinions of other state officials?

H: No. ~~~~~~~~~ not to pinpoint it anyway.

I: Do you think winning and holding office in Florida has been worth the effort?

H: I think so. It means a lot to ~~have~~ become a black official.

I: Do you think you've accomplished something?

H: I think so.

I: Like what kinds of things?

H: It, it, it means that it be a far sight from, for the younger generation to ~~look~~ <sup>evolve</sup> ~~for~~ something, look back for it.

I: Someone else mentioned that to me, that they think that's very important. Okay this is the last section here, and it's kind of, it's to compile a profile of the black officials in Florida. And these are kind of, some of them are personal questions but they won't be recorded as your answers, they'll just be recorded as statistic number one \_\_\_\_\_. The first one is just the type of office held. So you're a vice-mayor and member of the council?

H: Councilman, yeah, vice-mayor, yeah.

I: Okay, and when were you elected?

H: To this office, I was elected in 1971 to the council. But in 1973 I was elected councilman and appointed vice-mayor.

I: How often do you have to run?

H: Ran in '71 for two years, and in '73 I was top vote-getter, and the first three top vote-getters get four years, so I was four years, so I got two more years.

I: And so you took office in '71?

H: Right.

I: And continued to the present. So you've actually run for office twice, right?

H: Right, no, I ran three times. The first time I ran I lost by five votes.

I: So when was that, you ran the first time?

H: That was in '69, '70, ~~'71~~-'69.

I: <sup>Sixty-nine.</sup> ~~'69~~ Okay, how old are you now?

H: Forty-five.

I: Okay, um okay, I know your occupation. Education? What's your educational background?

H: No more than I finished high school, and I went to embalming school at Gupton Junior College in Monterey in Nashville, Tennessee.

I: How many years did you attend?

H: I graduated in 1948, and I went to Gupton Junior College and I finished in '52, graduated in 1952, from Monterey.

I: That's four years.

H: No I didn't go there four years. I went there in 1951. It was a year.

I: Oh a year so. Okay. What was your father's occupation?

H: He was a <sup>farmer.</sup> ~~father.~~ I was raised up on the farm.

I: What's your salary received from your elected position?

H: In the city?

I: Uh huh.

H: Two hundred dollars a month.

I: Were you ever active in the civil rights movement of the ~~60s~~ <sup>sixties?</sup>

H: ~~No~~ Hm mm.

I: Was there any reason for that?

H: I just didn't get involved in it.

I: Was it active around here? Did it have any effect on your life?

H: Not really, any fight?

I: Any effect on your life? (chuckle)

H: Really not . . .

I: Were you very aware of it?

H: I was aware of it, but really we didn't have too much movement here in this community.

I: Okay. Have you lived here all your life?

H: Yes.

I: What church do you belong to?

H: Baptist, Deliverence Baptist Church.

I: Are you an official in that church?

H: Yes, I'm the deacon and <sup>the</sup> chairman trustee both.

I; You already told me your community organizations and activities, Are there any other ones that you haven't mentioned?

H: I was appointed by (Gov.) Askew, that was in '70 . . . you know right at '70, it was in the ~~70s~~ <sup>seventies,</sup> the early ~~70s~~ <sup>seventies for</sup> the County Advsisory Committee Board.

I: For what purpose?

H: Advising the <sup>governmental</sup> ~~governor~~ uh, for city officials, county officials for the necessary.

I: Do you know of any other black officials in this area since '74?

H: Closest here is \_\_\_\_\_.

I: Do you know him?

H: Yeah, personally, he's personal~~ly~~, same profession I am. <sup>Holmes and</sup> ~~Home's~~ in Haines City.

I: In Haines City?

H: Yes, he's a funeral director. He's <sup>a new</sup> ~~in, he was~~ elected mayor there.

I: Okay. Getting back to those elections, what about your first election when you didn't win, what percentage of the total vote did you get, and how many people were running then?

H: Well, I don't know the percentage, but I can say this, I contributed to the blacks not cooperating. They didn't, really didn't get out and vote like they should. That was the main reason. Because during that time, in '69 I got more white votes than I did black votes <sup>at</sup> ~~for~~ that time. But the blacks just didn't go vote at that time.

I: Was there any reason for that?

H: They just wasn't concerned, <sup>seemingly.</sup> ~~singularly.~~

I: Cause usually . . .

H: They was registered, but they just didn't get out and vote.

I: Usually you would think, you would think that if a black were running . . .

H: But after, after that I got, had a few speeches and told them their responsibilities in this, and next year when I ran, I mean they just came out full force.

I: Okay, so in '71, how did you do that one?

H: I won in '71.

I: Yeah, but in percentages. Do you remember?

H: No <sup>see</sup> ~~str~~, I couldn't remember.

I: Was there any difference in say like the percentage black or white vote you had <sup>in</sup> in '71 and then <sup>in</sup> '73?

H: I still got the more, more white votes than I did black both times.

I: Do you percentage-wise because there are more whites than blacks? Do you think you got the majority of the black vote in '71?

H: Yeah, I'm pretty sure I did.

I: Say like in '73 you said you had about ninety per cent, did you get less than that in '71 you think?

H: I think I did because I mean it seemed as each year passed they seemed more concerned.

I: Do you think the job you're doing has anything to with that, that they have more and more confidence in you, is that why you're getting more of the black vote?

H: <sup>Yeah</sup> I think so, as time passes on. <sup>Because I've proven,</sup> ~~Of course I proven,~~ huh?

I: What was <sup>their</sup> ~~your~~ attitude at the start, do you know? How did they think of you?

H: <sup>Well,</sup> In the beginning there was quite a few that said that a black man couldn't win.

They said I was running in vain, and I said I was going to show them that I could yet win. That was in '69, and I lost that. <sup>Now as</sup> ~~And~~ I said, I was, I used the words of MacArthur, " I shall return again," and in '71 I ran again and I got it.

I: Yeah, you did it, hu? ~~~~~~~~~ Why did they have that attitude that a black couldn't win?

H: I guess it was tradition, all down through years we've been . . .

I: And that was one of the things that prevented them from going to the polls?

They just . . .

H: They just made up in their mind that a black couldn't win. And if he win, he wouldn't have no voice. That's, that's what's in their mind.

I: <sup>And</sup> ~~So~~ you proved them wrong?

H: ~~Proved~~ it, right.

I: So you think you have a voice?

H: Hell yes.

I: Has there been an attitude change, are blacks, do they feel more part of the city now?

H: Yeah they do. It, it's more unity.

I: What about percentage of, if the blacks are about thirty per cent of the population now, is that a larger percentage than when you first ran in '69?

H: It's about the same, but it's more voters.

I: More voters?

H: Yeah.

I: So blacks <sup>aren't</sup> ~~are~~ staying in Arcadia?

H: They stay here, but they go up on the season upstate after everything is finished here. Most of them go up for the season and come back say three or four monthes after.

I: Okay. I thank you very much. I appreciate it and I really . . .

H: I trust I gave you the information you wanted.

I: Yeah, I think so, you tried.

(End of Interview)