

JAMES WASHINGTON, SR., INTERVIEW ONE

Interviewee: James Washington Sr.

Interviewer: Max Jensen

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This interview was reviewed and edited by Donna Odom, Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society

Max Jensen: We want to thank you for being a part of our Engaging the Wisdom Oral History project. Um, this is like really the core of it, um, and we really appreciate you driving down in this horrible weather, um, and being a part of it.
Could you please tell us your name and current address.

James Washington: Yes, my name is JW Washington Senior, REDACTED

MJ: Great. Um, people sometimes have an interesting story to tell about their name. Do you have one? What's the story of your name?

JW: No story, just big family and a long last name. It was easy to remember.

MJ: Great. So are you originally from Springfield? Is that right?

JW: Originally from Springfield, Illinois.

MJ: That's right. Can you tell us what it was like growing up there? What your family was like?

JW: Well, my family was of eleven children, and I was number eleven. And we grew up kind of, I would say that we were, if we compared it to today, we were probably the poor side, but at that time, everybody was poor, so we didn't feel any difference, but, we were, we came up and we had to struggle for bread sometimes, but it was a good life.

MJ: What were your mother and father like?

JW: My mother and father. My mother, she did housework, day work, and my father he worked on the train. They called it the train from Springfield to Peoria. It was the Illiopolis. And he worked on that, so he was gone quite a bit of the time during the days, but we uh...

MJ: What values or issues were important to your family when you were growing up?

JW: We were African American Methodist Episcopal Church, and we had some strict ethical things that we had to go through. There were five girls and six of us boys, and so we--my mother was whatcha call very strict, and she didn't take no mess.

MJ: What about your father?

JW: My father, he was kind of like the jovial one, you know. He kinda got us into trouble more than he kept us out of it. [laughing]

MJ: What was that experience of growing up in that church like?

JW: It was, it was a really uh, experi —different type of experience, because it was very organized, and it was more or less you were silent in the church. We would go, we would go to church every Sunday. My mother would make sure that we went to church, and we didn't say much in the church. We just kinda were *there*. Children should be seen and not heard, and that was really strictly in the Methodist church.

MJ: Were you part of the whole services on Sunday, or was there kind of a younger kids'—

JW: There was Sunday school, which was the younger kids at first and then we became part of the whole worship service.

MJ: Okay, and you said it was an African-American church?

JW: Yes. Uh-huh,

. It was Saint John's AME. African American Episcopal.

MJ: [Coughs] Sorry. When did you first become aware of race?

JW: [chuckles] That's a, that's a tough question, because, you know, we ,we were always - I guess, I was always aware of it, of race, but, it was a little bit different. It wasn't like the southern towns even though Springfield is in the southern part of Illinois. It was a little bit different. I mean we had integrated schools all the while, at least the whole time that I can remember.

MJ: So in that community of Springfield, would you say that, how would you describe sort of racial relations in that town?

JW: Uh, [clears throat] during, during my lifetime it was, the racial relation was, was good. It was there, but it was good. Of course, you know, Springfield has a history of some of the worst race riots in history.

MJ: How long did you live there for?

JW: I lived there until I was eighteen years old.

MJ: And then you moved to Kalamazoo, is that right?

JW: Yes, I came to Kalamazoo to go to Western.

MJ: What was your experience at Western like?

JW: It was kinda like my experiences in my hometown, you know. We, at that time, the University children were different. We didn't mingle with people in Kalamazoo at that time. I was studying music, and I was a member of the University choir, which became the travelling choir, and so that made things a little bit difficult.

MJ: How were they difficult?

JW: Well, at that time, there was, when the choir would travel there was a separation. So that whites and blacks couldn't stay together. We, there was young man - him and I were friends. He was white, and we were friends, and so we decided well, we would room together when, when we traveled. Dr. Carter said, no, we could not do that. My brother at that time was president of the NAACP, so when I informed him, him and Dr. Carter sat down and had a talk. And so we were able to room together, but we had to stay with a Negro family. We couldn't stay where everyone else was staying.

MJ: So the choir was integrated?

JW: It was. There was three of us. [laughing]

MJ: So what kind of places did you [laughing]. What kind of places did you travel around to?

JW: Well there were, there were the small towns in Indiana and Ohio, especially in the northern part of, of Ohio. And we...we were well accepted there. There was never any incidents, except for we would always have to go off and stay with a Negro family where they, where they would not be with the others.

MJ: So it was all kind of Midwestern towns around here?

JW: Yes, uh-huh.

MJ: [cough] What did - you said you were studying music, right?

JW: Yes.

MJ: What were you planning on doing after college? Or why were you interested in music?

JW: I was interested in music because everyone in my family sang, played an instrument or something, so I was just kinda channeled that way. My ...course I think I, I think I wanted to teach music, but not in, not in a classroom setting, but teach music individuals, and that way...

MJ: How'd you first get interested in singing, at choir?

JW: Well, I was ... There was a...practice session there at [Maybee Hall](#), which was the music hall, and I started singing there and I got picked up by, by the choir director, and said,

hey, you know, you should be in the choir. Are you a music student? I said, yes. So, I was in.

MJ: What do you remember the race, race relation situation to be like when you were a student in Kalamazoo?

JW: Well, it was kinda like ...sep-segregated. I mean, and I don't think it was because of the university. I think it was because of the individuals, you know. We stayed to ourselves. Blacks stayed to themselves and whites stayed to themselves. The only interaction was in the. in the student union where we kinda were in the same area, but there really was no interaction between the two. Of course, that time there was a division on the campus, you know. The - Western was on the old campus and the new campus and so it was, it was kinda the same thing. There was a union hall up on the old campus which were, was a little smaller, so there was a little more interaction there.

MJ: So your classes were all, were integrated?

JW: Yes, uh-huh.

MJ: Would it be common for, for people of different races to be friends? Or was it, was it pretty segregated, would you say?

JW: Again it was, it wasn't the university's choice. It was just the people just did not intermingle.

MJ: Why do you think that is?

JW: I think that it just was something that - well blacks coming from the South learned that they wanted to be together, or they stayed together. They found that there was security in, in being together, so we just kinda mingled amongst ourselves.

MJ: Did you feel like you were treated fairly by professors and by other sort of administrative staff, or even by students?

JW: I thought so. I didn't, I never had a problem with anyone showing any type of racism to me.

MJ: Did you have any awareness of Kalamazoo College in your, in your idea of Kalamazoo?

JW: [chuckles] Kalamazoo College was just un-, was just there. It wasn't really on the map [laughing], but it was there.

MJ: [cough] So after you graduated you worked at Gibson, is that right?

JW: Yes, I worked at Gibson Guitar Manufacturing.

MJ: Can you tell me what your job was - what you did during the day?

JW: I was in shipping, and for that company. I was the first black to be hired there, and I worked in shipping and there was only one incident and the union took care of that right away. I was, 'member the, probably the second or third morning I came to work, and the white guy standing next to me says, "Hullo Sunshine," and course that's a derogatory term, but when I talked to the union steward, they pulled him to the side, and said, hey, you know, if you're gonna work here, you better get used to it. So he never, ever had another bad comment. In fact, he became quite friendly.

MJ: So Gibson was pretty, was pretty accepting of that? They were supportive of you as the first black man working there?

JW: They were. Yes, they were.

MJ: When they, when they hired you were they, did they talk about it sort of with pride, or were they kind of disdainful that they had to hire you, or was it positive for them?

JW: No, the word that I got was that they were looking to hire a black and, and so I just happened to fit right in.

MJ: Great. So you worked on the police force in Kalamazoo, is that right? And in Detroit?

JW: Just in Kalamazoo. I, when I came, left Gibson, I went to Western Michigan University to, and I was a, on the security force there, and I worked there for two years, and then I went to the city of Kalamazoo Police Department.

MJ: What was your, what was, what were those first two years like on the police force? Security force, I guess.

JW: It was, it was okay. I think I was, I noted that I was the first black to be on the **safety**, and so I was probably looked at a little bit harder than some of the others that were coming on, but they didn't show no overt action toward me, and I was accepted by the students very well.

MJ: While you were working as a police officer in Kalamazoo, what was that like in terms of your experiences of race? Were you the first African American hired there too?

JW: No, there were several before me, but I, at the time I went on there was just two of us, - a gentleman by the name Al Goodwin, who is deceased now. He was in the traffic division, and I, I came in in the patrol division. It was, it was a strange feeling because when, I guess you, when I came on I guess you could write a book and call it black pig in a pen, because I lived on the Northside which was predominantly black and I would come, have to leave the Northside and go become a member of the police department, which wasn't looked at very well. And so it, I always had some fears about my home being there, and I would be gone off someplace.

MJ: Who didn't look at that very well?

JW: Well, it was the, the white people of Kalamazoo was not really glad to have a black police officer that they would have to answer to. In fact, I stopped a white man in his car one day on Gull Road 'cause he had run a stop sign, and so he says, "Oh they're, you're gonna meet your quota today," and I said, "No, they let us write as many as we want." So, he didn't like that, in fact, [laughing] my lieutenant told me, "You know, we don't make...that type of statement to people." But...Then again, on the other hand, I was with, with black people at that time. They were not really satisfied. They were suspicious, because here, you know, I might be a turncoat, and I'm gonna, I might know some of the things that's going on and turn everybody in, you know, so it was really walking a tight line. I would, at that time I was going to a Baptist church, and we would go to church, and and we would get stares from people because they, they were suspicious of me.

MJ: So you didn't work within your own community, you kind of left it to work in a different one as a police officer?

JW: At first I did. I worked outside of the community, but then I, as you, I get to be seasoned, you get a district, and my district *was* right in the heart of the neighborhood.

MJ: So what was it like those first couple of years when people were sort of, I don't know if "suspicious" is the right word, but uh...

JW: It was kinda like, um, being in a, having to walk a tightrope that's kinda of like in a pen. Pent in, you know. One side, you look at that side, they don't like you, and here you're over here - they don't like you, so it's...

MJ: How did you manage that, that tension?

JW: Well, I think some of my um, family background was helpful because, you know, I was a member, being a member of eleven in the family, thirteen with mother and father. We were just, everybody was friendly and, and so that would help me get along with people, and so I was able to blend as much as I could.

MJ: Did any of your other family, any of your siblings, move to Kalamazoo, or live in Kalamazoo with you?

JW: Yes, uh-huh, before I came, my brother, who is Arthur Washington Junior. He was a member, or resident here in Kalamazoo, and I came, and I stayed with him for that summer before school started. But - he became the first black city commissioner in the city of Kalamazoo.

MJ: Did you have a good relationship with him?

JW: Sure. He was my oldest brother, and [laughing] and you know, older brothers, they'll beat you down if you don't act right.

MJ: What was he like?

JW: He was a good guy. He was a Civil-Rights man, you know. He became president of the NAACP, and he kinda helped form a drum and bugle corps here in town that kept the kids active. He was, he was, you know, an active person and very friendly with everybody. He kinda understood my relationship being, having to be in one side town and sometimes back on the other side.

MJ: Did you ever sort of [clears throat] get involved in any of the things he was doing? Or was it kind of, you were doing your own thing as a police officer and he was doing his thing?

JW: Oh, I, I got involved in, in a couple of his things, and he had a drum and bugle corps called the Kalamazoo Bombardiers, and I helped train the drummers and the buglers. So I worked with him on that, and I got involved with the, a couple of his um, Civil-Rights activities. At that time, he was, he was with the NAACP, and we had to, it was Civil-Rights era was moving on pretty good. We picketed Van Avery drugstore. [clears throat] 'scuse me. So I walked that picket line.

MJ: What's Van Avery's Drugstore?

JW: Van Avery's Drugstore was located at the corner of North and, and Burdick. And this, right there now is the Ecumenical Senior Citizens' place, but that was a drugstore that they were, they were there, and they allowed you to come in and buy your groceries, I mean, your medicines and your prescriptions, but they would not hire, and that was the main reason that the picket line was set up. They just wouldn't hire blacks, and so...

MJ: Did they, was that something they said, or was that something they sort of showed with the way they hired people?

JW: That showed with the way they hired people. They were, they were pretty fair people. In fact, you know, I was dating my wife, we used to go - they had the soda fountain, and we were, when I was dating my wife, we would go there, and we would have a fountain soda or a sundae, and they served us. There was no problem with that. It was just that they would not hire any blacks in the store.

MJ: What was...from your perspective, what was the sort of Civil Rights situation in Kalamazoo like? You said you participated in that picket line at the drugstore.

JW: It uh, at that time it was just beginning to, beginning to get to the point where there was gonna be an explosion, you know. That was around '66, '67 and I was a member of the police department, and the, and a certain amount of riots going on in the city. And we ... they even had a demonstration up at Western in the student union. The organization locked themselves - took over the student union - and locked themselves inside. Well, you know, I was a member of the police force and we marched up in riot gear, and they didn't really appreciate that, but (laughs) being a member of the force and a member that, and one of the things they teach you is that you're blue now, you're not white, not black, you're blue, so that was the thing and so we had to march up in gear and take the student union back.

MJ: How did you ...? You said you're blue, you're not black. How did you ... Was it easy to sort of remove yourself from your police work?

JW: It was ... At first it wasn't, but as, as you, as we go into it and you find that more and more you're accepted. You know I used to go when I, I remember when I was first on the police department, I would go in and I would be on the second or third shift, which would be the afternoon or the midnight