

Interview with Elmer Young by Vivian Rankin, Temple University,
African American Migration to Philadelphia Oral History Project,
December 30, 1987.

ELMER YOUNG: This is the speaker, here?

VIVIAN RANKIN: You can just talk.

EY: I was going to say—do you want to test to make certain?

VR: I'd go back and test.

EY: Huh? Just to make certain it's working.

VR: Elmer Young, December 30, 1987. Black Migration. [Pause]

VR: Your full name.

EY: My name is Elmer Young, Junior.

VR: No middle name?

EY: Nope, no middle name.

VR: Is that a family tradition?

EY: No, not necessarily, but my father didn't have a middle name, and they decided to have me named after him. And to this day, wondered why they named me Elmer. But what could I say? [Laughs]

VR: My name is Alma! [Laughs]

EY: Oh, okay.

VR: Let's see. Give me your date and place of birth.

EY: Okay, July 4th, 1924. And I was born here in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

VR: Where?

EY: At 4423 North American Street, which is near Third and Wingohocking Streets, up in the Boulevard, or Feltonville section of the city. We happened to have been the only black family living in

that particular area at the time. My grandfather moved from Virginia to this particular address in 1900. And it was at that time—my mother had not even been born. She was born in that same house as I was.

We had that as the family home for a number of years.

VR: Did you own the house?

EY: Yes, he did.

VR: Do you know of the first home ownership of your family?

EY: Well, that was, as far as I know, the first home ownership, was when my grandfather and my grandmother on my mother's side owned this particular property on North American Street.

VR: When did they buy that?

EY: Well, as I understand, 1900 is when they moved here from Virginia, a place called, as I understand it, Chatham, Virginia.

VR: Do you know the circumstances of your birth? Was there a midwife, a doctor?

EY: There was a doctor, but delivered at home. His name was Doctor Oliver Stout, S-T-O-U-T.

VR: Black doctor?

EY: No, a white doctor who had offices on Fifth Street. I want to say Lucerne, but it was the next street up. I don't know the actual street, but his offices were Fifth and Lucerne, somewhere around there.

VR: There's a Stout family in Philadelphia.

EY: Oh, really?

VR: Black.

EY: No, this was a white doctor, and he was the family physician for a number of years, the kind that used to come and visit, you know, come out to the home.

VR: Your occupation?

EY: Right now? Well, right now I'm a consultant to the Pew Charitable Trust, having just taken early retirement this past July. And as far as occupation, I'm being paid by them at the present time, and will be doing so until next October.

VR: Prior to that?

EY: Prior to that I was Vice President with the Pew Charitable Trust. I was in charge all their human services grant-making, as well as religion. For the record, the Pew Charitable Trust is the second largest foundation in the country, next to the Ford Foundation. We gave away, through grants, some \$136 million, for example, in 1986, and have done the same, this year, in 1987.

VR: Has there been a drop in that since?

EY: Well, that I don't know, because since my retirement, the stock exchange has suffered greatly, and much of our assets was in Sun Oil stock. So I don't know how it's affected it for the year 1988. I really don't know at this moment how it's been affected.

VR: Now, let's talk of your [unclear]. If I recall correctly, the middle and beginning wasn't nearly as illustrious as the top. Now from Vice Presidency—prior to the vice presidency, where were you?

EY: I was with First Pennsylvania Bank for thirteen years. I was a Senior Vice President, reporting to the President, one of his staff.

VR: What were you doing there?

EY: Well, really to act for the president on whatever assignments he would give to me. And at the same time, I was in charge of all the public affairs activities for the bank. I had a small staff that handled the grant-making that the First Pennsylvania Bank Foundation had, as

well as made all of the various committee meetings and things of which we could be of service to the community, such as: I was responsible for helping to start the Philadelphia Mortgage Plan, which made, for the first time, mortgage loans to residents in the inner city. I was very responsible for that. That started back in 1972, and '73.

I also created, through the help of someone on our board, the 3-2 Centers. You may have seen these centers around the city. That dealt specifically with welfare recipients. In other words, the state of Pennsylvania would mail their checks to our offices in particular districts in the city, and we would, in turn, through picture identification, issue them the check; have them sign it, give them the cash, or they could pay their telephone bills, their gas bills, and electric bills, and make money orders and things of that sort right there.

So it was sort of one-stop shopping for the very poor in that economic strata, and it helped stem the tide of checks being stolen from mailboxes, as well as some of the people could do some of their financial transactions because many of the people on welfare do not have checking accounts, so giving them the benefit of having money orders helped them tremendously. I was responsible for that. And was the chairman of the board of this subsidiary of First Pennsylvania Bank. We called it the 3-2 Centers, Incorporated. Three-dash-Two is the federal check number for First Pennsylvania Bank, and that's where we got the name.

VR: Ah! This the George Butler?

EY: Yes, chairman of the board, mm-hm. Right.

VR: And prior to First Pennsylvania Bank?

EY: Prior to First Pennsylvania Bank, I spent two years in San Francisco, California with a Hawaiian-based firm by the name of Dillingham Corporation.

VR: Hard work! [Laughs]

EY: Yeah, well, I was stationed in San Francisco, but our headquarters of the Dillingham Corporation was in Honolulu. And I was wooed to—this is an interesting story. I was wooed to this company because I happened to have been the first black to have built a shopping center in America, Progress Plaza Shopping Center at Broad and Oxford Streets.

VR: When was that built?

EY: Progress Plaza?

VR: Yeah.

EY: Well that was started in 1966—probably before you were born. Anyhow, it started in 1966, and completed in the beginning of 1968. And I became its first manager. I was the project director for the development of it; did all the leasing of all the stores. We have seventeen stores, and have office spaces on the second floor, a portion of the second floor, which we rented out. And I used to then—because we were such a unique organization—and I'll have to go into that subsequent to this, telling you about my job there. It was such a unique operation, until people or organizations from all over the country used to come to see it, because that wasn't all that we did.

I had built also an apartment complex on Girard Avenue, known as Zion Gardens. Zion Gardens is located between Tenth and Twelfth Street, on Girard Avenue. This was all part of our church

activities, Zion Baptist Church, Reverend Leon Sullivan. At that time, I was his administrative assistant.

But anyhow, getting back to the shopping center, and my being appointed to—or being asked to join Dillingham Corporation, they searched me out. I happened to have been in Chicago making a speech one day, and at lunch time this man sat next to me, and started telling me what a wonderful job that we as blacks had done, because remember, no shopping centers had been developed by black people in the country. He was just amazed. I think he had seen it, and wanted to know if it was possible that I could come out and talk to some of their people in San Francisco, because they were trying to develop a similar center, but much larger, in Oakland, California, in Center City, Oakland, California.

I didn't know who Dillingham Corporation was, but after inquiring from the International Council of Shopping Centers, who was giving this affair, I found out that they were largest shopping center developers in the country, as well as airfields, and things like that, they had built. It was a land-development company. So anyhow, I came back home and called them, and said I would accept. It was no obligation to come out and look; they would pay my way. As a matter of fact, he gave me a first-class ticket, for my wife and I from Philadelphia to San Francisco, and for three days to stay there, and then on to Honolulu for four days, so I could meet with the board chairman, Mr. Dillingham, and the staff there in Honolulu. And an open date for return, any time I wanted to come back.

So of course, I hadn't had a vacation in two months—in two years, took him up on it, you know. I figured, well, hey, this was a

good chance for me to get away, and I don't think I would accept, but anyhow, let's see what happens. So we went to San Francisco. They met us, of course, with a limousine. Took us to the Cliff Hotel in San Francisco; wined and dined us that evening. The next day took me to the office and met the staff at the office at Dillingham, which was in the financial district there, on Montgomery Avenue. Anyhow they arranged for a private plane to take me over the area which was to be developed in Oakland. We went to the airfield, and here they had this little two—four-seater, small airplane.

VR: Did your wife go with you?

EY: Yeah, she went with me. Yeah, we were all scared. I never had flown, you know, in one of these little small things. Anyhow, we flew over San Francisco and Oakland, and this area was in the center of Oakland, a fifteen block area which was being demolished. And it was going to be a 750,000 square foot shopping center, which was very large compared to, let's say, a 70,000 square foot that Progress Plaza is. This was going to be 750,000, plus two office buildings and some housing, or a total of a \$96 million project. So, boy, I could see my name

VR: And housing.

EY: And housing.

VR: [Unclear]

EY: Yeah. I could see my name in lights, you know: Elmer Young did this! So anyhow, we stayed there three days, and really enjoyed ourselves, and then it was on to Honolulu. And I went with the executive vice president and his wife to Honolulu; that's where he lived. And of course, again, they met us at the airport with all the lei

ceremony, you know, and the Hawaiian girls dancing, and all this jazz. Again, wining and dining us that evening. And then the next day, while I'm at the office—they own the Ala Moana Shopping Center on Ala Moana Boulevard. Have you ever been to Honolulu? No. That was there shopping center. Anyhow, their offices were there, so while they took me there, the wives of some of the guys took my wife to view the landscape; in other words, get the tour, you know, that day.

And what I had been doing by hand—of course, all of their work was computer operated, and it was just fantastic, the progress that could be made under a computerized thing! You know, all the things. So anyhow, we stayed for four days, because I had to get back for that next week. We left—oh, by the way, we left Thursday, and stayed in San Francisco until Sunday, and then went Sunday to Honolulu. Then, we stayed there in Honolulu from Sunday to Thursday.

And I'll always remember that Wednesday night—they had us out to dinner, Japanese restaurant, where I had my first taste of sake [laughs], which everybody, of course, got around to the question. Now, I knew they were going to get around to the question of, "Elmer would you like to work for us?" And I felt that I would put my price up so high that they wouldn't accept me, and then they would say, "Oh, well, okay."

VR: Thank you/

EY: "Thank you, but you know, we couldn't do anything." Because I felt that by doing this, by telling me to come with no obligation, that I wasn't losing anything. So anyhow, this was their way of

interviewing and trying to recruit. So that evening, I told my wife—I was at that time making \$15,000 a year, for Sullivan. And when it came up, he says, “Well, Elmer, what would it take for us to have you work for us?”” I started to say, well, it would take \$20,000, or 5,000. I said, no, maybe they might accept it, so I’ll just up it. I said, “It would take \$25,000.” I said, “Well, with all the things, the living in San Francisco, and the expenses,” because they had told me they would pay for moving expenses, and monies to set up, and all these loans to get myself together while we sold the home. I said, “Well, it would take \$25,000 at least.”

He says, “You’ve got the job.” Just like that! I later found out that they wanted me so bad that they would have accepted any price. I probably could have said \$30,000. They would have got it. Because, what happened was, my job was to interact with the Black Panthers. As you recall, Oakland was very strong, and the Black Panther party was very strong in Oakland, and they needed a black to interact with them, and at the same time who had knowledge of shopping center development, which was rare.

VR: Rare. [Laughs]

EY: You see, so, for that reason, the executive director was told to get me at any cost. No, the executive vice president was told to get me at any cost. I didn’t know all this, see, until afterwards. We later talked about this. So we moved then to San Francisco, and I tried to get a project underway. We were going to have two key stores, two key tenants, Sears Roebuck and JC Penney. And it was my job to go around and try to negotiate deals with these stores, while we were trying to get through the development stage of the shopping center.

The Black Panthers, true to word, were a pain in the neck. They would call me all kinds of names in the council meetings. And at nighttime, when we would go to this little bar where everybody hung out, they would come up to me, “Hey Elmer, can you get me a job?” You know, that kind of thing. So, we had a lot of problems. They wanted a piece of the action, so I was sent back down to Honolulu to talk to the board about the problem. And they said, “Well, if they want a piece of the action, Elmer, the same thing that you have done in Philadelphia maybe could work out, where they would buy shares into the shopping center; they could become owners, per se.”

So I went back, and said this to the fellows that I was dealing with, with the Black Panthers, who were the leaders at the time. And they said, “No, no, we don’t want to pay anything. We want the company to give it to you.” So I said, “How can we give you a piece of this center. How would that be ownership for the community?” You know, just a few of you guys that I’m dealing with didn’t represent the whole community—cause I used to talk to the community. Some of them—felt these guys were not representing them, and rightfully so. How could they, as a gift? “Well, if you don’t do it, we’re going to lay down in front of the bulldozers,” and all that business, you know.

So of course, the word got back to the company, and they became very, very nervous about this, and thought maybe what they better do is put the project on hold, because they just couldn’t work under the circumstances of somebody jumping in front of—then they

had never dealt with black people before. They were from Honolulu, they don't know what.

VR: Were they a white company, or Asian?

EY: Oh, yes. No, white, a white company. Dillingham was a Norwegian who settled—the family settled in Honolulu back in the 1850s. Anyhow, they had Asians working, Japanese and Chinese working for them. If you're in Honolulu, you're going to naturally have that. But it was white owned. Anyhow, they put that on hold, and had me then managing some centers, a couple of office buildings in San Francisco, called the Ice Houses, which were furniture marts, similar to, like when 2401 Market Street, where only you can come in if you were an interior decorator or designer. That's the kind of thing.

It was all right, but it was too, oh, just routine. I found that I wouldn't do anything. I would be reading books during the course of the day, because there was nothing to do in the office. My secretary could handle the problems—you know, my bathroom's leaking, or I need to change this, or have the plumber come in, or have my room moved, or things like that. All she had to do was call the people. So there really wasn't much for me to do. The only thing I had to do was negotiated leases, you know. I had 85 tenants which I had to take care of, you know, for this.

So it so happened—and I'm moving now to the next step that John Bunting needed a black to work with the community here. Remember this was 19—now, this is 1970.

VR: Who is John Bunting?

EY: I'm sorry, he was then there the chairman of First Pennsylvania Bank. They thought of me, and someone said, "Well, why don't we try to get

Elmer to come back?” Because I happen—because of my working with Sullivan, I knew a lot of the people. So when he called me—he called me in 1970 and asked would I be willing to fly back and talk to him about this new job that they would offer me, a vice presidency. You’ve got to remember, in those days, there weren’t any black vice presidents at all, in banking, in the city of Philadelphia. Nobody.

VR: Is First Penn the oldest bank?

EY: The oldest bank in the country.

VR: Yeah?

EY: Yes, yes. 1782. So anyhow, but that’s the way banks were. There just weren’t any blacks in major banks.

VR: Would you say—I know Philadelphia, actually, traditionally, very conservative banking industry and legal industry. Was that representative of the nation, per se?

EY: Pretty much so in banking, yes. New York may have had one or two, but most of the country, they just didn’t have vice presidents. Maybe Chicago might have had one. I don’t remember now. But this is 1970, right after this, during the civil rights movement, when really the movement began. It wasn’t long before that that banks didn’t even have blacks as tellers, you know, in the sixties was when they first even became tellers, let alone holding officerships. So, I thought it was a prestigious job, so I left there and came here. That’s how I became affiliated in ’71 with the First Pennsylvania Bank. So I stayed with them until ’83, when I joined Pew. Now prior to—

VR: Back up one minute. Which Black Panthers did you interact with?

EY: Who?

VR: Yeah.

EY: Oh, my goodness. I'll always remember one guy by the name of Paul Cobb. Elijah Turner. There were some names I can't remember, some of the Panther names there. But they were the guys who used to cause me the problem. I didn't have any contact with what's-his-name.

VR: Eldridge?

EY: Yeah. It was around four guys that did all this meeting with me, or that I would go to meetings with.

VR: In retrospect, give me your frank assessment of them, in terms of: how they fit in the movement, their personal commitment, how much was private agenda?

EY: Well, to be real frank with you, maybe the original intent of the Black Panthers was to do something for the community and to stop the injustices to black in their particular area. And at that time, it was the Black Power Movement, so it caught on. "Hey, let's fight back, and do something for ourselves." But soon after that, those that I knew within that movement, it was strictly self-agenda, trying to do something to something to enhance their own self. They didn't give a damn about the black community. They didn't even think about the black community, per se. They were looking out for themselves. And that was a very big problem, and I think that that's why it all fell down, to be frank with you.

VR: Did they ever build that shopping center?

EY: Nope. Oh, well, subsequently a portion of it was built, but many years later. Many years later. Last time I was out there, I go by the area where we done—so some of it had been done—one office building, not two, and some of the housing.

VR: And Oakland at that period of time had been was predominantly black.

EY: Well, it's a very large percentage of it black, not predominantly, no. Oakland is a very big city. You know, Oakland is like the bedroom of San Francisco.

VR: Okay.

EY: Yes. And when I say the bedroom, I mean, housing is so expensive in San Francisco that people have a tendency to move out and across the bay. Like, the house that I purchased there was \$49,500. That same house, I'd have to—well, I'd have to show you. That same house in San Francisco would have been \$75,000.

VR: And today it would be 200.

EY: Well, right now, to be real frank with you, that same house today is selling for \$200,000. I was just out there in January. Yeah. So you're absolutely right. But my point is, that's the way all things have appreciated. Even the values in Philadelphia have appreciated tremendously from what the original sale prices were a few years ago. But it was an interesting thing. I enjoyed the two years that I was out there. I felt we had more of a cosmopolitan air, like people on my staff were Spanish, Mexican, Japanese, Chinese, white, black. You know what I mean? So it was a cosmopolitan thing.

And I noticed one evening, New Year's Eve, I gave a New Year's Eve party at my house, and to see this mix was just wonderful. I wasn't used to it, here in this city, to see this mix of people at my house, you know, and all of us getting along together. It was just fantastic. It was a good time, so I enjoyed my stay there. But because

of the job, and the offer that I had been given here, is why I moved here, moved back to Philadelphia.

VR: When you compare the two, living, do you have a preference?

EY: Oh, yes.

VR: Which?

EY: I would move on the West Coast any day. I just like that kind of living. I guess, really, Vivian, I am tired of the snow. I need more of a moderate climate, and I think we experienced that on the West Coast, in the particular area which I lived. You know what I mean? And then the houses. I just like the long sweeping ranchers. We used to have to have—and I mean it—used to have to have the intercom system to talk from the bedroom to the kitchen, because it's such an area, you know what I mean, without screaming your lungs off. Here in this small house, this is a rancher, but I could still call you in the kitchen—at least my wife calls me—without it.

You know, I just liked that it—that was where I first learned about golf, and it was just more of an outdoorsy type-atmosphere for doing things. Of course, there was so much to see, such beautiful sites around there. In 200 miles, you could go to anything, to Reno, or to Tahoe, up where the big Redwoods grow. You know what I mean? Down to see El Capitan—different things to do, but I enjoyed it.

VR: Does your preference have anything to do with the nature of Philadelphia?

EY: Not really, no, because being born here, I think I know Philadelphia pretty well. It's still a colonial, town. I think that you still have a lot of clique-ishness. Here in Philadelphia, used to be at one time, the light skin versus the black, the dark skins. All light skins went to this

particular church, and didn't want blacks. I even know some streets in this city that didn't want dark-skinned people.

VR: What streets?

EY: Thirteen-hundred block, North 55th, for example. I used to sell real estate.

VR: Keynes lived near there.

EY: They lived in that hundred. They certainly did.

VR: No kidding.

EY: Yup. But I remember trying to put a dark-skinned family in that house, and was politely told through my broker at that time, Wendell B. Cornish, no, they don't want dark skins in that hundred block. Now, this is going back to when I got out of college—I was in college. This was about 1948, or so, but of course it's not that way today. But I'm talking about how it used to be.

VR: When I think back to my childhood, I'm trying to think of dark faces on 55th Street.

EY: Did you live in West Philly?

VR: I lived at 40th and Haverford.

EY: Oh, Okay.

VR: We're friendly.

EY: Yeah. Well, I'm just telling you, this was some of the things that I experienced in those particular days. There used to be churches—First African Baptist Church, Sixteenth Street, Christian. They, light-skinned folks. Those who belonged to the Episcopalian churches were light-skinned people in the main. That's what Philadelphia was, sort of separated by not just necessary ethnic groups, but by color in the black race. And it wasn't until the civil rights movement in the

'68s and all when really there was a coming together. I don't know how much it's done. Even some of your female clubs that were started in those days were all light-skinned women. I have to think back now, but as I can remember, certain clubs seemed to have that sort of under the code.

VR: When you were coming up, did you see light-skinned men and women marrying brown skinned men, especially those who'd made it, at that time?

EY: Yes, that's how it happened. The brown skin men who had made it, the doctor, the lawyer, sure. And he, vice versa, wanted the light skin.

[End of Part 1/Begin Part 2]

EY: Maybe don't let me wander, then maybe.

VR: Oh, but it was such a wonderful wander! What's your wife's name?

[Pause in recording]

EY: Okay. So that means I get home early.

VR: Your wife's name?

EY: Oh, Thelma, T-H-E-L-M-A.

VR: Maiden name?

EY: Watson.

VR: And is she a Philadelphia girl?

EY: No, she isn't. She's from a small town in Virginia called Meherrin, M-E-H-E-R-R-I-N, Virginia. It's about 75 miles south of Richmond, 75 miles north of Danville, Virginia, so it's sort of right in the middle there.

VR: How did you meet her? In Philly?

EY: I met her in Philly, yes. She had come up to work during the war. She had just come out of school, and decided that she would come up

and live with her aunt here in Philadelphia. So when I was discharged from the Army, in '46, I met her on a blind date, and we dated for about a year, got married in June of 1947.

VR: And you have two children?

EY: I have two sons, yes.

VR: And what are their names?

EY: Well, Victor, my oldest, is an attorney here in the city. And then my youngest is Vincent; he's an ophthalmologist here in the city.

VR: Is your wife working?

EY: Yes. She's a personnel director for the OICs of America.

VR: Tell me about your education. Elementary—where did you go?

EY: Yeah, okay. My first school was the McClure School in Philadelphia, where I attended sixth and Hunting Park Avenue. I attended there the first through the sixth grade, and then we moved down to North Philadelphia, to a little small street called Fairhill Street, at Fairhill at Susquehanna Avenue. I attended John Welsh School from the seventh through the eighth grade.

VR: And was that a mixed school?

EY: Yes, mixed. As a matter of fact, the McClure School, I might tell you, I was the only black. My sister and I was the only black in that school for my first six grades.

VR: So it really wasn't mixed? [Laughs]

EY: Well—

VR: But you mixed it. You mixed it.

EY: I mixed it. It was an Italian neighborhood, primarily.

VR: In North Philadelphia.

EY: Sixth and Hunting Park Avenue. Yeah, I'm sure it must be mixed now. But, many days, many days, I used to fight my way home, because they used to call me nigger, during my early school days there. But finally I ended up getting along with the kids, so at least we eventually—it goes up to the sixth grade. I might just point out, my mother went to the same school during her years of schooling. Anyhow, from the eighth grade—I mean, from the ninth grade, I was admitted to Central High School. I went to Central only for one year, because they were moving. This was the Central at Broad and Green Streets, the old school.

They were moving, though, that year, to their present location up on Ogontz Avenue, and that was just too far. My family didn't have any money to send me by car up there, you know, trolley or anything. So I then continued on at the school that's called Benjamin Franklin High School that took over Central High's place. I stayed there up until '43, until I graduated. And from there, I was drafted into the Army, and served with the 369th Infantry of the 93rd Division, for three years, and attained the—

VR: Three year draft? Did you re-up?

EY: No, no, no.

VR: That was normal then.

EY: Well, remember, the war was on.

VR: That's right. That's right.

EY: So there's was no such thing as just re-up. You just stayed in the Army, because you didn't know when the war was going to end. And if you recall, the war ended in August of 1945, and I was discharged in January of '46. I entered in January of '43, and discharged in

January of '46. I had attained the rank of what we call a staff sergeant. I was personnel sergeant major in the 369th Infantry. I was able to—I was a court reporter. I did court reporting for many of the court martial cases that they had.

VR: Can you type?

EY: Yes, yes, used to type 60 words a minute, and it was very helpful to me during the war, because I didn't have to be out on the line all the time.

VR: How did you get that? How did you—this question you must answer now. Everything I hear about you, everything I've ever known about you, and then here having you recount your history—everything you do is a mark of excellence. Going to master sergeant—that's the highest non-commissioned officer, right?

EY: Yeah.

VR: You managed to do that in three years, and you're a teenager.

EY: I was eighteen. But I mean—three years, twenty-one. Huh?

VR: What's the secret? What do you think?

EY: What was the secret?

VR: Is there anything that you know helped bring that about, besides your pleasing ways?

EY: Well, you know, I think that maybe I was motivated by an uncle. His name is Ernest Young. He was a very famous basketball player at that time, in Lincoln University, where they called him Deke Young.

VR: Right.

EY: But he was the first in our family to have gone to school, and when I say gone to school, I mean to have gone to university. And, I don't know. I looked up to him as hey, this is what I would like to be.

Because my father was a truck driver, and I had taken some trips with him with this big Mack truck that just would bounce you to death. As a matter of fact, it gave him kidney problems because of the jarring that he had to take daily. So I just said I never want to be a truck driver.

And I guess it was in the Army when I really took a hold of myself and said, now what do I want to do with myself when I discharged. So I'd take correspondence courses in accounting, things like that. I learned great shorthand while in the service, through a program that they had to teach shorthand. I learned typing, I guess, more or less—well, I started one semester in school, but I learned it more or less by being in the service and practicing, to the point that I became very proficient in both shorthand and typing. Yeah, I think I looked up to him, and just said I want to do something with my life other than just be a truck driver.

You know, in those days, it's amazing, but when I growing up, the big shots on our block were postal employees! Big shots! And I'll always remember, if we could ever become a railroad postal clerk, well, that was an aspiration everybody was aspiring for, unless you wanted to aspire for a doctor or a lawyer, dentist, things like that. So when I came out, that was in my mind: Let me just do something that sort of will help myself, but I guess I took that kind of inspiration from my uncle, if that's answering your question.

VR: Certainly, in a way. Now, that speaks to your motivation. That's what decided you to go to receive a full education. And there are plenty—I mean, the world is full—how many of our contemporaries

do we know have very fine educations? A multitude of degrees, but success eludes them.

EY: I guess I was lucky. Well, after I graduated from—after I graduated from Temple, in 1952, I had taken the Business Administration at Temple. I opened—I became a real estate broker and an insurance broker and opened an office in West Philadelphia, in 56th and Race Streets. I stayed there for about a year. That was '52, '53. I had a partner; his name was Norman Welsh. Our office was known as Welsh and Young. I stayed there for about a year, and we just couldn't seem to hit it. We were both in school together, but after we got to working, you know, just didn't seem to hit. So, I left a little over a year, and we were really doing lousy. That's why you say about success—

VR: [Laughs] Remember that one!

EY: That's why I was saying not everything was a success. Then I joined with two men who were in the insurance business, Waddington and Cooper Insurance Agency, who had offices then in North Philly on North Broad Street, 3718 North Broad Street. So I worked with them up until 1956. In November of '56, things were still so bad, and I had now had two children. The second one had just been born. I just had to do something to get out of it, so I then tried to apply to various private industry for jobs in my background, in real estate or insurance, like the Insurance Company of North America, Penn Mutual, some of the big insurance companies. I felt that with my background, I surely should qualify.

But in those days, they weren't hiring blacks. I was fortunate enough to be hired by IBM Corporation. I became the first black to

be an administrative clerk at IBM in Philadelphia. And I think the reason for that was my boss was a former Temple University graduate. So, we clicked. You know what I mean. Because then there weren't any blacks in Temple. I mean, I'm sorry, in IBM, here in the city. I could tell you a story about something that used to happen. I'd come to work very early—

VR: I want to hear it—[pause in recording]

EY: So you back on now?

VR: Yeah.

EY: Okay. So go ahead. Was there something you wanted to ask me?

VR: From Temple, you had what kind of degree?

EY: Oh, BS.

VR: And any further education?

EY: Oh, yes, I had further schooling at IBM administrative school in White Plains, New York. I have taken courses at University of Arizona for shopping center development, and also at the University of California at Berkeley.

VR: What was there?

EY: Where?

VR: At Berkeley.

EY: Oh, these were real estate courses. That dealt with shopping center development. I'm sorry.

VR: Your religion?

EY: Baptist.

VR: Is that a family tradition?

EY: Yes, I would say, basically. For me, now, it's a funny thing. Now, most of my family are Pentecostal.

VR: Now?

EY: Yes.

VR: Switched from Baptist to Pentecostal?

EY: Yes. Yes, and have done so—I don't even remember the number of years ago, but my family, here, we're Baptists.

VR: Any particular hobbies?

EY: Golf. I love to play golf. That's my first love, right now. I guess that's what you would call a hobby.

VR: Or an avocation.

EY: [Laughs]

VR: Your parents' names?

EY: Elmer, Senior, and Mary Young.

VR: What was her middle and maiden?

EY: Mary Magdalene. Oh, gosh. Womack.

VR: W-O-M-A-C-K?

EY: Right.

VR: Now, your mom had a very Catholic name.

EY: Mary Magdalene. It was a biblical name, if you recall. Magdalene, the one with the sins within and they had to cleanse her. Yeah.

VR: Did you know how your mother came by that name?

EY: Oh, no, I don't.

VR: Is it a family name?

EY: No. My grandmother, as I know, just named her that. I don't know how she got it.

VR: When was your father born, do you recall, and where?

EY: 1900, in Chatham, Virginia.

VR: And your mother?

EY: She was born in 19—I believe 1906, I think it is, here in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 1906, 1908? I'm not sure. I think 1906.

VR: Your father was a truck driver?

EY: Yeah.

VR: And your mother?

EY: Domestic.

VR: Where did she work?

EY: Well, various people.

VR: Any particular part?

EY: Yeah, up where we lived, which would be around the Boulevard section.

VR: And what kinds of families lived there—racial, religious groups, just general?

EY: Oh, no, just whites. I don't remember. Yeah, I don't remember. Just Caucasians.

VR: Have you brothers and sisters?

EY: Yep, I have eight others beside me. I have three brothers. Do you want their names? Three brothers and five sisters. One is now deceased.

VR: So, eight living?

EY: Oh, you mean all together?

VR: Yeah.

EY: Yeah.

VR: And your brothers and sisters also went to school in Philadelphia?

EY: Yes, every one. Mm-hm.

VR: And did they finish high school?

EY: Mm-hm.

VR: Any of them go on to higher education?

EY: Yes. I mean, the next oldest brother, Norman.

VR: You're the oldest.

EY: I'm the oldest, yeah. But, division here is it was first me, then a sister, then another sister, twin sisters, and then another sister. So I had five girls, and then another boy. You follow me?

VR: Oh! [Laughs]

EY: Another boy, three boys. So, my next to oldest—three of them have had college training. Two are ministers.

VR: In what church?

EY: In the Pentacostal Church. Yes.

VR: Are most of them in Philadelphia?

EY: Yes, all of them are in Philadelphia right now. Mm-hm.

VR: And the accomplishments, singular—where was this drive to more education? Where did that come from?

EY: Where did that come from? For all of us you mean? I guess it was through the family—well, through the mother trying to tell us that if you wanted to make something of yourselves, you have to get an education. So I guess that's where it was from. It was amazing that as poor as we were, you still had that ambition to get out of the rut. Because I remember being on welfare—you know what I mean, when I was a kid, and it was sort of an embarrassment to me.

I'll always remember this, as an early teenager, going to Broad Street to get some of this here food that they would give away. And instead of coming back on regular streets on my wagons, I would go through alleyways. So you know, I just felt ashamed. So I guess the

idea was to get out of it, you know. I guess from my parents, my mother.

VR: What was their education?

EY: Both of them just had eighth grade education.

VR: And your father went to school in Chatham?

EY: No, Trenton, New Jersey. As kids, they moved to Trenton, New Jersey. My family is in Trenton, New Jersey, on this side.

VR: Who was the first of your family to come to Philadelphia, about what, 1900?

EY: Yes, my grandfather on my mother's side.

VR: And what brought them here?

EY: Don't ask me. I really don't know. I never got to know him, unfortunately, to ask those questions. I sure wish now I had all of that kind of history, because we lost it. You know what I mean. But I don't know what caused the migration.

VR: And your parents religion?

EY: Well, my mother is a Pentecostal. Well, I guess, you could say both of them were Pentecostal, because he had adopted that before he died.

VR: What is Pentecostal?

EY: Pentecostal is like the holy church of God in Christ.

VR: Is it an off-shoot of any of the other, like AMEs and the Zions, Baptists or something?

EY: Oh, I see what you mean. Well, I guess it's an off-shoot of all of that. They just decided that they want to have—they do an awful lot of playing with the cymbals, and the shouting, and supposedly speaking in tongue. I don't know if it's an off-shoot of one particular, because I imagine people who join that Pentecostal came from all various

religions, who didn't find what they wanted in it, so they formed that.
I don't know their origin.

VR: Was your family—now, you were a child, were they involved in politics?

EY: No.

VR: Did they have an affiliation?

EY: No, no. Oh, yes, they voted, but never involved in any way.

VR: How did they vote, did you know, recall?

EY: No. I don't. No, I don't remember how they voted. Well, now, I remember just, I was eighteen, and in the service, everybody voted for Roosevelt. You know what I mean. He was the savior so to speak. But prior to that, I don't know.

VR: Have you been to the tomb?

EY: On, many times.

VR: [Unclear]

EY: No, no, I have never been. I thought you meant, have I ever been to Virginia. I've been to my wife's home in Virginia, not to our homestead. No, I wouldn't even know where to look.

VR: So, no ideas about what caused that move for your particular family?

EY: No, none whatsoever. Not really. I imagine, seeking a better life; you know what I mean. But I'm sure that they were farmers, but I don't know what caused the move north.

VR: Were there any family traditions or hobbies that you were aware of?

EY: Any family traditions?

VR: Or hobbies. Like from you family or parents.

EY: No, huh-uh.

VR: Were there any slaves in your family?

EY: Yes.

VR: Where? On what side?

EY: On my mother's side that I know of. And also on my father's side, but I didn't know them. But my grandfather was a slave, the one who moved to Philadelphia from Chatham. Yeah, mother's father. That's right.

VR: So you don't know any of the circumstances of the plantation?

EY: None. I don't really know—that's what I said—what all happened. He died, like he was 90, in '38. So I mean, he was like a teenager, I guess, back in slavery days, or a young man. But I don't know any details.

VR: Did your family ever tell any stories that had racial connotations that were part of the family?

EY: Well, the only one that I used to hear as a little kid was my grandfather used to call every white man "Cap'n". Captain. And he got this, as I understand, from living on this farm in Virginia, where the boss was Cap'n. You know, you say, "Hi Cap'n." You know, that's the way he would address all white men. Cap'n. C-A-P, apostrophe N. And even as a little kid, I always remember saying, "Grandpa, don't call that. Don't say that." You know. We'd be walking down the street, "Hi Cap'n." You know. And that's about the only thing I can remember. As I said, unfortunately, I never got to know him that well, so that I really could have talked about the things that they've done. I guess my mother would have stories, but I never got any of them.

VR: Is your mother alive?

EY: Oh, yes, she is still living.

VR: Is she in Philly?

EY: Yes, she's in a home, Clara Baldwin House in North Philadelphia.

VR: Is there a family Bible?

EY: Yes, she has that. Mm-hm.

VR: And are you a member of any fraternal organizations?

EY: Well, Sigma Pi Phi. That's the only one that I'm not affiliated with.

Well, I mean, I belong to a couple of clubs, like the Frontiers International, but it's not really a fraternal organization.

VR: Weren't you [unclear]?

EY: I never. To tell you the truth, I never had the time for it, really. I was supposed to go into the Alphas, but I just never got around to it.

VR: [Unclear] [Laughs] I know. You're not a Mason, or an Elk, or a Moose?

EY: I never wanted to. That's what I say, I never—that stuff never impressed me. You know why? I want to see more physical accomplishments from those organizations. If I could see a hospital, or if I could see homes built, or homes for the retired, then I would want to be a part of it. But I don't want to be a part of something that's just a social gathering of men. I think that they're too important, and too many members not to do something that's tangible for our community. I might be all wet, but.

VR: Many opportunities lost. Where is your family living, in the United States?

EY: My family? Oh, okay.

VR: Where in the United States is your family living?

EY: Okay, primarily, most of them are either here in Philadelphia, Trenton, New Jersey, East Orange, and Montclair, New Jersey.

VR: No other states? No family left in Virginia?

EY: My family, no. No, wait a minute, I shouldn't say that. There are some of which I'm just not knowledgeable of. Yes, there are some still down in there, in that particular area.

VR: Anywhere else?

EY: No, that's it.

VR: What occupations did your family usually find itself?

EY: Well, on my father's side, there were, like, uncles who were school principal. One was a detective sergeant—

VR: Oh, a detective sergeant—in the military?

EY: No, a sergeant in the police. He was a policeman, but a sergeant, as a detective. Do you follow me? Two worked for the school system. And one worked for the city. My father's brother, oldest next to him, was a city truck driver. On my mother's side, she had one brother who was injured during World War I, who got a pension because he was disabled.

VR: Did you have any businessmen, shopkeepers in your family?

EY: No.

VR: No. Military? Did your people find themselves in the military?

EY: Yes. Yes. Mm-hm, as I said, I have a couple of uncles who were in the military. As a matter of fact it used to be a lot of fun, when we'd all get together, all of us in the service—not in the service, but when we'd come home on leave. Many times we would all travel together. They used to call me their brother, their little brother, you know.

VR: Did you know about the farmers in your family?

EY: The farmers?

VR: Mm-hm. Was that a farm, your family, originally?

EY: Well, that was, from my grandfather's sake; you know what I mean. However, again, I didn't know what they did, because, as I said, they moved up here in 1900. Can you get it?

VR: Yeah.

EY: Okay. Yeah, they moved up here in 1900, so I'm just not sure what they did. But if it's Virginia, more than likely it was tobacco and stuff like that.

VR: What about transportation. Anybody work on the railroad?

EY: No, not on the railroad.

VR: Mining, or industry?

EY: No, no.

VR: You have Baptist and Pentecostal. Any other religious groups?

EY: No.

VR: You know anything about your blood line?

EY: Hm-mm.

VR: You don't know. You just generally know Afro-American?

EY: That's right. I don't have any knowledge of—like somebody was married to an Indian, or somebody was married to somebody else like that. No, I have no knowledge of that.

VR: No English?

EY: I have no knowledge of that at all.

VR: So you consider yourself, an Afro-American.

EY: I'm an Afro-American.

VR: Any political affiliations that you've had?

EY: When you say affiliations, what do you mean?

VR: Is there one way that you vote in particular?

EY: Primarily Democratic. But I believe in voting for whomever—you know, I've split my ticket many times. This last time.

VR: How do you keep track of your family history? Do you have interviews or vital records? Diaries?

EY: No, we don't. We have an uncle and an aunt who have these family reunions, on occasion. And I think they would have records of it in Trenton, or a place called Ewing Park is where they live; it's right outside of Trenton. My mother has a lot of history, as far as things that happened during the years that I was small, things like that. But I can't picture anybody else having that same kind of thing. Now, I guess I have never been that much interested in those kind of things, to get like an oral history, like you're doing now. Even though we've talked about it, I've never gotten around to it, if you know what I mean.

VR: Did you have any black teachers in the public school system?

EY: None.

VR: Any black history?

EY: Hm-mm, none. All that I learned was subsequent to my schooling.

VR: When did you first have black playmates?

EY: Black playmates? I guess, how old are you when you get into the seventh grade?

VR: Eleven or Twelve.

EY: That was the first time, except for my own relatives. It was the first black playmates I ever had.

[End of Recording]