LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY
SHADES OF L.A. INTERVIEW PROJECT
TRANSCRIBED EXCERPTS

Accession #:

INTERVIEWEE: **WALTER GORDON**
INTERVIEWER: AMY KITCHENER
DATES OF INTERVIEWS: PT. 1 - 9/29/93
PT. 2 - 10/6/93
LOCATION: LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
ETHNICITY: AFRICAN AMERICAN
OTHERS PRESENT: NONE
TRANSCRIBER: SOJIN KIM

INTERVIEW NUMBER: SH-
NUMBER OF DAT TAPES: 2
NUMBER OF CASSETTE TAPES: 3

G: Gordon
K: Kitchener

Note: Interviews were recorded on DAT (Digital Audio Tape) and transferred to standard cassette tape for transcribing and listening purposes. The three digit numbers are indexed from the cassette recording and not the original DAT recording. These numbers may be used as a guide for locating indexed information on the cassette tapes. In some cases, the numbers on the transcript may not correspond exactly to the counter readings on the cassette player.

PT. 1
SIDE A, TAPE 1

000 Silence

002 Introduction

004 Walter Lear Gordon, Jr. was born in Santa Monica, CA on June 22, 1908.

009 Father, Walter Gordon, was from Woodville, Mississippi. His mother, Vertner Gordon, was from New Orleans, Louisiana. His mother graduated from an old Southern University that used to be located in New Orleans. His father left Woodville for New Orleans.

018 His mother met his father after she graduated from

college. His father had come to Ocean Park in Santa Monica and started a shoe shine parlor and a window cleaning company--he had 26 employees who rode bicycles. After this, he returned to New Orleans and married Bertner Gordon. Their wedding was a "very well-published in black circles wedding in New Orleans." He brought his wife to Ocean Park. Walter was born on Bicknell on Ocean Park.

035 He assumes his father moved to California because he had heard there were opportunities on the West Coast. He was an adventurer and very enterprising. He had gone to Africa for mining and had been involved in the Boer wars.

045 His mother's mother was Mary Lewis. His grandfather was Addison Lewis. Addison Lewis had a horse dreyage business in New Orleans. He remembers riding with his grandfather to the river to pick bananas and other fruits.

055 All of his siblings predeceased him in their infancy.

061 The family left Ocean Park when Walter was very young. The first place he can remember living was Shutzon Park, which was located off of Huntington Drive on the way to Pasadena next to El Sereno. The name was later changed from Shutson Park to Rose Hill Park.

072 He went to school at Rose Hill Grammar School on Huntington Drive. He graduated from Rose Hill when he was twelve-and-a-half-years-old. The principal, Henrietta Glissman, had not treated Walter very fairly. She had threatened to send Walter to special schools but was thwarted by his mother who was actively involved in the PTA. This was unusual because she was a black woman and the neighborhood was all white.

103 After Walter graduated from high school he attended USC for two years. He later left USC and went to Ohio State. While in Ohio, he met his wife, whose father, Charlie Bellinger, was an important black politician in San Antonio, Texas. He used to mediate local political disputes. He got into a feud with Morey Maverick, a Texas Kingpin--either a senator or congressman from Texas. They prosecuted Charlie Bellinger for income tax evasion and he was sent to Leavenworth. Charlie was an important influence in Walter's life. In 1936, Walter graduated from Ohio State Law School.

167 Rose Hill Grammar School was almost entirely white--with an occasional black student. When he was in

kindergarten, WWI broke out--he remembers the minutemen coming around to the classrooms.

182 His father became a postal carrier. He had the downtown business route and the South Pasadena route. He became a mounted carrier--with a horse and wagon. Walter used to accompany his father around Christmas time.

194 The Chicago Defender was a black newspaper from Chicago. They used to send 200 papers a week to Walter's father. Walter and his father would put the papers in barbershops, etc.

200 Sometimes other students and he would argue while playing handball. They would sometimes call him a "coon" or "nigger," and this would lead to fights--which ended with him in the principal's office. Ironically, none of the principal's favorite students ever amounted to much. Walter continued to send cards to Rose Hill Grammar School to Henrietta Glissman--the principal--when he was attending Ohio State. One day when he was in the Santa Monica Superior Court, he came across the file of Henrietta Glissman in the probate files of deceased persons. He wishes he could have seen her and talked to her before she died.

246 In 1948, Walter was married and practicing law. His father was running a real estate business at the time across from his office--South Central Avenue. His family had been very close. His parents were both murdered in a robbery in their home. The person convicted of the murder was an ex-football player who had been befriended by Walter's father.

278 Walter's law office had been successful--he had other attorneys working for him. A person who Walter had sued for over-charges in rent spread rumors that Walter was behind the murder of his parents. His practice suffered as a result of this and he had to start over again.

318 Detectives told Walter that they knew he wasn't involved in the murders because Walter owned property that was under his father's name. Prior to his death, arrangements had been made to make Walter's children the beneficiaries of this property. When his father died, Walter had no rights to the property since it wasn't in his name. Walter had to go to court to establish his ownership over the property, and he was able to recover it.

379 There was a lot of controversy during the trial of his parents' murderer. The D.A. and the judge argued over the death penalty. Walter received in the mail crude drawings of his father and mother in the bathtub where they were killed--they would come elaborately gift wrapped. One of the jurors, a white woman, started coming to his office once a week and bringing him presents. The postal authority discovered that this woman had been the person mailing him the drawings.

432 He rebuilt his practice.

437 By 1944 he became active in the show world. He used to go to the clubs. Los Angeles was very provincial at this time. Walter had an affinity for people from the East Coast. The lawyers in the city were formal and conservative. They tended not to come to Central Avenue and associate with the barbers, bartenders, or show people. Walter was very familiar with the people in this area--he had grown up selling newspapers there.

491 When Walter returned to California from Ohio State, he brought back a friend with him. The two of them gave dances under the name of Gordon and Nickens. They promoted Duke Ellington, Floyd Ray, Fletcher Henderson. They promoted Battles of Bands. These events were huge--held at Shrine Auditorium.

515 Walter got to know the various promoters and managers--Joe Glazer, Ed Fishman. Walter married an ex-show girl--Nobel Sissle's wife. He was friends of Andy Razoff, who wrote "Ain't Misbehaving."

553 He defended Billie Holiday in several law suits in Los Angeles. In one case, she stabbed a man who had been heckling her. In another, he successfully defended her in a case where Ed Fishman was demanding $1 million dollars. She had been tried a few times on narcotics charges.

635 The scene on Central Avenue was progressive--in terms of the black community. During the early years, 1917-1918, it was at 5th and Central, and East of 5th and Central, near Mateo Street. It kept going south until it opened up around 9th Streets. The California Eagle, the original black paper, was located at 9th and Central.

661 Prior to this there had been small settlements around Wall Street and 8th. The Los Angeles Forum met every Sunday in the Elks Building at this corner. Walter used to go there as a kid and he would see the early

black leaders. The black leadership at the time were primarily city employees; street sweeper, employment agency owner, businessman, junkyard owner. They had two scouts who were so light-skinned they looked white. They used to go to various places to gauge the sentiment.

750 **END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1**

PT.1
SIDE B, TAPE 1

000 Silence

001 His father and some old attorneys were active in the forum as well. All of these old black attorneys looked white. He wonders if the Bar Association favored them because of their complexion.

026 The issue that these people were organizing around was jobs. The only city job available to blacks was street sweeper. They wanted someone in the police force, fire department. When there was finally a fire department appointment of a black employee it made the headlines of a black newspaper.

040 Blacks were well represented in the post office. His father was a mounted postal carrier. He helped other black men from New Orleans get jobs at the post office.

046 The most sought after, luxury job was head waiter in clubs like the University Club and the L.A. Athletic Club. He remembers a popular head waiter named Parker Lee. The men who became waiters took on all the mannerisms of the people they worked for--they became an elite crowd.

061 Chauffeurs were also another group of employees. At the end of the business day, you would see limousines pull up to the office buildings on the main streets like Hill and Broadway. Some chauffeurs were considered almost as members of the families that they drove for.

082 Central Avenue extended to 9th Street before the 1920s. With the opening of a barber shop it extended down to 12th Street. The Hooper Avenue Street car used to come down 12th Street. Business began to fill in between; drugstores, doctors offices, grocery store. Blacks started moving down towards Pico, and then down to Washington. As they bought homes in these areas, the whites moved out.

105 The earlier business places around 5th and Central closed down. The neighborhood extended to Adams and then to Jefferson and then Vernon Avenue. Vernon and Central was the border for the white neighborhood. South of Vernon was all white.

121 Restrictive Housing Covenants were affected by changing circumstances. Though the restrictive covenants were in effect, they were not enforced. Vernon Avenue was one point that was firmly established as the border.

131 People began to move down as far as Slauson. In the early 1930s, his father who was in real estate sold a piece of property on 58th Drive--east of Central--to George Godfrey. The whites in the neighborhood would not let him move into the house. His father had to take the house back. Walter remembers going with his father and a group of armed men to protect the house. Once property got purchased by blacks, it continued along Central.

166 He remembers his friend violated the restrictive covenant enforcement.

K: 179 How did people get around the laws? Like you were saying you knew somebody who was able to buy in an area that was...--

G: 180 Well, here's what they'd do: The owner would want to sell the property but the owner...there wasn't much of a market other than blacks. And the owner, his neighbors said "Man, don't sell because if one's coming in, they'll take over." So it ended up that they would clandestinely sell anyway to a black, but the black would have take the risk of trying to live there.

K: What were the risks?

G: The risks were whites attacking them--getting out in front of the property and shooting into the house or putting signs out, tearing down shrubbery, breaking out windows. It was very serious. And I grew up with that. I remember seeing that. Interestingly enough though it didn't cause...it didn't cause hatred. It was growth (gross?). If you were born with something happening like that, then you were kind of used to it. See what I mean? For instance, if you had to go back to something that never existed, that would be different. But this...these were the things that we raised with. I was...for instance, if say I would go in to get a drink at a kind of a friendly drug store and you run into somebody who you'd never seen there before, but everything had been very friendly up till now in this drugstore, and some guy would walk up to you--some guy much older than you and you were just a kid--he'd say "Nigger, what are you doing

here?" Well, you're not going to respond as you probably would today because you had had other things like that happen. You grow up to accept these things happening. So I ran into a lot of that. I must have been sensitive. I never once ever went into a white restaurant even though everybody else was going. This is how I felt about it. I just didn't want to take a chance of being humiliated. And it was the hardest kind of thing to get me to go into a restaurant like that even long after I graduated from Law School. I must have been at least forty or forty-five before I ever went in a white restaurant.

227 When Walter lived in Rose Hill Park, it was predominantly white and German. His mother was very intelligent and had a knack for dealing with people.

250 During WWII, the neighborhood hung a sign over Huntington Drive at Rose Hill Park that said "Japs, don't let the sun set on you here."

258 He lived in Rose Hill until he went away to school. In 1932, he left the city.

265 When he was growing up there were black communities on Central Avenue and on the Westside between Budlong and Western, and Jefferson and 37th Place. There were also black residents on Catalina around 24th.

279 Fair complexioned blacks could live on certain streets where white people lived and not experience any problems. Certain people were able to "pass" as white. But he knew a lot of families who looked very white but insisted on being identified as black.

332 Some people who could pass as white would only hang around with other light complexioned blacks. This sort of attitude among some blacks still persists.

406 He attended Lincoln High School on North Broadway by Lincoln Park. He also went to USC High School on the campus of USC.

423 When he entered Lincoln High he had expected to continue to be friends with the white kids with whom he had gone to Rose Hill. These kids were elusive and he began to affiliate with the black students.

459 During vacations, Walter worked at a wholesale market. He was nicknamed "Slim." They would unload watermelons from railway cars for the stall owners. He worked at a market on 7th and Central, and another on 9th and San Pedro. He learned to pitch and stack watermelons. He would take the cracked watermelons and sell them on the

boulevard.

511 He was a sailor's mess on the Luckenbach Line Steamship. He went through the Panama Canal. He lived in Boston for a year and a half. He had tried to get into Harvard but had been rejected. He did all of this after he graduated from high school in 1926

541 His ambitions at this time. He wanted to go into business. He hadn't been thinking of law. After he married Mr. Bellinger's daughter he had hoped to go down to Texas and work in real estate. A professor of his encouraged him to return to Los Angeles.

577 Walter attended USC High School, then he attended USC. After this he went to Ohio State. He went there for liberal arts first and then he went on to law school.

589 He had not initially planned to go to law school, but he discovered that he had an aptitude for it.

K: 601 But before you decided to go to Law School...you know, you were trying to decide if you wanted to go into business or what area you wanted to--

G: --had no idea. I didn't mention to you but that...you were asking me about early occupation. I worked...I was at the corner of 43rd and Central when I told you that Vernon was becoming the border line. They had an experiment. It was big controversy then about putting blacks to work. So the people at the corner of 43rd and Central, on both sides of the street, said they were going to hire blacks for the first time. So they...someone suggested my name to work in this Chili Parlor called Finley's. And it was a place where they served hot dogs, tamales, and chile, all kinds of milk shakes, and so forth. And they gave me the job. It was just...the gang of people who started coming in there, I knew all these guys: Lionel Hampton, I knew him then when he used to drink a great deal as a youngster, and his wife would come there. I would serve them and the orchestra members. And built up fine relationships with lot of young guys who were going to school. It was right before the depression and I had a lot of leeway there. I was making money for the man and to build up his business he put me on nice hours. I'd go on at 6 p.m. in the evening and clean up to close up at 6 in the morning. Six to six. And got the magnificent wages of $ 16 dollars a week. That was good money then. And just before I got ready to go back...I was going to leave there to go away to go to the university, he told me things were very rough, that my shift was making money but it was the only one making any money. So he cut me $2 dollars. I didn't get mad about it because I knew the man, I liked the man. And that man, his name was Mr. Finley, he happened to take a trip east about two or three years later and

he came all the way to Columbus, Ohio, and came where I was living there going to school, and we had a good old heart-to-heart talk. So, I got along well with people. And I liked the people, they liked me.

K: 668 So, where were you during the depression?

G: The Depression is '32 and I was working up to that time at Finley's from about '29, 1929 to '32 at Finley's. And '32 I left after the Olympics. I met some of the guys there like...a guy by the name as Gordon, Ed Gordon, a world champion broad jumper. And a guy like Albreton (?), high jumper. And formed good friendships with them. And that's what induced me to go back to Ohio State.

The main inducement though was...ah, you're going to laugh about this maybe. By that time I had already gone to USC and I became a member of the fraternity called the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, a black fraternity. And we gave a lot of social affairs. And here I was going...entertaining and paying the expenses of these teachers who were coming out from all the states. This used to be a mecca ground for summer vacationers. So all these beautiful women would be coming out here from various states like...and they'd come from Cincinnati, St. Louis, Kansas City. And so on this particular evening, the thing that really got under my skin; I was taking this big, tall, delightful woman by the name of Angiebelle MacNeil, I took her out. And we were talking seriously. Of course I was pretty confident I was making all this money; $16 dollars a week. And she says "Walter, what do you intend to do in the future?" And I said, "I don't know," but I had hopes and so forth. And she says "How much are you earning where you're working?" So I told her about $16 dollars. She says "$16 dollars what?" I said "--a week." And she says, "Oh no." And I said "Yup. They just cut my wages but I'm not doing badly." And then I had nerve, I said, "And what are you doing?" She says, "I'm teaching in Cincinnati." And she says, "That's the highest salary teacher's location in the country." And I said, "Well tell me this, what are you making?" She says, "$22 dollars." I said, "What?" And she says, "But not a week," she says "a day."

750 **END of SIDE B, TAPE 1**

PT.1
SIDE A, TAPE 2

000 Silence

002 The woman he met from Cincinnati was making $22/day. He decided to move to Ohio. He drove to Ohio with some friends.

K: 022 Did you find that there were many opportunities in Ohio? More than here?

G: Listen, I got so...first of all, I got engrossed in school. And secondly, when I married Lillian Bellinger it just looked like it opened up new vistas to me. Because they had done so much and you could see that if you don't limit yourself you might emulate them and do well too. And then she was ambitious, she was telling me what I could do in San Antonio. She just introduced me to the type of life that I just never seen. For instance, she could get on the phone and call the manager of her bank down there in San Antonio, and whatever she said "send, send," and you learned that there was success out there if you could just go after it, you know.

K: So it really inspired you, propelled you forward?

G: Oh yeah. See, it was kind of a closed world then, but I didn't realize it. My ambition, I thought, was high. But it was no where near what could be. That was a real turning point in my life: meeting her. And I give them, that family, credit for a whole lot that happened to me.

045 He returned to L.A. in 1936. He took the bar exam in 1937. During 1936-37 is when he put on the dances and sold real estate.

G: 057 Around from '32...say from '30 on through, the clubs on Central, particularly the Club Alabam, became the mecca for whites from all over, and the...run by a man by the name of Curtis Mosby who used to have an orchestra. They used to call his orchestra Curtis Mosby's Blues Blower. And he was made the manager of the Alabam. But the Alabam was owned by some Ritzo brothers, Italian members who lived over there...and by the way, they were a very clandestine group of about six or seven brothers. They dressed alike, they wore somber clothing, they drove big, expensive automobiles, and fedora hats, and had very little to do with the people around them. And they surrounded them....those were the people who ran the Alabam. I've heard a lot of things about the Alabam, but my father had to rent some of those places around the Alabam and he had direct contact with them. So that's the situation. That might...you hear all about

the Alabam and so forth, but...I would almost say it was gangster controlled. And I think they were gangters.

K: 082 What about some of the other clubs down there? What were the big ones?

G: The others were all black clubs and they didn't attract...They were interesting but they didn't attract the crowd at the Alabam. There was a valet service at the Alabam. You park your car, people take them, and they go and park your car, you could get liquor there. And knowing what I know now, I can understand what was happening. It was a huge thing. And I just got through reading about these...I have a book by a man by the name of Travis about Chicago and its clubs. And Italian men opened up clubs that were thought to be black clubs but it was run by other persons. So it might have been just a type of program all over the country. I just got through reading about that subject. And it interprets for me what happened here.

K: Like for instance with the Club Alabam.

G: Club Alabam was...

K: What do you remember too about the kind of music that was becoming popular, and your impressions of that?

G: 103 Well, one of my clients and close friends was Ivie Anderson. And Ivie Anderson was the headliner at the Club Alabam. I-V-I-E. And she later went with Duke, Duke Ellington, and she was <u>the</u> songstress of Duke. Her famous one song was "Rocks in my bed," I don't know if you've ever heard of that. But anyway, Ivie was the headliner at the Alabam, and I remember her and the rest like Joe Turner and so forth, were Johnny Come Lately's. They would sing at some of the smaller clubs and so forth. But for the period that the Alabam lasted, she was the headliner.

And they would bring in, I suspect, people that I was not, at that time, old enough to be one of those persons that was in and out of those places. But Ivie I did get to know very well.

K: 123 So you weren't going out a lot?

G: No, because let's see how old I was then. Say in 1928, at twenty...I would be twenty...I might have had a liking to going out but I was in school and very country.

K: You lived way up here?

G: Yeah, lived out here in Baird's town (?) And I'd come in town to sell papers and see people. But I'd see things but I wouldn't understand them as well as I do today.

K: 133 But then when you came back in 1936 and you were doing the battle of the bands, then you were really immersed.

G: Yes. I was hip then [laughs]. Yeah, I knew what was happening then pretty well.

K: So, how had the music changed? And what was really popular? What was the rage?

G: Well, don't forget, you had spells of music. During the Alabam's trip, it was blues and so forth. And then, I knew fellows like Witherspoon and Joe Turner and Jimmie Russian of Count Basie, of course Billie Holiday. All of those folk, I got to know them very well. I would go and visit with Louise Beavers, she had a house down on Harvard Boulevard, and all that crowd, I got to run with them, and grew at the same time. And it was a very sophisticated crowd, and if I didn't know, I learned fast. And that was more or less it. I rode the tide. Well, I formed very fine friendships with most of those people.

057 From 1930, the clubs on Central Avenue, in particular the Club Alabam, became a mecca for whites. Club Alabam was managed by Curtis Moseby--he had an orchestra called Curtis Moseby's Blues Blower. The Alabam was owned by the Ritzo brothers--who were probably gangsters.

082 The other clubs were all black clubs that didn't track the same crowd as the Alabam. The Alabam had liquor, valet service, etc.

104 Ivie Anderson was a close friend and client of Walter's. Ivie was the headliner at the Club Alabam. She later sang with Duke Ellington--her famous song was "Rocks in my bed."

120 When he was growing up, he knew about the scene on Central Avenue but he wasn't involved in it. When he returned to L.A. in 1936 after being away he became very involved in it.

138 The music played at the Alabam was Blues. Walter got to know Witherspoon, Joe Turner, Jimmy Russing of Count Basie, Billie Holiday.

161 While he was on the boat that went down to the Panama Canal, he made money gambling. At one stop, he bought a bunch of scarves that he sold in Philadelphia. This experience revealed to him potential business opportunities.

192 **End of PT.1**

PT. 2 - 10/6/93
SIDE A, TAPE 2

196 Introduction

200 During the Depression, Walter was in Los Angeles. He met a teacher from Cincinnati who was making a lot of money in Ohio. This made him realize that he could do better else where. He had been working 12 hours a day and only making $16/wk.

He was in Ohio when news of the bank closing reached him. He was worried about his father because he was in business. He called California and realized that the news was being withheld from California. He was able to warn his father in time for him to withdraw money.

233 During the Depression, Walter was living in Columbus and was going to school. He remembers that there were bread lines everywhere. He was fortunate to have been in school during these hard times. When he returned to CA he was able to earn a good living running dances.

K: 260 So in 1937 you got your law degree. Was there a reason why...when did you open your practice?

G: I opened my practice the first year...'36, when I arrived here. You have to sign up...most individuals, after passing the bar, take a refresher course. They don't just plunge in and take the bar. So I took that course, which carried over into '37. So I took it the first opportunity in '37. I opened my office immediately after that...I passed it the first time, and that was it.

K: 271 And did you have very many clients when you first started? How did you go about getting clients.

G: Well, clients...I knew everyone. And if I hadn't have known them, by the time I got through participating in those various dance, battles of bands, and standing at the door, and helping admimission people come in...and interestingly enough, one of the persons that helped me collect tickets at the door was Judge David Williams, who is presently a Federal Court judge. He helped me at the window collecting cash admissions. And I got to know everyone, youngsters. And when you put out posters for the dances and sent out memos about the dances, you acquired name lists and you made a very fine personal contact situation.

K: And so many of these people became your clients.

G: Yes, many of them.

288 He handled all kinds of cases. He and his associates devised an instrument called a Revocation of a Power of Attorney, which they started serving on the Southern Pacific, Santa Fe, Union Pacific Railways. They were able to get wages released for the railway employees.

327 His female employees became highly proficient typists and stenographers. The local police office would solicit them for jobs because of their good reputation.

344 Conditions were difficult for attorneys at the time. The filing fee in Superior Court was $5. He handled a lot of divorces.

390 In 1970, he quit handling divorces because of the extra work involved.

402 He handled a lot of criminal cases--always defending. He also handled a lot of bankruptcy cases.

G: 413 That type of practice,...I became interested in sporting events and I started going to the track. And going to the track, I got so I knew about horse-racing and the prices the horses paid at the track, the type of bets that could be put down. I also...several clubs hired me to represent them with reference to gambling activities where they were gambling, shooting dice. And I learned...and I had to read a lot behind dice and learning percentages and so forth. And it ended up I got a lot of bookmaking business; representing bookmakers. And if there were gambling clubs that were running illegal gambling, I would represent them because I did know about house percentages and banking percentage games. And I think I could classify myself as almost an authority on dice and bookmaking. And I could represent a defendant well in those things. It gave me a great diversity.

440 His practice was very diversified. There was a feud between the pastor and the congregation of Mt. Zion Church. He represented the congregation against the minister. He had to learn about the churches rules, rules of order.

488 The only cases he wouldn't take were ones that clients wanted to fix.

515 He classifies himself as a general practitioner. His office knew a lot about wage release, gambling, bankruptcy, divorces, alimony payment. The women who worked for him became very informed about all of these different cases.

543 Most of his clients were black. Each evening, there

would be so many people in the waiting room, people had to stand.

560 Walter had salaried attorneys working for him. The practice was first called Gordon, Shaeffer and Long. This would change over the years.

K: 580 Were there many black lawyers in Los Angeles?

G: Yes. I figure there must have been...most of them, though, were downtown in various places: About twenty-six--a far cry from today; there's hundreds--but about twenty-six. Don't forget too, I was a young lawyer. As a matter of fact, when I came out of law school, I was twenty-nine. And most of these old practitioners, they were very jealous of their own practice. They were located on Broadway: 2nd and Broadway there was a Bryson (?) Building; and then there was a Wilson Building; and there was Clarence A. Jones, a well-known old practitioner who I got along well with; Willis O. Tyler. Now Jones from Ohio State. He graduated from Ohio State in 1912. And then there was Tyler who graduated from Harvard. And then there was a man by the name of Wicliff (?), who also graduated from Harvard. And a man names Ceruty, C-E-R-U-T-Y, who was also from a big school. There were very competent, black lawyers. But the only the failure that you could attribute to them was they didn't get out with the masses. They were people...the client, whoever he was, and he could be some black person who was catching hell at a job. And he couldn't go downtown and find them very well. I was readily accessible at the corner of 41st and Central.

624 And I built my own building. I built my own building in six years. And it was glass front, and it had tile floors and had fine, nice equipment, and a huge library. And it was a nice looking presentation. And then in the evenings--I was skating on whether it was ethical or not, but I had not complaints--we had a revolving lighting system at the top; like...it was a green light, red light, so forth going around in a circle at the top of the building. And so it fit right in with Central Avenue at that time.

K: 645 To attract--?

G: Right. Because the crowd was going up and down Central Avenue in droves at night. And you had this great crowd come from Beverly (Hills?) and so forth to the Club Alabam. And any holiday, you could look out in front of your office and see as many as three, five, six hundred people right out in front of your place all the time. It was an alive thoroughfare. Entirely different today.

K: 656 How have you seen it change?

G: Well the change came first with business places going west. First they would hit someone to San Pedro Street from Central, someone over to Main, then now something at Figueroa. Then they start moving to Vermont and then Western. And the town was just spreading. Now as the town spread, nice buildings and things open up. And your building was getting older too, you follow me? So then the question came in; whether to improve your building or to move? Well, that question was answered for me. I woke one morning, my son called me and told me there was a huge blaze over on the eastside, and someone said it was the law office. And I couldn't believe it, but it was. It went up. One of the attornies there, drinking at night, had gone to sleep and apparently who left the office, and the office just was an inferno. And when the air hit it, it just went up in a jump.

K: Was it like he left a cigarette burning or something?

G: Yes. Yeah, that's what was the cause of it.

695 Shortly before the building burned down, the police used his office building as fortification so they could shoot across the street at the black panthers.

706 He was invited to share an office space on Martin Luther King for free. He worked there for ten years. This was the last office he had.

732 He has had so many cases--none stand out as more important than the others.

735 He had a case involving Eva Jessie, a choir leader. He had a church case in which the minister allegedly had stolen money from his congregation.

747 **End of SIDE A, TAPE 2**

PT. 2
SIDE B, TAPE 2

000 Silence

002 He has had so many different cases [cont. from Side A]. He represented approximately 200 waiters from the Union Pacific who were being accused of stealing because they kept their tips.

035 His father was a postal worker, newspaper distributer, and at one time was the president of an ice cream company. His mother was involved in civic causes.

048 He and his parents would go to hear various orators. There were black public speakers who would tour the

country and give addresses. They would go downtown to Oddfellows Hall downtown. He remembers going to hear William Pickens, the field secretary of the NAACP. The subjects addressed in these speeches included presidential elections, labor problems--discrimination within the unions.

G: 075 I remember hearing Ralph Bunche. You ever hear of Ralph Bunche? Well, Ralph Bunche...Ralph Bunche was a personal friend of mine. Ralph would...Mr. Eason, the man over here, Ralph was a protege of him. Mr. Eason was a professor of Greek and so forth.

K: Can you tell me again, for the tape too, Mr. Eason was...Mr. Charles Lewis Eason...you said he was the first--

G: 080 He was the first black, male teacher in Los Angeles. And everybody knew him by the name of "Professor." He was a graduate of Oberlin College. And he taught, in some black colleges, languages. Well, Mr. Eason, because of his great interest in education, took a personal interest in Ralph Bunche. And Mr. Eason worked, when he would leave school in the afternoons, he would come down and work with my father in the real estate business. He wouldn't do much soliciting or anything like that, but he would sit behind the desk with about three or four other old gentlemen. And all these old gentlemen, who were probably younger than I am now, these old gentlemen would have some great confabs (?) back there.

093 So Mr. Eason would get Ralph Bunche to come down there. Now Ralph Bunche was a star basketball player at UCLA--they didn't call it UCLA, they called it...yes it was. Anyway, so Ralph would come with his blue sweater emblazoned with gold. He'd come to there and he and Mr. Eason would have tremendous conversations and so Ralph...My mother would always prepare everyday--we had a house behind the office--she'd go back there and prepare lunches for all these men. And she just got--no paying or anything like that. And a lot of the college guys would come by there too.

K: 102 This was also on Central Avenue?

G: Yes. Yeah, and so Ralph would come by and Judge Jefferson--there were two Judges that were Jefferson: Judge Edwin Jefferson was of the District Court of Appeals and Bernard Jefferson also made the District Court of Appeals. Their father was a little old gentleman who worked for my father and mother in caretaking for property. So this little, old gentleman must have taken a lot of solace out of the fact that here he had two sons on the District Court of Appeals. And he had another daughter who was Ruby Jefferson, who was the secretary of the YWCA here. But now as far as Ralph Bunche is concerned; we were talking about speeches. Ralph, I remember, gave a very scholarly discourse at

the--what's the place out in Hollywood? The great open-air place--

K: Oh, the Hollywood Bowl?

G: Hollywood Bowl. And the subject was "Secondary Citizenship."

K: What year was this?

G: This would be rather late. Let's see, what was this? I'd should imagine this should be about '60. And he discussed the fact that the Declaration of Independence--no, the Constitution or the United States didn't make any specific references anywhere wherein the government could reduce persons' citizenship to first stage or second stage, and that citizenship was citizenship. And that we must...well, he would bring up the various complaints that could be levelled at the government for not enforcing certan laws. And he made a very interesting address. He later came down and visited me--spent some time with me at the office--and I noticed his hands were trembling a great deal. And he apparently had Delirium Trimons (?) at that time. And later Bea DeVon (?), the woman I pointed out to you and spelled her name, Bea DeVon threw a party for some of us old timers here, and he was there. And it wasn't long after that he died. I think Bea DeVon must have realized that he was very ill.

149 They all used to play basket ball together at the YMCA on 9th Street. There used to be a lot of talented guys who played ball--all were good scholars and athletes. Ralph stood out among them all.

171 There used to be a steamship that ran between L.A. and San Francisco--a passenger ship called the H.F. Alexander. The guys who went to the various colleges worked on it during the summer.

K: 183 Back when we wre talking about what you used to do for leisure when you were growing up and you had mentioned the oratories. Did you ever go places for picnics or to the beach?

G: Yes. They used to go each year to Brookside Park. Brookside Park would have the Annual Sunday School Picnic and all the kids, black kids, from all the Sunday schools in Los Angeles would go out there. They'd have tennis matches and so forth. And Newell Eason, the lad I mentioned, was a great tennis player. There was a fellow named Rayfield Lundy who used to play. And we would spend the whole day out there. But the Annual Brookside Park Picnic was something.

194 They had a man-made place in Watts called, "Leakes Lake"--Leake, L-E-A-K-E-S. A man-made pool. And we'd go out there.

This is right in Watts. You don't hear of it today. We would also go to a park that you don't hear to much of it anymore, but people would go every Sunday. You'd see hordes of people at Lincoln Park. A lot of people would go to Echo Park. These parks...But in those days, it would be a dress-up crowd and where they're having fun, where they had concessions, and they had skyrides and all those things. The Exposition Park wasn't so well-known; they didn't talk too much about it. But it was Lincoln and those parks that I mentioned.

K: 209 How about the beaches?

G: Beaches, we had...There was a black beach called Bruce's Beach. And the Bruces had this building there and the blacks would flock around Bruces Beach. And they would rent bathing suits and so forth. And a big crowd would go there all the holidays.

K: Was this near Manhattan Beach?

G: Bruces Beach is right next to Redondo Beach. And I remember that you would take Slauson to go there. So it would be right near Slauson Avenue on the beach.

K: All the beaches were segregated up until--

G: The beaches were...I'm hazy on the subject. I know I didn't go to any other beach but Bruces Beach. So apparently we weren't welcome at the other beaches.

K: 225 I heard there was a black beach at Santa Monica--there was a certain section there you could go to.

G: Yes, that's true. I remember something about that, Bruces Beach was the one that attracted most of the people.

K: So what else did they have out there? There was a place to rent bathing suits and--

G: --yeah, and let's see, you could buy soda water and so forth. And you could go lay out on the beach. And the kids could have a good time. But that was about it. I remember driving in my automobile. I had a little automobile that I would go to the beach in and see all the people on the road, on Slauson--didn't have freeways then. I would hit Slauson and go straight on out there. And Slauson was a deserted district then; you were really out in the country then, going to the beach.

244 He moved from Rose Hill in 1928 after he returned from Boston. He had gone to Boston to try to get into Harvard. He had stayed in Boston for a year and a half and worked in a laundry. He returned to L.A. through

the Panama Canal on the Luckenback line. He moved into the house that his father had taken back from George Godfrey years ago. His father bought him a sports car, which is what he drove to Ohio.

271 He didn't have any problems moving into the house that Godfreyd had tried to buy. In Rose Hill, there were a few conflicts--caused by one or two people, not the entire neighborhood.

298 His parents lived in the house in Rose Hill until they were killed.

K: 302 So then you moved on to 58th Place and then you moved to Ohio. And then when you came back, where did you live?

G: When I came back, I stayed at my home a couple of nights and then got a room with some youngsters in town, where I wouldn't have to go so far, and worked at my father's and had my office at my father's place with another fellow that I brought out here from Ohio. And I'd work at my father's place, selling real estate, giving dances and so forth. But there was no estrangement or anything like that. It was just an accomodation for me--I didn't have to drive way out there to go home at night.

K: 314 When you drove your car from here to Ohio, that's what, the early '30s?

G: It was in June or July 1932.

K: What was that like, driving your car that far?

G: I was accompanied by two boys who were going back to Wilverforce (?) University. It's called Central State now. And so they had been on the route before and we--

K: --what road was it? What roads did you take?

G: This was 66 and we went through Texas and I forgot that place--they call it "the high place" in Texas, what do you call that? Anyway, went to Texas, Oklahoma, went on through. I rmember we stopped off in St. Louis and then came on to Zino (?), Ohio first. And then I came on to Columbus.

K: So where would you...what time of day would you drive or would you drive all day and then stop and stay somewhere at the night, and what kind places would you stay at?

G: We would drive and sleep at night, most of the night, in the car. Didn't have...no acccomodations anywhere along the way.

K: Why not?

G: We all slept in the car. Wouldn't dare take a chance trying to find accomodations, see? And...by the way, one of the first things...in those days, one of the first things you learn on the road was when you hit the town is ask where the colored section of the town was. Then you'd go there and you'd find a restaurant. Then you could sleep somewhere around in that district in your car. And that's the gist of it.

352 He returned from Ohio with a brand new, blue Pontiac with the license plate "GX 7." He drove back with his friend, Nickens. When they went into pool halls, people would think they were government men. He remembers going to a pool hall in El Paso and seeing the prize fight in which Smelling knocked out Joe Louis.

382 Walter has three children. One set of twins and a son: Anne, James, Walter.

434 During WWII, Walter was practicing law and representing the railroad men. The draft board men constantly deferred Walter because they felt the community needed him here.

489 During the war, there weren't that many big changes--in terms of job opportunity for blacks. Most of the women were still doing maid work and the men were doing janitorial work. A lot of people did work in the ship yards and in the rubber plants.

K: 507 I've heard that during that time was a time when great numbers of African Americans came to Los Angeles because there was work here, so much work, because of the war industries, did you notice that?

G: There was a lot of them came here. Oh yes, because we saw the town grow. And don't forget, as a young man, you're more or less concerned in your own personal life. You're not sitting around being philosophical and thinking about things a great deal like that. You're thinking about girlfriends and dances and so forth. But you just knew the town was growing. For instance, I remember the time that I was bragging that there were almost 50,000 blacks here. I remember saying that and thinking that was an astronomical figure.

K: When was that, that you were saying that?

G: Oh, I would say that I said that aobut 1927-28. Yeah. And you saw no blacks living on the other side of San Pedro Street, except a few that were willing to risk a whole lot of trouble or they got in a nest of white neighbors that were not opposed. You could run into that; you could have the good fortune to run into

that. But that's the way the situation was. 50,000 blacks at that time looked like a great big figure.

K: 543 What were the most important organizations that you remember?

G: No question that the NAACP very important--kept people mobilized. Then the lodges: Eastern Star, the Elks, the Masons. They were active. There were groups of persons who I think they might have been...you might classify as white liberals who were...they might have been communists, but they would also give stags and smoke-outs around the town. There weren't all of us weren't invited, you know what I mean, but I'd know they'd be going on.

K: What's that? What's a smoke-out?

G: Stags.

K: What's that?

G: Stags--nothing but men. And in those days, they would...instead of...When I say "smoke-out," the real name was "smoker." So at the smoker, you'd go in and it's a room crowded with smoke and you could hardly see each other, and that was the fad. And they would sit around for hours and talk over the problems in these smoke-filled rooms. And of course it was a great health hazard, and sooner or later they stopped it. But they stopped using the word "stag" and would use the word "smoker."

584 Now, whenever I think of Loren Miller (?), I think of smoker because Loren would always be posed with a cigarette. Loren was the number two man to Ralph Bunche, as far as accomplishments are concerned. And I always remember seeing Loren with a cigarette. Loren was...have you heard of Thuragood Marshall (spe)? Loren was an associate of Thuragood Marshall. They were about the same age. And they both tackled the same problems.

K: 597 When you mentioned those organizations before, like the Elks and the Mason, did you have any involvement with these groups?

G: No, I was what you call a "fraternity man." The Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity...There were three black, national fraternities among men--among college men, and that's the Alpha Phi Alph, the Omega Psi Phi (?), and the Kappa Alpha Psi. They all aspired to own fraternity houses in the various cities. You'd find them very strong on college campuses. Alpha Phi Alpha originated at Cornell University. And it has chapters. For instance, when I went to Boston in 1926 around, and I wanted to go out and socialize and meet some of the youngsters in school, and I was

taking out a girl in Boston, and here comes a big affair coming up on Saturday night, and she's asking me if I'm going and I said, "No, I don't know anything about it." And she says, "Well, are you a frat man?" I said, "No." And she says, "Well, I'm sorry. I got an invitation," and she says, "It's a closed party." So you couldn't do anything socially unless you were a frat member.

636 Now this is...I brought this [photograph] to show you. This is where...I was already in the Alpha, and when I came back to Los Angeles out of school, this is where forming a graduate chapter here, and I happened to be one of the charter members, you see. And I notice it's the year 1940. Most of these people are dead.

K: So this was the chapter here in L.A.

G: Right. So this is a flourishing chapter here now. So, here is where...

K: But you got involved when you went to college in Ohio?

G: Yes, I was an Alpha before I went back there to Ohio.

K: When you went to Boston--

G: No, when I went to Ohio. I was an Alpha then. As a matter of fact, you've heard of Jesse Owens? Well, I helped initiate Jesse Owens in our frat at Ohio State. And he and I had been friends ever since.

K: What kind of initiations did you have?

G: It was rough. It was battles. It was rough.

664 Walter reads an invitation to an event by the L.A. chapter of his frat that announces that they will be honoring him as one of their founders.

706 There were two sororities.

726 Other groups not in the university have also began to use greek letters for the names of their social clubs.

750 **End of SIDE B, TAPE 2**

PT. 2
SIDE A, TAPE 3

000 Silence

004 Black-balling in fraternities and sororities.

Different qualities associated with the people accepted into the different fraternities or sororities--but varies from city to city.

012 Advantages of being in a fraternity.

G: 022 It saves you from going through the ordeal of picking your friends. They're already there. You know if he's an Alpha man, he's okay. At least, he was okay when he was in school with everybody, and he didn't get a black ball.

It's regarded as snobbish, but if you ask a guy if he went to certain universitites and so forth: "What school did you go to?" "I went to University of Chicago." "Are you a frat man?" "No." Alright, your guard is up. Your guard is up--this is old timer's thinking. Your guard is up because either he didn't want to mess with them or else they didn't want him. So at least you want to find out the reason. Ipso facto, it doesn't mean that he's no good. It just means there's a reason. And it saves you so much time.

035 Now this is very important with black people. See, because it...there's so much activity going on that you can waste your time. And this way,... you don't have all that money where white folk can spend, sit down and spend a long time and select a friend. You hit a town and you've got just enough money to last you over-night, you can sort our friendships very fast. And you establish...

050 Experience in Boston motivated him to join a fraternity when he returned to school.

064 He hasn't been a member of any church, but he has been involved in church activities.

077 He listens to Reverend Price of the Faith Temple on the radio--Price and his congregation bought the land that Pepperdine University used to be on.

110 His mother was involved in AME Zion, Pico and Paloma. This is where they attended church when Walter was growing up.

127 He has watched many black leaders become successful in their endeavors: Tom Bradley, Judge David Williams, Clayton Russell, Ralph Bunche.

Walter has met many famous people through his law practice.

His first wife and her family had a great influence on his life. He had been provincial--they opened up the

world for him.

211 He became aware of life on the East Coast and other parts of the country when he met his second wife. Both he and his second wife married after divorcing their previous spouses.

220 His first wife was Lillian Bellinger. His second wife was Anne Franklin--she is the mother of his children. She was the daughter of the medical officer of Prairie View University.

233 He meets his third wife, a show-girl, Ethel Sissle who he later divorces.

248 He readjusted after the divorce and started over again. He married his present wife, to whom he's been married for thirty-five years.

266 Ethel Sissle deteriorated after the divorce. She died of cancer.

280 He ran for a Republican seat in congress in 1954-55. He ran unsuccessfully against Gus Hawkins.

311 He is no longer a Republican. He's not a very active democrat, but he favors the party. He's not a supporter of Jesse Jackson.

326 [Walter's wife enters]

357 He and his older friends do not like Jackson's style.

377 His involvement in the civil rights movement was "luke warm." But he did take on a lot of civil rights cases. There had not been a lot of publicity about those who made the greater sacrifices of going down to the south and demonstrating.

K: 404 Can you think of some examples of the cases, to you, that stand out in your mind?

G: Oh, we had lots of cases where...I didn't have too many, but they were going on all the time [his wife interrupts to ask a question] about refusal's to serve and discrimination. I...don't forget I came up during the time when I had just grown used to refusal and used to denial. And I had professors in law school who said that law was...you can do this and you can't do this. For instance, they taught about...discrimination on railroad trains and so forth that was permissible under Plessy vs. Ferguson. They went all into the principles of it. I knew it was an 8-1 decision. And here I am in law school and the

professor is teaching law and he tells you, you've got to go through the priniciples that justify it. On "restrictive convenants," the professor taught that this was legal. So, I'm young and just hoping to get a license, and not being too sure I'm going to pass the bar. You know, you're under a great fear that you might be going to all this law school and not pass the bar. And I was just being thankful that I could get by. And I didn't think of upsetting the world or anything--

K: --at that time.

G: And didn't think of upsetting a lot of these decisions. When the decisions come down changing things, they would be as much a surprise to me as they were other people.

446 Some of the big changes he has witnessed: the restrictive covenant; Martin Luther King and his supporters impact on voting and discrimination in public places.

455 The discrimination in public places doctrine didn't affect those in California the way it did those living in the South. Black lawyers in the south had a harder time in court than those in California.

491 The worst experience he had in court. He represented two black men accused of contributing to the delinquency of a minor--who was a white girl. Walter criticized the judge for being prejudiced in the way in which he was conducting the case. It became a well-publicized case.

702 **End of Side A, Tape 3**
(corresponds to end of DAT Tape 1)

PT.2
Side B, Tape 3
(corresponds to DAT Tape 2)

000 Silence

004 Introduction

008 Continuation of Walter's description of his worst experience in court--involving the racial prejudice of the judge. The case ended with that judge being transferred.

030 Fifteen years later, a case of Walter's was tried by the same judge.

060 Successes. Hasn't thought about what his greatest successes have been. He's enjoyed the practice of law. He feels fortunate that he chose to pursue law.

079 Disappointments. He has never been able to reconcile his parents' death.

087 His relationship with his mother and father was the greatest, most rewarding thing in his life. He gets a lot of satisfaction from and is sustained by the love they had for him.

K: 143 I have one last question. What do you do now and what are your plans for the future?

G: (laughs) Right now, I have no plans for future except continuing to work and do my work if I can, if my health holds up. And I'm thinking a great deal about the physical side. I've talked to other relatives of mine, some in medicine, they tell me that an old man's legs give out first, so I'm being very careful about my legs, and I'm walking. And I hope to...I'll be eighty-six in June coming. I hope if I can make it, just ease along to ninety-five [or '95, 1995?], then I'll be willing to fight from ninety-five on (laughs).

K: (laughs) You might think of retiring maybe around ninety-five.

G: I will retire...I want you to know, I'll retire anytime just when I think I can't make it anymore. Because I don't want to be a burden. You know, sometimes old men push things too far. They end up losing the capacity to do their best, and I don't want to do that. So that's about it.

K: 162 And I just remembered one other thing you were going to tell me about but I never asked you was about the lottery--the Chinese lotteries.

G: Oh yeah. There was a time when every black barber shop, they had a rear room, and the Chinese would come in that rear room. And on that rear room wall would be all types of tickets in Chinese insignias. And they would sell lottery tickets back there. And this...and people, women--it would be a men's barbershop, but women and men would file in and out buying those lottery tickets. And I remember you'd hear about a "seven-spot" and a "three-spot" and so forth. And I sometimes wondered whether or not they're the same things that are used in Kino (?) games. I don't know. But the Chinese lottery was a well-established thing in the '30s.

K: Was that just locally here in Los Angeles?

G: No, I think...I better not give an opinion about the rest of the country. But I know this, there's a gang of them here.

K: And so like what would you win or how did it work?

G: Oh, you'd here people win a thousand dollar, six, five thousand dollars.

K: And it was legal?

G: It was illegal, but...it was very illegal, but the police set-up in those days, in the '30s, permitted all that stuff to go on. And the police were grabbing and taking money from these people.

188 Clifton ran a cafeteria downtown. He took up a crusade against the mayor of the city. A detective who worked for Clifton had uncovered evidence to convict a sheriff.

207 Back then, you could go to Clinton's, get served, and pay whatever you thought was reasonable.

212 **End of Interview**
Remainder of Side B, Tape 3 is blank