

Interview with James R. Roebuck by Tony Clay, African American Migration to Philadelphia Oral History Project, Temple University, September 11, 1988.

TONY CLAY: Good afternoon. My name is Tony Clay. I'm continuing my report of the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American audio collection. I'm sitting at a glass dining room table of State Representative James R. Roebuck, Junior. I would like to continue my interview with him at this time. Excuse me—begin my interview with Representative Roebuck by asking him to state his name, and his occupation, and the place of birth.

JAMES ROEBUCK: James Randolph Roebuck, Junior. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Occupation is representative in the General Assembly.

TC: Okay. What district is that that you represent?

JR: The 188th legislative district.

TC: And how many years have you been a state representative?

JR: I'm in my second term in the legislature. Third year in the legislature.

TC: So each term is—?

JR: Two years. I won a special election in May of 1985.

TC: Well, Representative Roebuck, what is your educational background, starting from elementary?

JR: I was educated in the Philadelphia Public Schools. I went to Thaddeus Stevens Elementary School.

TC: And that's located—?

JR: Thirteenth and Spring Garden Streets to Jay Cooke Junior High School at Thirteenth and Loudon. And to Central High School at Ogontz and Olney Avenue.

TC: And what year did you graduate?

JR: I graduated in January of 1963, in the 219th class at Central.

TC: Okay. Were you ranked highly among your graduating class?

JR: No. [Laughs] I graduated from high school and went to college in February 1963, seven days after graduating from high school.

TC: Okay.

JR: And completed my undergraduate education at Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History, with honors. And did that in June of 1966. Then went to graduate school at the University of Virginia, from which I received a Master of Arts degree in 1969, and Doctoral degree in History in 1977. So I did all my subject matter was in history.

TC: Well, when you attended Central High, was it a good mixture of Black, or was it mostly White when you attended?

JR: In my class, which numbered I believe 186 students, there were twelve Blacks. And the school was predominantly Jewish in population. Sometimes I think the best days of Central were the Jewish holidays, because it was in the time when those were not general holidays, and no one was at school, and it was always a free day.

TC: Was there any racial tension there while you attended Central?

JR: No. No, not that I remember. None at all.

TC: Okay, then. Then you are the son of—who are your parents?

JR: My father was James Roebuck, Senior, and my mother was Cynthia Compton Roebuck.

TC: Okay. Compton was her maiden name?

JR: Yes.

TC: Well, let's see if we can trace her roots. Do you recall, what is the oldest relative on your mother's side that you know of? How far back can you reach?

JR: I can probably go back to at least my—at least, in terms of knowledge, to my great-grandmother.

TC: Yes.

JR: My mother was born in Cleveland, Ohio. Her mother, whose name was Piccola, MacNealy maiden name, Compton, was born in Salisbury, North Carolina in 1886, August the twentieth, 1886. Her mother, whose name was Mariah, was also from that area of North Carolina, and she lived to be 95, and died in 1947, so I believe she was born in the 1850s. Her husband, my grandfather's father, also lived in Salisbury, and was a barber by trade, had a store, a shop in Salisbury. His mother was in fact White. So that I know that much of the family history, at least back to that far, in my family.

TC: Now, this is your mother's grandmother?

JR: My mother's side.

TC: Grandmother.

JR: Yes.

TC: Do you know if she was born a slave?

JR: My great-grandmother was born a slave, yes.

TC: Did anyone tell you about their experience back then?

JR: No, I never really knew my great-grandmother. And my grandmother talked a little bit about growing up in Salisbury, about interaction with some of the—very seldom about interaction with the White community in Salisbury. But for the most part, she talked very little about North Carolina.

TC: Well, let's go to your grandmother, which would be your mother's mother.

JR: That's right.

TC: Now, did she have any brothers or sisters that you know of?

JR: Yes, there were, I believe, five sisters and one brother. And all the sisters lived into their 80s, and the brother died somewhat earlier than that. So I knew most of my aunts. In fact, I knew all my aunts.

TC: Okay.

JR: In one way or another. All my great—I guess you'd call them great-aunts.

TC: Yes, in this case. Can you recall their names? And if they were married?

JR: Sure. The oldest one was named Alena. She married a minister, who in fact pastored a church here in Philadelphia. And I don't remember the name; I know the location. It's at seventeenth and Fitzwater [First Colored Wesley Methodist Church]. In fact, I don't know the exact name, but I knew her certainly. Let's see who else now. Daisy, who lived all her life in Salisbury, North Carolina, stayed in North Carolina. Orpha, who lived in Philadelphia. Georgie, who lived in Western Pennsylvania, lived—[unclear] in Newcastle, eventually in Cleveland, Ohio. Beulah, who lived in Cleveland, Ohio. My grandmother, who we mentioned.

TC: Okay, Representative Roebuck, now, on your mother's father's side, how many uncles and aunts did your mother have on her father's side?

JR: On her father's side. Okay. There were—let me think. There must have been—there were probably five or six of that family, all of whom lived basically in a place called Chambersburg, Pennsylvania,

which is where my grandfather was born and died. And of those, many of them—I knew his sister, whose name was Louisa, who lived in—to be 90. And I knew she was around when my grandpa was around. He also had other sisters who had died, mostly much earlier in the 1920s and 30s. The sisters were named Kate and Minnie, and he also had a brother, whose name I don't recall at this moment. They all had a family burial ground in Chambersburg, so you could go down and read tombstones and you knew the names. So.

TC: This cemetery, was it because they were had a lot of influence in the town that they lived?

JR: No, it's just a small town, with a very small Black community, and there is a cemetery that has existed for years and years, and families buried people together, and still do.

TC: I don't suppose you know how your grandparents met.

JR: I do know how my grandparents met. My grandmother's oldest sister, Lena, was married to a minister who pastored in Chambersburg, at the Methodist Church in Chambersburg. And my grandmother came up to live, or to visit with them in the early part of the century, 1904, 1905, and met my grandfather in Chambersburg. They were married, I believe, in 1905.

TC: So, your mother's parents, your grandparents, were the father and mother of how many children then?

JR: There were five children, two of whom died as babies, very young, several months old. My mother had a brother and a sister, both of whom also died relatively young. Her brother, I believe, was 41, her sister was 37, in fact, died in 1938, a day apart.

TC: Were they married?

JR: No, they were not.

TC: So none of them had any children, then?

JR: None of them had children.

TC: Okay. Let's see if we can find on your father's side. Do you recall your grandfather, and maybe, how far back can you recall on your father's side?

JR: I knew my grandmother, who lived until the early 1970s. My grandfather died when I was—her husband, my grandfather, died when I was three months old, so I never knew him. I did know my great-grandmother, who also lived into the early 1970s.

TC: Was she born a slave or a free lady?

JR: I believe that she was born free, although I'm not entirely certain. I have somewhere an obituary. She lived in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. And I believe that she was born free, although I'm not entirely certain. I don't know much beyond that. Although, I have a cousin who has begun to do research into that side of the family. I think traces the family back to Virginia in the 1820s.

TC: Okay.

JR: That branch of the family.

TC: Well, so far you've mentioned almost, you have family all up and down the eastern seaboard.

JR: Well, certainly mother's family was rooted in Chambersburg. My father's family was in Carlisle, so I knew those two towns, and the family in those two towns. And if I go to either one of those cities, those towns now, people know me who I don't know [laughs], so.

TC: So, on your father's side, with his parents, you had how many uncles and aunts on his—?

JR: There were twelve children altogether.

TC: I'm going to put you to the test on this one. Can you recall all their names, and whether they were married, and how many children each of them had?

JR: Sure. Sure. My father was the oldest. I'm an only child. He had a sister Juanita, who had two children.

TC: Was she married?

JR: Yes, she was married, and she had two children.

TC: Do you recall her husband?

JR: Her husband's name is Albert; he's in fact still living. My father is dead, and she is also dead. Uncle Chester, I think you might know. He's a member of Mount Olivet. Is married, has one son. My Uncle Teddy, who is next in line, has four children. My uncle Frederick has three children. My Uncle Stephen has two children. My Uncle George is married with no children. I have an Aunt Ethel, who has twelve children, or had twelve children. An Aunt Mary, who has four children. Aunt Arlene, who has one child. My Uncle Ronald, who has, I believe, three children, and my Aunt Beulah has three children.

TC: You have Aunt Beulah on both sides of your family?

JR: Yes. Yes.

TC: And out of all your cousins that you have, it's amazing that you have a family of twelve that gave birth to another set of twelve.

JR: Yes.

TC: Are there any of your cousins that you keep in contact with?

JR: I keep in contact with the ones who are closest to me in age, more than I do the others. We have some kinds of family things where I see

cousins, but for the most part, the ones that I'm closest to are the ones closest in age to me.

TC: And they would be?

JR: Well, you want names, or—?

TC: Their names, and if, in fact, they're married, and who are their kids?

JR: Okay, well, my oldest cousin's name is Patsy, and she has one daughter. Her brother, whose name is Albert, has one son. He's a year older than I am.

TC: And they're Albert Roebuck?

JR: No, no, they're not. Their Albert Mitchell, Patricia Mitchell, or Patsy Mitchell and Albert Mitchell. They're my Aunt Juanita's children. She married an Albert Mitchell.

TC: Okay.

JR: So, that would be that family. I have, then, cousins, who are the daughters of my Uncle Frederick, who are named Marba and Myra and Birdie, all of whom are initially Roebuck by surname, and who had married. I know that Myra has a daughter. Her married name is Anderson. I don't know the other—I believe the other two are also married, although I don't keep in close contact with them. So those would be the ones that are closest in age to me that I also remember.

TC: Okay. So do you know how your parents met then?

JR: I do know how my parents met. My parents—my mother went to Girls High; my father went to Central. And the two schools are rather close proximity, so they, I believe, met in part through going to high schools that were close to each other, and they lived somewhat close to each other also.

TC: And now obviously then, they are originally from Philadelphia. They were not born in Philadelphia?

JR: No, they were not born in Philadelphia. Neither one of them were born in Philadelphia.

TC: Well, then, I think then I missed the point, and I want to at least get a date as to when you think both of them came to Philadelphia.

JR: Okay, my mother came to Philadelphia in 1926 when her mother moved here. And my father came to Philadelphia much earlier. I believe his family moved from Carlisle to Stilton, where his sister, his older sister, was born, and they moved in turn to Philadelphia. So they must be in Philadelphia by—something by 1920, because he did all of his schooling in Philadelphia.

TC: So after your parents finished at Central and Girls High, where did they—did they continue their education?

JR: My mother went on to Berean and did a course in secretarial studies, and finished that in 1939.

TC: Is that the Berean on Girard College [Girard Avenue]?

JR: Yes, Berean Institute. Still in existence, yes.

TC: Okay.

JR: And my father did not do any kind of formal course study after high school.

TC: Okay. So what did he do for his livelihood?

JR: He did a number of different kinds of things. He did janitorial work. He wanted to do auto mechanics; that was his original goal. Eventually he ended up being a mechanic with the school board. That's what he was doing when he died. [Pause in recording]

TC: Okay. Representative Roebuck, when your parents did get married, do you recall their first address, where they lived together in Philadelphia? What part of the city did they live?

JR: They lived in West Philadelphia. My father, when the family first moved here, lived in South Philadelphia. But in 1931, '32, they moved to West Philadelphia. And all their married life, my parents lived in West Philadelphia. I don't know the initial address in which they—well, I think I do know the initial address in which they lived. I know they were married at 870 North 46th Street, and that's the first house they also lived in. So they would have lived, I believe there, which is where my grandmother also lived.

TC: Okay, so they lived there until—?

JR: 1948. '48? I believe. Yes, '48. Then we lived at 4019 Haverford Avenue until 1955. And then we moved to 5840 Chestnut Street, which is where my parents lived until first my father, and then my mother died.

TC: Okay. So, you were still living with them at that time?

JR: I was living at home when my father died, which was in 1974.

TC: And that was on—?

JR: 5840 Chestnut Street.

TC: Okay. So, where did you move to after—after living on Chestnut Street?

JR: Well, I lived for several months in an apartment in Westchester, and then moved into this home we are presently, at 435 South 46th Street.

TC: So, why were you living in Westchester, then?

JR: I got married, and my wife had an apartment, and we lived in Westchester for a while.

TC: Okay. Deacon Roebuck, that's news to me that you are married, so I have to ask, what is your wife's name?

JR: Okay.

TC: Deacon Roebuck, can you tell us about your wife that caused you to be in Westchester?

JR: Okay, I was married in 1974, and remained married for approximately four years. That marriage ended in divorce. Subsequently, I had remarried, as of November, 1987.

TC: Did you tell us your first wife's name then?

JR: First wife's name was Irene Owens.

TC: And Owens was her maiden name?

JR: Was her maiden name, yes.

TC: So while you were out in Westchester, were you taking any courses or anything?

JR: No. Just we were there by terms of an apartment lease that had not expired. There was nothing particularly significant about that residence.

TC: Well, where were you working at at the time?

JR: I was teaching at Drexel University.

TC: Okay. Then obviously somewhere I missed that point, because—because somewhere when I was covering your occupation, I did not backtrack far enough.

JR: That's right. Okay.

TC: So, let's get the information on the second wife, and then I'll come back, and I'll backtrack to see how we got to Drexel University.

JR: Okay. I am currently married to Cheryl Arrington.

TC: Yes, I just met Mrs. Arrington. Excuse me, not Mrs. Arrington. But Mrs. Roebuck. Excuse me. And therefore earlier I said on the tape that I was not aware on the tape that you were still married.

JR: That's right. So you missed something. [Laughs]

TC: So, do you and Mrs. Roebuck have any children?

JR: We do not.

TC: Are any plans in the makings?

JR: I would think that's a very strong possibility. We were just married in November, so we haven't gotten to that point yet.

TC: So, if there's ever a son of yours, it would be James Roebuck, III, I believe. So if in fact sometime in the future there's a Roebuck named James Roebuck III to come to listen to this tape, he'll be able to know that you did think of him at this time.

JR: Absolutely.

TC: Now. Now, let's see if we can trace back to after you finished high school. And this time, we're going to try to concentrate on the occupation, because you were instructing at Drexel University, and we knew that your history in school, your major was History. A historian.

JR: Yes.

TC: You were what they call Black historian, or historian?

JR: No, historian. I can trace it out there. I majored in history, in general history, in undergraduate college at Virginia Union, and did graduate studies at University of Virginia. And my major field of concentration was in American Diplomatic History. So when I wrote a dissertation, I wrote it on American policy toward East Asia in the early 20th Century. I did four years of graduate study at Virginia and

began to—came back to the city and began to work at Drexel in September of 1970.

I might just add that during the time I was in undergraduate and graduate school, I also worked for the U.S. government one summer, for the State Department of Washington, summer of 1965, and two summers for the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Philadelphia in 1968 and 1969. I began to teach at Drexel in 1970, September 1970; continued to teach there until the September of 1984.

At that point, I went to work with the mayor for the City of Philadelphia, Wilson Goode, and was his liaison, what was called legislative assistant. I did liaison between mayor's office and Philadelphia City Council, on legislative matters, and worked with the mayor for eight months. At the end of that eight months, that period, the representative of my district died.

TC: And who was that?

JR: James Williams. And I received the Democratic endorsement for state representative, and was elected, and went to Harrisburg.

TC: Were you working for the mayor's office at the same time that you were instructing at Drexel University?

JR: No, they're completely separate. I stopped teaching at Drexel, and then went to work for the mayor. So there is a break in there. There is a clear division between the two.

TC: Well, what was your motivating factor to accept the Democratic nomination?

JR: Well, I always wanted to be a state representative, thought I'd do well at it. It's something I always thought I would enjoy, and I have.

TC: Okay. Representative Roebuck, do you have any family records of your family tree, or anything?

JR: I have some photographs of my parents, grandparents, great grandparents.

TC: Okay. And I also want to mention that I neglected to ask you about your father's mother, and her tree, and the individuals. Do you know of your father's grandmothers?

JR: Well, my father's grandmother, my great-grandmother, lived into the early 1970s, so I knew her. She lived in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Her name was Matilda Hodge. I knew that she had several sisters, who I also met. So I knew her. She is somebody I did meet, and know.

TC: Can you name her sisters?

JR: I cannot. I know that I met them, and I think I might even have pictures of them, but I don't know their names off the top of my head.

TC: Okay. So, your father's mother. Did she have any sisters or brothers?

JR: She did not, no.

TC: Was she an only child?

JR: I believe she was an only child.

TC: Okay, well, I can't say that that's a pattern in your family, because that is—

JR: No. She suddenly then had twelve children. They skipped generations, or whatever. [Laughs]

TC: Yeah, up down there. People have been very selective. So, now that we covered basically both of your parents grandparents and forefathers, as they usually call it, now, do you have a family Bible here?

JR: I have a bible that's my family Bible, yes.

TC: Okay. And do you have the dates and things of that in that family Bible?

JR: I'm not sure that I do. I know that when the Bible was first bought, some of the information was put into that Bible, but I have not kept it up to date, which I probably should do.

TC: Well, Deacon, excuse me.

JR: Whatever. [Laughs]

TC: Representative Roebuck, I'd like to ask you about your religious affiliations. What denomination would you classify yourself?

JR: I'm Baptist, and a member of the Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church, which is a church I've belonged to pretty much all of my life. Was baptized there in 1956, 1957.

TC: And where is it located at?

JR: Forty-second and Wallace Streets.

TC: Have you been involved in any of the organizations at the church?

JR: Sure. I started out by going to Sunday School there, and I was involved in the Boy Scouts when I was growing up, and the junior ushers. And then after coming back from school, I still continued my involvement in Boy Scouts, and I served as a Trustee. I was elected to the Deacon Board, and eventually served both as chairman and vice chairman of the Deacon Board.

TC: So how long were you a deacon then?

JR: I've been a deacon since 1972.

TC: Okay, 1972. That means you were a deacon at how old?

JR: Twenty-six, twenty-seven.

TC: So, would you possibly be one of the youngest deacons that have been at Mount Olivet?

JR: One of the youngest ones, yes.

TC: That was first instituted as a deacon, at age twenty-seven.

JR: Twenty-six, or twenty-seven, yeah.

TC: And were you teaching at Drexel?

JR: I was teaching at Drexel at the same time, yes.

TC: And, so when did you become the chairman?

JR: I was elected chairman of the board in 1980. And I'd served four years as vice chairman, '76 to '79, and was elected chairman in '80, and served for four years as chairman, and then was reelected as vice chairman for three years. Currently serving, or finishing out another year as chairman. So, over the last twelve years, I've either been chairman or vice chairman of the board.

TC: Okay. And can you tell us a little bit what the duty of the chairman of the board?

JR: Well, certainly the deacons have a large responsibility of the spiritual life of the church, and they are, with the pastor, the major policy making body for the church. So we affect every aspect of the spiritual and administrative life of the church congregation.

TC: Okay. Have you been involved in any community organizations?

JR: I'm involved in a number of community organizations. As I mentioned in part, I've been involved with the Boy Scouts within the church, but also within the West Philadelphia community. I served as a district chairman for the Boy Scouts in the area that's north of Market Street in West Philadelphia. It's called Conestoga District. I've done that for about four years. I also served on the district level as finance chairman, chairman of nominating committee at different occasions.

I'm involved with the American Red Cross. I'm involved with the NAACP, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and other number of kinds of groups like that. Also active in my neighborhood organizations. We have three community organizations in the immediate area. I'm on the board of both the Spruce Hill Community Association and the Garden Courts Community Association, and I'm an active member of the Cedar Park Neighborhood Association. So they're all contiguous to the area in which I live.

TC: Well, have you ever worked on any political campaigns before your own campaign?

JR: I can remember going door to door when John Kennedy ran for president in 1960, working with a committee person at that time. And was involved in political campaigns when I was in college in Virginia, Active in the Young Democrats.

[End Part 1/Begin Part 2]

TC: Afternoon, this is Tony Clay. I'm at the home of State Representative James R. Roebuck. We are continuing our interview on part two of the Roebuck family history. And I had just asked Representative Roebuck was he involved, or worked on any political campaigns, and he was telling us about the campaigns that he worked on. Will you please continue?

JR: Certainly. I worked on a number of different political campaigns in Virginia and was active in the Young Democrats. Selected to statewide office as a young Democrat in Virginia. 1968, was very active in the McCarthy campaign. Virginia helped to get delegates

elected, and most certainly one of the first Black delegates from Virginia elected in that year, to a Democratic convention. Also, my noted terms of the Young Democrats was instrumental in forming the first Young Democratic Club on a Black college campus in the south, at Virginia Union in 1964, '65. 1963, '64.

When I came back to Philadelphia, I continued my political activity. Worked in the election for mayor in 1971, the Green-Rizzo race, and was campaign chairman for senator, for Paul McKinney when he ran for senate in 1974. I was involved in some of the other campaigns—McGovern campaign, and the presidential election campaigns thereafter. So I've had a very active political involvement.

TC: How many mayors' races?

JR: I was active with Charles Bowser, when he ran in—oh, starting with Bill Green in 1971, and Bowser in '75 and '79, with Lucian Blackwell in '79, with Wilson Goode in '83 and '87.

TC: Lucian Blackwell, I believe, is your City Council representative.

JR: City Council representative and ward leader, also.

TC: And ward leader, also. Okay. I'd like to ask you a couple of personal questions. I'd like to know if you can remember what you were doing on April the 4th, 1968. That's the day that Martin Luther King was assassinated on. Do you remember how you got the news of his assassination?

JR: I remember that I was walking into the library in Williamsburg, Virginia, and one of the graduate students came up to me and told me that he had heard that King had been shot. And I remember that we talked about the fact that he had—there had been a previous attempt upon his life. He'd been stabbed while he was involved with

promoting a book, I believe, at a department store in New York. And the sense was maybe this wasn't—this was the kind of thing that he would recover from. Of course, that did not happen. I do remember that's what I was doing at the time I first heard the news.

TC: Have you ever encountered Martin Luther King himself in your days?

JR: In 1965, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had their convention in Richmond, and they convened on the campus of Virginia Union. I remember that on the final night, Dr. King spoke. Adam Clayton Powell also spoke on the same platform, and afterwards I got a chance to shake his hand. That's the only—kind of remember being directly being in this.

TC: Then, continuing on, I'd like to know what your assessment of the Black leaders of that era. What is your opinion of the Black leaders of that era? From the fifties and the sixties.

JR: Well, I think that you had very strong leaders who were able to mount a very effective effort for change. I think if I look—as I remember those years, it was a time when there was a feeling that things were going to change. Growing up in Mount Olivet, and having as a pastor Reverend Shepard, Senior, as a member of the City Council, you always had a sense of what was current and important in terms of the political life of the nation. We had any number of speakers who would come on Sunday morning, who made you aware that there were things that were happening that were important. It was not unusual, for example, for the mayor of the city to come and speak from the pulpit on various occasions.

I remember being involved—or I remember the Selective Patronage Campaign, which again, Dr. Shepard was in the forefront

of. And when there was an effort made to open up an educational—employment opportunities at places like Woolworth's and other businesses that were within the city, but which had made it difficult for Blacks to gain employment. I remember that came.

I remember the activity at the end of the NAACP; I remember working in trying to raise money, soliciting funds for the NAACP by just asking for donations at various times. And so when I went to school in Virginia, I got involved in a very different kind of world, which was still a world that was segregated.

I remember that first—first half year I was at Union that we undertook a campaign to breakdown the pattern of segregated movies. And so what we did was we'd all get in line at the movie theater. They wouldn't sell us a ticket. We'd just make the line so long that a White patron coming to the movies would be inconvenienced by having to wait maybe twenty or thirty minutes to get up to pay, buy their ticket, which they would sell to them, but they wouldn't sell to us. It was a way of bringing economic pressure to bear against the movie theaters, and that campaign worked, systematically through that process of breaking down that kind of barrier. So I had a much greater sense of a civil rights movement when I was in the south in the early sixties than I had when I was in Philadelphia.

TC: So the end result was they sold you the ticket?

JR: No, they would not sell you the ticket.

TC: I mean, after the—

JR: Well, after—eventually, in fact, they desegregated the movies. But all you could do was go up and ask for the ticket, and they would say “No, we can't sell it to you.” But you'd keep doing that in order to

keep the pressure up. And you were able to put a line of people out there a block long. Some people would come up and wouldn't want to go through the hassle of having to wait that long, or they would—they'd wait in line, and they'd miss the beginning of the movie. So it was an effort to bring very real pressure to bear.

TC: What year was this?

JR: 1963. I still remember going into the state library in Virginia, in Richmond, and there were still two sets of bathrooms in there, one for Whites and one for Blacks.

TC: And that year was—?

JR: '63.

TC: My goodness. I thought after the bus boycott that most of that was resolved.

JR: There are still remnants of it, certainly even much later than that. You'd run into patterns of resistance. Certainly.

TC: Okay, I wasn't aware of that. I'm glad that you shared that with us, because I know that probably a lot of individuals who are probably my age range, which I'm not that far behind you, mind you, but a lot of us, we are not that familiar with what was truly going on, because we were still just walking, and just learning how to talk.

So, Representative Roebuck, did you ever encounter any national or local leaders, be it Black or White, that made a strong impression with you? And why did they make an impression on you?

JR: Well. Certainly I gained through my church affiliations, I met any number of the prominent local public officials, certainly mayors in another period—Joseph Clark, Richardson Dilworth. I remember in 1969, or 1959, 1960, seeing Dwight Eisenhower when he came to

Philadelphia on a visit. I remember so well that he had a ticker tape parade, and it was a period when presidents still weren't subject to the kind of protection they are now. He was in an open car, very visible, prominently wading through the crowd, so you could see him very clearly.

I remember seeing John Kennedy when he campaigned for president in 1960. He, again, was in the back of an open convertible. So that these are some of the earlier people that I remember from that period. I worked in Washington; I got a chance to see President Johnson. So I do remember seeing some of the very prominent people of that period.

TC: So what is your opinion of the present Black leaders?

JR: I think we've been very fortunate in bringing to the forefront some individuals who have significantly improved the status of Blacks in Philadelphia and in the nation. Certainly, the ability to elect a Black mayor in Philadelphia has, I think, helped to improve the status of those of us who live in the city. Hopefully it lays a foundation for future advancement.

I've often thought it's not so important that you elect the first Black mayor, but that you elect the second Black mayor, because when you begin to elect individuals because of what they represent, then the qualities they have, rather than any other factor, then you begin to advance toward the goal we all seek, which is a society in which everyone is judged by the quality of their character, and the content of their minds.

TC: What challenges do you feel await the future generation of leaders?

JR: Well, I think that certainly we've got to address the kinds of serious problems that affect the quality of life of everyone who lives in a city like Philadelphia. We've got to do more in terms of improving housing. We've got to do more in terms of improving the quality of education, so that kids don't get lost very early in their educational experience, and therefore get to become as productive as they could be in their adult lives. We've got to try to address these very clearly pressing needs. They're not needs; they are things that have been with us for a long time. We've got to try and begin to address them more effectively.

TC: Well, what is your outlook on the condition of the Black community during the next century?

JR: Next century? That's rather broad. I think that we're at a crisis. I think that if we don't begin to effect [coughs]—excuse me. If we don't begin to effectively address the needs particularly of our young people, we're going to lose them. We perhaps already lost some of our young people, who have not gotten the kind of foundation, whether it be educational, or in terms of moral and spiritual values, that would give them a ground to build on. We're in danger of losing another generation for the same reason.

And so in some way, whether it's through political leadership or religious leadership, or whatever, we ourselves have got to begin to address that problem. No one else is going to do it for us. Certainly in Washington, or Harrisburg, or even City Hall is not going to do that. It comes down to the community, people in the community working together to address their own needs.

TC: Are there any suggestions that you—excuse me, you just made a suggestion and a resolution. My mistake. Now, are there any other times—now you mentioned the incident of discrimination with the movies, but were there any other times when you came face to face with discrimination?

JR: Sure. I went to the University of Virginia at a time when the University of Virginia was basically an all-White institution. There were two Blacks in the graduate history program when I was there. They still faced continuing patterns of segregation within the university community even. Not that it was an all—it was a predominantly a White institution, a White male institution. That's to say they didn't even admit women into the undergraduate college as freshman, so it was a very peculiar kind of circumstance.

And certainly Charlottesville was in many ways a city that had not fully come to grips with the civil rights kinds of changes. I can remember things like being in a classroom and having students slip up and use racial terms. When they would mean to say Negro, which was a current term for Blacks at that period, they would instead say things like Nigra, which was sort the southern way of not saying nigger. So you'd run into that kind of thing. And there were some general patterns even of resistance in some of the areas of the rest of the community, things like restaurants, even into that period.

TC: Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday—excuse me; I believe it's the second or the third official national holiday. Do you have any thoughts on that?

JR: It certainly defines how far we've come, in many ways. I think that nevertheless, it should serve as a reminder that we still have a long

ways to go. It's not just a celebration. It should be a rededication to the goals that Dr. King had, certainly that all of us as Black people have.

TC: Okay. Also, just light touch back on the family knowledge. On the questionnaire, I asked Deacon—excuse me, Representative Roebuck to fill out a questionnaire, and he checked out some of the occupational categories, and he checked off farming. And I was going to ask him who was it that was involved in farming?

JR: I have cousins, actually, first cousins to my mother had a farm in upstate Pennsylvania, in Chambersburg, which they operated until—at least until the husband died. So that was the farming interest. In fact, I used to spend my summers in Chambersburg, and pick tomatoes and beans, and those things like that.

TC: Okay. And you checked off professions.

JR: Okay.

TC: So the question that I would be asking—that would mean that you have professionals in your family?

JR: True. I have an aunt, or two aunts, who were schoolteachers, and an uncle who was a government worker—those kinds of professional involvements.

TC: Okay. Well, Representative Roebuck, I just want to ask two more questions, and then I will let you continue to enjoy your Sunday, and get ready for the celebration of Martin Luther King. And of course, just one question, we'd like to know what was your opinion of the constitutional celebration?

JR: I thought the celebration was good for the city, in that it offered a way to positively focus upon Philadelphia as a nice place, as a good place

to live, as a nice place to visit. I thought we got a lot of positive press out of that celebration. Certainly celebrating the constitution reminds us, in some ways, of limitations of that document. Clearly, it's a document that's evolved over 200 years to include more and more people under the common fabric of American society. And I think that was in some ways made clear, in various ways, through the celebration.

TC: And one last question, what ethnic or nationality would you consider yourself? Afro-American?

JR: Certainly.

TC: Black American, Indian, Cuban?

JR: Well, certainly African American, Black American in my mind are virtually synonymous. That's what I would consider myself.

TC: And why is that? Why would you consider yourself—?

JR: Because that's what I am. [Laughs]

TC: Okay. Some people have other reasons as to why they consider themselves a nationality, so I thought I'd ask you. And now that we're just about to close, now, I believe that you'll be running for re-election?

JR: Yes.

TC: And that would be 1988?

JR: The election is in April, April 26th of 1988, so we're looking towards a third term in Harrisburg.

TC: Okay. I want to take this time to wish you the best of luck, and I'm going to say congratulations in advance, because I'm sitting next to the best representative of the 188th District, so I want to extend my congratulations in advance. And I also want to thank you for taking

the time to share with us parts of your life, for the Charles L. Blockson Collection. And if someday, you do decide to have a son, or maybe a cousin or a relative—

JR: Or a daughter. [Laughs]

TC: Or a daughter, come and look up their uncle or father, they can come to the Charles L. Blockson Collection and listen to this particular tape. Thanks again.

JR: Thank you.

TC: And enjoy the King holiday.

JR: Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]