

**ORAL HISTORY T-0029**  
**INTERVIEW WITH ALBERT JEFFERSON**  
**INTERVIEWED BY DR. RICHARD RESH AND FRANKLIN ROTHER**  
**BLACK COMMUNITY LEADERS PROJECT**  
**AUGUST 10, 1970**

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This is the twelfth in a series of oral history interviews sponsored by the University of Missouri, St. Louis. Your interviewer is Professor Richard Resh, my assistant is Mr. Franklin Rother. Our guest today, August 10, 1970, is Mr. Albert Jefferson. Mr. Jefferson is a retired Postal Department employee and is a member of the Board of the Carondolet Historical Society.

RESH: Mr. Jefferson, could you begin by telling us something about your self? Are you a native of St. Louis?

JEFFERSON: Yes, I'm a native son. I became interested in black history, I was rather nourished on it because both of my parents were born in slavery. They were youths, quite young, but then at the table. I heard so much of the Civil—the life on the plantation, I've heard them tell stories, of the Yankee soldiers purging, coming and stripping the plantation of its livestock and grain.

RESH: Where were they?

JEFFERSON: My mother was born in Louisville, Kentucky, and my father in Frankfort, Kentucky. They were both from Kentucky. And I used to listen to their stories, I knew all the terms, my father talking about mini-balls whistling in the woods. And, oh, a lot of the toys he made for me were the toys they made on the plantation, take and saw a log and make wheels. And my mother would tell how they used to take grape vines and put in their dresses to make hoop skirts. And, so, but it's remarkable how my parents got together. After the Civil War, General Hancock, Winfield Hancock, he had been stationed at Jefferson Barracks: but later he won some fame at the Battle of Gettysburg, at one of the ridges, I think it was. And after the Civil War, he came back and he acquired a large tract of land just north of Jefferson Barracks. Well, many times when someone would ask me were there many Negroes in the, in Carondolet or South St. Louis after the Civil War: well, then, golly, I guess there wasn't that may that he went back to Kentucky to recruit some employees for his farm he expected to establish north of Jefferson Barracks. So my mother was engaged as a nurse maid, and she with a lot of other new employees, and he got a plantation-like farm north of Jefferson Barracks. I guess there's, no monument down there, There's Hancock School and there's Hancock Avenue and I guess that's about all that's known locally of, General Hancock., And probably a lot of them couldn't tell you who Hancock School was named for. But General Hancock: later began to notice about, you know, after the. Civil War most of the schools, they had one. Negro school here in South St. Louis, a one room school, and I think. Belle

Sundrus was the principal, I think it was one room, and she had about sixty pupils. But later in 1870, they built Public School Number 6, Well, the White schools had names but the Negro schools in St. Louis went by numbers. And public school down here was Public School Number 6. Well, later, I think it was Dr. Calvin Woodward, I think he was one of the trustees of Lincoln Institute at that time, now Lincoln University. And he suggested that they have, try Negro teachers. And so they had, they tried them, recruited them where ever they could. But later a young white attorney, a lawyer here in St. Louis, he suggested naming these Negro schools after heroes of the Civil War. And General Hancock was one of the names suggested. Well, now, you know, during the Reconstruction days they had lieutenant-governors over the subdued South, and he was governor, General Scott was governor of New Orleans, of Louisiana. I understand in New Orleans they had a problem with Jim Crow streetcars. And the ones that Negroes were supposed to ride, he suggested putting a star on the streetcar. Well, when it came to naming one of the Negro schools after General Hancock, well, a lot of the Negro leaders knew of his part in the Jim Crow streetcars in New Orleans and they protested. So it was withdrawn. And then when the Negro principals, these young Negro principals who were appointed to these schools, and it was suggested by the Board of Education that each principal would name a school. I have it on paper, I can't recall off-hand, but if you like I can get a paper with the names of the principals that named these schools, and the schools that were named. Of course, I know the school Number 6 was named after Martin R. Delaney. He was an early, yes, he was the captain and a surgeon during the Civil War. Later he was assistant editor to Frederick Douglas on his North Star paper.

RESH: He was one of the early ones, Negroes, who suggested going back to Africa, too, I believe, or at least...

JEFFERSON: Well, I think so. "" You know, now...

RESH: There's been quite a bit of work done...

JEFFERSON: Well, you know, there was quite a protest about, and I just come upon one of William Lloyd Garrison's books where a John B. Vashon, this is in 1831, when this here African Colonization Society started, they were violently protested. And another thing, I'm of the same opinion as these men. I do not like the term "Black," I do not like the term "Afro-American." You see, after the, well, say the Negroes were here, I mean after there was intermarriage. You know, years ago, they would advertise for a runaway slave and they would describe them as a mulatto. You had octoroons, you had quadroons, octoroons 1/8, quadroons 1/4, and so on. And then there was such a mixture with the, some of them had Indian blood in them. They had been here now for a couple of hundred years and they were Americanized. And if you don't mind, I'm gonna get this book, do you mind me getting this book?

RESH: Okay, sure.

JEFFERSON: A Voice from Pittsburg. This is dated Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, September the first, 1831. "At a large and respectable meeting of the colored citizens of Pittsburg, convened at the African Methodist-Episcopal Church for the purpose of expressing their views in relation to the American Colonization Society. Mr. J.B. Vashon was called to the chair." Now this here, now my principal, when I graduated from grade school was John B. Vashon, John

Boyer Vashon. And the Vashon School is named for him, and I think a brother or his father, it must be his father which is this, the Vashon that I'm talking about. He was...

RESH: Yes, John B. Vashon was a, I believe, active in the underground railroad and was an early contributor and seller of Garrison's *Liberator*.

JEFFERSON: Yes, I believe so. Yes. "The subject of this meeting was then stated at considerable length and in an appropriate manner by the chairman. The following resolutions were then unanimously adopted: "Resolved that we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Liberty, equality, now, liberty and equality forever." Is that too long?

RESH: No.

JEFFERSON: "Resolved that it is the decided opinion of this meeting that African colonization is a scheme to drain the better informed part of the colored people out of these United States so that the chain of slavery may be riveted more tightly. But we are determined not to be cheated out of our rights by the colonization men or any other set of intriguers. We believe there is no philanthropy in the colonization plan for the people of color. But it is got up to do us away from our country and home to the burning shores of Africa. Resolved that we the colored people of Pittsburg and citizens of these United States, view the country in which we live as our only true and proper home. We are just as much natives here as members of the Colonization Society. Here we were born, here bred, here are our earliest and most pleasant associations, here is all that binds man to earth and makes life valuable. And we do consider every colored man who allows himself to be colonized in Africa or elsewhere a traitor to our cause. Resolved that we are free men, that we are brethren, that we are countrymen and fellow citizens and as fully entitled to the exercise of the elective franchise as any man who breathes. And that we demand an equal share of protection from our Federal Government with any class of citizens in the community. We now inform the Colonization Society that should our reason forsake us, then we may desire to remove, we will apprise them of this change in due season. Resolved that we of the citizens of these United States and for the support of these resolutions with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence do mutually pledge each other our lives, our fortunes, our sacred honor not to support a colony in Africa or in upper Canada, nor yet to migrate to Haiti. Here we were born, here we will live by the help of the Almighty, here we will die and let our bones lie with our fathers. Resolved that we return our grateful thanks to Messrs. Garrison and Knapp publisher of the *Liberator*. Mr. Lundy, editor of the *Genius of the Universal Emancipation*, for their untiring exertions in the cause of philanthropy. Resolved that the proceedings of this meeting shall be signed by the chairman and secretary and published in the *Liberator*. By J. B. Vashon, chairman. R. Bryan, secretary." Now Mr. Vashon was a very knowledgeable man.

RESH: May I ask a question?

JEFFERSON: Yes, you may.

RESH: You were talking about the movement now to name these Negro schools in St. Louis, to give them proper names instead of numbers, when was this movement undertaken?

JEFFERSON: That was about in, could you wait until I get some notes?

RESH: Sure.

JEFFERSON: It was around that time.

RESH: Around 1876.

JEFFERSON: Right, around 1876, yes.

RESH: So then moving up now in your own family, how did your father get to St. Louis?

JEFFERSON: St. Louis, well, my father came, I think he said he came by steamboat, and he got in the building trade here in Carondelet. And later they met, I guess. My father did do some work in some of those buildings down there and maybe down in the Barracks, I don't know. I never did hear them quite say, it may be due to, you know, Trilby, how they met?

TRILBY: I don't know.

JEFFERSON: I know that they met and they moved, well, I think there was just about three houses that they lived in Carondelet, isn't it? They lived in the one near the old Carondelet Hotel.

RESH: When did they come to St. Louis?

JEFFERSON: When they came to St. Louis, I don't think it was too long after—must have been about 1870. I don't think it was too long, around 1870.

TRILBY: Well, you can figure it out this way, because she said that when she came here, when my mother came here, Carondelet still wasn't annexed with St. Louis area.

JEFFERSON: Carondelet, yes, because they were here when Carondelet was an independent city, before Carondelet was annexed by St. Louis. Because, see, Carondelet was quite a thriving city at that time. It was, you know, they called it the Pittsburg of the West." They had steel mills here, and well, I know that they came here when the old city hall was on the Boland, when the old city hall was on Boland and Broadway. And then later they had 'moved to Wayfield Hall here at Broadway and Loughborough. And that's where they had so many, where they had balls and operas and things at the old Carondelet. And they used to tell us about it, there was so much about the—and then it was here, because my mother used to often speak about the streets. And see, Minnesota was Third, Pennsylvania was Second, Michigan...Fourth, Virginia...Fifth, and so on. And if we want to say, we'd say Fourth Street, she'd know right away that you meant Michigan Avenue or Fifth Street for Virginia Avenue, Sixth Street for Vermont, and so on, and the streets like that. And many times Loughborough Avenue here was Pine Street and the changed the name of the streets later on. But they still had it in their mind, you know, you knew like north of Elmwood Street my mother always called Chouteau's Hill. Of course, they had the correct French pronouncement as "Shu-To." But they always called it Chouteau's Hill because Charles P. Chouteau lived there in one of those, oh, right where the Altenheim is now, they're rebuilding there now. That used to be the old Chouteau mansion. We knew so many of the descendants of the old French families ii

Carondolet. You take the Gamache, old Pete Gamache would stand on the corner of Broadway there and anybody who would lend him an ear to listen to him he would tell you, "All of that should belong to my people under the Spanish grant." Well, I understand. A lot of those were told that you had to process that. And sometimes they didn't and there was a lot of crooked work or something, I mean a lot of them were deceived and all that. But there was a lot of the old French families that were here in Carondolet that we knew a lot of their descendants. The oh, I can't tell you, so many of them that we knew. Carondolet was a nice, well-knit community. Good relationships here in Carondolet. Most, now like the church my mother belonged to was in a white neighborhood, and they had to walk about seven to eight blocks through the, they had to walk all through white neighborhoods and there was no clashes, no nothing, it was just, you know, we lived here and we were the only Negro family, there was another one, this was a double house. And the O'Rourkes and the Walshs and Schertel, German and the French family there, Mrs. Stinger they were French, and Renehaus. Mrs. O'Rourke would bring her cod fish balls, always making them for some of our family, with her Irish stew, and these others with bakery goods, and I mean, it was a good relationship, you know?

RESH: When were you born?

JEFFERSON: Well, I was born in August, the 26th, 1899. I got a card when I applied for my old age pension, not a wage pension, I mean, I'm on Civil Service retirement, but everybody when Medicare came in you had to subscribe to the Social Security, get a Social Security number, I didn't have anything before that time, you didn't need it in the Civil Service. And the girl at the office. Social Security Office, asked me how long I had been living. I says I was born in the house I was living, that was about 1967. She went in to her supervisor and he came out, he says, "Mr. Jefferson, we're going to send to the census bureau." So I got a card from the census bureau and the census of 1900 I was 9/12ths of a year old. And it's 7010½, this is a double house, and our number was 7010½ at that age. So that's when I was born. And born just at the turn of the century.

RESH: And then what school, what grade school did you go to?

JEFFERSON: Well, I went "to Delaney School. That was, well, it was an old school, built in abut 18, I think it was built in 1873. And it was four room, no six rooms because they had two portables. And the last principal, then they built the new school, they built the new school and I think I was about the first class to graduate from the new school, and it wasn't finished when Ethel, and I think we were the first class. And they built, we could just watch from the old school. So now, later some of the Negroes left Carondolet for better homes and a lot of them died out and there was not many children. RESH: Could I ask you a question about the World War One period?

JEFFERSON: Yes.

RESH: Some of your memories of that period: there were perhaps the most notorious, scandalous episode in East St. Louis in July, 1917.

JEFFERSON: The race riots?

RESH: The race riots. Did you have recollections? Of course you weren't over there, but did you have, see Negroes fleeing East St. Louis to come to St. Louis?

JEFFERSON: Well, no, we could hear. But I didn't. Let's see, 1917, I would have been about 18 years old then and I was in the Post Office, but I can remember the horrors and I know what bitterness we all felt over here about that race riot. And while we had Mayor Kiel at that time, and he welcomed the Negroes from East St. Louis over to St. Louis. And I think there was committees of different organizations to help those people in whatever way they could. That's about what I remember of it. I was later reading, I think it was in Dubois, one of Dubois books about the East St. Louis riot. But I can remember, I think we saw smoke and remember the bitterness the people felt over here, but the white people over here were very receptive and Mayor Kiel, and they done all they could to welcome those people over here, you know. I can recall, that's just about what I can remember of that.

RESH: Then what did you, what high school did you attend?

JEFFERSON: I attended Sumner.

RESH: Sumner, which was the only one until...

JEFFERSON: That was the only one, yes. I was carrying mail out of Anchor Station and another letter carrier, Thomas Marshall, he said, "Jeff, you don't have to hurry home, come on, go to the Board of Education with me." And I says, "Yeah, I'll be glad to go down there. I didn't even know what was up. So I got down there I found out they were petitioning for a new high school. And those that were involved as speakers was. Homer Phillips, the lawyer, and Mrs. Curtis, and John Wheeler, and Robert Stephens, I think they named a school for him. And I went down there, I think Mrs. Curtis' presentation was about the best, she was very able, very fluent.

RESH: This was in the late 1920's, was it not?

JEFFERSON: I think it was around...

RESH: The other school was Vashon that came along?

JEFFERSON: Yes, Vashon came along in ...

RESH: About '27 or '28.

JEFFERSON: I think it was around '27, I think that's what the corner stone is, in '27, Well, this must have been around '25 or something like that when they went down there, '24 or something like that. But then they pointed out the differences in the first: they had the Sumner Normal School, the Negro teachers was only getting two years and then at Harris Teachers' College. The white teachers were getting four years, when they worked for a degree. And they pointed out that they had one man that was probably a dictator, Frank L. Williams, he was principal of Sumner High and the Cottage Avenue schools and Sumner Normal School. They pointed that out. And seems like, I don't know, they named the school for him and according to my estimate, I would never have named the school for him because I think he done more to retard the schools than anyone else. Because he showed them how he

could save money by him becoming involved. Did you see that book that Dr. Harris wrote on Sumner High?

RESH: Yes.

JEFFERSON: I bought that, I mean on the Stowe Teachers' College. Bit that was one of the things...

RESH: Let's back up then and get you into the Postal Service, when did you enter the Postal Service?

JEFFERSON: I entered, I think it was around 1917. And when I came in the service it was kind of tough getting a Civil Service. Later the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People they had, because you had to put your picture on your application and that was very discriminatory because then they, I'll tell you, you had to make a very high percentage on your examination to be called. And when I was called, there was only two Negroes called, Joe, Joe, not Joe, a fellow named Page and myself. They employed about fifty white subs and two Negroes. And you see the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People fought that. And then I came in the Post Office under this here Colin M. Selph. We had a postmaster general, Albert Burlison from Texas and Colin Selph: they were of the same stripe. And there was a lot of, under Selph, he just didn't like them and he'd tell you so.

RESH: How did you spell his last name?

JEFFERSON: Selph?

RESH: S-E-L-F?

JEFFERSON: No, S-E-L-P-H. Yes, Selph, Colin Selph. C-O-L-I-N, Colin. And then there were so much, see under them, and it was almost universal all over the United States the trouble that the Negroes were having in the Post Office. So I get a call to a meeting, I think it was the Masonic Hall, out on Easton and Grand, and Will White and a group of fellows, and as I remember Mr. Steele was there. He was superintendent of building down at Jefferson Barracks. Seems like under Woodrow Wilson they were all having a hard go. And that is when they first proposed this here National Alliance of Postal Employees.

RESH: This was what year? Approximately.

JEFFERSON: I would say this must have been around 1919, because I think in 1920 Harding was, yes, Harding came in. I think it was around 1919, I'd say prior to that, I'd say from 1917, well, you might say that during Wilson's administration, and when Burlison was Postmaster General, the Negro employee, postal employee was really being discriminated against. You had to really watch your p's and q's, because the least little pretext, they had the demerit system then and they could give you demerits for most anything, or if any supervisor didn't like you, and you didn't have a redress. I remember one time I was called up, they said I mis-delivered a letter. Now ordinarily under the other Post Office, postmasters, the supervisors would take care of it, and not the postmaster. But Mr. Selph, why, he was very vicious, he wanted everybody to know he was Postmaster And I got this letter to come up, had an

appointment with the Postmaster. Well, one of the old employees down here told me, he says "Now, when you go up there," most employees had been up there one time, whether white or colored. And he says, " Just say 'I cannot affirm or deny I mis-delivered the letter.'" And so I did, I went up there, they had, you sat at a table, and the Postmaster at the other end. And you could look out in the corridor and the employees would be walking with their hands like you was a doomed man, you know, going to your doom. It was kind of comical in a way, with those others over there. They'd be shaking their heads. He read the charges that I had mis-delivered a letter and I said, "I cannot affirm or deny that I mis-delivered a letter." And he says, "Hey, you must be a Philadelphia lawyer like that." He didn't give me no demerits or anything. But the thing of it was, it was time consumed and wasted where ordinarily just common correspondence would have been...

RESH: It was a form of harassment.

JEFFERSON: Yes, that's it. And another thing you had to get a uniform, he wanted you to get one every year. And it was unheard of because if you had a good uniform it would pass inspection. But we understood we got it from a Pecktimer salesman that he expected to get a dollar off for every uniform when it was sold. So, on the day of inspection...Ordinarily the field foreman would always come down to the station, and he would call the carriers together to get our uniforms and that was it. There was nothing to it. But he had the letter carriers' van, he had an old letter carriers' van, he had the letter carriers from all over the city and the county up there in front of the old Post Office, it was there on Eighteenth and Market at that time, and they would line up, and he had a letter carrier as orderly holding his overcoat and walking down, back and forth among the carriers. And that was on your own time, on Sunday. So then when Harding, I think it was Harding elected, they had a change in administration.

RESH: Yes, 1920.

JEFFERSON: Yes, well, then that's when the National Association of Letter Carriers got busy. And they called in Congressman L. C. Dyer and I don't know who, Sullivan, Spencer, I forget who was the Senator. But anyway, they got him ousted, they got him and they called on Inspector Cain to act as postmaster until they could replace, appoint a postmaster. And well, none of the white postal employees liked Selph and you know how hard he would be on the Negro, you know, he would be still worse. He was just in a ...And so, they were having so much trouble and that. And I know at this meeting they were, each would get up and tell some story of harassment or something that was happening in the Post Office, citing little incidents, and it looked like he was just trying to find fault or pick fault. And so that's when the beginning of the National Postal Alliance was organized. I joined it but, I guess, I was a member for years but later I got out because I felt that I belonged to the Rational Association of Letter Carriers and I felt it was stronger. And I didn't see the need for a dual postal organization. Which I still don't believe today because most of the bills put through, I've been a delegate to so many of the letter carrier's conventions and up until, even after I retired I was a delegate up in, I think, the last one was in Detroit, and that's been about four years, six years ago.

RESH: Could you tell us something about Mr. Lafayette Ford who organized this?

JEFFERSON: Well, yes, I'll tell you. I knew him, but to know his background or that I really don't know. I've met him, I met him out in a social way and that, but to tell much about his, his two sons are good businessmen. This one, I think, is a director on one bank out in the West End, and he's been with the insurance, with the American, let's see what is that some insurance company out there on Lindell, there at 4144 Lindell. And then the other one, I knew them, the boys opened a restaurant there on Jefferson and Chestnut some years ago, they called it The Turf.

RESH: Was this, this Alliance organized in St. Louis?

JEFFERSON: That's what I understand: it was organized in St. Louis. Yes, to my knowledge it was organized in St. Louis. Now whether some of the other cities got the drop and then this one, I really don't know. That dates a little far back and all. I know I was a member of that, but I really can't tell you. You know, my memory just don't serve me. So it may be. I know Mr. Ford.

RESH: What were some of your memories then, working in the Postal Office during the Depression? Did things improve when the Democrats came in improve for you as a postal worker?

JEFFERSON: Well, yes.

RESH: Of course, I guess that would depend on your politics.

JEFFERSON: No, no it didn't. Because you see today, years ago you didn't know a fellow's politics in the Post Office because it may, you didn't know whether a carrier was a republican or a Democrat. Of course, most of the time during that era after Woodrow Wilson, why-most of them were relieved to get back to normalcy as they called. The majority of them were Republicans. But as far as, things did improve in the Post Office. They built a new Post Office here. And, you see, under Burlison and under those others, of course, I'll tell you one President that I didn't think much of and that was Calvin Coolidge. I didn't think much of Calvin Coolidge because his was pinch-penny and you see that so many times when they would, our union would organize or initiate a pay raise and it would go through maybe the committee in the, the Post Office committee: they would recommend it and, well, Coolidge would be opposed to it and, I think once or twice he vetoed a raise. And for that reason, I don't know about that pinch penny attitude that he would take, he had...

RESH: He was a stingy New Englander.

JEFFERSON: Yes, he was. He wanted to take the stripes out of the mail bags if it would cost more money, I don't know. Certain reforms he Initiated in the, that's the reason I didn't think much of him. Because at that time when you went in the Post Office, especially as a sub, you was just the scum of the earth. Because you didn't work regularly, it's different from the sub carrier today, because the sub carrier today, he's a regular employee. He gets sick weeks, he gets all the fringe benefits, because years ago you didn't. And so there seemed to be, seemed to have been a good relationship, I've seen many of the Congressmen. I used to go to the conventions regularly, I seen one of the friends we used to have was Senator Langer from South Dakota, and Olson Johnson, he was friend of the Post Office, and Lyndon B. Johnson,

I've seen Lyndon B. many times when he was a senator. And the first time I saw Eisenhower was at the Letter Carriers' Convention in New York City.

RESH: When you entered the Postal Service in 1917, how high could you aspire to go in the postal hierarchy?

JEFFERSON: No farther than the highest grade they'd give me as a letter carrier, but for me to become a field foreman or supervisor or anything like that, well, that was just out. No, I know when they started appointing Negro foremen down in the office, they would pick them from the ranks of the National Postal Alliance. Will White, I think he became a supervisor, he got in some kind of trouble down there, I think, I don't know whether he was let out or whether he resigned. And several of the others, I how John Wheeler said they would, the Post Office, the foremen and that, they would ride these here fellows, who were officers in the Postal Alliance and that, and make it hard for them, you know. So they may be, there may have been some...

RESH: You mentioned John Wheeler just a second ago, was Henry Wheeler related to him?

JEFFERSON: I said, that's what I mean. Henry Wheeler.

RESH: Tell us something about him, because I've read his columns that he used to write for the St. Louis American during the Second World War, and Henry Wheeler was a very dynamic individual apparently, very outspoken.

JEFFERSON: Yes, he was. Yes, he was very outspoken. I knew Henry best from a toastmasters' club he had organized. See, I carried mail here in Carondolet and I didn't hardly come in contact with the,— think the St. Louis American has an article this week on Henry Wheeler this weds, did you see it?

RESH: No, I didn't.

JEFFERSON: Trilby, would you get the St. Louis American? From last week. I think there's something about the Post Office in there. Henry Wheeler was very dynamic and I remember, I don't know whether he was an organizer of CORE or not, but I remember, I started going with a girl, as a matter of fact she was much younger than I was, so that was about in '52, and she says, "I want you to go some place with me." And we went to the, oh a hall there on West Belle, Tom Powell Post Hall. I thought it was a Junior League, but it was CORE. And that's where I first met Henry Wheeler.

TRILBY: Here's one...

JEFFERSON: Yeah, let me see it. And when I first went there I heard him speak. This isn't last week's.

RESH: Well, I subscribe to that, so I still have a copy. I'm behind in my reading.

TRILBY: Is that the one, August the sixth. Let's see, what was this last week?

JEFFERSON: No. I know that, I remember Henry, we were best. Well, after that we got,

Henry Wheeler, we organized the toastmaster's Club, I think it was the first Negro Toastmasters' Club in the United States.

RESH: When was this?

JEFFERSON: That was in, must have been around, 1947. I could get it if you wait a minute.

RESH: Oh, that's okay, no. I just wanted to get an approximate date.

JEFFERSON: Well, later I'll find out. We organized this Toastmaster Club and it was a mixed group. What I mean by mixed group, there was a lot of professional people, Dr. Young and John Buckner, principal of Sumner High, I think he was president. We had a nice organization there. We got an invitation to a convention up in Minnesota and we sent a delegate and they didn't know that our unit was Negro and they asked for our charter. And of course James Cook and that stood adamant, they wouldn't give them the charter back, they kept it. But I know at one of the meetings of this Toastmasters' Club John (Henry) Wheeler spoke about Negroes couldn't buy nothing but second balcony seats at the American Theater. So we organized, that's my first protest march, went down to the American Theater and Ethel Waters was playing there at the time. I don't know if it was "Manda's Daughter", it was "Manda's Daughter" or something, some show she was in. And that's the first time we picketed, I picketed with John Wheeler was down at the American Theater. But he was very militant, and he was very militant in the Post Office. And they asked him to retire on account of his militancy. And I had a friend who was a foreman in the main office and when I'm up as a clerk visiting him he said, "Do you know John Wheeler, I mean Henry Wheeler?" And I says, "Yes, I know him," he says, "Well, we had to ask him to retire because he was rather erratic in his casing of mail." But John Wheeler told me it was on account of his militancy that they asked him to retire, it was for that reason.

RESH: During the Second World War, Mr. Wheeler, in his column, "The Spider's Web," which he wrote for the St. Louis American, organized or helped to organize the Citizens' Civil Rights Committee which had as its objective the integration of various downtown department store cafeterias like Scruggs, Vandervoort and Barney.

JEFFERSON: Well, it succeeded.

RESH: Yes.

JEFFERSON: Yes, the first was Scruggs. I attended many meetings, and I know Mr. Cook used to say, "I can go down and buy my wife a five thousand dollar fur coat and yet I can't eat a fifteen cent hotdog." That's in the stores, and which was true at the time. You go downtown, you go shopping, they accept your money alright, but when it comes to eating, you couldn't eat at the Forum. And then later, Woolworths and Kresge's had a separate counter there for you, you could stand there, and a lot of Negroes wouldn't eat there, they distained that they said that you couldn't eat, you know. When you see a lot of the things that are happening and you can understand this younger generation. I can understand their protest. You just think of all the thousands of shoes that Negroes wear and yet the only employment they could find with International Shoe, Robert Johnson, Rand, and those shoe companies was as porters. I was reading in a book about Liggett-Myers, and this here was printed, this

here book was printed I think in 1900. But where Liggett-Myers used to hire young boys to strip tobacco, and they didn't have enough of them and they employed some Negroes. Well, now they fought, these here white boys fought these here colored boys to keep them from, and I often wondered because when I was a boy going— the first thing that most of these boys who get a job in a shoe factory or when they become 14 or 15 years old, they'd get a job in a shoe factory, Liggett-Myers, and them. Cause I know I used to like to get that licorice, they used to put a licorice in their chewing tobacco and it was a kind of bitter licorice, and they'd bring a plug of that home, you know, for us, but when you stop to think of the things... Now my mother used to tell me, before the turn of the century there was a lot of tolerance, that the boat excursions were not separated, white and colored went on the boat excursions together. I can remember the first nickelodeons that was established downtown, my father used to take me: they didn't question your color or anything. I can remember the Old Train Robberies, I remember ones they said "talking pictures" and I know my father carried me, and there was a man behind the screen talking, that was doing the talking. But, at that time we could eat and, of course one of the worst things that happened to the Negro in the United States, I think, was the potato famine which brought in a lot of Irish and a lot of foreign born. Now you take for instance the neighborhoods where there would be more racial clashes would be around Kerry Patch, be around Jefferson and Clark here, they called that the "Patch." But now there was a "Patch" here in Carondolet, too, and they had good relations, they never had any trouble down here. But it's the funniest thing, and I was reading in the, a book I got called the Segregated Convent, that the Irish in New York and, I don't know why, and they came over and they became maids and washwomen and charwomen, and, but they've taken so many of the jobs. I asked my mother one time, too, I says, "Can you tell me why there was so much prejudice in Arkansas and Tennessee among the whites?" And she says, "Yes, I can tell you," she says, "When those people came over here there was nothing for them to do: the Negro was doing everything. He was building those anti-bellum, those palatial plantation homes, he was a blacksmith, he was a bricklayer, he was a carpenter, and there was no need for tern. He couldn't see having a little farm, he couldn't sell his produce because everything was being done by the Negroes. Teamster and everything else like that." That's one thing I often wondered why, see after the Teamsters' Union, but years ago there were more Negro Teamsters in St. Louis than there were whites. All the big bosses, except in the brewery, I don't know why there was so much prejudice in the breweries. There was very few that I know of that had employment and still they're great consumers of beer. But that's just one of the things. Still and all, you could go any place, I mean, and relationships was pretty good down there.

RESH: I wonder if I, since we're slowly arriving at the end of the tape, there are two questions I'd like to ask you about. The first goes back to your Postal Service, and that is your opinion of one of the Postmasters who took over, I guess in the thirties sometime, it was through the Second this was Rufus Jackson.

JEFFERSON: Well, to my mind, Rufus Jackson, he was an improvement on Selph. Now, I'm just trying to thing who was Postmaster before him. It seems to me it was a Republican seems to me it was a Republican, wasn't it?

RESH: Probably.

JEFFERSON: Because Rufus Jackson come in under Roosevelt. But I can't think of this

fellow's name, but it seems to me he died in a barber chair, this here other postmaster. And then when Roosevelt came in I think it was Rufus Jackson. But Rufus Jackson, I never will forget, a field fireman said, "Yeah, I know," he says, "they tell me he likes colored." That's what the field foreman said to me, I never will forget it, he says, They tell me he likes colored." Well, he was, he was more tolerant, there was a better feeling for the men. And I remember at the convention, he went to the first, the Postal Employees Convention I went to in Kansas City in 1937. And he was a delegate, he wasn't a delegate but I mean he went along, I think as a guest of the St. Louis Letter Carriers. He went along. But he was very gracious, he didn't show that he was prejudiced. And seems to me there was a good feeling under his administration. Now somebody, you said that somebody didn't like Rufus. But I didn't experience any unpleasantness and things seemed to me that he appointed a, even the foremen under him were more tolerant than the others. So I can't say that, I can't say that...

RESH: My other question concerns something, an institution you mentioned at one point during our talk, this was the Pine Street Y. It is a very important Negro institution.

JEFFERSON: Oh, yes. Well you know, I can remember when that before they built the Pine Street Y it was, they had a house around Lawton Avenue, and they didn't have much equipment or anything, but it was the nucleus of the Pine Street Y. And then I remember under Frank Williams, who used to be principal of Sumner, they started a drive for this here Pine Street Y. And you'd be surprised how much I gave to that. I think it was a dollar, and I paid it in four installments. I never would forget it, I used to pay it and Mrs. Barrett would catch me in the hall at Sumner High School and say, "Jefferson built a Y." But you know, money was, when I was going to high school, I mean, money was scarce, that was a lot of money. But Mr. Frank Williams started the drive by giving a thousand dollars. He said that he was going to buy a flivver and that was, he would give that to the Y. And then Mrs. Malone gave ten thousand, Mrs. Anne Malone, she gave ten thousand. Well, that was really a pride of the colored citizens of St. Louis, that Pine Street Y, and I almost lived there. I guess I was a member. I've been a member of that ever since it was built and still a member of the Page Park. But I prefer the Pine Street Y because there is a different group, I guess there's generation gaps between, I don't, when I see going out there sometimes and I see those far out groups meeting there and that, and a lot of the others told me, and I been a member, I've been a member for years, and there's a nurse, we used to be on the drive committee and she said, "I'm not going to subscribe next year." I said, "I don't think I'm gonna subscribe either, because it's just kind of gruesome, you know, I can deduct it from my income tax." But that was really a, well, you might say, a kind of a culture center.

RESH: Because some very famous poets came there.

JEFFERSON: I heard Langston Hughes, I heard, let me see, I heard, I don't know why I can't think of all these Negro leaders they had, Walter White, and I heard Moreland, and I heard, what's his head, fellow from the pullman's?

RESH: Oh, A. Phillip Randolph?

JEFFERSON: Randolph.

RESH: He was a magnificent speaker.

JEFFERSON: I heard Moten. No, I ain't talking about the circus troupe, I'm talking about the public meetings they used to have there on Sunday. That's what I meant.

RESH: Well, Mr. Jefferson, I see we're running at the end of the tape and I want to, I wish we had more, and perhaps we can interview you again. I want to thank you very much If or sharing with us.

JEFFERSON: Well, I, what I contribute, I hope it was worthwhile. If any other time, you know.

RESH: Thank you very much.

JEFFERSON: Well, I appreciate it.