

ORAL HISTORY T-0274
INTERVIEW WITH HOWARD B. WOODS
INTERVIEWED BY MILDRED SCHOLMEYER
BLACK COMMUNITY LEADERS PROJECT
SPRING, 1972

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SCHOLMEYER: This is an interview with Howard B. Woods, for History 366, Dr. Resh, instructor. May I have your full name, sir?

WOODS: Howard Berl Woods.

SCHOLMEYER: Your date and place of birth?

WOODS: I was born in Perry, Oklahoma, January 9, 1917.

SCHOLMEYER: The size of your family?

WOODS: Well my own personal family, I have two sisters, one brother and that was it. Mother and father of course.

SCHOLMEYER: Education, sir?

WOODS: I finished high school that was all.

SCHOLMEYER: Your present occupation?

WOODS: Well I'm editor and publisher of the St. Louis Sentinel newspaper.

SCHOLMEYER: Your parents' date and place of birth?

WOODS: Well, my mother was born in Topeka, Kansas, and my father was born in Tennessee, the town I do not recall at the moment. A small town in Tennessee.

SCHOLMEYER: Their occupations?

WOODS: My father was a chef cook, my mother was a housewife until her later years, when she moved to St. Louis, and at that time she became a domestic.

SCHOLMEYER: To what groups did they belong. Your church and....

WOODS: Well, we were Baptist, of course. I think most blacks in those days were Baptist. I was baptized in a Baptist church here in St. Louis. My mother in Perry, Oklahoma was a very aggressive woman. She organized the first, what was called, The Mothers Club, then in

public schools. She always had a great sense of social consciousness about her.

SCHOLMEYER: Fraternal groups?

WOODS: My father was a Mason, my mother was Eastern Star and this of course, was a big thing in the small towns.

SCHOLMEYER: Union?

WOODS: No unions, no unions in Perry, Oklahoma.

SCHOLMEYER: Professional organizations.

WOODS: None, none.

SCHOLMEYER: When did you or your parents move to St. Louis?

WOODS: We moved here in 1925.

SCHOLMEYER: And what brought you or them here?

WOODS: Well, my mother decided that she did not want to rear her children in a small town. And St. Louis was the one place that she thought she would come and she left her home and family, I mean furniture and etc. My father didn't want to come and so she saved for one year and announced on a Saturday night, "Frank, I am going to St. Louis tomorrow morning" and she brought us on here by herself.

SCHOLMEYER: And how did you get here, by train?

WOODS: By train.

SCHOLMEYER: By train. And where did you and your parents first live when you came to St. Louis?

WOODS: We lived on West Bell, 3940; my mother's sister owned the property there. She still does. And we lived at 3940 West Bell which was sort of a middle class black neighborhood in those days.

SCHOLMEYER: And what kind of work did you first have when you were able to work?

WOODS: Well, my first job was a grocery boy, delivering groceries from a market at the corner of Vandeventer and West Bell.

SCHOLMEYER: How old were you?

WOODS: Oh I was in my teens then.

SCHOLMEYER: What were the wages?

WOODS: I think I got 75 cents for working from 7:00 on Saturday morning until 12:00

Saturday night.

SCHOLMEYER: And did you have any other jobs? Did you change jobs in your teen years?

WOODS: No, the only other job that I ever got was when I got into newspaper work after finishing high school. And there was no salary attached, it was a new newspaper and I learned the business by working on this new proposition and I begin to make money over a period of time. Little money, but money.

SCHOLMEYER: Did you join any new organizations, such as the NAACP or the Urban League after coming to St. Louis?

WOODS: Not in those days of course, because you understand that I started with the newspaper, I was still in my teens. It was I think a year after I finished high school, but I guess when I got to my twenties, I joined NAACP because that was the organization at that time. And the Urban League is not a broad based membership organization anyway.

SCHOLMEYER: Did the ideology of national black leaders influence you, such as Booker T. Washington.

WOODS: I would think so but not in that day. I was aware of Booker T. Washington and of course Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois debated. That happened at the turn of the century where Washington said we will train the hands and forget about the mind and things social and things political, that the Negro does not need this kind of thing and DuBois said we want to compete. The philosophy at that time was won out by DuBois because black people were shortly out of servitude and they were fleeing from what they thought was menial jobs. I think here now in 1972 that we have learned that there is a merit in some of the things Washington was talking about.

SCHOLMEYER: You mentioned DuBois. How about A. Phillip Randolph?

WOODS: Oh A. Phillip Randolph to me was a great idol still is. He's an elder statesman of the civil rights movement. He still lives in New York. But I think that he set the course, the great dynamism of this man. So important that he organized sleeping car porters, but he also started the whole concept of fair employment practices laws with his threatened marches on Washington during Roosevelt's time.

WOODS: And he was organizing it through the Sleeping Car Porter's Union, which at that time was very strong. And it had a great impact. I was a great admirer of A. Phillip Randolph.

SCHOLMEYER: Did you have any World War II experience?

WOODS: Yes. I was in World War II for a very short period of time. Didn't go overseas, served in the fort company, learned what it was all about. Did not like the Army. Did whatever I was to do and got an honorable discharge.

SCHOLMEYER: What effect if any did the New Deal and its program have on you and your family?

WOODS: Oh I think it had a great deal of effect as it did on most black people in this country, because what Roosevelt did was to turn around the economy of the country. Up until that time as you well know, poor people could not get a loan from a bank, an automobile financed. He changed the whole concept and because there were so many of the poor were black that we benefited thereby. So Roosevelt, I think, became kind of the indispensable man. I recall when his death was announced, that people were setting on the street corners saying what shall we do next. They really felt that without Roosevelt, we can not live. Of course, I also understand there were a great number of persons who hated him.

SCHOLMEYER: Now we have some St. Louis political and social leaders, I'm going to name some of them and could you tell me why they were important, as Jordan Chambers?

WOODS: Oh yes, Jordan Chambers was the great political leader of his time. A man of tremendous strength and independence, he was what you would call a political boss. But in his time he had a tremendous independence that is so important in political leadership. Jordan Chambers never begged for money, he financed his own campaigns. He knew how to deal with politicians, white politicians. There are a number of great stories told about Jordan. For example, Jordan helped elect a senator who came back for re-election at one time. Jordan was a committeeman, a lone black committeeman. They had gone around the room and all of them had told the senator that he was going to get elected, but Jordan said, "I have canvassed the byways, and Senator, you can not be elected because you will not be able to carry the Negro vote." And he said, "But, Jordan, you stood with me before; you can deliver." And he said, "But, Senator, after you were elected, we asked you for some jobs; all you gave us was them brooms and shovels, and we want some of the better kind of jobs." That's the way Jordan talked, you know. And the senator said, "You know, Jordan, you asked me for some jobs under Civil Service." And he said, "Senator, you are a United States senator and that's an awful lot of power." He said, "Don't tell me about Civil Service; I know what the senator can do." He said, "Now, Senator, the only thing that a committeeman can sell a politician on is his record, and Senator, that's what you ain't got." And the senator went down to defeat, 'cause Jordan knew what could be done.

SCHOLMEYER: How about Henry W. Wheeler?

WOODS: Well, Henry Winfield Wheeler was the grand old man in the Civil Rights Movement who picketed the American Theater single handedly for about three years because of its segregated seating policy. He started a Jim Crow fight in the United States Post Office, when they had separate eating facilities there. They gave him what is most difficult to get in government; they gave him a disability retirement at a very early age to get him out of the Post Office. But he kept on his fight, he kept on his struggle. He was one of the founders of NAACP in St. Louis. He was a little fellow with a tremendous will, a great heart and his name will be forever in the civil rights annals of St. Louis, Missouri.

SCHOLMEYER: Why do you think T. D. McNeal was very important?

WOODS: Well, McNeal, who still lives had just come out of the State Senate and has given to this community the kind of statesmanship and leadership that I think is so very important. He was a protégé of A. Phillip Randolph. As you well know, he was an organizer of this

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Union. And from that vantage point he was in the early March on Washington that marched around the defense plants during World War II that brought some three thousand jobs to black people in defense industries in St. Louis, on Goodfellow Blvd. He went on to the State Senate and there he made an enviable record not only for black people but for all people. He authored of course, the first FEPC Law that went to the Senate. He also did things for education in this state that has not been equaled and he has, of course, been honored for this. He now serves very well as curator of Missouri University. He's on the Housing Authority, he's a man of great stature, great wisdom and great integrity and I think he's made a great impact on the community.

SCHOLMEYER: DuBois did not want the blacks assimilated with white Americans. He felt that assimilation would mean a strong degree of erasure of their ethnic and cultural heritage. He wanted integration moving about freely politically and economically, having all privileges as anyone else. How do you feel about this?

WOODS: Well I think DuBois had a point. I'll cite to you, I was at a meeting at the White House just a week ago, at an ethnic press briefing. And there, sitting across at lunch was a gentleman who was the publisher of a Polish newspaper. And he said, "You guys got everything. He said, "Black people, you got some on the Supreme Court, you have people in the cabinet. He said, "You guys got everything." He said, "We Poles don't have anything, and we've got just as many Poles in this country as you have." And I said, "You know what your problem is?" I said, "You've lost your identity you've become white... We could lose our identity; this is why we've kept our identity." I am a firm believer that one has to keep one's identity. Not necessarily that there has to be so many Poles on the Supreme Court or vice versa. But I am saying that one's own culture is important to one's self-esteem, and this has to be, as you move around this country. And I think that you can still participate in the American main stream without losing one's identity.

SCHOLMEYER: Do you think Dr. Martin Luther King would have changed his philosophy if he were alive today?

WOODS: No. I do not. I think King was completely committed to non-violent passive resistance. However, I think that perhaps some of Dr. King's programs would have had to change drastically or he might have become an elder statesman and accepted a chair at Harvard University that they would have offered him. But the nonviolent concept became exposed which was patterned after Thoreau and Gandhi...but he would not have changed. He was thoroughly and unequivocally committed to this. I don't think he would have changed at all.

SCHOLMEYER: Well, now, this is the end of my interview. Would you like to add something else?

WOODS: No, except to say that I think there are a number of things that one has to think about if you deal in Black History. The series of editorials on Black English...which contended that there is no such animal as Black English...there is only incorrect English. There may be regional English in the instance that black and white speak the same, black southerners talk the same as white southerners or a westerner or easterner and this type of thing and, I think, there's a lot of misnomers filtering around. But I think that this nation will

move ahead regardless of what people say. I don't like the word "racism," because I don't think it says anything. I think it's simply an emotional kind of thing. But, you know, we just have to reach the world as it is and get respect. I don't care whether the people love me as long as they respect me. You're interested in my political views?

SCHOLMEYER: Yes.

WOODS: I consider myself an independent Democrat. By that I mean I don't vote the party line. I was appointed by a Democratic president. He knew that I worked for him in his campaign. When Mr. Johnson appointed me from his ranch in 1965, he said, "I have to appoint three democrats, three republicans and one independent." That's me. I think that one has to have independence of thinking and that's important. As far as capitalism, I don't think there's any such thing as black capitalism. There may be some black entrepreneurs. I think we're getting into the American main stream, but capitalism, you're talking about ITT, we're talking about Rockefeller, we haven't reached that point yet, I think we will in time. Because the Empire State Building, the worth of it is worth more than all the black financial institutions and black insurance companies combined, the Empire State Building alone. So let's not talk about black capitalism. That's a myth. Black entrepreneur, black business, sure. But not capitalism.

SCHOLMEYER: Thank you very much, Mr. Woods. This was given by Mildred Scholmeyer, my student number is 664663.