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Interviewees: Vernon Dahmer, Jr.

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Interviewer: Emilye Crosby

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: approximately 1 hour, 52 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Female 1: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

EMILYE CROSBY: I'm Emily Crosby and this is December 1, 2015, and I'm here with Mr. Vernon Dahmer Jr. at the University of Southern Mississippi at the program on oral history and cultural heritage. And with us is John Bishop and Guha Shankar, and we're doing this interview as part of the Civil Rights History Project, cosponsored by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. So, thank you so much for joining us and doing the interview.

VERNON DAHMER JR.: You're welcome.

EC: Mr. Dahmer, could you tell us when and where you were born and about your family history?

VD: Yes. I was born in the Kelly Settlement community, about five miles north of Hattiesburg, here where we are today, in August 27, 1929.

EC: Tell me about your family.

VD: Okay. My dad, Vernon F. Dahmer Sr., was one of twelve children born to George Dahmer and Ellen Kelly Dahmer. He was the youngest of twelve kids, six boys and six girls. One of the boys died as an infant so that left a family really of five boys and six girls. Being the way segregation was back in that day, discrimination, and the oppressive situation for blacks in Mississippi, and where the black race had very little defense from law enforcement, my grandfather made a conscious effort to make sure that his six female daughters had the opportunity to leave the state of Mississippi at a very young age. This was for their own protection, because it was pretty obvious at that time that the white male, he treated the black male as--however he wanted to. My grandfather, he saw this, being raised, born and raised, in Mississippi. And likewise, the male sons, all except my father who was the youngest boy, they left the state also and went north.

EC: So your father's the only one.

VD: My father was the only one to remain here, and since he was a baby boy, I would imagine he was the closest to the parent, you know, being the baby. And he worked on a farm, and he made a decision to remain and not leave this state. The older males went ahead and assimilated into the society in Chicago and those places where they were identified as Caucasians, which is fine, because you were going looking for a better life, and I don't fault them at all about that. It's a situation where if you don't ask, you don't tell. So he was not asked because well, because all of them are very, very light-complected and just right off the bat, they look like whites. So, the assimilation was not that difficult, and they were very fortunate in landing good employment. The females, all of them went north and they married African American men and black men.

EC: It's interesting that the--.

VD: Yes, it was.

EC: Do you have a speculation about why the women did one thing and the men did something different?

VD: No, I don't.

EC: Yeah.

VD: Probably realizing and being raised in the South, it was probably find it easier to find a suitable black man [5:00] to marry. Not being closely affiliated with the white males in Mississippi, they'd feel comfortable being in a black environment. I would just imagine that was the reason why. And the same applied to men. When I went in the military in 1951, being raised in [an] all-black community, I never really had no desire to pass for any other race than being African American. I was married to a dark-skinned African American woman, and I was very comfortable.

EC: Did the men who assimilated, did they stay in touch with the family?

VD: Yes. Yes, they did. They'd come and visit, and on occasion, they would-- one or maybe two of them--would bring their wives, their white wives, with them. And that was not hard to do at that time because due to the complexion of the family, and there were other mixed races in the community. To tell you the truth, there was quite a few of us coming out of slavery. So anytime a white person saw a light-skinned person with a dark-skinned person, it was automatically assumed that they were all Negroes because you had a lot of mulattos around. And that came out of slavery, as we saw the mixing of the races by the slave master and his family.

EC: So that when they come here, it's almost like the whites are passing.

VD: Yeah. And they felt comfortable, you know?

EC: Yeah, good.

VD: In moving around. I never saw any anxiety, but being a little boy, I didn't pay any attention anyway.

EC: Yeah, they were just people visiting. Yeah.

VD: Right.

EC: My senses are I have been told by some people that Kelly Settlement and some of the other areas, as you were saying a lot of mixed-race people, that there was a sense, at least among some people, being kind of in-between, that they didn't really identify--. You've been saying you identify with the black community, but I've heard some people say that they didn't identify one or another, that they sort of had an independence. Are you aware of that?

VD: It could have happened. It could have happened, but coming out of a family where I never saw any racial separation or division, my grandparents and my parents always treated everybody the same, my school was all black, my church was all black. Consequently, I didn't have any notions about going over to the other race or being maybe out of place. I felt very comfortable being black, and likewise today, and went through the military feeling that way. Black and from Mississippi. "Oh no, you're not." "Oh, yes I am." [Laughter] I'm not making this up. It's just the way it was.

EC: "You're not going to change who I am," right?

VD: Oh, no, no, no, no. No. And I saw that coming out of my family. My grandfather, George Dahmer, which you probably ought to [have] heard of this, he was white. He was thoroughbred white. His mother was white and his dad was a German,

Peter Dahmer, from Darmstadt, Germany. I spent a lot of time there in the military. And he was white, and my grandfather's mother was born out of wedlock, Laura Barnes, and she was placed with a mulatto woman to raise. And while being there with the mulatto lady who was a Barnes because you carried the slave name and all, this mulatto lady was running a boarding house up in Covington County, about twenty-five miles from here, and that's where my dad's--my grandfather's--mother lived and worked. And then, the Dahmer family--.

EC: So he was raised in that--.

VD: Sure, the Dahmer family migrated from Germany because of economic conditions over there, and there's like five of those brothers. And one of the older brothers settled there in the area and he became acquainted with my grandfather's mother, and they had a child. And then later on, my grandfather, George Dahmer, grew up in that environment, and his mother Laura, she hired this black guy, Charlie Craft, to work for her in a business, and I think she ran a boarding house for the woodcutters and all also, eventually. [10:00] Then, she married an ex-slave, Charlie Craft. They went on to have nine mixed-race kids. My grandfather, George Dahmer, he was the oldest son. Yeah, he was the oldest son in that mixed-race family. Now, when they got married, even though Laura, my grandfather's mother, was assumed to be mulatto because she had been raised up in a mulatto family, it was okay as long as she was unmarried. She married Charlie Craft, started having kids. Then, those white in that area say, "Hey, no. Uh-uh. This, we don't go."

EC: Right. It's okay for them to be together, but not for them to be married.

VD: Right, and to have kids. And they started that, okay? And then they had to leave from there and move down and commute to where we live.

EC: And why was it okay for them to be in Kelly Settlement?

VD: Because there were a lot of mulattos there, the Kelly family, which my grandmother came out of, my dad's mother, Ellen Kelly Dahmer. And by the way, her mother was also white. She was born out of wedlock and she was put with a black family, McComb family, to be raised, and that's how she met up with my grandmother Ellen Kelly's dad, Warren Kelly, okay? Because there were two, a mulatto and a white.

EC: That's interesting.

VD: So that's why he got this real light complexion, but there were other families out in our community likewise: the Wilson family, Eaton family. At one time, our family was identified as kind of a slang, "That's where all the white Negroes live."

EC: We talked to Mrs. Smith earlier today and she said she was called that, a "white Negro."

VD: Mrs.--. Which one?

EC: Jeannette.

VD: Oh, Jeannette! I know. Yeah, Jeannette. Sure.

EC: Yeah. She said she had that same name given--.

VD: Right. Yeah, but she was from up around Soso, Mississippi.

EC: Yeah. That's what she was--.

VD: Yeah, she was a Musgrove. I know of them.

EC: Telling--. Yeah.

VD: Lot of mixed-race kids.

EC: You know, the part of Mississippi I'm from, there were a few individuals, but not the families like this that I was aware of growing up in the community.

Hattiesburg seems, this area-- Is that true? Did Hattiesburg have more mixed-race families?

VD: Well, I have nothing to compare it with, but we had a lot of them, a lot of them, sure.

EC: Can you tell me what it was like growing up? You had a farm, your family farm.

VD: Right.

EC: Can you tell us about that?

VD: Yes. My dad, being the youngest son, and actually involved in farming, that was his first occupation, being that with my grandfather George, they owned several hundred acres of land. And he was a very, very successful farmer. And having to raise twelve kids on his farm, you had to be good to feed them because there were no public service jobs out [there] and their families really lived on mostly what they raised on the farm. [Coughs] Pardon me. Consequently, my dad saw this as just a normal way of life, and he liked it, and he became a landowner after he married my mother. And my mother's from the same community, and my grandfather gave him a little land to start and then he went on and acquired his own land, but it was adjoining properties. My dad became successful in the business and early, I would say in the mid-1930s-- My dad was born in 1908, and by that time, he was like twenty-six, twenty-seven years old. He bought a school bus because the days of segregated schools, the black kids had to have transportation, so the white school system loosened up and allowed independent

individuals to go buy a bus to transport black kids to and from school. So what that did, my dad bought the school bus and that put him earning more income to supplement the family.

EC: So if he bought it, they would pay him to drive it?

VD: And he leased his services and the bus to the county and they would pay him for his time. And in the meantime, when he'd get the--.

EC: So he both simultaneously earned something and get his kids to school.

VD: Right, and not only that, by buying a bus, he had the opportunity to provide public service to other people in the community, or organizations or whatever, because during that time, it was coming out that the person has very little personal transportation around. So he'd haul people to Sunday school [15:00] conventions, church conventions or where--basketball games--which supplemented his income. And he continued to do that until 1940, and I remember these days because at that time, you know, I'm born twen--. I was like eleven years old, oldest kid, of eight kids.

EC: You had a lot of responsibility, I imagine.

VD: Yes, I grew up with a big responsibility and my dad and all the farmers in the area, this whole area, they were using animals to farm. Mechanization had not yet arrived in this area, not to an extent to where it was noticeable in the family farm. Consequently, my dad, in 1940, the war was starting in Europe, as you well know. And Camp Shelby is just south of here, about fifteen miles, and it [was] one of the major training camps and it started to grow to provide, what, soldiers to go off and fight the war in different locations. That created jobs because the camp had to grow to do this. That means black folks that were living on the farm had a chance to leave the farm--not leave



the farm, go and work to supplement their farm income, okay? So what dad did then, he saw an opportunity with that extra money to go and buy him a new tractor.

EC: So he used the income from working Camp Shelby or--?

VD: No, he used the income from--. He used the improvement in the economy.

EC: Got it.

VD: Okay?

EC: Right.

VD: To bring more money into the community, and he had more activity with what he had already going on, and he was using his bus to transport people to and from Camp Shelby to work and all. So what he decided, took that extra money and bought him a tractor, and all of the implements that goes along to do his--run his--farming operation.

EC: He would have been really in the forefront of that.

VD: He was in the forefront. He was the only guy in the neighborhood, white or black, that had a tractor, as far as we know, definitely with black folks. And when he bought the tractor, well the other farmers in the area were using mules and horses, and by my dad having a tractor, he could cultivate more land and he expanded his farm, plus we used the tractor to assist other farmers in work that they needed to move them forward. And then around 1942 when the war was really moving along, and the black community had money coming in, my dad said, "Hey, now's the time to open a grocery store." [EC laughs] So he opened a grocery store adjacent to the house and--.

EC: He was really a very savvy businessperson.

VD: He was a mover and a shaker. Only had a tenth-grade education, but he'd take chances that I would've balked at. [EC laughs] But being raised the way he was, in a progressive home, my grandfather was not openly that progressive but he was a mover and a shaker by him having the land that he had and the success that he had. And not only that, my grandfather and my dad were very close friends, too. They worked in partnership. But by that time, my grandfather's getting up in age and the farming now is moving toward my dad and his family, us boys.

EC: So he's taking more responsibility.

VD: Right. He's taking on more responsibility. Consequently, my dad built a grocery store, country grocery store. And in that country grocery store in the black neighborhood, he also attracted some white customers, and the grocery store was fully equipped with everything going in, canned goods, and very little electricity in that area at that time. A lot of people living in the country had iceboxes and they used block ice for special treats. So, he built a little icehouse [EC laughs] right next to the grocery store.

EC: Where would he get the ice?

VD: We bought it down in Hattiesburg from the wholesaler that sold it to restaurants and all. And one of my jobs was to take that school bus and go down and hauled in three-hundred-pound blocks of ice and deliver them on a Friday, and bring them, put them in the icehouse, and chip them into fifty- and twenty-five-pound blocks. [Laughter] So that was one of my jobs, and being in the summertime, I didn't mind it too much, but he--. The icehouse was built homemade, with sawdust in the side as insulation, sawdust in the bottom. It was quite cool.

EC: How did he know how to do that? He just--?

VD: Smart guy. That's all I can say.

EC: So did you all, did you help build?

VD: No. Well now, at that time, I was only about fourteen, fifteen years old, going to school. My interest wasn't--. Hey, I'm doing what I'm being told to do, okay?

[Laughter] And I'm doing what I'm being told to do too, without any question, okay?

[Laughter]

EC: You weren't a rebellious--.

VD: And not only that, by being out in the forefront [20:00] and I was kind of comparing, you know, "Boys, I'm doing this. I can drive a tractor. You can't."

EC: Right.

VD: And you got that--.

EC: "You've got a mule."

VD: "You found a mule," so I felt real good about who I was. But it never did feel like, there was never that atmosphere of you were better than somebody else. That just never crept into the picture because I saw my family just maintaining like they always were.

EC: Did your family talk to you all about that or was it just how they acted?

VD: No, no, no. No, no. It's how they acted. Go to black Sunday school, everything you do is black. Segregation kept us what? It kept us together. In a way, integration really affected our unity. There's no doubt about that.

EC: You didn't have a choice before about being--.

VD: We depending on one another.

EC: And having the same, people couldn't escape it.

VD: No, and you couldn't escape it. Now, if you stepped outside of your boundary, you were in deep trouble. Right? And what you did, you learned to--you didn't learn--you were just comfortable in an environment because you do nothing else.

EC: Yeah. So you were growing up. So you were working on the farm.

VD: I worked on the farm. I started out working on the farm as soon as I was big enough--.

EC: And then the ice--.

VD: Feeding the hogs and chickens, went into the grocery business. I learned how to cut meat. We butchered our own cattle in most cases. And then, around 1945, now my dad had a grocery business going on. We had a school bus business and we had the farm, and my dad is having all these boys in a row, see.

EC: And that's good labor at that point.

VD: And hey, well [it's] in-house labor.

EC: [Laughs] What kind of salary were you getting?

VD: Hey, sleep--.

EC: Room and board? [Laughs]

VD: Room and board, that's the word I was looking for. That's right. Right. Room and board, and a little spending money on the weekend, which was not very much, either.

EC: Did you get--? Did you have candy? Did you get spending, penny candy at the store?

VD: Oh, yeah. You could do that, but you had to watch it. We were very disciplined, but you still steal a little bit every now and then. You know how that goes.

Boys can be boys. And then around 1945 when the war effort was really moving in Europe and in the Pacific area, there was more money coming into Hattiesburg, more black folks being employed to supplement their income. So, my dad went off and bought a sawmill, a small sawmill, because we had a lot of land, had a lot of timber and all. And first, he started cutting his own timber and he had a little--had two guys that he worked with that had experience. And then, there we were, so we started in, what, cutting logs and cutting lumber, for sale in the neighborhood, and the other folks heard about it. And first thing I know, the log business is starting to flourish and dad was selling his lumber to local farmers or whoever to build barns and chicken houses and outhouses. So, we had three areas of income going on.

EC: When we spoke with your mothe--well, Mrs. Dahmer--she told me that you father knew which trees the boards came from in the house that was burned down.

VD: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Sure.

EC: When was that house built?

VD: I was away in the military and it had to be built probably in the early sixties or late fifties. I don't remember.

EC: So did you grow up in that same spot where the house is now?

VD: Oh, yes. I grew up there in that same--.

EC: So it was a new--?

VD: It was a new house firebombing had destroyed, which was a new house that they were lived into when the firebombing took place.

EC: So they had already had one destroyed?

VD: Well, no. The house I grew up in was the old original home.

EC: That's what I was wondering about.

VD: And then they built a new home after my dad married my stepmother, Ellen, but she's been in the family. She's our mother. She's been in the family sixty-something years.

EC: So she's been your mother sixty years?

VD: Oh, yeah. And she's a real fine lady, and everything worked out fine. My dad and mom, they married 1928 and they divorced about 1935. My dad had the three boys by her, so we got three sets of kids: three by my mother, three by another. The second wife, she died at thirty-one years old. It was some kind of muscular disease. And then, he married the existing mother in 1952. I had been married then one year. My kids are the same age or older than--.

EC: Than your youngest--.

VD: Yeah, sure.

EC: Yeah. So let me just ask you one more. So in 1935, so I'm trying to--. So you were about six years old?

VD: I was six years old, yeah.

EC: So did you have a relationship with your [25:00] mother after they divorced?

VD: Yeah, for about two or two and a half years because her family only lived about three miles from where we lived. All in the same community. And my mother took the baby boy with her to live with the grandparents, and my dad kept the two older kids, my brother and I, because we--. He didn't have no money to pay child support. He told me the jury said, "You keep them and feed them." [Laughter] He didn't talk about

that because my mom, my mother, my maternal mother, my dad had a beautiful relationship [with]. I never heard either one of them talk bad about the other, even after they divorced, which I definitely appreciated when I grew up. It doesn't make sense.

EC: Right, yeah. That's not always the case.

VD: Right. So my mom took the baby, and my dad then took us and he didn't dump us on our grandparents who lived nearby.

EC: I wondered because--.

VD: No, he did not. He kept us right there in the house with him, and then we visited grandparents as needed, and he had other older ladies in the family because people--. Jobs were scarce. Depression in 1929, we still in Depression. They'd come and cook, and clean, and my dad would pay them or whatever, and they were older ladies, family. And that worked out well until he married again in 1938, and he married there and they went on to have three sons by that wife, and she died in 1949. She had three boys. So, there we are again in the house with my dad, five boys and no mom. Right. So, but I grew up with that wife.

EC: So she was in many ways your mother?

VD: Right, in many ways---.

EC: The one person--.

VD: But having one baby right after another, because she was a younger woman.

EC: She's pretty busy.

VD: She's busy, yeah, but that's okay. We had a lady in the house and it worked out fine.

EC: Were you happy to have a lady in the house?

VD: Right. But then again, us boys, five boys, ended up then with older ladies coming in and cooking and cleaning. So, we were raised a lot without a mother, and our dad met the need for both. You know, he was a busy man. We were always a part of his life; part of his life in working, part of his life in social activities, part of his life in play. He didn't ever have to take out time for us.

EC: It was just everything you did was as a family?

VD: Everything, we were together. We'd work all day and go to the river--our property run adjacent to the river--and go in swimming. He'd beat us in the water. [EC laughs] He was just that kind of guy, and I'm not making this up. If you all talk to any of my brothers, our dad was the focal point of our life. It doesn't mean that we didn't appreciate the grandparents and the other ladies that came through the family, but he was with us.

EC: He was your parent?

VD: We didn't miss any fairs, any circuses, and things like that.

EC: That must have been a really remarkable childhood to--.

VD: It was.

EC: The combination of the work and then also the--

VD: Yes, it was.

EC: Opportunities.

VD: Yes, it was. And then what that did, by having--this is my own personal-- by having to focus mostly on one family person, like your father, who was very involved in our life, it created an unusual unity in cooperating amongst us. My dad was the leader.



He was the boss, but he wasn't bossy, but he was a disciplinarian. Consequently, we all danced by the same music. What I mean by that, we all followed the same group of orders and there were no, any confusion being "what Mom said," "what Dad said." Everything coming from one direction. And I learned this over time in raising my own kids. Consequently, we bonded. Us boys, hey. I mean, the bond even exists today.

EC: You all are very close?

VD: And I've lost three brothers, but hey.

EC: Yeah.

VD: If you mess with one, you mess with the whole crowd. But we always got along real well. We didn't fight. We argued. We competed, but we got along real well, and to some extent, our wives didn't quite understand. [Laughter]

EC: They couldn't compete with your brothers? [Laughter]

VD: That was a fact, but it worked out good, you know?

EC: Yeah. What was your schooling like?

VD: Going to a country school, and the school was like only within a half a mile from the [30:00] house. We walked to school.

EC: Did your family provide the property for the school?

VD: Yes. My great-grandfather, Warren Kelly, provided the property. He gave the school--. He gave one--two--acres, by the way, to build a school building on. And that was my grandmother, Ellen Kelly's, father, Warren Kelly. And he was a descendant of Green Kelly, slave master, and his African mistress, Sarah. He was a mixed-race kid, and that put him in line with family connections and he came out of that environment owning quite a bit of property. And what he did, he used his property to

build the first church on, and the first school, and just kind of structured the community around it. Now, you had other families that came in starting to build with that same attitude, so this was not a one-man show, but he provided the land and worked with the school system, and the first school was opened in 1879. First school, but prior to then, they had school in the church--.

EC: But that's the first school building.

VD: Which was built--. Yeah, first school building. Yes, ma'am. Now, the first school itself came out of the church which was built, was a log cabin.

EC: What denomination was it?

VD: Shady Grove, a Baptist church.

EC: Was it built after the Civil War, do you know?

VD: No, no. It was built in--. Well, the church itself was established in 1864.

EC: Okay. That makes sense.

VD: The Negroes and the blacks in that state, prior to that time, was going to a white church. You've probably heard that, have you?

EC: Well, I don't know about this particular community, but I know it was common.

VD: Well, it did in our community. The whites, naturally they were subjects of the plantation owners, and they went to the local Baptist church, which was about four or five miles from where our church is, and they attended church there, and it's the Providence Baptist Church. And it still didn't exist in Soso when I was growing.

EC: So is it a white church now?

VD: It's a white church, yeah. Sure. Large church. And then the black church members established their church, the Shady Grove Baptist Church, and then Shady Grove came from the first church service they had was on the gro--under a shady tree. And the church we have there is right in the same place. The trees are gone, but the church is there.

EC: That's too bad about the trees. [Laughs]

VD: Yeah. Yeah. And it was a one-room log cabin, and that one-room log cabin also served as the first school.

EC: Where did the teachers come from?

VD: Local.

EC: Yeah. And so when you were go--.

VD: When I say local, it came out of the family.

EC: Yeah. From the beginning, from when it was first founded? The first teachers were family members from back in the 1870s?

VD: Right.

EC: Where did they get their education in slavery? Or did they get it in the immediate aftermath?

VD: That's a good question.

EC: Yeah. That's not part of the family history?

VD: It was obvious that education and religion was the avenue out of slavery because if the first thing you're going to do is build a church, then the second thing you're going to do as a freed slave is to build a school. You learn something from being what, enslaved, because you saw that going on around you. So rather than go out and do

something differently, what you do is you repeat what you've already seen. Even though you may not have been a part of the building, you were a part of, what, of the success.

EC: Yeah. You know what freedom--.

VD: Right. And my great-grandfather, Warren Kelly, he educated his kids, and when my grandfather, George Dahmer, wanted to marry Ellen, "No. Boy, where's your education?" And he would not permit it until, what, until my grandfather went to Jackson State and improved his education because that's where my grandmother Ellen Kelly had gone. So there was enough education at that time coming right out of slavery. Well, let's put it, there was enough forethought about education that provided [35:00] people who had enough to teach.

EC: Well, there were always people that found ways to learn.

VD: Found ways to learn. Right, right.

EC: Even when there was a law saying you couldn't.

VD: Right.

EC: So your grandfather, George Dahmer, went to Jackson State for a while?

VD: Yes, he did.

EC: Okay. And your father went through tenth grade?

VD: He went through tenth grade in a local community school, Bay Springs school.

EC: That was probably the last grade they had.

VD: At that time, it was the last grade, and as the population increased and decreased, it would go from ten to twelve, back to ten, to twelve. And at the time, my dad was going to tenth grade. By the time I graduated in 1948, it was twelfth grade.

EC: So what was--? So you said that you went to the school about a half mile from your home.

VD: Yes.

EC: What was that school like?

VD: Being in a community where you knew a lot of the kids, practically all of the kids, except the ones that are maybe in the outlying areas, it was more like a big family reunion. You knew everybody and it was a lot of fun, and you never felt out of place. And the teachers that we had blended right into that same environment, and it was a good atmosphere for learning because the education I have today, the basic education, what it is, and what you see, and what you hear, started right there. And coming out of a family, like many other black families too, by the way, they came prepared to learn. And my dad always had us saying--a lot of the other older guys I'd heard say this,--says, "Hey. I'm not sending you to school to carry a lunch." [Laughter] Because we didn't have a lunchroom. "Hey, I've got work here at the house for you to do." So, going to school served two purposes: get an education, plus get out of a lot of hard work. [Laughter] So it didn't lack a lot of motivation there. It didn't take a lot of motivating to do it. And a whole lot of the kids, their families were not able to continue their education. We had a lot of dropouts, and that was--and as I look back, that was a sad thing. Where my family, and there was other families, allowed their kids to go on through and graduate. All of us graduated from high school.

EC: Yeah. No, I know that I've had many people tell me that they had to work so they couldn't keep going to school.

VD: And I saw that with guys. You got to the fourth grade. By the time you made it to the fifth, the kids big enough to go to the fields and work, you start losing population. And by the time you got to the tenth or eleventh grade, my class only had eight people in it, and we started off with a big class in the primary.

EC: Yeah. What were your favorite subjects?

VD: I liked math. I liked reading, and math and reading--. English, I had difficulty with because I could never grasp the verb and the noun, and the pronoun. I could do those, but when you got over to the other parts--.

EC: The subjunctive? [Laughs]

VD: Yeah. I'll tell you that. And I kind of tuned it out because I figured I didn't need it anyway. I found out later that I did, and so I had to go back and do some remedial study in order to move ahead.

EC: You didn't see any need for it?

VD: Right. But those are my favorite and favorite subjects. And then later on, when I say later on, when I got to being about to fifth or sixth grade, we had spelling class where the kids get up before the class and the teacher would call your word, and you'd spell it. I fell in love with spelling, and the way it happened was my dad drove a school bus, and when he come to pick up the kids, spelling was the last class at the end of the day, and he would come to my classroom. And here I am up at the board, writing my spelling letters and the teacher would call them out, and my dad's sitting there watching me misspell these words. [Laughter] So when we'd get home at night, he says, "Get that spelling book," and we'd sit down in front of the fireplace, kerosene lamp, and he'd call me those words. And if I missed one, he'd bump me upside the head. And after a while,

I got where I learned--and then I learned how to identify syllables, and then I'd do pretty well at that. So, that turned out to be--helped a lot.

EC: Did you enjoy doing that with your dad or was it pressure?

VD: No, I didn't enjoy it.

EC: It was pressure. [Laughter]

VD: Nope, no I didn't enjoy getting bumped upside the head, you know.

EC: You have to learn how to act under pressure if you're going to get--.

VD: Right. That's exactly right. But all in all, the school turned out well. I graduated on time, eighteen years old.

EC: I've talked to a few people. I think they're a little younger than you [40:00] and they went to different schools, but one person was telling me that she had a-- she didn't call it civics class. I can't remember what she called it, but she said that the teacher actually talked to them about voting in their class. Did you ever have any kind of--?

VD: Yes. Yes. I don't want to miss that piece. Our principal was progressive. He was educated. He saw the need for education and--. I lost my thought.

EC: I had asked you about voting, teachers and--.

VD: Oh, yeah. Yeah. He saw the need for the education and he was really in tune with African American history, Negro history. I learned about Booker T. Washington early in those days, George Washington Carver, the Underground Railroad, and all of those things I learned right there in the 1940s. We had a little thin green black history book, and I went looking for one when I returned home, and it identified the prominent Negroes back in that day that had really made a difference in bringing us

forward as far as education is concerned. And I tried to find it, and he acquired that book, and we had to--. It was a part of the curriculum in seventh and eighth grade. So, I had a real good feel of what blacks had done up to that period. Who invented the cotton gin, and things that came along in that era.

EC: Did you have any sense of the politics behind that?

VD: No.

EC: Because of course--.

VD: No..

EC: The white school district, I would imagine that your school had a black principal and then probably a white superintendent or something.

VD: White superintendent. And the most of our textbooks came from the white schools because they passed their used textbooks down to the black schools. Right. Some would have pages missing. You'd see names of other kids in them, but they were books.

EC: Did you think about that at the time, that you're getting these secondhand books or anything?

VD: No. No. No, I didn't.

EC: Did you have any sense of the white kids' school, or did you have any contact with white kids?

VD: The white school was only about two and a half, three miles away and they lived in another world. But now, their properties adjoined ours. We would see them. We knew them, but we went to separate schools. Everything was separate. Separate church and schools, separate theaters when you went to town and have a chance



to go to the movie. We didn't have any social interaction other than maybe we'd end up in a creek swimming on a hot summer day, and play just like nothing ever happened. I grew up with them, but socially we didn't mix outside of that, no.

EC: Yeah. I know you said that your dad's store had white customers.

VD: Had white customers, sure.

EC: Did he ever have white people working on the land?

VD: Yes. There were some poors in the community that were just so poor that they would come and they'd work in the cotton fields, pick cotton. I do remember they wouldn't be mixed up. Say like maybe a part of the field, but not the distance away. A little segment here, blacks, and a little segment there, all adjoining, picking cotton together. Right.

EC: Yeah. That's a--. It's just--.

VD: But now, they were extremely poor white folks to do that.

EC: And that they really, that they would have to have a pretty desperate need in order to go to work for a black family?

VD: A very desperate need. Very desperate need, yes. But we didn't look at them as being poor, just some white folks, coming to pick cotton.

EC: Yeah, yeah. I mean, when you were working in the store when your dad had the store, were there ever any issues with white customers, or did things go pretty smoothly?

VD: My dad had--not malicious, not--arguing and that. The white customers would come and take his goods and wouldn't pay him because my dad could not make them pay. Back in that day, people didn't walk around with credit cards, or cash money

in their pocket. They'd buy groceries and put them on a charge book, and when they got paid, they'd come pay the bill and buy more stuff, and they're living from week to week or payday to payday. Well, some of the white customers took advantage of my dad. Like there was this one guy, right after the war, came back. He was a vet and he got in good with my dad and he was paying his bill real well. My dad let him get too far out, and he owed my dad several hundred dollars and walked off. And by that time, I'm working in the grocery store. I'm a clerk, cutting meats, selling ice, pumping gas, fixing flats, whatever, and I was in tune with what was going on in the business. And my dad had a good business on Saturday, when country folks [45:00] come by to buy, oh he'd--. Money was everywhere--not everywhere. We had a lot of money. And after, you had to put it back into the business, but the business was good and growing, and you had them to do that.

EC: What would--? Would your dad say anything about that? Did he talk to you or did he--?

VD: No, he didn't say it.

EC: He just--.

VD: Yeah, we had no distractions, like television. There was a lot of family conversation that went on in the presence of the kid, and my dad was open, and he said, "Yeah," he said, "I let Sam have this, number one, and he won't pay me." And he'd be disappointed, and then he'd move on. And on the other hand, I saw my dad and I was a part of this. There were some families there, primarily black, not very many but so poor, they'd come to buy groceries and didn't have enough, and they have kids. And when they arrived at the store, they'd sit on--you saw this picture of the store--sit on the porch.

My dad would give them a drink and a Moon Pie, and that was their treat. Walked up there from way back in the woods some place, and then before they got ready to leave, they'd have a little grocery list. Most of them had the grandmother or somebody like that. He'd give them extra meat, just pass out stuff, and he just had an open heart.

[Pause] And he got that from his dad. Excuse me.

EC: No. I imagine that's something you never, never lose.

VD: No. Uh-uh. He got that from George Dahmer. My grandfather, George Dahmer, had enough property to where he had sharecroppers. You've probably heard that. And only a couple of families, but they were not servants. They're people coming in, looking well, but make a living. They'd come from other communities, and he had a couple of rental houses, nothing--. Nobody had nothing fancy, and they'd move in and what we made, as far as edibles, greens, peas, you even had sugarcane, made our own syrup and all that. They were like a family. They participated in it. Nobody went hungry.

EC: It was a more communal kind of--.

VD: Right. But you maintain your independence, and you were respected as an individual, and there was a love relationship in that environment because those people appreciated so much until they loved him, and they'd give their all. He loved them back likewise, but never look down. Wasn't a noisy man. Quiet, and would just--. We'd kill four or five hogs and have people come help us clean the hog and he'd be passing--not passing out--they could tell you what they want, and we'd share. Now, that sharing came out of that, to me, as I look back on it, and as I kept growing, it came out of that slave-type community where we had to depend on one another, and we knew that was the way

we had to make it, and it carried right on over beyond that period, and it went right on in to the way my grandfather treated everyone. And my dad was raised with it, and that was part of life. And you know what? We do the same thing. I just did something that we're pretty crazy about, a young--. I'm involved in the Scouts, helping kids and all this, and I'm not bragging or anything, and the kid's dad died and his mother died. He was small, lived in the community, raised up there, and his dad was an older guy and the dad died and left him a little house and an acre of land. And the kid didn't know any--he's nineteen years and he had to pay taxes? Tax collector came out and took the property! The property's adjoining my property that I own, and he said, "Do you want to buy it?" And I looked at him and I says to myself, "No, I don't want to buy it." I go to the tax collector. I say, "How much did this cost?" What does this guy pay for it, that bought it at the tax sale? And he told me--my relationship, our relationship's so good with the citizens in this area--he told me everything. He said, "Tell you what, Vernon." He said, "Go call him. Tell him you talked to me" and they paid, the property's very little house on it, for fifteen thousand dollars. Well, I ain't got no fifteen thousand dollars. But I got the guy down for nine hundred fifty dollars, okay? [EC laughs] So what did I do? [Coughs] Pardon me. My sinuses have been--forever.

So, I got in cont--. [50:00] After I got in contact with the guy, then this investor said, "Well, I'll finance it." I said, "No. We'll take care of that," and I sent him a check for nine hundred and fifty bucks. Now, I'm not wealthy. Nine hundred and fifty dollars is a lot of money to me, but in the meantime, I said, "This kid was raised up in an environment where people learned there had to be no parental guidance. There was not none. It was not good enough for him to survive on his own, and so what? I got all the

paperwork fixed up, made him a payment plan, and he's going to pay me back in a year." And I showed him how to pay your taxes, how to get your homestead exemption, trained like I trained my kids. And when I finished with him the other day, and got him all set up--and he works for my brother, Dennis, that you saw there, doing the sugarcane thing, cutting my mom's yard. "Hey, we don't throw you away," and he's going to be all right. He left the house, and my wife had some chicken. We ate, and he went out there with tears in his eyes.

EC: I bet he did.

VD: Yeah.

EC: I mean, it's like he lost his family and he has--.

VD: Hey, and I didn't go out--

EC: Family in his village.

VD: In the community. I can tell you, that's not for publication.

EC: Right. I understand.

VD: No, that's what we do. Sure.

EC: You know, in Claiborne County, there was a man that had land and--.

VD: You have to keep me on track, now.

EC: Yeah. No, no, you're good. And he wanted people to have houses, and so he sold people land at a price they couldn't have bought it anywhere else, and they call it Jones Village out there now after him.

VD: Is that right?

EC: That's right.

VD: Where's that at?

EC: It's in Claiborne County. So, yeah.

VD: Yeah, my doctor's from over there.

EC: Yeah.

VD: Yeah, he passed away.

EC: Yeah. So when you graduated from high school, what did you do next?

VD: I enrolled at Tougaloo. Tougaloo's expensive, but my cousin was going there, and his mother was a teacher. He could afford it. But I went anyway. [EC laughs] Went to Tougaloo and during the very first semester, I became seriously ill with pneumonia before testing time, and I was unable to make my tests. My dad had to come get me. By the time I recovered, we'd already gone into another semester, so I just stayed at home. I'm eighteen years old at that time, going on nineteen. I'm a part of the workforce, so I went to work for the remaining part of the year and the next school year, I went to Alcorn. And when I got out to Alcorn, then the second wife, she took seriously ill, and then I had to come home and help in the business because things were not going good after World War II. It was in a recession during the early fifties, and I came home to help my dad and we buried her, and then I went back to Alcorn again. And by that time, I lost my deferment and that's when the draft came and got me. [Laughter] So that ended my education, but I had a full year.

EC: A full year?

VD: Yeah. I had thirty-eight credits. That's about it, isn't it?

EC: Let's see.

VD: Thirty-eight--.

EC: That's about three semesters. Wait, let's see. Thirty-eight credits, thirteen classes. Yeah. Yeah. Did you like--? Well, tell me what Alcorn was like.

VD: Alcorn, I went there under a work program. And a lot of country kids, lot of kids from the country, and then there were some kids that were from upper-class black families, too, that went dressed every day. And then there was us kids, we came out the country. [EC laughs] So there was some adapting to do to that environment. And some of them came out of some schools--well, they came out of families who were, they were probably advanced in their educational abilities and all. But all in all, it was a big, big--. Back in the woods, and there were very few distractions, very few.

EC: Counting crickets. [Laughs]

VD: Counting crickets. That's exactly right. And it was all about work, study, and sports, and I was not qualified to be on any of the teams, just go to some of them, and that was the extent of it. Very little time for girls, hardly none. [Laughter] Not only that they had a mistress there named Miss Tanner. She'd kill you, so.

EC: Yeah, they had some strict rules, didn't they?

VD: Yes, very strict rules. You walked a girl to the dorm holding her hand, which that didn't happen very often anyway, and when you got to the dorm at the end of that, no kissing, no hugging and all that. You better get from here.

EC: [Laughs] And a curfew too, probably, for the girls.

VD: Oh, definitely a curfew. Sure.

EC: Was it for you too, or was it just for the girls?

VD: Oh, it's just for the girls, I would imagine. Well, I never--. They were--. I don't know what they had. We didn't interact that much except in the classroom.

EC: Yeah. Was there a big difference between Tougaloo and Alcorn?

VD: Yeah. More affluent kids. Definitely more affluent; you could see it.

[50:00] It was obvious. Yeah, I was more comfortable at Alcorn. Sure. Because they had more guys from rural communities, farming. I had a lot more in common, and being in a work program.

EC: And Alcorn was an agricultural school.

VD: And it was agricultural, and I was majoring in agriculture. That was my goal.

EC: So that probably influenced--.

VD: Right. It did influence. Most of my friends worked in a dairy because at that time, we had our own dairy, our own cattle, and all. Fortunately, I had a job inside mopping floors, and this was good. I liked it. [EC laughs]

EC: When we were talking before we started taping, you mentioned about Tougaloo having white faculty.

VD: Yes, I did.

EC: What was that like for you? Did you think about it?

VD: I was not overwhelmed by it because coming out of a community where there were a lot of light-skinned people, there was not this contrast of dark/white because I came out of a family and a community where there were just a lot of light-skinned folks. And the whites in our neighborhood, they interacted also. So, no, but it did surprise me to have white instructors, with all the black students. And there may have been a handful of white students there at that time. Let's see if I remember correctly. It's kind of hard to tell.



EC: That's true. Yeah.

VD: And the president was President Warren, and I think he was handicapped.

I think he was.

EC: Really? I don't really know much about Tougaloo at that time.

VD: Right. And a couple of my teachers were--one of them I know was--  
white.

EC: Yeah. Were they from other parts of the country or were they local?

VD: I don't know.

EC: You don't know.

VD: No, ma'am. I don't know.

EC: I had meant to ask you before. Was your father registered to vote when  
you were younger?

VD: No.

EC: Was he ever able to register?

VD: No.

EC: I know some people were registered, and then they took them off the rolls,  
and then they had to try to re-register.

VD: No. No. My dad was very conscious of the fact that he was being denied  
the same ample opportunities as whites, and he didn't hide that from us. He depended on  
them for survival, and he never did talk mean about them, but he let us know that there  
was a difference in survival. And he would tell us boys, he said, "You got to be twice as  
good to stay out of trouble. You've got to work twice as hard to get ahead. It's not  
even." And he let you know that up front, "It is not even." And that helped a lot when I

went in the Air Force because I felt a little inferior, because I figured these, the white kids went out of these superior schools. But after a while, I found out, well, yeah, they may have come out of superior institutions, but [Laughs] some of them weren't no smarter than me. [Laughter] But, anyway, at least I didn't think they were anyway. So, I lost my thought.

EC: Well, I had asked you about your dad trying to vote.

VD: Oh, yeah. So in growing up in that environment, my dad paid very close attention to what was going on around him, like my grandfather. We had a newspaper every day. We didn't have electricity in the house up until I was probably in the eighth grade, and we studied by light, and my dad bought a small radio, RCA, one of them old-fashioned kind? And so he could listen to the news and other programs, and he would drive the school bus up to the window of the house and drew the power from the truck battery to run the radio.

EC: And that's how you'd listen to the radio?

VD: And there were three things that he'd listen to religiously. One of them in the evenings, the six o'clock news with John Cameron Swayze, because he'd make us sit down and be quiet and hear the news. If you want to change that, sir, just let me know.

John Bishop: Oh no, I'm fine.

VD: Okay. And everybody, the news is on. He didn't have to tell you. The news on, you be quiet and you listen. You didn't leave the room. He listened to *Lum and Abner*. They came on every day, if you ever heard of *Lum and Abner*.

EC: Uh-uh.

VD: Okay. That was a comedy show of hillbillies. [EC laughs] They came on every day, on *Lum and Abner* and the Jot 'em Down Store in the country. And *Amos 'n' Andy* at six o'clock in the evening. And on a Saturday night, he would listen to the *Grand Ole Opry*.

EC: So that was the big [1:00:00] entertainment?

VD: The big entertainment.

EC: So you got news and a couple of shows.

VD: Right. But as a result of paying attention and keeping up with the news, we all became news listeners.

EC: He influenced you.

VD: Influenced. And we found out that's where you get your information from. My dad had another saying. Once we got big enough to understand what he's talking about, he said, "Pay attention to what's going on around you and you have a chance to get away without being a victim of your circumstances." In other words, don't be a victim of your environment because you're not paying attention. And he had a parable he'd use, "Don't be like a hog eating acorns under a big oak tree. You're eating acorns but you never look up to see where they're coming from, and one day when the acorns run out and you're hungry, you're left to starve to death. So, be aware of what's going on around you." And that's just the way we all grew up. All of us are very political-oriented, okay? Very much so. So, we came up in a political environment.

So when, in the mid-1940s, my dad had heard about that NAACP had started up. And he and eight other black men established the Forrest County branch of the NAACP. It was nine of them that started it, and they held secret meetings, and they went to the

meetings at night. There are nine men, black men, in the Hattiesburg area that founded the Forrest County branch of the NAACP, and it was around 1945, the mid-1940s. And at that time, they had the meetings at night and my dad would always let us know, let me know, "I'm going to a NAACP meeting" because it was an underground-type organization during that time. And he continued to go to these meetings very religiously, and then when he'd go to the meeting, he would come home and we'd be working that day and he'd tell us, tell me and my older brother, what was going on as we did our work. And as a result of him being a part of that organization, and he let us know by just a conversation that there were--. It had something to do with politics. It had something to do with voting. So, in about 1946--yeah, I think I was around sixteen, seventeen years old, maybe--my dad started taking me with him, even before then, when he did business. I'd go with him when he paid the property tax, and at the same time he paid the property tax to the sheriff--sheriff was the tax collector in Forrest County--he would also pay his poll tax. And when he'd leave the sheriff's office, he'd go down the hall to the voter registration office and pay his poll tax.

Well on this one occasion, he went to pay the poll tax. It may have been the first. I don't know what happened prior to then. He went in. He pulled out his receipt he had in his hand, and there was this white man behind the counter, and he walked up and he asked--he knew who my dad was without a doubt, you know, being a country town-- "Yeah, what do you want?" My dad said, "I paid my poll tax. I want to register." And he looked at him, just kind of like stared at him, "Why are you here?" I remember that because I'm old enough now to know how you treat my dad. And he gave my dad a card, like a four-by-eight card, a six-by-eight, and it had some writing. He said on it, "Read

that and tell me what it said,” then he went on back and sat down. And my dad read the information on the card and finally he says, “Sir, I’m finished,” and the guy came up and looked at him, and looked at me. He says, “All right, tell me what you read.” My dad told him. He says, “That’s not what it said.” And that was the end of it.

Now, here’s a man, my father, who had helped me with my lesson, he was in business, he was running a business, and he couldn’t interpret what was on the card, and I was old enough to know that’s not true. That aggravated me some because what you did, you just denied a man that I care a lot about. Hey, you just told him, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” That didn’t hit me very well. Now, I didn’t get mad about it, but I saw that as strange because I had never seen this upfront, that close. [1:05:00] I’m sure it’s happened other places.

And from that time on, he may have continued. I didn’t go with him anymore, but I don’t know whether he did or did not. And the next time I heard anything about him becoming involved was when he became president of the local NAACP during the mid-fifties. And as a result of the Supreme Court ruling on the school segregation problem, was that *Brown vs. Board of Education* in Kansas, something like that. I think that’s right. Mississippi then tightened up. It really tightened up. “Hey, we’re not going to have no school integration here.” Well, my dad’s already involved in NAACP by then, and he’s out of the closet. The organization is out of the closet. It’s well known. And then, that’s when he became targeted by the hostile forces out there.

EC: After that first incident that you saw, or the one that you witnessed, did he--when you were riding home that day--did he say anything to you?

VD: No, he did not.

EC: Did he talk to you about what happened?

VD: No, he did not. No. I think during that time, I can only think that that was such a routine practice of being denied. Maybe not to him so much, but he'd start going with other blacks. He'd just suck it up and move on.

EC: Yeah. And you said when he was president in the mid-1950s, people knew who he was?

VD: Oh, yeah, without a doubt.

EC: And you said that's when the harassment started?

VD: Yeah. That's when the harassment started, then.

EC: Can you--? You probably weren't home.

VD: I wasn't here but--.

EC: But he told you about it?

VD: He talked about it. Yeah, he talked about it.

EC: Can you tell us what he said to you or what you know about it?

VD: Yeah. During that time, the racial climate was changing. The tension was rising and this friendly atmosphere that we once had there was disappeared. Now, here's how I experienced it. I went in the Air Force 1951. I came home around 1954, [19]55. At that time, after I had reenlisted, and chose the Air Force as a career and I was a Staff Sergeant. Did well doing my first enlistment. And I stopped at the local white grocery store that had been in the community before my dad built his because we had a relationship with the--with that family because that's where we did our trading. And I stopped there to get some gas, and I went in with a real friendly atmosphere, and the wife of the storeowner, she was there, and I spoke to her. And they had one son, and he was

several years younger than me, but I saw him grow up. So I ask her, I says, “Well, where’s your son?” I called him by his name, and [she] said, “You mean Mr. So-and-so.” Well, here I am now twenty-five years old, twenty-six, and she want me to call her son who’s probably still a teenager “mister.” Never saw that before.

And I stopped at another grocery store in the community on down coming toward Hattiesburg where we would stop occasionally, and I went in there just to buy something, because I felt comfortable being at home. And the grocery store owner there, he said, “Oh, you’re in the--. You’re up north now!” I says, “Yes, I am.” I was stationed in Nebraska, Omaha, Offutt Air Force Base. And he says, “Well, what’s it like being up there? Are they different?” So he was quizzing me on my being outside of that Mississippi environment.

EC: Have you been ruined?

VD: And how had it affected me being in a more integrated area? And I picked up on that immediately.

EC: He was wanting to know if you’d been ruined. [Laughs]

VD: Whatnot. I’d been ruined. That’s exactly right. So, that’s how I knew then that the things that’s changing, and my dad then was getting into a situation, but I didn’t really focus on it because there had not been any open violence. It was just a rise in the recognition that things about to happen in Mississippi now that the masters don’t want to happen. And now where you’re not going to be treated quite as kindly and as friendly as it was because now, you’re starting to threaten “our way of life.” And I had to look back on it. I didn’t recognize it at that time. So what I did then was I didn’t go into these places. I just kind of stayed away from them.

EC: Yeah. Did your father [1:10:00] talk to you about the changing atmosphere or did you just know it from your own experience?

VD: When I would visit home, he didn't have to say it. It was obvious. And what I mean by obvious, he would--. For example, I came home with my family at that time, got a wife and couple kids, and we stayed there with him. And he says, "Hey, be careful where you go and you hear at nighttime, we don't walk and get in front of windows. And also, we've seen some harassment here. There's a gun in that room where you're going to be. If you hear anything, hey, be aware of it." Well, being military, that was no big deal, coming out from where we had guns. "Hey, that's okay. I'm comfortable with that environment." So I saw the difference happening then.

EC: It's a real change to have to take all those precautions.

VD: To have to take all those precautions. That is exactly right. Sure.

EC: Can you tell me about your own military experience? What happened when you got drafted?

VD: What happened when I got drafted was it was during the height of the Korean War, and there was troops everywhere. And what I mean by "everywhere," when you get into that military environment--. And I left home on a bus, went to Jackson along with some other recruits, went to the recruiting and the reporting place, and it was on a tri-state bus, a Greyhound, one or the other, and there were whites and black guys on there, and maybe some other passengers. I don't remember exactly. But anyway, we got there and checked in. The day was far along. They gave us some food and took us to a motel. Well, there was no motel for whites and went out on Fairview Street. There was a black hotel down there. Well, I'd been on Fairview Street, so I'm all right. And the



white ones, they went wherever they went, and the next morning, got up, and they picked us up in a bus and carried us to the induction center. And that's when the processing took place, along stripping down, doing your physicals and all, and getting ready to ship us out.

From there, the next day, we left and made it up--went to San Antonio, Texas to Lackland Air Force Base, which is a major Air Force training base. And, I mean, there were troops all over the place, and we were sleeping in tents because the permanent structures were all full. And we stayed there just, oh, about three weeks, and they keep us busy, the guys busy. Mostly, got up, dressed, do your military thing, and they would go out and pick up big rocks, put them in a pile. And then the next day, we would come along and we'd pick up the smaller ones, put them in piles. [Laughs] Just to keep you busy. You think I'm kidding! That's a fact, all right? [Laughter] And then, during the night, they'd spread them all out again or whatever. All right? But anyway, you went through all that stuff, and I'm a man twenty-two years old, been working on a farm. "Yeah, I'm out here picking up rocks and I'm piling them up." And then we went on a-- shipped us out to Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas. That's where I did my basic training.

And from basic training, I was assigned to Francis E. Warren Air Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming, for my tech training. That was a Teletype training school there, along with other training facilities too in the communications field, and there was a mode of transportation for kids to learn how to drive trucks and stuff.

EC: Let me ask you. So how did you feel about being drafted?

VD: I tried my best to stay out of it. My dad tried to get me deferred, and I didn't want to go. No, I did not want to go, all because I just, I'm comfortable where I am. Yeah.

EC: Yeah. What about, were you drafted specifically into the Air Force or did you have any say?

VD: No, no, no. Oh, that's a piece I missed. No. Let me tell you how that happened.

EC: All right.

VD: One, maybe a month, a little over, prior to going in the Air Force, I received a letter from the--they had a name--local board.

EC: The draft board?

VD: Draft board. Directing that I report for induction on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September, 1951. And I looked at it, and I says, "Okay. Well, I'm getting ready to get out of here." So I'm leaving the house with my dad, and I told him, I said, "Hey. This is what this is about." So, I start preparing to go off to the Army because that's where the guys were going. [1:15:00] My uncle, my dad's baby sister's husband, was in the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry in Italy, a ground foot soldier, fought. And I told him, and he said, "No, no. You don't want to do that. Uh-uh." Then, I had a couple of other black guys in the community that was in combat and he said, "Oh, you don't want to do that." He says, "Hey, go to the Navy or the Air Force. Don't get caught up in this Army thing." And after they told me that, I says, "Okay." So, I procrastinated up until the 10<sup>th</sup> of September. [EC laughs]

EC: You didn't give yourself much--.

VD: No. And I said, "Look, I got to do-- make up my mind." So, I went to the Air Force recruiter here in Hattiesburg. It's in the basement of the old post office downtown?

EC: Yeah.

VD: And I walked in, and there was an Air Force recruiter, Army recruiter, Navy recruiter, and I'm not sure whether they had a Marine or not. And I saw that Air Force, and I went in that door. And that sergeant, he said to me, "Can I help you?" And I told him, I said, "I'd like to volunteer for the Air Force." So, he gave me some papers to fill out, and I took some tests or whatever, and he said, "Well, when do you want to leave?" I said, "Can I leave today?" [Laughter] He said, "No. The bus is already gone." He said, "What about in the morning? Be down here at seven o'clock." I said, "Okay, I'll be here." So, at seven o'clock, I reported to the post office, and they were there and they carried us down to the bus station, which is on Walnut Street, caught a bus out to Jackson. And so after I got situated at Sheppard Air Force Base in basic training, which is in Wichita Falls, Texas, and that was, by the way, in the early part of September of 1951, I was in my unit in my squad, drilling with them out on the parade field, going through my training. And in that group, there must've been about thirty guys in these squads. My name came out over the PA system, "Private Vernon Dahmer Jr., report to the orderly room." I'm twenty-two years old. I'm in there with a bunch of guys eighteen, nineteen, maybe twenty. I'm kind of like the old dude. There were a few left over from World War II that was coming back again, but not very many. I don't know what in my outfit, but anyway. I said, "Dang, what have I done now?" because I'm in

this military environment now. Your name come out and you don't remember anything that you did. "What have I done?"

EC: Right. [Laughter] A little scary.

VD: And so the squad leader called to a halt, dismissed me from the group, told me to report to the orderly room. I went to the orderly room, reported to the first sergeant. "These two gentlemen want to talk with you." They were in civilian clothes. And they asked me, "Your name?" I told them, "Vernon F. Dahmer Jr." "Let me see your dog tags." Dog tags around my neck, pulled my dog tags out, and they check them. That's who you are. He said, "You know, you're a draft dodger." "No, sir. I didn't know that." "Well, didn't you get your notice from the local board?" Lying through my teeth, "No, sir." [Laughter] I didn't sign up for it. Lied, stood him flatfooted, and he says, "Well, you--. They sent you one." I said, "No, sir. I never got it." He said, "Well, okay. You're already in now. I guess that's all right." Well, I guess it is all right. You're going to take me out and put me in the Army? I wasn't thinking that for him. I'm thinking that now. And, when he did that, boy, the perspiration dried up, and I got a hold of my nerves, and the first sergeant said, "All right, get back to your unit." I went back to my unit.

EC: Did you know that that might happen? Or did you just--?

VD: No! I didn't know that was going to happen, no. These guys flashed their badges on me, so they were from some kind of investigative unit. I don't know whether they were the FBI, or the local Army investigators. You know, at Air Force, they have their own investigators. But no, they were federal. I know that, though. They had to be federal.

EC: That's a little nerve-wracking.

VD: Without a doubt.

EC: And you came up with that on your feet. [Laughter]

VD: Oh, hey. Well, you know, being twenty-two years old, you learn how to lie and you learn how to lie quick, especially when you get in a bind.

EC: Sounds like it came in handy.

VD: Yes, it did.

EC: That's a good skill, I guess.

VD: Yeah, very good. It worked.

EC: When you went into the military, how did you end up--? You said you went to the communications school for Teletype training.

VD: Yeah, that's--.

EC: How did that come about?

VD: That's another phase that's very interesting. I was assigned to Francis E. Warren Air Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming to become [1:20:00] a Teletype operator. Being raised on a farm--. Or, we had an old cash register my dad found somewhere and it was manual, and now you're taking this farm boy who's been used to driving trucks, hauling logs, running tractor, and all this. Yes, I had mechanical ability, operation-type, operating-type abilities, but not for no typewriter, no Teletype, no typewriter. And they assigned me to that school, and I started off, and after [I was] there for a while, I was in this typing class, "J-U-J, space, F-G-F, space," and I'm telling myself, "I don't want to be no Teletype operator. It just doesn't fit me and my prior experience." And across this great big open field--Wyoming's big and everything is open--was a bunch of guys in

training learning how to drive a truck with a trailer. Well, I knew how to do that. I could back a truckload of lumber down an alley. And I'm sitting there in front of a typewriter and I could go over there to that school, and I can go right through there and be a truck driver, and I don't have to deal with this typewriter.

Well, being the older guy in the community, I mean, in my squadron, I had a relationship somehow or another with the first sergeant. Been around a little bit, and I started to be his runner. He asked me, he said, "Dahmer. I need guys to carry messages from one outfit to another to the headquarters. Do you want to do that?" That's during my off time when I got off in the evening. Well, I'm doing this remedial training, me and two other guys, training to catch up in the typing, and then I would do that in my off time thinking I may get a little something out of that. So during that time I was working with the first sergeant, things got real comfortable with my sergeant. I says, "Can I go in and talk to the captain? I want to go to over here to do that automotive training place, to that truck driving school." And he said, "Man, they don't need you doing that. You're in Teletype."

Finally, one day, he said, "Okay." He made an appointment with me to see the captain, and I got all dressed up and went in and reported to the captain, and gave him my experience, driving trucks, raised on a farm. And he's sitting there with this nice little smile on his face, and I thought I was getting over on him [EC laughs] and when I finished, he says, "You know what, you've got a lot of good experience. And they can use you over there," he says, "but Private Dahmer," he says, "the Air Force needs come first and I want you to go back down to that Teletype school and be the best Teletype operator in the outfit." [Laughter] He busted my bubble right in front of his desk, and

when I went by the first sergeant, he said, "I told you so." I went on back to the barracks and I got with it.

EC: You resigned yourself?

VD: Yes, I did. I learned how to type, graduated, and believe it or not, that was the best decision that was made for me by somebody else. That, being a Teletype operator, moved me into the communications vein, all the way to computers when I retired as a senior master sergeant. There ain't no way I would've been a senior master sergeant driving a truck. And I got promoted on my first enlistment because I was used to studying. I was used to commitment, so I didn't have no problem becoming a good Teletype operator, and it worked out real well. And I married, too, one month before I went in the Air Force, and by the time I finished my first enlistment at Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida where I was stationed, I was already a staff sergeant. I could take my family with me any place I went, and then assignment came up going to Europe, but prior to, my first assignment--. Let me back up a moment.

Coming out of Teletype school, my first assignment then was to a radar station in Omaha, Nebraska. Not to the air base, a radar station, and from there, to Nome, Alaska, at a radar site overlooking the Siberian Strait, watching the Russians take off and land every day. [EC laughs] They fly you out and they leave you there for a year.

EC: Wow.

ND: Isolated. I'm married one month before I leave, my wife is pregnant with a baby, I'm wanting to be home, and I'm sitting here now in this isolated place waiting for a year to pass.

EC: That must've been a--.

ND: To me, it was domesticated purism, or whatever. [EC laughs] But it was all work, nothing else to do. You worked and slept. And I [1:25:00] cleaned up, did extra work in the offices' quarters, make extra money to send to my wife and all. So when I came, when I was assigned from there, I had preference on the base because of this--.

EC: Because of where you had been?

VD: Where I'd been. And I picked Panama City, Florida, which was close to home.

EC: And then your wife was able to be with you there?

VD: And my wife came down there. I only had two stripes. She came down, but they had quarters on base for low-ranking airmen, and by that time I had two kids, boy and a girl. They were little tykes. And I went there with two stripes and I stayed there and made two more while I was there. Thing worked out well and I reenlisted, and that started my Air Force career. So, at reenlistment time, I talked to my wife. I says, "Look." Now, prior to talking with my wife, this warrant officer from Kentucky, white fellow, World War II vet, was my boss. He was the communications officer over the whole thing. And I had left the comm center being a Teletype prompter, and I was his clerk. I learned how to type on a typewriter then, and that's where I got my rank, working for him. He jacked me up. But I had to work, though. Then I became a Western Union accountant clerk, doing another task. And he asked me one day, he says, "Sergeant Dahmer," he says, "you're coming up for reenlistment" and because I talked about it, he says, "What you going to do?" I said, "Well, I'm going back to Mississippi



to my dad's saw mill," and he said, "Are you crazy?" He said, "You only got sixteen years to go. You're already a staff sergeant."

EC: [Laughs] So let me ask you. I don't know if I know enough about the military. So, was your draft two years or four years?

VD: It was a four-year tour.

EC: It was a four-year tour.

VD: When you're in Air Force, meant a four-year tour.

EC: Okay. So once you moved towards the Air Force, you had to commit to a longer tour.

VD: I had two more years.

EC: All right. So you had invested four years.

VD: I invested four years. But that gave me a chance to make enough rank to where I can make a decision to whether I want it to become a career, in hindsight.

EC: And so that was enough for you to envision a career with the Air Force.

VD: I could envision--. And then when I told my boss, the warrant officer, because his offices back there, and I'm in here, at a typewriter, answering phones, and doing all this other work. He said, "You're crazy," and he and the top sergeant in the outfit there who was in the office with him come and said, "Hey, you don't want to do that. Hey." Started explaining the Air Force benefits and things going on, which I hadn't really zeroed in on. And so after I talked with my wife and thought about it, I said, "Yeah, I'll reenlist." And I went back and I told him, I said, "Yeah, Mr."--he's one of them--I said, "Mr. Johnson, yes, I'll reenlist." He made an appointment, and I went out and talked to the commanding officer, squadron leader, major, and he already received

notification that I was going to reenlist, and I walked in, and he shook my hand. He said, "Hey, Mr. Johnson says you're going to reenlist." I said, "Yes, sir. I'm going to." He said, "Congratulations." Then, they set me up for reenlistment and they were giving me a bonus.

EC: For reenlisting?

VD: Yeah. And if you reenlist for four years, you get a certain amount. If you reenlist for six years, you get more money. Well, since I'm going, I went for six years, and when I went to the finance office, they paid us in cash. I had a stack of twenty-dollar bills that high. [EC laughs] That's the most money I'd ever seen in my life. Man, I said, "Oh, man!"

EC: So you felt like you made a good decision.

VD: Oh, I went on and told my wife I was rich, because she lived there on base, you know, and had bought me a little Ford car, and everything was going well. And that started my Air Force career. And the house was firebombed in 1966. In 1964, my family and I had returned from Germany, and we visited with dad and my mom there in the family home. And my wife is from here also, so between the two families. And I saw at that time that the racial tension was real high, and my dad was quite conscious then of his safety. But being home and enjoying being home, I didn't really focus on it that much. Then, I was assigned to March Air Base in California, and I moved my family there with me. Got the kids involved in school, and at that time I was a master sergeant, and I became shift leader in a big communications organization, and I didn't hear anything more from my dad because we didn't communicate that much because he had his thing going and I had mine going, my Air Force career, and kids, and school, and all.

And on the morning, Monday morning, January 10, 1966, I received a telephone call from one of my dad's sisters who lived in [1:30:00] Compton, there in South Central, LA; Compton, California. And I was informed of what had happened. The house had been firebombed and it was like two or three o'clock in the morning. It woke me up out of a deep sleep. I was living in my own house downtown--I bought a house downtown with my family--and that was really a shock. I wasn't too surprised because what I had seen, but at that time, it was a shock. So I woke my wife up and told her what had happened, and I proceeded then to get ready to go to work, put my uniform on. And so while sitting, after I got ready to go, I had time to think. I couldn't call anybody because the house had been burned, destroyed, and there was no telephone communication.

So, I'm here now just waiting on my--to find out what my next move is going to be. So in my thoughts, I said, "You know what? I know the--how blacks are treated in the justice system"--because I'm a grown man now, I'm thirty-five years old--"in Mississippi." And something told me, "Go to the FBI office in Riverside and tell them about what has happened and express my desire, what I would like to see happen in my dad's case." I reported downtown, Riverside, California federal building. I was standing outside the FBI office when they came to work. Just two or three gentlemen came in, and we greeted one another. Went, "Officer, can I help you?" And I told him about it, and he said, "We already know about it," because they were keeping up with these firebombings apparently on their system.

And long story short, I says, "I have one request. I do not want any law enforcement officers, people, on my dad's case, none from Mississippi. Outside of Mississippi, fine, because I'm well aware of the FBI, and I have top-secret DSI clearance.

I'm well aware of what's going on now." And that one FBI officer looked at me and he says, "Hold on a minute. Are you telling me that you doubt the integrity of the FBI?" I'm never going to forget it, like it recorded on my brain. And I told him, "I didn't say that. I told you what my desire was." And from that time on, I found out later that I was being trailed. I was under observation. One of the reasons being is, my security clearance and my position, because I was in charge of base telecommunication center, had fifty people working, having all kinds of intelligence stuff, very super sensitive thing. And the commanding officer, when I left going home, who was a colonel, called me into his office and told me, "Do not compromise my position." You know?

EC: How did they think you might do that? What were the--?

VD: What I knew. Now, I had access to--.

EC: So they think, but what did they think you would do with it?

VD: Well, we've had people deserting and going on and doing crazy stuff. Just want to let me know that my commitment was to the Air Force. Well, my commitment is also to my family. I'm not going to kill a career of fifteen years, going home, and do some crazy stuff. No. But that was okay, and I don't recall them ever telling me that he regret what happened to my dad because I wasn't focused on that. But when I went by the first sergeant, who was a good friend of mine, big outfit, a lot of people, he looked at me, just kind of shook his head like, "Dang." In the meantime, I went on in and started preparing to come home, and I arrived home. That was on a--. I left Los Angeles Airport at midnight on that Monday night after I got reservations, so I arrived in New Orleans that next morning and got a flight coming out of New Orleans to home. And during my trip home, I saw this one guy on the plane. I didn't notice it at the time, but the same guy

that I saw on the plane had boarded the plane at midnight in LA and we got to New Orleans and had to change planes a couple of times because we were having difficulty, and finally I called a bus, and came on the bus. When I got to the site, I saw the same guy again, but I never connected the dots.

EC: They already had somebody.

VD: Already had somebody on me, and that person stayed on me for a long time, because when I got back to my job after being home for two weeks, and then one of the guys in my department, where all of the messages on the base, all kinds of clearances, going through my facility that I'm in charge of. They never, never did identify me as being the guy who sees everything that go on. A message come across telling about my activity. [Laughter] My [1:35:00] analysis guy showed it to me. So then, you know, I says, "Hey. These people don't know I'm a Negro or whatever," and so I said, "Well, they've been keeping up with me."

But in the meantime, coming home to bury my dad and what happened, this is the most essential part. My dad, the father of eight children, seven boys and a girl, seven of his sons, including me, served a total of seventy-eight years on active duty during the Korean and Vietnam era and beyond. We were serving our nation protecting the very country that neglected to protect my family from the terrorist forces here. My dad and mom slept in shifts for years, which my mom probably told you about, for years, while we were throughout the world protecting the nation, and my country couldn't protect me.

Coming home to that devastating sight that morning when I arrived, and I looked at the burned-out facilities, which I think you've probably seen pictures of, and I went to the morgue and looked at my dad, that was probably the worst days of my life. I mean,

that was horrible. But I said, “Hey. You’re the oldest kid. You’ve got a responsibility. You’ve been around. Your mom, your sister been burned. Your dad’s dead. My family’s homeless. Law enforcement people everywhere, reporters everywhere, curiosity-seekers everywhere, at the burned-down site. Some grieving, some whatever. But I got to deal with this issue and then the burden is on my shoulder.” And having that responsibility as I grew up in the Air Force prepared me for a lot of tough stuff, but I was not prepared to deal with this.

But I said, “It’s over now. You’ve got to do what--.” So I just blocked it out. And I started dealing with the objective. I mean immediately. “Dad ain’t dead as far as I’m concerned. Yeah, he’s dead, but I don’t let this get in the way of what I have to do, consequently.” I got good family, and I had some help, but the decision was on-- around—me, being the oldest son, because that’s just the way we were raised. And in the meantime, I had contacted my other brothers and they was coming in, and the family getting prepared for the funeral and all this other stuff. Now, that was a very tough time. To tell you the truth, there’s never been another time in my life--. And it wasn’t--. My dad’s death, death comes, but the way he died and the contribution he had made to society, and the contributions he s--. All of us retired from the military with honorable discharge and with accolades. File full of things that we did that we learned at home to do right, and we’re good soldiers, no black mark nowhere, and we dealt with this.

So and I looked up and said, “Well, my praise for defending my country was to what? Put up with what happened to it.” That’s what my country thought of me, because this did not have to happen. The oath that my brothers now took, hey, we lived up to it. Wherever they were going to send us, that’s where we were going to go, and we were

going to do what we had to do. That's the way we--. But the oath that those people who took to protect my family, they did not do it, and I fought my country for not making them do that.

Now, I still love my country, but I still say, "Hey. My country could've done better than that. If I can do this for my country, how come my country couldn't do this for my family?" And it took me a while to get over that, but I never thought about being vindictive. That ain't me, but these things go through, because you have to have been denied the opportunity that you gave all of you for to try to have. And that was tough.

EC: When your father was killed, were all of your brothers who'd served in the military, had they already, were they already in the military, or did some of them join after?

VD: No, no, no. All of us had gone--.

EC: And drafted, right?

VD: Yes. Well--.

EC: You said joined, but--.

VD: But they were in the military. I don't know how they, how all of them got there. Being the oldest, I was the first. When my dad was killed, it's four of us on active duty. I was in California. Me, and my brother next to me, the second [oldest], he was career. He was on Shemya Island off of Alaska. My other brother was in Germany and I had one in Florida, and my brother Harold who had just returned from [1:40:00] Korea and ended his commitment to the service, honorably discharged, he was in the house that night. So the time that mom and dad, mom and dad were sleeping in shifts to avoid what eventually happened, they had five sons serving on active duty in the military. And for

us four sons to come home in uniform and bury my dad because of these race-haters, all because he's the "wrong" race, he's the "wrong" color, but he's born in this country. He was a good citizen, well thought of, a family of good citizens, and as far as I'm concerned, we weren't better than nobody, but hey, my family had--. And as far as I'm concerned, did a good job in raising us to be good citizens, and we live by that code today.

EC: Did anybody at the time recognize that fact about all of you all serving your country? Yeah.

VD: Other than the fact that we came home, it'd be in the newspaper. There's a sergeant came home, that one came home, but as far as--.

EC: But nobody--.

VD: Special, no. No.

EC: Yeah. The contradiction you were pointing out.

VD: Right. Nobody pointed it out.

EC: Can you talk about what your family's done over the years to try to pursue--there's probably no justice in this case, but--to make sure that some people were held accountable?

VD: Yes. My mom is a lady that I have the utmost respect for, and she gets that respect from all of us. She's number one in our life. She's the leader of our family, even though we were grown men. She went through all this and we never overshadowed her. You may notice that. We don't do that. And as a result of what happened to our family, she chose not to leave. She chose to stay here because she had those two kids. She was a teacher, and she had brothers living in Washington and other places that were



financially in good shape. One brother a dentist, others worked for the federal government in Washington, had good jobs, and they said, "Hey, leave the place! Come here." She said--. She thought about it and she said, "I'm not going," and she stayed, built a house on the same spot. Hey, and raised those two kids, Dennis and Betty, that she had by my dad, my brother and my sister. We don't have no "halves." Everybody's brothers and sisters. Sent them to college, college degrees. They're professionals and running them off in a life. And she built a home with assistance and continued her life, became an election commissioner in the same district where my dad was killed, for three terms and could've had more terms. And the whites put her in, all because of the kind of life that she lived. It wasn't because they felt sorry for her. That was probably a part of it, a little sympathy there, but because of the life that she did and the way that she lived her life after this catastrophic event.

And then she had to live through all of these klansmen's trials. She testified over seventy-something times and after the fourteen who did this were indicted and they brought some to justice, and finally they couldn't get Sam Bowers after they tried him four times because the jury had klansmen in there. She went through a whole, whole lot, and as a result, she maintained the family nucleus, the location, and we all came back home around her and built where you see we are today. She held everything intact, and to me, that demonstrates a whole lot about who we are as a family. There ain't no "big I's and little you's." We're just a family committed to where we were raised and we got a lady here that my dad chose to be his wife down the road that we totally respect until the end, and that we do.

EC: It's such a thing to have to go through, and it seems like that you all have handled it as well as anybody could.

VD: Coming out of this situation after we got the conviction of Sam Bowers--.

EC: Did that help?

VD: Yeah. Sam Bowers was in 1998. The Medgar Evers case serviced the opportunity for us to get Sam Bowers back in the courtroom. We won't go through all of that.

EC: Can you just--? I mean, we know, but can you say who Sam Bowers is, for people in the future who might--?

VD: Oh, yes. For Sam Bow--. Sam Bowers was the leader of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Jones County in the Laurel, Mississippi area, and he had power [1:45:00] that was equal to the governor's, what a former Klansman told me, that he was highly regarded and he could go to the governor's office anytime. And he had told former klansmen, or other klansmen in his organization, "You can kill a black man or nigger in Mississippi and don't have to worry about going to jail." Now, I got this from a former Klansman. So, Sam Bowers was a man that was beyond reach during that era. And to get him back into the courtroom in 1998, which required a lot of work. Our family worked with the law enforcement people to get him back to the courtroom, and I was the primary leader on that, with the assistance of the family now, but you've got to have a spokesperson. My mom and I, and my brother Dennis helped a lot also, and we were with the news media, and all, and created enough attention on it. [Pause] We created enough attention until we got the support of the community because we're going through all these phases and we only got five convictions out of the previous trials that

was held in the 1960s, late 1960s, [19]67, [19]68. But we never could get Sam. Now, we have a chance to get Sam. For Sam, and Sam was convicted on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August by jury verdict, 1998, somewhere around between two and three o'clock, a day I'll never forget, for what he had done. And he was carted off to the jail and there at the prison, and he died in November of 2006 in prison.

EC: What did it mean for you that he--?

VD: Justice finally, even though it's thirty-two years late. I wish it had been better, but it finally came and was very pleased. There were no high fives. There were no celebrations. We was glad to be treated equally in the justice system as others, even though it took a long time to do it. It took thirty-two years to do this. And the good thing that I see with my family, and I give this to my mom because she stayed here and dealt with it, is that we didn't give up, and the community worked with us and didn't allow us to give up. In other words, we had these memorial services every year on January the 10<sup>th</sup> and about that time at the church to keep it alive. And the Hub City Professional Men's Club, which is an all-black men's club in Hattiesburg, my brother was a part of that, Alvin, they'd have a program every year. For twenty-five years, they kept it alive.

And we got good support when it came time for the trials in [19]98. We had good support from all of the law enforcement officers. I never got one bad telephone call. One of my neighbors that I grew up with, a white guy, told me, he says, "Vernon," he said, "they're still out there." He says, "I'm not sure if I was you I'd be doing this." Well, I thanked him, and I appreciated it, and I moved on because I'd seen worse things in life. My dad gave his life, and it's the least I can do, or we can do as a family, is to keep on--

EC: Pursuing.

VD: Doing what we had to do until we get justice, at least try to. Okay?

EC: Go ahead.

VD: This photo is of my father, Vernon F. Dahmer Sr., back in his young days. This photo is a copy of the home site that was destroyed by the firebombing on January the 10<sup>th</sup>, which involved the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Laurel, Mississippi, led by Sam Bowers. This is the burned-out structure of the family home, taken about three or four days after the [1:50:00] firebombing. Those standing overlooking the site are my brothers who were serving in the military on active duty at other locations, including me, and I'm a part of this photo also.

Okay. This is a copy of the grocery store prior to the firebombing. The grocery store was adjacent to the house, about a hundred, hundred and fifty feet away. This is the burned-down site of the grocery store, with two of my dad's sons, my brothers, looking at the burned-out debris following the firebombing. This is a copy photo, is of the family members following the funeral, my father's funeral, which took place--the exact date I'm not sure--but it was the weekend following January 10<sup>th</sup>, which was on a Saturday.

This is a copy of the car which was in the carport, which was destroyed along with the firebombing.

F1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF INTERVIEW

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