Oral History Project
Joe Dickson
April 15, 1996
Code: Huntley [H] Dickson [D]

H: This is an interview with Mr. Joe Dickson. Today is Monday, April 15, 1996. We are at Miles College. My name is Dr. Horace Huntley.

Mr. Dickson, I want to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to come and sit and talk with us today about the Civil Rights Movement.

D: I'm happy to be here Dr. Huntley.

H: I want to just start by getting some general information about your background. Tell me just a bit about your parents. Were your parents from Alabama?

D: Yes. My mother was born in Hopewell, Alabama, a few miles outside of Montgomery. My father was born in Lownes County, over in Fort Deposit. Each of them migrated to Montgomery and there they got married.

H: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

D: I have now, one sister and three brothers. There were six of us. I had one sister who is older, who died in infancy. There were six of us, one sister older. I have a brother older than I am and I have a sister younger and two brothers younger.

H: Okay. So you're the third out of the six?

D: Yes.

H: You then were born where?

D: In Montgomery, Alabama.

H: Did you start school in Montgomery?

D: I was born in Montgomery and started school early in Montgomery. I started kindergarten -- Castle Kindergarten. I left there and went to Loveless School. In Montgomery, we lived on the west side of town. And, Montgomery had few schools at that time. Mr. Loveless was an undertaker and they built a school on the west side and they named it Loveless School. It went from elementary through high school.

H: Loveless was a Black Undertaker?

D: Yes, Mr. Loveless was a Black undertaker in Montgomery, and, so they named this school on the west side after Mr. Loveless.

H: What kind of work did your parents do?

D: Well, my mother worked in the White folks' house. My father worked at a cotton mill in

Montgomery. He died rather young. He caught what they called "eight day pneumonia." Back then, if you caught pneumonia, they didn't have penicillin and all this other stuff that they use to get the fever down. If you made it through the eighth day you would live, if you didn't you died. Now, of course, they've got that under control, but he died in 1938.

H: How old were you when he died?

D: I was born in 1933, so I was five.

H: So your mother raised you?

D: My mother raised me, my older brother and my other two brothers and sister by herself here in Birmingham.

H: And you said she was a domestic?

D: Yes. Once my father died, immediately following that, my mother's sister died. She had four children and her husband had died with tuberculosis. Black folk, at that time weren't getting the necessary health care that they needed. So, my mother had her five children, because my youngest brother was born in June. My daddy died in May, my brother was born in June of 1938. So, when my mother's sister died, about nine months later, my mother's oldest sister, who was living here in Birmingham came back to Montgomery, and because my mother only had a brother, Glover, she decided that my mother, who was the youngest. And, she said, "Rachel, you can't take care of these children. You're nothing but a child yourself." So, she brought all of us back to Birmingham, out to Fairfield to live with her, her husband and one child.

H: So you were living with your aunt and uncle and mother when you first came to Birmingham?

D: Yes, sir.

H: And you moved to Fairfield?

D: Yes, sir.

H: Did you mother find employment immediately?

D: Well, it wasn't hard then to find employment because if you could clean up the house, if you could wash, iron, cook and sew, you could get a job. I remember my mother having 2 or 3 different jobs. My father, when he died, we didn't qualify for social security because the Social Security Act was just really coming into effect. Welfare was just unthinkable. Black people didn't want you to give them anything. They had another name for it. They didn't call it welfare. But, people just didn't want you to give them anything, so they would work, work any number of jobs. You may remember yourself, you cannot, back during this time, go to anybody else's house to eat. If you ate

in somebody's house and your parents found out about it, I don't care how hungry you were, you had to refuse. But, if they found out about it, then you had a reckoning coming.

H: You had to answer to it?

D: Right.

H: As a child, what do you remember most about growing up in Fairfield - those first days of coming to Birmingham?

D: Well, one of the things I guess all children grapple with is how do you relate to other children around you. I can remember our trying to associate with the other children around us and we were from Montgomery and Birmingham was a larger city. We were from the country. Montgomery was more rural than Birmingham was. So, I guess the early part of it was trying to associate and develop new friendships with the younger people in the community there. My uncle and aunt were kind of protective. They didn't want us to go out in the yard because they knew we were new in the city and they didn't know how we would mix in with people. I remember that as being a problem. But, I think that one of the most distressing things to me was, as a youngster, I was in the third grade when I left Montgomery. I had gotten skipped because my oldest brother was a good teacher and he taught me well my A-B-Cs and I could read and I got skipped. But, when we got to Birmingham, they put us back a grade and I just couldn't understand why they would do that, but that was the thing they were doing with just about everybody.

H: With anyone coming from a smaller school system, they'd normally put them back?
D: Yes.

H: Just as when we would go north, you're from Alabama, you obviously would be put back.

D: I never understood that to this day. But, it didn't do anything I don't think to hurt me. It was kind of tough.

H: You mentioned that you started school, you went to a catholic school. When you came to Birmingham did you remain in a catholic school?

D: No. In Montgomery, when we left catholic school, that was kindergarten.

H: Okay and, then you went to Loveless?

D: Right. And, then when we got to Birmingham we went to 61st Street School, which is now Robinson Elementary School. It was a good school. The teachers were very interested in the students. Ms. Robinson was an older lady and you really had strict discipline there. You didn't play around any. You had to get your lesson. I guess one of the most memorable things that I can remember about then was my mother had to -- everybody rode the bus, nobody had a car. So, my

mother had to be 'over the mountain' to serve breakfast for the people she worked for over there, which meant she had to get up early. She would get up and would cook and my oldest brother would see to it that we would have food to eat. And, when mamma came back, the dishes and everything had to be clean, so we had to wash these dishes before we left, get the other children ready to go to school. So, as a consequence, I would be late every morning. I'll never forget George Albert's mother taught me in the 5th grade. I was going to school and I got there crying that morning and Ms. Yarber came to the desk, patted me on the back and said, "Son, just get here. Just get here." I've never forgotten that.

Dick Arrington was in our 4th grade class. I remember distinctly. This was Ms. Williams' class and Arrington was always just the way you see him now, that's the way he was when he was a little boy. Always *(Inaudible)* and moving on, so they skipped him. So he went to Ms. Glenn's class and left us back there with Ms. Williams in the 4th grade. So, I guess we started with him in Ms. Woodruff's class in the 3rd grade. But, when we got to Ms. Williams, he went on by.

H: So those early days at Robinson or 61st Street were very memorable days. What was the transition like from Robinson to the next step?

D: Fairfield Industrial High?

H: Yes.

D: Well, even before I left Robinson Elementary I got one of the best lessons of my life. We would have spelling matches within the school. And, one day I intentionally sat down and wouldn't spell a word. I thought I was smart -- just frolicking trying to show the teacher what I was going to do. So, our class lost the spelling match because I wouldn't do anything. I was clearly the best speller.

H: Why did you decide to do that?

D: Just devilish. Just didn't want to be a team player.

H: They couldn't win without you?

D: They couldn't win without me and I showed them that they couldn't win without me, which showed that I really wasn't a team player and it didn't make sense. So I looked at Ms. Moore when I sat down. She just *(Inaudible)*. When we got back, they were on this side of the building at Robinson, we were on the other side. When I got back over there she said, "Joe Nathan, come back I want to see you." She called a word out to me and I spelled it. She took that strap and she beat me and told me one thing that I've never forgotten. She said, "You take too much for granted. You play too much. Do not take things for granted. You got to get serious about yourself." I've never forgotten that.

H: So you've been serious?

D: I've been on business ever since. I guess the strap got me on business. I been serious ever since then.

H: What was the transition like from Robinson to Fairfield Industrial?

D: Well, you're anxious to get to high school. You think you're a big boy and everything and it was great. I wanted to go to high school, but I had this proclivity to be -- to try to be -- I wasn't a bad kid, I don't think, now that I look at it, but I would take up other folks burden and get into trouble. I guess the thing that saved me was the fact that I had to get my lesson. In Fairfield you had to get your lesson.

H: What kind of issues would you take up that would get you in trouble?

D: If somebody was fighting, they would come and get me to fight for them. If someone was fighting my brother, they'd come get me. If my brother wouldn't fight, I'd get mad and fight. When I look back at it, I think I had a chip on my shoulder, because I guess it might have been I was mad because my father was dead or my mother couldn't put in any time. Back then you had the 'high yellows' and the 'black' ones and all this other stuff and you think people were picking on you. It was just a situation where I was not mature and didn't understand what was going on and I was really strong -- I could wrestle anybody. I was just the guy that you'd come to get to solve a problem. Somebody told me once they saw me, "If you were in New York, you'd probably get a job with the Mafia because of what you try to do." But, I guess it was just a confused youngster.

The thing I think that saved me, the teachers took a lot of interest in me. My teachers that I had taken a lot of interest. The fact that Mrs. Moore took that time out with me to tell me about taking so much for granted, that was a blessing. And, then when I got over in high school, I was always the leader of the class. I was the president of my class from the time I was in the 1st grade until I was a junior in college, I was the president of my class.

H: Even when you were in Arrington's class?

D: Yes. McPherson and all of the rest of them. Kids liked me. They liked me. I don't know why, but I could get along with people and I was a paper boy. While I was going to the 5th grade and all, I had a job. I fed the hogs in the morning when I left and I fed them in the evening when I came back. I started throwing papers when I was in the 6th or 7th grade.

H: What paper?

D: The *Birmingham Post Herald*. Mr. Burke had the route for the *Post Herald*. It was *(Inaudible)* I worked for Mr. Burke, and, then you graduate to working as a news carrier. You sell *The Afro American*, you sell the *Pittsburgh Courier*, you sell *The New York Amsterdam News*, *The Birmingham World*, *The Birmingham Mirror* and you make two pennies, you were independent, you had money. I didn't have any problems then because I was making money. But, what I did with the money I

made, I always had to take mine home, because my mamma needed it.

H: So you were really helping to support the family?

D: Support the family and myself. My brother, Robert, my oldest brother worked down at Brady's Tobacco Store. We set up pins in the bowling alley. When I graduated to the White folks paper, then I began to work with Wilbert Hughes and Edwin Hicks. Wilbert had the largest route and Edwin had the next larger route and Wilbert would put the papers together, the different sections. You would put the funnies in with the *Parade Magazine*, then you would put that with the social section, and, then at 12:00 on Sunday morning, the newspaper would come in and, then we would put that together. So, when you got to about the 9th grade, Wilbert was graduating from high school. That meant that I was the big man in Fairfield then because I had that big paper route. So, I hired my brother and I hired other people on the way to help me to sell the paper and I got to be known. I was popular. It's not so much that I was smart, but people knew me and liked me and they would vote for me. While I was in high school for some reason, I just couldn't get adjusted. So, finally in the 11th grade I got into trouble and I got suspended by the end of the school year. I was elected president of the senior class while I was suspended from school. So, Mr. Oliver called me to come back and he did something for me that has stuck with me and I'd use it for my family. He made me come across the stage, sit down in assembly and apologize to all of the students at Fairfield Industrial High School for my behavior and the way I was acting. Me and Robert Lee Taylor, who died in New York, but Robert Lee was on the football team, but he left and went over to Westfield, and they found out what was going on, so they put him out of school. So, Mr. Oliver had Robert Taylor and myself sit on that stage and made us apologize to the student body for what we were doing.

But, I guess that the other thing that kept me all right in school was I made the honor roll every six weeks. And, the reason I made the honor roll was my oldest brother was on the honor roll. Mr. Oliver would parade us across the stage, in front of everybody and he'd say, "Joe Dickson, honor roll, junior 3-C, second six weeks is maintaining.." He'd tell how long you been on the honor roll. So, I said to myself, I said, "I'm not going to let my brother beat me." And that is why today I am against magnet schools, I'm against separating these students, because you take away the competition. And, when I was in school, whoever was the smartest had this seat. The next smartest had that seat and everybody was there trying to out do the other one and get their lesson so that you could really be recognized in the community. That was the thing that saved me, the fact that I would make the honor roll. And, every time the man put you out of school, you got to bring your mamma back. You get the punishment from him before you leave. And, then if your mamma can't go to the White folks' house and work, and all the time she tell you, she say, "Boy, I just can't, I don't know what I'm going to do with you, but come on, let's go on up there."

H: I was going to ask you. What would you say was the impact of Professor Oliver on children that came through Fairfield Industrial High School?

D: I think E. J. Oliver probably was the best educator in the State of Alabama since Booker T. Washington. Now, of course there were a number of people during that time that could hold a candle to him. And, I think the thing that made Mr. Oliver such a great educator was he adopted the

principals of Booker T. Washington and that is, you got to learn how to do something with your hands, as well as your head. When you finished Fairfield Industrial High School, you could go on to college and could compete. You could also go out into the job market and get a job. Mr. Oliver challenged us to reach for the top. One of his sayings was, "There's room at the top. There's room at the top." "You know why? You know why?" "Just talk with everybody on the bottom." "That's why you got to reach for the top. Got to reach for the top." "You got to reach for the stars, reach for the stars." And he pushed it, he pushed it and he preached it. Then he put in the hall of fame, long before anybody had the hall of fame, Mr. Oliver had the hall of fame, where he was showing where who had gone to Fairfield Industrial High School had achieved and were making their name and presence felt in the community. So, in my book, he was the ultimate educator.

Also, he did something that a number of other principals were doing. Mr. Oliver made sure that we knew something about ourselves as a people. Before you finished Fairfield Industrial High School, you had to read Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*. You had to outline it. Then, that meant that you know that if you went out on a job, you did it like Booker T. Washington did it. You do it to perfection and, then when you wipe the white handkerchief across it, then you pick up no dust.

H: It was a requirement?

D: It was a requirement that every student, every senior that left Fairfield Industrial High School had to read and outline *Up From Slavery*. We had Carter G. Woodson's book there.

H: Which one?

D: *Negro History*. We had his book. That was a requirement. And, later on, after I had gotten out of law school and was walking through the alley one day, Mr. Oliver was coming he said, "Boy, wait a minute." He stopped me. He said, "I'm proud of you." He said, "I always knew you had it in you, I just didn't know how to get it out of you." He said, "I'm proud of you." He said, "I never thought that you would have gone as far as you've gone." I said, "I got one question to ask you." I said, "How did you get Negro History taught in the school?" He said, "When I went and took the job at Fairfield, I made a deal with the superintendent of schools, Mr. Baker. I asked him could I do it, could I teach it. He said, "No, you can't do it." He said, "They don't allow you to teach it." He said, "But, if I don't teach Negro History and I don't give these people the opportunity to know something about themselves, then we're lost." He said, "I need the cooperation of the preacher. I need the cooperation of the families because the people were coming from the farms, that work in these plants and mines." He said, "They didn't even know what was going on, so he needed their cooperation and he had to teach us something about ourselves." He said that the man told him, "Go ahead and teach it. If they catch you, I'll swear I didn't tell you to do it."

H: So he did it.

D: He did it. And it paid off.

H: In other words, it was a rather courageous move for him to take that upon himself. After high school, Joe, what did you do?

D: After high school I got a job at Vulcan Furniture Manufacturing spot welding chairs for making dinette sets. I worked there from the time I got out of high school in 1952, I should have gotten out in 1951. I went to summer school every summer. Mr. Oliver said I didn't know how to act. He made me go to summer school every summer to learn how to act. Anyway, I was drafted from Vulcan Furniture Manufacturing in 1953 in June, that was during the Korean War, and went to Fort Jackson. From Fort Jackson back to Camp Rucker and by the time I got to Camp Rucker, they had called a truce and they pulled back to the 38th Parallel. I guess mamma had prayed real hard that we didn't have to go and fight over there. I stayed in the Army for two years and was discharged and came back home.

H: So you came back home in '55?

D: Yes, sir.

H: What did you do then?

D: Much of the same thing that I was doing. Running around with the fellows. The little money I had saved 18 bonds, one for every month. Mamma had saved a little bit of that and they paid me the money that I got and so Naeree got me a job up at Lloyd Noland. He was a cook. Walter Kirk was the head cook and Naeree was the next to the head. He was going to get Walter's job so Nae said, "Come on, Joe. I'm going to get you the job. I'm going to make you a pot washer. You know how to wash pots. You washed them in the Army, you'll be a good pot washer." So he talked to the lady and the lady gave me the job and I went up there and worked in the kitchen up there in Lloyd Noland Hospital. And, all the while I was up there my mamma would ask me "What was I going to do." I said, "You know I'm working. I'm up at Lloyd Noland."

So, it was getting close to September and time to go start at Miles. So, she asked me again, she said, "Boy, you going to school?" I said, "Mamma I got a job." You see I had already argued with her and told her that I didn't need her to keep my money. I was grown, I had been in the Army. I'm a man. And, so, she said, "Well, you going to school, boy." I said, "Mamma I got a job. I'm working now." She said, "Boy, you going to school." She said, "You finished high school and I couldn't get to go to school. You need to go to school." The next day she asked me, she say, "Boy, you going to school." The time was getting closer and closer. You know what the problem was. The problem was I had spent that money and having spent the money, I didn't have no money to go with. She said this to me and I'll never forget it as long as I'm Black. She said, "They tell me that if you been in the Army, Uncle Sam will pay your way to school." And, she said, "I didn't get a chance to go to school, boy and you done finished school."

H: How far did she go in school, did you know?

D: Maybe the 5th grade.

H: And your father?

D: The same. She said, "If you don't go to school and somebody pay your way, boy you ain't got as much sense as I thought you had." That killed me. I came out here and I found out...

H: 'Out here' meaning Miles?

D: Out to Miles, yes. I was living right across the street there in the projects, up on the hill, 5116 Avenue G. I came out and it was $68 or $58 a quarter. I had spent all of the money. I went back and I didn't say nothing. Mamma said, "Boy, you going to school?" Then finally I had to give in. I said, "Mamma, I ain't got no money." She said, "You ain't got no money?" I said, "No, m'am." She said, "What you do with the money." She knew what I had done with it, she just wanted to hear it from me. I said, "Well, I spent it." She said, "Well, go back out there and see how much it costs." I went back out there and they said $58. My mamma gave me two $50 bills that she had tied up in a stocking. I came out there and I paid to get in school at Miles. Then she gave me the money to buy my first books with. But, that was an agonizing thing for me to have to be pushed to go to school and I was a leader in the class. Joseph McPherson was the Valedictorian and I was the Saluatorian of the class. That was one agonizing moment for me and I came to Miles and graduated.

H: Were you active in the student body while you were here?

D: Yes. I became president of the freshman class. The largest freshman class they ever had. I became very active. We did fashion shows, we did a number of things to raise money to help the school. There was tremendous school spirit at that time. This was the time when the veterans were coming back from the Korean War. More women were coming to school. Our people were really into it because this was right following *Brown v. Board of Education*.

H: This was also just after the NAACP is outlawed from operating in the State of Alabama and the Alabama Christian Movement had been organized in '56. So between '56 and '63 there was some organizing going on in Birmingham. Were the students from Miles and yourself involved?

D: Let me say what happened. This is a strange one here. We were attempting to get all the fraternities on the campus and the sororities -- so we brought in Cecil B. King was one of the teachers here. He was a Kappa and brought Kappa in and I had pledged with the Alphas. So they went to the Alphas and talked to the Alphas and said, "Look, we need to bring this other fraternity on the campus. We want to get it started." And, they allowed me to leave the Alphas and go to the Kappas and we...

H: Wait a minute. You're saying that you were...

D: I pledged Alpha first. I was in the speech club with the Alphas first. And, then when it was determined that we were going to bring the Kappas on to the campus, they released me in order that I

could be a member of the Kappas.

H: So you're a Kappa-Alpha?

D: That's right. That's real strange. But, we put it together and I became the president of the *(Inaudible)* Club and, then eventually I was Poll Mark of the chapter here. And, all during that time the Alphas were really in the lead because they had been here for some time. Dean Pearson and those men, Alpha men who were here, they decided that we were going to get people to register to vote. So, we started going down to the courthouse to get people to register to vote. And, what happened was we met with all kinds of opposition.

You got to read this. These obstacles that they put in front of us were just superficial. You had to be able to read and interpret and tell who was the president and who were the congressmen and who was this and who was that. It was very subjective and a lot of our people were disillusioned by the fact that some of the things they didn't know that they were requiring of us. But, we did manage to become very successful in our efforts to get Blacks registered to vote.

H: Do you remember when you registered to vote yourself?

D: Yes.

H: Did you have any difficulty?

D: Well, I had to do the same thing everybody else did. I had to answer the questions about who was the senators. How many of the House of Representatives did we have and all that. I did it.

H: I heard there were questions like "How many bubbles in a bar of soap?"

D: Yes, these kinds of things. And I think one of the things was, at that time, I wasn't quite as mean as I am now or grew in to be in dealing with people because that was something that was important to me. We had good civics teachers at Fairfield Industrial High School. Ms. Cook and those folk. They drilled it in you and they made you read the newspapers so you would know what was going on. As a consequence, we could answer the questions fairly easily. But some of our people that went down with us, I remember Andrew 'Shaky' Collins went down with us. He got so mad about having to answer, he didn't see no reason, so they wouldn't let him pass 2 or 3 times. A number of people they just wouldn't let them pass. It was very subjective. But I do remember in 1955, that's when I registered to vote.

H: So these efforts are all really leading to something it appears. When did you graduate?

D: I graduated in '60. I dropped out twice to go to the hospital.

H: And, then what did you do directly after you graduated?

D: Well, let me tell you what we did while we were here. We managed to get a number of people registered to vote. We also served as role models to get other kids to want to come to college. We, Jesse Walker, when I got to my junior year, I became vice president of the student council, and Jesse Walker was the president of the student council. This meant that the next year I was going to be president of the student council, which in my estimation, was higher than being president of the class. We started protesting the situation here in Birmingham. We started complaining about the fact that they had these double standards and all the segregation was going on. Jesse Walker was the leader in this effort and Jesse has never been given any credit for what he did. Jesse and myself and the rest of us would go up to Kelly Ingram Park. You couldn't go in it, but we would march around there protesting what was going on. No hiring the Black people, the police officers and strict segregation here in Birmingham.

H: This is in 1960?

D: 1955 and '56.

H: And, you would go to Kelly Ingram Park and you would demonstrate by marching around the perimeter of the park?

D: Yes, because that was a White folks' park. You weren't supposed to go in that park. One day it appears that we were going to be out there, so a White detective, I can't think of his name. But, he came to us and told us, he said, "Look, I want ya'll out of this park." He said, "We got word that's some Klan people are going to come through here and they're going to be shooting and doing some of everything. We don't want you in the park tonight. Don't be out here." He pleaded with us, so we went in the A. G. Gaston Motel and met in there. Word got back to the campus what was going on, and Dr. Bell called an assembly. He told us, he said, "Young men and young women, you can not lead demonstrations from out here on this campus. You can not lead demonstrations from out here on campus because I'm in the business of educating young Black people to face the world." And, he said, "I have to go and raise the money from Whites. And, Whites are not in keeping with what you're doing." He said, "You will not lead demonstrations from on this campus." That was one of the reasons we were downtown. And, he said this, "You have to be sure that this is what you want to do." He said, "If you have decided that this is what you want to do, even though we can't sanction you leading it from here, you have to understand this. That if you're going to fight, then you're going to have to take responsibility. You're going to have to be prepared to educate your young, take care of your school. You're going to have to be prepared to take care of all these things. You're not going to be able to ask the White man to do this for you." He said, "Because, young men and young women, you cannot fight and beg too."

H: What was the reaction of your student group?

D: We continued. We didn't stop. The demonstrations that was led got Jesse Walker suspended from the school. And, when we finally got him back in school and he graduated, but, in the meantime, Mr. Shuttlesworth was doing what he was doing over at his church. I started attending the meetings

over at Fred's church in north Birmingham. And, Fred told us this is big. "You students need to join with us in this fight that we have." And, so, that's the way that happened.

H: Now, this is prior to you graduating from Miles?

D: Yes.

H: How active then were you? At that time the Movement was involved in the attempt to desegregate Phillips High School. They were involved with riding the buses, trying to desegregate those.

D: When I graduated from Miles, I got a job with the Booker T. Washington Insurance Company selling insurance. And, that gave me the opportunity to participate more in what was going on. It was an effort that came from outside Alabama as well as what was going on inside Alabama, and I think the thing that happened with the bombing of Rev. Shuttlesworth's church, with the beating of the people at the bus station and the Klan meeting *(Inaudible)* and beating Mr. Reed, I think his name was James Reed. They beat him so bad up there.

H: The White minister?

D: The White minister. That put the spot light on them. At that time, stuff was happening kind of simultaneously. But, what started the situation in Birmingham, immediately after this Dr. Bell died and Lucious Pitts became president. Lucious understood. Lucious had been in Atlanta and working with the "Y". In the interim, in one of those slivers there, I left and went to New York. When I went to New York I saw Howard K. Smith on television with *Who Speaks For Birmingham*. When that came on, then I realized that it was all out. Then I came back. I got sick in New York. I came back to Birmingham and went back to work for Dr. Gaston. That gave me the opportunity, the freedom to participate.

Dr. Pitts organized what was known as a Selective Buying Campaign. I think it was the most effective buying campaign I had ever seen, because nobody was any where putting up signs. Nobody was screaming from anywhere about it. It was a method. God had to have been in it. It had to be the work of the Lord because we managed to pull all those people out of the stores and they didn't go downtown to buy.

H: This is in 1962. You were out of school and you are now working for Booker T. Washington Insurance Company?

D: Yes.

H: But also are involved with the Selective Buying Campaign?

D: Yes, sir. My brother, Luther was yet a student out here. He was very active in the campaign. Frank Dukes was an excellent friend of mine and Frank was one of the true leaders in the struggle. And, so

we got everybody out of town, not buying. Now, that was a task though. I never shall forget, I had GES out on Lomb Avenue one day.

H: What is GES?

D: It was something like K-Mart. You could buy groceries, drugs and all that stuff. Right there by that ditch on Lomb Avenue. Right by Rickwood Field. I went in there one day and I see this guy ease out -- it's clean as a pin. Nobody is in there. Nobody but the White pharmacist, the White clerk and all those other. We were asking these folk, if we spending our money, we want to know why can't our women try on the hats or why can't they try on the clothes? Why do you have to have two signs for the water? You got to walk all the way back down to 4th Avenue from downtown to use the bathroom. You get on the bus, you've got to stand there. Nobody is sitting there. They got the sign. We just wanted to know why. Dr. Pitts, said, "Well, what you have to do, is we take the money. We don't have any weapons to fight with but our money." So, finally, they agreed to take the signs down.

H: In the store?

D: In the store. Man, the White folks took the signs down and we let our people go back downtown. After they got back downtown, they put the signs back up. So we had to go back at it again. And, this is where we had to go into strict surveillance. We had to tell people, "If you go downtown and buy something, you're going to have to answer to us." Real people were having folks to deliver the clothes to their store. So we put up a watch to see who was having stuff delivered to them. We fronted them out. "You can't buy downtown. We're at war with this man. It's a non-violent war." So, when I got in GES that day and we had people patrolling to go see who's buying. And, so, when we did, Upshaw came out at the same time I came out and he said, "Hey." About the same time he ease up to me and I say, "Buddy." He say the same thing. I said, "We aren't buying in these stores." He said, "You know I thought you were in here trying to slip and buy something, but we're together." I thought he was trying to buy.

H: So both of you were...

D: We were on patrol, that's right. And, that was the way we did it.

H: The Selective Buying Campaign was successful because it did galvanize people. This is in 1962. The demonstrations that would be known world wide would come about in 1963. Where were you during that part of the struggle?

D: I was still here in Birmingham. Let me just say this...

[END OF SIDE ONE]

D: ... Marie Jemison, the lady over there. Somebody told Mrs. Jemison, *(Inaudible)*. But, she was right here with us trying to help us make Birmingham better. And, John Drew and all these people managed to pull these folk together and he was honest, and he knew all of the answers. You see, first before the demonstrations and all of this other stuff, we met with Whites folk to try to get them to see that we weren't asking for much, we just want a little dignity. And, they told us, McPherson, Duke, Shelly Miller, my brother, U. W. Clemmons and 2 or 3 more, they told us, "Well, you know nobody is concerned or worried about what's going on here in Birmingham." He said, "These Niggers are satisfied." He said, "The Negroes here in Alabama, they're out there, they're singing, they're dancing."

H: Who was this? Who did you meet with?

D: We met with the White power structure. And they said that "Nobody was dissatisfied but you Niggers and if you Niggers are so dissatisfied with Birmingham, we will give you your fare to any city, New York, Chicago or anywhere you want to go and give you some money and help you get a job when you get there." That was cold.

H: Now, this is in a meeting. Was there a reaction to that? Did you respond to it?

D: Well, we knew. Pitts said, "Now they're going to tell you this. And when they tell you this, you tell them this. And when they say this, you tell them this." Dukes was the spokesman. He was the president of the student council. Shelly Milner was there. My brother and U. W. and all of them were there. I was out of school so I just had to -- you know, and I was slipping over there doing it because I was supposed to be selling insurance. Then the demonstrations came.

H: Did you attend mass meetings?

D: Sure. Just about every one they had.

H: How would you characterize a typical mass meeting?

D: A typical mass meeting was something that you probably would need to have witnessed yourself. There was singing. There was praying. They sang in the manner like the slaves song, then they moved it on up to where we are today in singing and the praying. And the speaking and the teaching. You know a lot of people really don't understand of the role Ralph Abernathy played in getting us ready for Dr. King. Abernathy could hold them there and keep you not wanting to leave and stay and wait until Dr. King came to speak. The singing -- you could really feel the spirit moving through. We did not do this alone, it was a work of God. And the more I think about it, the more I think about those meetings and how King showed real leadership. I remember one night, I think we were at 16th Street. There was this guy from *The New York Times* writing. I was standing at the back. And this guy was just looking at Dr. King and he said, "Look at him. Just look at him. Just listen at

him. He shows superb leadership skills." Dr. King was speaking extemporaneously and everybody referred everything to Dr. King. We waited until Dr. King got there. He was our leader. And, you see I hear Black people tell you now, Black folks don't need *(Inaudible)*, but every group of people I know that exists, got leaders. Every animal that I know of, they have leaders. But, if you haven't been there, if you don't know, it makes a difference. But, there was a feeling that would go through you. And, they would make the call for volunteers to go to jail the next day.

H: Did you participate in demonstrations?

D: Yes.

H: Just explain to the people that will view this what it was like being involved with a demonstration.

D: The first demonstration, Fred Shuttlesworth led to the federal court house steps on 5th Avenue. We left A. G. Gaston Motel. They told us, they said, "Joe, you get on one end. John Henry Germany, you get on the front." And, they put somebody else in the middle. He said, "Now, when you get down there and you march down there on those steps, these White folks are going to offer you everything and people are going to get up to leave." He said, "Try your best to keep them from leaving because we have to be arrested."

H: What do you mean, 'offer you anything'.

D: Well, you know when we got there to the steps, they let us march on. Before we got there they kept saying, "Ya'll go back, ya'll go back, ya'll go back down there."

H: These are policemen?

D: These are policemen. And, then when Bull Connor came, he was standing on the other side over there where the treasury is and he was having one of the captains to tell us to go back, that if we would go back now, nobody would be arrested and we'll just go on and forget about it. And, so, we kept telling them, "Don't go. Stay." So one or two people got up and left and went on. And, so the rest of us stayed. Rev. Shuttlesworth led us in prayer. And, we stayed there and started singing. And, so Bull said, "I'm asking you to leave. We're going to give you three minutes to leave. If you don't leave, I'm going to arrest every one of you." So we stayed there. Nobody left. And, so, Bull said, "Arrest them Niggers." They came over there and arrested us. At the point in time I wasn't thinking about being afraid that somebody was going to kill me. I wasn't thinking that they would do anything like that at that time. We just felt -- and we picked the federal steps because really, at that point, we didn't think they were going to arrest us because we were on federal property. Well, Fred said, "If you're on federal property, they won't arrest you." But they did just the opposite. They did arrest us and we were on federal property. So, we didn't think about any danger at that time.

H: When was this?

D: This was in '62 I believe. If you can remember, we were doing struggle with the Whites while Dr. King was in Albany, Georgia. He had been down in St. Augustine or some place and everywhere he had gone, in Albany, they wouldn't never do nothing but let them do what they wanted to do. So, when we were here in Birmingham, we had a different individual, Mr. Conner. And, I don't blame it all on him. I blame it on the power structure. The power structure here was different. They were determined to keep it as it was. And, we were determined that we weren't going to be under this. So, Fred Shuttlesworth was the leader here. There was no NAACP. They had outlawed it. The Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights was the organization here. They had beaten Rev. Pfeiffer and Rev. Billups and Mr. Armstrong and Fred with the chains at the school up at Phillips and over at Graymont. We had moved up to the next level when we got involved in the demonstrations going downtown and the people from the lunch counters were coming in. The people were driving in with the Freedom Riders and everything, so it was getting hot. I don't think anybody acted as bad as they acted in Mississippi and Alabama.

H: How many times were you arrested?

D: I think three. At that time, on the steps, the first arrest. I don't know, Mr. Gaston must have known I was over there because I was the first man they let go. They said, "Joe Dickson all the way." I didn't know what they were talking about. But, that meant, when they said, 'all the way', that means that you come out of the jail and you can walk out. They had key boys in there that would tell you what to do. Look, they get you up in the morning. I don't know how people kept going to jail. They would get us up at 3:00. Then they would get you up at 4:00. Everybody eat at one time. The key boy would tell you when to sit down and when to get up. And, while we were in there, this is very interesting, they were so nice, that first group that they arrested, they were so nice. So Fred said, "They're too nice." He said, "Something is wrong with these Birmingham Police, they're too nice." And, so, we looked around and Fred said, "We got to do something to make them show who they really are." They looked around and there was big fan up at the top of the jail and it was keeping up a lot of noise. It wasn't putting out no cool air, but it was making a lot of noise. So the guy, he does transmissions off of Bush Blvd., Smith is his name. So Smith looked up and saw a loose brick and was going to take the brick and put it in the fan to break the fan. I said, "No, brother. Look you got to realize this. We don't do this. We are in here for civil disobedience. We are not going to..." Fred said, "That's right, we aren't going to be arrested for tearing up property." So, we let that slide and finally we got out of there and went back.

Then the next time I went to jail, I don't remember where we were. I received a call after the first time and told me that Dr. Gaston was in complete understanding of what we were trying to do. But, Mr. Gaston also knows that, when you get integrated with the White man, you're going to have to have some money. And you're one of our best men. We want you selling insurance. We don't want you marching going to jail. So, I went back again. The next time, Mr. Pegues came out there and told me. He said, "Joe, the old man...

H: Who is Mr. Pegues?

D: Clarence Pegues. He was the agency director. He said, "The old man put his money in and he's with us. But we have to have men who are working. We don't want you to go to jail no more." Then came that Saturday when A. D. and Rev. John Porter and all the people, Rev. Smith and all of them were going to jail.

H: This was the Easter?

D: Easter Sunday. I don't know if I was already in there or if I was there or if I went with them, but that was a time when I really understood what this Movement was about and what the real deal was. I was sitting right next to Rev. Porter and they kept bringing folks in jail. They had all the priests with their robes and things on. And, I said to Rev. Porter, "Rev. Porter, we're losing this one. What we going to do?" I said, "They're mad with Dr. King, talking about he broke the injunction because he told us to march, they put him in jail. You're in here. Rev. Smith in here. A. D., Dr. King's brother is in here." I said, "We've lost this one." You know what Porter told me. Porter told me, he said, "Joe, no, no, no. We are not losing this one. We are not going to lose this one." He said, "Martin is working from on high." "He's not working from down here." And, as I reflect back over the struggle and think about when we went uptown to get those kids out of Newberry's -- they asked us to come. Everybody was tearing Newberry's and Kresge's up. We went up there and got them. Fred had a white flag.

H: Let me understand this now. You're saying that there were kids at Newberry's and Kresge's who were demonstrating?

D: Yes.

H: And the demonstrations were getting out of hand?

D: They got out of hand, right. They called down to 16th Street Church and said, "Come and get these children." We went up to get them.

H: This is during the '63 demonstrations?

D: Right. And when Fred got to the Carver Theater, the Birmingham Fire Department put a water hose on him, knocked him up against the Carver Theater and he went down. He got up with the white flag. They put it on him again, and, then some of the brothers who weren't participating, told them they said, "Hey look, don't put no water on them. Don't put no more water on him." And they didn't put any more water on him. Fred went on down -- got down to 16th Street Baptist Church, got all the children inside the church and, when he was going downstairs into the church, they put the water hose and knocked him down in there -- we thought they had killed him. They took him to the hospital.

H: So you're saying, now this is well known, the one where he was knocked off of the steps at 16th Street, but you're saying even prior to then?

D: Prior to that.

H: A water hose had been put on him at the Carver Theater?

D: That's right. That's the same day. And, then when I reflect back and I think God had to have been in this. Then, I remember that same day we brought those children from uptown, when we got down there where *(Inaudible)* was about to do there job. We were coming up 5th Avenue and 16th Street, or we might have been up by the *(Inaudible)* where Freedom Manor is, some Black guys who had not been in the march attempted to get in the line like they were marching back with us. And, a White policeman told them, "Don't you get in this line." A White policeman told him, "Don't you get in this line. You're not worthy. Get out of the way, move back." Then I knew then, after I talked to Rev. Porter, as I reflect back that this isn't anything that we did. Trust me.

H: It had to have come from on high?

D: Porter said, "Martin is dealing from on high?"

H: Now, you were arrested that Easter Sunday and you were placed in jail. How long did you spend in jail that time?

D: I was out that Monday morning on my way to Tuskegee, Alabama. They had found a lady down there that could give me somewhere to stay. And, Pegues told me to go down there, ride around and learn the debit and just ride around all that week, don't do nothing, don't say nothing to nobody, learn the debit and go on. They said, "We need you down there, we don't need you up here."

H: So they got you out of town?
D: Yes.

H: So that you could do some work?

D: Right.

H: How does this period in your life impact upon your development later?

D: I think that having known Emory Jackson and having listened to him and believing in what he was talking about, this same thing. Emory was a Morehouse man, Martin King was a Morehouse man, and they were about the struggle. I never shall forget Emory saying the last part of it, that "A Morehouse man won't pay to be segregated." When they were in Atlanta they would go upstairs to the movie. And, I think about how we fought so hard to change things and in 1988 I was down there with the Hunt Administration and *The Birmingham World* became for sale and we didn't say nothing. Me and my wife certainly didn't need it, but I thought about Emory and I thought about all of the institutions, how we as a people always have to start over. We never keep going. We never

move up. We move over.

I thought about all this stuff we went through and until today, until one day, I will be fighting with the same fierceness that I fought with from the 50s, through the 60s and the 70s, because I'm a firm believer now, and I know that when you're at war, if you win the victory, you have to occupy the land. When we won that victory in the 60s, we didn't occupy the land. So, as a consequence it's still a strong fight and what I learned from the struggle was, that when they told us that "Nobody was interested in this but a few Negroes." And when other Blacks were telling us, "This is a White man's world and you can't change it. And the White folks going to always rule." It only charges the battery. It only makes me want to continue to fight because I firmly believe that this land is God's land. This land is our land and we have to be respectful of each other. We have to treat each other right, because man is made in the image of God and we should treat each other as we want to be treated.

H: Mr. Dickson, I want to thank you for taking time out of your schedule. What I would like to do, I would like for you to agree at some later date to come back. We have a lot of territory to cover between '63 and '95 because you have been actively involved in any number of areas. We would very much like to have opportunity to sit down and talk with you about that as well.

D: I'll be happy to come back.

H: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]