



Citation for this collection:

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Interview with Mr. Lewis Redding at his office in the Farmer's Bank Building, Wilmington, Delaware, March 30, 1971, by Myron Blackman. Project: Delaware and the Depression.

Q Mr. Redding, just to begin, what were you doing when the Depression hit?

A Well, I was admitted to the bar during the Depression and I worked as a lawyer throughout the Depression, that is as a private lawyer, trying to develop a private practice during the Depression and up to World War II. Actually we were fairly well into World War II when I left private practice and started working as a lawyer with a war emergency of the federal government. So that my activities in the Depression were chiefly those related to my profession as a lawyer.

Q Do you remember the stock market crash?

A I can't say that I have a specific recollection of the stock market crash. It may very well be that it is not something that I would have particularly noted because I had no stock investments and I did not come from a family background in which there were stock investments. So that would not have been something that would have particularly impressed itself upon me. Of course I do know, from any number of written sources, that there was such a debacle in this country and that there were many many dire consequences ensuing from the crash. Whether the crash initiated the Depression or was a result of weaknesses in our economy precedent to the crash, I'm not an economist and I cannot say.

Q Do you think the Depression placed any difficulties in the way of your becoming a lawyer?

A No, I don't. I don't think that the Depression made it more difficult for me to become a lawyer. As a matter of fact, it may be that the fact that we were undergoing a depression when many new social ideas were evolving as a result of the Depression, somewhat enriched my personal experiences and my opportunities as a lawyer.

Q Could you expound on that for a minute?

A Well, I remember one thing in particular. I was a young lawyer at a time when the so-called hunger march on Washington was organized. And those people en route from New York and points north of Wilmington marched through Wilmington. They encamped overnight on the grounds of a church, I believe it was, in a certain section of Wilmington, and some difficulties broke out in which the marchers and the police were involved. These difficulties unfortunately led to various charges which the courts were called upon to resolve. And I was asked to represent some of these people, and did represent them, and learned perhaps a whole new set of ideas about the way some people organized their lives and thought that life in this country might be organized. Some of these people and associations which grew out of that experience, I continued to know for a long time, and I'm sure that they had some influence in shaping some of my own points of view and in leading me from being just a shall I say "bread and butter lawyer" to a lawyer

who became much more deeply interested and much more involved in what might be called social causes. And I suppose that some of that has continued right down to today. I remember that one of the people I represented in the courts, growing out of this hunger march incident in Wilmington, was a man named Ben Gold, who was the head of the leather workers union, fur and leather workers union. And I must say that for good or for ill, I learned a great deal from representing this people. I learned a great deal about--as I say, about their views of the way life is organized and the way they, at least, would like to have seen it organized in this country. And I think that this was probably an enriching experience and one that I do not regret having had, because I think it as I say has played a part in my own personal life, my own personal development.

Q What was the reason you were chosen, were you among other lawyers . . .

A I don't really know except that I suppose that even then I had some small reputation for representing what might I suppose colloquially be called the disadvantaged, the underdog, and so forth.

Q Was the firm you were employed by--I assume you were . . .

A I was not actually employed by a firm. I was a single practitioner, associated with no one. I was running my own one-man law office.

Q I was speaking with George Wilson, who's a contractor in Newark, about contracting. And I asked him if the Depression itself changed things for the black community in Newark, and he said not much, not a great deal, except for some hope or some realization of the opportunities that were available. Did the Depression affect the black community in Wilmington in any way?

A Well, I'm sure it did. I'm sure that any economic depression would affect, and by affect I mean squeeze even more tightly, the people who were on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. And I'm sure that there was a great deal of deprivation and economic suffering. A little later, of course, after the Roosevelt--the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration took over the operation of the country, there were a number of schemes devised in Washington to alleviate suffering. For example, there were special work programs like W.P.A., the Works Progress Administration, and there was a program for youths, the Civilian Conservation Camps, and I'm certain that among the people who shared very largely in the benefits of those programs were blacks, and they shared in those programs because they were in need. As to whether or not the Depression made people more aware of opportunities, I'm not fully prepared to say, though as I think about it, I can see that in a very thoughtful family, black family, I mean, it was probably thought that people who had better education were people who would suffer less in the event of economic depression, that is black people who had a better education, because there were certain jobs which people with an education would be called upon to fill, which were not likely to be cut off in the event of a depression. I'm thinking, for example, of jobs as teachers or social workers and people of that ilk. And I dare say that many blacks were induced by such thinking to keep their kids in school and help their kids to go beyond the public schools and to college and perhaps into some sort of

professional school in an effort to avert the harsher effects of a depression, should one occur again. Aside from that, I can't think of any particular stimulation and achievement that a depression might have.

- Q Well, wouldn't--he was speaking down in Newark and he told me that Newark had sort of a motto, which was that they were a northern town that looked South, meaning sociologically, towards Negroes. They were in sympathy with them and they treated them as if they were a southern [inaudible]. Was Wilmington like that?
- A Yes. Well, I thought you were talking about opportunities for blacks which blacks were made aware of by the Depression. I don't see quite how that fits in. The whole state of Delaware is a kind of ambivalent state as far as race relations is concerned. Delaware is a small state; it has only three counties. The northernmost county is the county in which we are now, New Castle County, and the central county is Kent, and the southernmost county is Sussex. Well, New Castle County also has a sort of--has always been considered as having a sort of significant division socially. The Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, which is probably some 18 or 20 miles south of Wilmington, is considered the point at which Delaware very definitely begins looking southward. Above that it has generally been thought that as far as relations between blacks and whites are concerned, Delaware is somewhat more advanced than it is below the canal. This is perhaps true, but the differences are not very great. There was certainly as much opposition above the canal to according blacks equal access to places of public accommodation, identity of education in the public schools--and by that I mean of course non-segregated education in the public schools. As I say, there was as much opposition to that kind of thing in Delaware above the canal, I believe, as there was in Delaware below the canal.
- Q What I was trying to get at in a way with both questions was--it may not appear to be connected--was that from the reading I've done on the Depression, during the '30's, activity among Negro organizations, such as the N.A.A.C.P. and other groups, plus activities through the C.I.O. and the Communist Party, began influencing blacks, who had been no trouble at all by himself, you know, to [inaudible] and then agrees with their own interests. And that's what I meant by rising expectations.
- A Well, I think, yes, I think the involvement of blacks in the C.I.O. was a very stimulating thing as far as blacks were concerned, because for the first time they gained admittance to a national labor organization on a basis which the organization itself had to proclaim was a basis of equality. And I think that this was certainly stimulating to Negroes. The N.A.A.C.P. sometime in the '30's began--that is the lawyers for N.A.A.C.P., Charles H. Houston, a Washington lawyer and Nathan Margold, who was a New Yorker, both of them graduates of the Harvard Law School, developed a blueprint at that time for court action designed to obliterate racial distinctions in this country. What influenced the economic depression had in developing that, I'm not at all sure that I can understand. I'm not sure that the economic depression had any influence on that. I simply think that time had arrived when men like Houston and Margold, impatient with the segregation which was in vogue in this country, decided that something had to be done about it. There might have been some relationship, as I think a little bit further. There might have been some relationship between the

kind of expanded opportunity offered by a labor organization and the development of this blueprint for abolishing indicia of race in our public institutions. It may be that hence the opportunity offered by the C.I.O. had some influence, but I would think it would be very difficult to trace. I don't know that the Communist Party did anything more than claim a very few adherents among blacks. There was--and this of course--somehow, and I don't know just why, suggests to me the activity that revolved around the Scottsborough Case. I think that certainly this helped to dramatize the debased position of Negroes in the South and perhaps in this country as far as their treatment in the courts was concerned. And I think that the activity which evolved out of that case to aid the defendants was probably very stimulating in making Negroes and other people understand that this country should not continue to exist in complete contradiction of its professed ideals of equality. And of course there were--while the Communist Party itself probably attracted few Negroes, there were other organizations that were perhaps adjuncts of the Communist Party which may have had some part in the stimulation. International Labor Defense, perhaps, was one such organization. There were any number of publications coming out of such groups which were widely distributed and which espoused abolition of segregation and that kind of thing. But then we also had a sort of a queer contradiction on the part of the Communist Party, because they, as you may recall, espoused the separation of blacks in this country from the major population group, and the establishment of some sort of a black colony somewhere in this country. Well, that certainly was not a popular idea with blacks and it really cast some doubt on the egalitarian ideals that the Communist Party professed to espouse. So that all in all, I don't think that the Communist Party as such claimed many adherents or did very much to improve the debased position of blacks in this country.

Q A book that I was reading entitled its first chapter "The Gloomy Depression of Herbert Hoover," and the second chapter "The Exhilarating Depression of Franklin Roosevelt." Was there such a change?

A Oh, unquestionably there was a difference, a marked difference. Franklin Roosevelt espoused ideas that probably never entered the thought of the predecessor Republican administration. And I think that this is too well known for me to make any very substantial contribution to. I think the most notable thing, and one of the things most indicative of the fact that Roosevelt and the era which he inaugurated in this country was different than what had preceded was the fact that Negroes, which had up to that time been thought of as faithful adherents of the Republican Party flocked en masse to the Democratic Party, and have continued very largely to be adherents of the Democratic Party ever since. And of course the only explanation that one can offer for that is that they found benefits, they found not merely or not so much economic benefits, but they found benefits in concepts--the concepts were more liberal and seemed more nearly to comport with, as I say, the basic ideals of this country, than concepts of any administration which had preceded the Roosevelt administration. And of course there has been an accentuation of that in the Democratic administrations which have succeeded the Roosevelt era. I think that even Mr. Truman is regarded as a President who espoused obliteration of the disabilities, the legal disabilities, which encompassed Negroes. And certainly John Kennedy is so regarded. And in my own

personal view, Lyndon Johnson made a greater contribution to the obliteration of racial distinctions in law in this country than any President, perhaps than all his predecessors combined. And this is something that ought really to be understood by people who are trying to woo the Negro away from the Democratic Party. They fail to understand the tremendous boost given to Negro aspiration, Negro rights, Negro achievement, Negro prestige, ensuing from the recognition by appointment to important federal positions; and unless Republicans can come somewhere near matching that or equalling it, they of course can really never hope to gain any substantial, or regain any substantial support from the Negro populace. I think Negroes know only too well that our effective civil rights legislation has come through Democratic administration and the fostering of Democratic Presidents. I said something about enhancing the dignity of Negroes through recognizing them for appointment to important jobs in the government, and as a lawyer I naturally think first, I suppose, of judicial appointments, where Democrats have . . . [tape is stopped here, starts again below]

Q You were speaking about the judicial appointments.

A Oh, yes. Well, of course, one thinks of the fact that Mr. Truman named the first Negro, black man, colored man, call him what you will, to a position on the Court of Appeals, the Circuit Court of Appeals, and that succeeding Democratic Presidents have named others and have named Negroes to United States District Courts and of course nominated Thurgood Marshall for the United States Supreme Court. Well, this is only one example of the kind of recognition of the merit of Negroes that has come from Democratic Presidents. There have been any number of appointments in non-judicial fields which have given recognition to the fact that Negroes should not always be relegated to minor and inferior governmental positions in this country.

Q Would you consider Franklin Roosevelt's black cabinet as in a sense a beginning?

A Well, historically I suppose there have been in this country under Presidents even before Franklin Roosevelt Negroes who held some kinds of positions in the government at Washington and frequently these people have been referred to as the black cabinet, but this is probably facetious rather than a thing of any substance or of any significance. I don't know just what Roosevelt's black cabinet was, but I suppose by that term is meant merely the fact that there were some Negroes who held governmental positions in Washington above the menial level, from whom the President was thought to get advice on occasion and get opinions on occasion about matters affecting Negroes. But it certainly had no significance aside from that. And I think perhaps the term was used in derision rather than as a term of any real substance.

Q When you spoke before of Roosevelt's programs, the New Deal programs, you referred to them as schemes.

A Schemes?

Q Yes, you mentioned . . .

- A I did not mean that. I certainly did not mean that in any deprecatory sense. I was not using that term to scorn or belittle the efforts that particularly the first Roosevelt administration instituted to relieve the economic distress of this country. I certainly meant no such implication at all. They were very necessary programs and they benefited not only--many of those programs benefited not only people who were very low on the economic scale, but they also benefited people of substance. I would certainly not call, for example, something like the Home Owners Loan Corporation, which saved hundreds of thousands of homes from mortgage foreclosure in the early days of the Roosevelt administration. A scheme, if anyone is going to interpret scheme, in the sense of trick or cunning or something of that sort.
- Q I've looked at some statistics and I found that out of 26,000 unemployed in the state of Delaware, 24,000 of them were in New Castle County itself. I imagine the programs had a great effect within the county and within the city.
- A Yes. Well, of course I don't know anything about that particular statistic. New Castle County is of course the most populous of the three counties. And there are more Negroes in New Castle County than in either of the other two counties. But in addition to that, New Castle County is the industrialized county and it may very well be that there were more unemployed in the two southern counties than your statistic indicates, but the information gathering about that, because these were certainly at that time largely rural counties, was not as efficient--that is the information gathering there was not as efficient as it was in New Castle County. One thinks of a depression as affecting the industrial jobs much more acutely than non-industrial or agricultural jobs. And the statistic may reflect that, also.
- Q Did you ever see any bread lines or come into contact with the missions? There were a few missions in Wilmington, I know.
- A I have no personal recollection of having myself observed bread lines, but that is not to say that they did not exist. I know that there were many charitable efforts and some of them designed to give well, for example, breakfasts to unemployed men. I think there were institutions in Wilmington, religious and sectarian, which undertook to provide hot breakfasts at various times during the height of the Depression for unemployed men, particularly. Beyond that, I have no actual knowledge of bread lines--I know they did exist, but I--as I said, I personally never saw any, and I don't have any personal information about those. There were probably some governmental schemes--I use the word schemes again, but not in the derogatory sense, for supplying food to the needy. And I suppose that the people who obtained this might have constituted a kind of a bread line, but all I'm saying is that I personally never saw one and never came into any personal contact with one.
- Q A particular interest of my own is--I guess you recall the amusement or entertainment during the period of the '30's--did you have a radio at that time?
- A Oh, I'm certain that we had a radio at that time.
- Q You don't recall anything specific about it?

A No, but by that time radios had become very common. I myself have never been a person who had time to spend listening to radios, even today. If I hear a radio, it is usually when I'm in a car going from home to work or work to home, so that I don't have any--well, I don't have very much reason to remember radio. Of course I remember listening to prize fights in the Joe Louis era on radio. Of course I know we had radios in our home, but aside from that kind of vague recalling, I couldn't say very much about it. By that time the radio was a very common appliance.

Q Would this carry over to movies also?

A I'm not sure that I understand your question.

Q That you didn't get to many movies then.

A No, I did not. Actually, in those days, I used to sometimes find time to go over to New York and see a legitimate stage show, but unless the movie were something very, very special, I normally didn't bother to see it. It was not a leisure-time involvement of mine at all.

Q One of the reasons that I ask is that I was reading Native Son [inaudible] . . . very much struck by this one part where the hero, Thurgood Thomas, goes into the movie and he, a black man, is sitting there watching a white society group at a ball or a dinner party or something, dancing around and the disparity between this man in the slums and you know, this dream world.

A Yes. Well, I think that that kind of perception was a development of the '30's when Negroes were awakening at a much more accelerated pace than had been true in the past. And that pace has probably been accentuated in more recent years. Of course the wars always have stimulated Negroes to self-improvement and achievement also. And of course this was an era when we were having wars. But I think that prior to say the '30's, many Negroes went to the movies just for entertainment, just like the rest of the populace did. I suppose that many Negroes were interested in the Wild Western pictures and the cowboy shows and that kind of thing, just like everybody else was, and that they viewed these things very frequently without any thought of the disparity in social relations between blacks and whites. They probably identified themselves with the hero in the movies--before we had this accentuation of social consciousness which came perhaps in the Depression, as the Depression was waning, and came through some of the forces we've already mentioned. Congress of Industrial Organizations and federal programs designed to improve the lot of people in this country.

Q Many of the people--people who were children, people who--even adults during the Depression, expressed quite a feeling of pride that they didn't go on welfare. They avoided it by any means, and yet it's different from the attitude towards welfare today.

A I think that that is quite true. I think that is quite true. It is very difficult, I think, for some people to understand the multiplication of people on the welfare roles. I think that of course many people who obtain public assistance do so out of need. But I think that there's perhaps something almost akin to a cult of being on welfare, and it may be, I don't

know, but it may be that people way way down in the scale of our social life look upon this as the only way they can get something out of society. It may be that many of them just feel that they have no chance for a decent job and that they're getting even, perhaps, with society, which has deprived them of a decent job by making society support them after a fashion. This could very well be. I haven't given any real thought to this, but as I sit here and talk, I can see that this might very well be an explanation. People feel that they're not going to get equal opportunity, and they attempt to make society pay for this life by supporting them. I'm not a sociologist, but I think that might be a very interesting thing to explore, to see what it is that helps to keep people on relief roles from generation to generation. It may be that we are--we have bred a whole flock of people who sort of get back at society by making society to support them. It would be interesting to have somebody really explore this.

Q You mentioned before that the case involving the hunger marchers changed your views somewhat and your social views, I suppose. Could you describe that? Describe the change . . .

A Well, I suppose that prior to that time I was keenly aware that many Negroes themselves wanted to see a closer conformity in this country between the ideals expressed in our historic documents, such as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, and practice with respect to Negroes. I say, I knew that Negroes wanted to see a coalescing of ideal with practice. But for the first time, I suppose I became aware that there were large numbers of non-Negroes, non-blacks, who at least professed that they wanted to see the same thing. At the same time I learned that there were large numbers of non-blacks who were economically disadvantaged, like Negroes were, and that many of these people were also disadvantaged in other ways. They were disadvantaged socially, and they felt this. And so I became aware of the fact that in many respects the struggle for equality had a root and a basis which was broader than the struggle of Negroes as such, and that Negroes could find people who at least professed to be allies in their struggle outside the ranks of blacks. And of course this gave me an interest in the problem of this non-black group that professed an interest in the aspirations and struggles of Negroes. And I became more keenly aware of the economic disparities generally in this country. I had always thought of economic disparity in relation to white millionaires and black paupers, black people who were on relief. But I realized that there was a disparity, and a great disparity, between the very rich in this country and the very poor, of whom Negroes were only a part. It was about this time of course that we had these great movements of people, these great migrations, shall we say, from the so-called dust fields of the Middle West to more fertile areas. And all of these things together helped to give me a kind of a social concept which I suppose I had really not had before. My major concern had been with the deprived condition of blacks, and I came to realize that blacks, Negroes, were only a part of the total problem, and that other people needed equality of opportunity and needed to have disabilities removed from them, just as blacks did. I suppose I became aware of the problems of some colored people in this country who were not black, not Negroes--Mexicans, Indians. And I had a few Chinese clients, and I realized that aside from their ties to their mother country that their position was very little different from

that of other disadvantaged minorities in this country. And that's really the kind of thing I was referring to.

- Q Just two more questions. Do you think that the occurrence of a depression of such magnitude has in a sense taught the country or the government or the people a lesson? Or possibly another way to put it, has left a legacy behind.
- A I don't know what the lasting effects of the Depression might be, except as it might have influenced the thinking of people such as myself about the scope of the problem of people, deprived people in this country. I'm not sure that there's any legacy other than say the kind of experience, thought experience, through which I went with relation to this. I could identify very easily with say these people who called themselves hunger marchers who came through Wilmington en route to Washington because here was a group which was not essentially black, which was proclaiming that it was deprived, just as blacks were. And it's only this kind of lesson that I'm prepared to speak about as having been gained from the Depression. It would only be this kind of legacy, the continuing point of view that that experience developed.
- Q Many people feel that a negative aspect of what the Depression gave to us is big government. They feel that Roosevelt's government was the start of an ever-increasing government which interfered more and more with individual liberties.
- A Well, I'm not prepared to go along with that because big government it seems to me--I don't want to use the term big government, but government, it seems to me, can also enlarge and enhance the liberties of people, and this has certainly been true as far as blacks are concerned in this country. And so I'm not--as I say, I do not agree with that point of view. People call government oppressive when they think it hurts their particular special interest, and they call it beneficent when it thinks that it in some way enhances the things that they want. So it depends upon the position of the person who's talking as to whether government is oppressive or government is beneficent.
- Q And finally, this is a more speculative question than many of the others. The answer is of personal interest to me. If there was a depression, another depression, like the one in the '30's, how do you think the people born since the Depression, the generation that has grown up, would be about 30 years old now, how would they react to such a depression? Would they react better than people in the '30's reacted, or worse, or . . .
- A I'm not prepared to answer that question on a general scale. Let me say that I am not certain that young blacks would feel that they could be hurt anymore by an economic depression than many of them feel that they are hurt at this time by what they proclaim to be a lack of opportunity to develop in this country. Beyond that, I could not say. I think that there are--as you must certainly be aware, from the various black organizations that are presently somewhat vociferous in this country, there are many blacks who feel that they are now just about as far down in the scheme of things as they can be, and I don't think that they would think that an economic depression could make them very much worse off.
- Q O.K. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]