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UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Dr. James Button Project

INTERVIEWEE: Albert W. Tresvant

DATE: September 16, 1975

I: Could you please tell me what year you first registered to vote?

T: It was about thirty years ago.

I: What year were you first eligible to vote? That would make it 1956.

T: Yeah, I'm forty-nine now. At that time eligibility was at the age of twenty-one, and I think I registered about the time when I was supposed to.

I: Did the local registrars ever turn you down when you applied to register?

T: No.

I: Have voter registration drives been held in your district?

T: Yeah, quite often. I have instigated or pushed those registration [drives] as a civic worker, even before I became an elected official.

I: Could you name a couple of those organizations for me? Were they local or national?

T: The one that I had been mostly interested in, which pertained to Opa-locka at large, was the Opa-locka Civic Club. That's about the only one that I've actually participated in.

I: Was there any national one that came down to try and get the voter drive going?

T: Yeah, the Democratic Party, every four years I would say, worked through the Urban League to try to entice people to get the registration drives going.

I: What year were these voter registration drives held?

T: I would say before 1960.

I: How successful were these drives? Did a lot of people get to register?

T: I would say mostly pertaining to black people more or less....

I: Right.

T: Since 1954, we have had more of an extensive drive push.

I: Were there things that prevented blacks from registering to vote in your district?

T: No.

I: What happens here is I'm just going to ask you these orally and if you would just check it fairly important, or very important, or not important. Some of them may not even pertain to Opa-locka. Please rank how important you think each of the following items are in preventing blacks from registering to vote in the area: economic dependence on whites?

T: My personal evaluation on that first question--I don't think that has much of a bearing in south Florida. It might be around the panhandle, but you know....

I: So it's not important then. What about fear of physical violence from whites?

T: No, again, in this area you don't find that problem.

I: Complicated registration forms?

T: Again, no.

I: What about poor registration hours?

T: That might have something to do with it because usually people knock off at five o'clock. If they catch the bus to work, they would get in the registrar's office about six. Well, that office is closed.

I: They don't have night registration in Opa-locka then?

T: No. These offices are geared to fit the person who is running and not the person that's receiving.

I: Right. What about registration not held often enough?

T: I would buy that. That's very important.

I: In Opa-locka if you don't vote in two years, do they take your name off the registration forms?

T: Yes they do.

I: So would you say that's fairly important?

T: Fairly important.

I: What about indifference of blacks to voting? Is there any of that in Opa-locka?

T: No.

I: What about districting? Do they have gerrymandering, like of a black official?

T: Not for the city of Opa-locka, everything is at-large.

I: I guess that's not important either?

T: Right.

I: The following questions are asked to gather information on the election campaigns of black elected officials in Florida. Were you able to campaign freely; that is, were you threatened in any way in your campaign?

T: No.

I: Nobody called your house or family?

T: No. The few smears I got, I call them very unimportant; you're going to have that, even whites call whites during an election.

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

T: I guess, due to the price of everything. When some people want to get paid for doing the least little thing, I feel like, in the black neighborhood, you're dealing with working people, not business people. If you asked a man to stay off his job to do something for you, he's probably losing eighteen to twenty dollars a day. Therefore I feel like he should be compensated. That makes the election campaign quite expensive in the black neighborhood because he expects to get nothing in return for his vote anyway. The old slogan has always been, "Well, what's the use, they're going to do what they want to do anyway." That's slowly leaving but that has always been the real feeling. So they have always said, "If I'm going to work for this guy or he's not going to be of service to me after he gets in office nohow, so I might as well charge him for the week's work?"

I: So it was a little problem then?

T: Yeah.

I: Why did you decide to run for office? Was it your own decision?

T: Yes, it was.

I: It was? You weren't selected by a political party or a group of citizens?

T: In my situation there was a vacancy on the commission and I was selected by a group, black and whites. I was appointed because I had been a stout civic worker in this area. They thought that there was a need for a black official. They appointed me for the remainder of a term which was about four or five months. Then I ran for election.

I: Which political party do you belong to: Republican, Democrat, or other?

T: Democrat.

I: Have you ever received support or financial aid from the party?

T: No.

I: What were the two or three most important issues on which you campaigned when you ran for elections?

T: Better living conditions was one, and I've campaigned strongly on that. I campaigned strongly for more police protection and to cease police brutality if some existed. They were the main platforms.

I: Were these the problems facing the blacks in your community?

T: Yes.

I: These questions are asked to determine some of the conditions which have enabled blacks to win office in Florida. How were you elected: at large or by district? You said at large.

T: At large.

I: How many people in your district? I'll use district now....

T: Let's say it's about 17,000 people in general.

I: What percentage of this population is black?

T: The ratio is about fifty-fifty.

I: What percentage of blacks of voting age in your district are registered to vote?

T: I would say about 30 per cent are just of the voting age.

I: What percentage of blacks who are registered to vote do you estimate actually voted when you were elected?

T: It was way down.

I: It was down from that 30 per cent?

T: Yeah, because as a rule people just don't vote.

I: Do you think you got any votes from whites?

T: I know I did.

I: What percentage of the total vote came from whites? Do you know?

T: I don't have that information.

I: In the election in which you won office, how many opponents did you have?

T: Thirteen opponents.

I: How many were white?

T: Thirteen.

I: What per cent of the total vote did you receive?

T: I would say about 60 per cent.

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

T: By giving them assurances and making them feel that it can be done by voting. Making them realize that in order to obtain some of the things you want you must get out there and register and vote for the man of your choice. Because I won, I hope to have given other blacks incentives in order to run for higher offices.

I: What, if anything, has prevented you from doing a better job, especially in regard to benefitting blacks in your district?

T: Money.

I: Anything else besides?

T: No, I have not had any type of arguments. Nothing has existed in the white population that would have prevented me from doing the job. Of course, you are always going to have obstacles, but that's not a black or white thing that has prevented me from doing it. I have a very, very good relationship with the rest of my commissioners.

I: Just another one of those little questions. This is the same thing: fairly important, not important or...the office has no real authority, that is, not much power in getting things done.

T: Right.

I: Outvoted by white officials? Do you find that that's a problem at all?

T: No.

I: What about not enough money or revenue?

T: That's very important.

I: Are you unfamiliar with administrative duties?

T: No.

I: That's not important?

T: No.

I: How about lack of cooperation from whites?

T: Not important.

I: How about lack of cooperation from blacks?

T: Not important.

I: How about lack of cooperation from the state officials?

T: Well, that's probably fairly important. Fairly important because we don't get all the cooperation that we need from the state.

I: What about lack of cooperation from federal officials? Does that apply to Opa-locka here?

T: The only way it does is by trying to obtain grants and what have you. I would say fairly important.

I: Has criticism or lack of support from the black community hindered you in holding office?

T: No.

I: That blacks don't cooperate with you because they think you're a token in government?

T: No.

I: Do you feel that the white officials treat you any differently from the other officials?

T: Not that I can see. It might be an undercurrent, but I don't see it.

I: They don't consider you a spokesman for the blacks, and you are only able to raise certain issues. That's what I'm trying to say.

- T: I raise everything that's possible. I don't have no type of a problem of that nature. I'm a spokesman for the people and that has been proven. I think everybody knows by now.
- I: So you can raise any issues you want on the board.
- T: Right.
- I: What services have you provided blacks in the district that they did not have before you took office? Could you give us a couple examples of those?
- T: More police protection. Services by itself is a very hard question to answer because in a city like Opa-locka you try to do everything. What you do for one you try to do it for the other or you don't do it. As far as recreational facilities I feel like we had been behind. We're trying to bring it up, but with the cooperation from all the commissioners, so therefore I can't use I.
- I: Please rate how effective you think you have been in each of the following services, and then in terms of benefitting blacks also. Better fire protection, have you been effective, somewhat effective, or not effective? What about streets and roads? Was there a road problem in Opa-locka.
- T: No. We are building a new road now.
- I: What about housing?
- T: That's very effective. We need that bad.
- I: What about welfare?
- T: Welfare, we need that bad. Employment, we need it bad. Parks and recreation, somewhat effective. Water, sewage, we have that. That's good.
- I: Have you been raising these issues or you don't need to raise water and sewage?
- T: We don't need to raise it. Health and hospitals....
- I: Health and hospitals?
- T: Education, which I have nothing to do with.
- I: What about fire protection in the black...?
- T: That's in very good shape.

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

T: Yes.

I: Could you name some of the grants?

T: Naturally we get the revenue sharing funds. I think all cities get that. We are now in the process of receiving a grant from the government on a crime prevention grant.

I: Do you know the amounts of the federal revenue sharing grants?

T: No. I don't know the amounts. We just got a grant for some police equipment: computer and what have you. We're slowly getting the grants in. We only really started working on those grants about a year and a half ago. Now we have a man who does nothing but try to secure grants for us.

I: Have you helped with applying for those grants?

T: Not directly.

I: Have you as an elected official been able to bring industrial retail stores in the community?

T: Not yet.

I: Are they going to try for that?

T: Yes.

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

T: Yes.

I: Was there any problem with that before, policemen not getting promoted or firemen...?

T: Yeah. We had that problem like cities in the South and North, too. We were unable to get qualified blacks in police work. They knew that they were going to a racist department. So why deal with it if you can find a better job? Most blacks who can pass or qualify for the job can definitely find something else that would be more suitable to them. So far I have upgraded two police sergeants that weren't thought of before. I was successful in getting a sergeant last month.

I: What about the fire department?

T: We gave our fire department to metro. We don't have it ourselves.

I: What about just around the office or any...?

T: When I first came here we didn't have any blacks in high echelon here. Now we have an assistant city manager who is black. I have a black receptionist and I have about five blacks in the office of the water department. I have about five black men who work in the water plant. I have two black water meter readers. Naturally, we have blacks in the sanitation and what have you. We have all that.

I: So you could say that things are starting to equal out a little more.

T: It's working out. I'm satisfied in the way it's working out.

I: Has federal revenue sharing helped the district?

T: Yes, it has.

I: Do you know a couple of things that the money is going toward?

T: Alabama Avenue is being financed with revenue sharing money and we are going to refurbish our police department safety building with revenue sharing money. We give away 10 per cent of our revenue sharing money to Dade County functions that have a particular bearing on blacks like manpower, welfare, senior citizens, anything that pertains to the welfare of poor people.

I: Sounds like a good idea. Has there been any black protests, sit-ins, boycotts or riots in your city in the last ten years?

T: Yeah, two.

I: Two? Could you tell me some of the issues that were...?

T: The first one--I think that was in 1970--derived from a white policeman who shot--I think it was through a mistake--a black man. It was a big flare-up then. They burned down some stores and lit up the neighborhoods. We had another one flare up during the Christmas holidays. They had a carnival in the area. The black policemen attempted to put a black woman in jail. In retaliation, black teenagers began to throw rocks at people that were white going down the street and from one thing to another. It just was a big thrill.

I: Was there any good effects that came out of it like after the riots?

T: I believe so because it put the city on notice that if we did do something.... We tried to work out conditions for blacks in the black neighborhood like better living conditions and more recreational facilities for them.

Because if they don't have anything to do, they're going to find something bad to do. Now I think we have a pretty good recreational program in order to enhance people from staying off the street.

I: The following questions are asked for an assessment of black politics in Florida in general. Briefly, what is your opinion of Governor Reuben Askew?

T: I think that he's a pretty nice fellow.

I: Do you think he has a favorable attitude towards policy towards blacks in Florida?

T: In my opinion, yes.

I: What is your opinion of the other state officials and state representatives? Do you feel like they're helping the blacks?

T: I wouldn't say that everybody's done all they can, but I would say that the state officials that are from the larger cities are doing their share to try to make Florida a better place to live.

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

T: Yes, definitely, absolutely.

I: Could you elaborate on that just a little bit?

T: As I said before, I think to win is always a blessing but black people to try to get into the mainstream of local and state government, I think that is a very great asset. Because the more representation that black people have, then that gives the black citizen more assurance that they know that things are going to be better for them.

I: This is the last section here. These questions are asked to compile an overall view of black elected officials in Florida. Type of office held?

T: I'm the mayor.

I: When was the date you were first elected?

T: As a commissioner?

I: Right.

T: In 1971.

I: When did you first take the mayor?

I: Were you a member of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] or SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference]?

T: Yes.

I: Which one?

T: NAACP.

I: Which church do you belong to?

T: I'm a Protestant.

I: Are you an official of the church?

T: No.

I: Are there any other community organizations or activities that you are now involved in?

T: I'm a member of the Opa-locka Civic Club. I'm an Elk, a mason. I'm a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. That's about it.

I: What effects did running for office have on you and on your family?

T: It keeps me away from home quite a bit. It keeps the telephone ringing. That's a big effect on my family because it's almost a twenty-four hour job.

I: Did it have any hardships on them when you were running for office?

T: No.

I: Okay, Mayor Tresvant, thank you.

T: Thank you.