

WORLD WAR II ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS SPENCER RESEARCH LIBRARY, KANSAS COLLECTION

Interviewee: Robert Reed
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Location: Lawrence, Kansas
Interviewer: Deborah Dandridge, Field Archivist

REED INTERVIEW NO. 1
Tape 1, side 1 begins.

DEBORAH DANDRIDGE: July 12, 2011 and this is an interview with Mr. Robert Reed of Lawrence, Kansas. And I thank you Mr. Reed for taking time to conduct this interview with us and share your story about your World War II experiences and your life experiences in general. So, we'll begin with some very basic questions about you. Let's find out when and where you were born, where did you grow up, who your parents were, what schools you attended, that sort of thing. Just background information

ROBERT REED: Okay. Well I was born in 1924. And—

DANDRIDGE: Is that what you told me, what did you tell me?

CAROL BURNS: That's fine.

REED: In Des Moines, Iowa and (clears throat) my family moved from Des Moines a little before I was two years old and we moved to Topeka, Kansas. And we resided at 1135, approximately, Lane Street for a while and that was next to the Charles Scott family, Elisha Scott family, Elisha Scott with his sons the— Charles and John who participated in the *Brown v. Board of Education*. (clears throat) Then we moved, when I was approximately three years old, to 1125 Lincoln Street; that was a block east of Lane Street. And that's where I grew up. I went to school at Buchanan School in Topeka, Kansas, that was about two and a half blocks from my house. And the school teacher there who I remember the most was Morgan Maxwell that taught the eighth grade. And he was very efficient teacher and when I left the grade school, before *Brown v. Board of Education*, when I left there to junior high I was well prepared.

DANDRIDGE: Buchanan was a school designated for African Americans in Topeka, Kansas, is that correct?

REED: Well, that was one of the schools.

DANDRIDGE: Right, one of the them. Uh-hm.

REED: Yeah and that was in the center of what we called Tennessee Town. Tennessee Town was named that because many of the blacks came out of Tennessee and settled in the middle of Topeka there, which was called Tennessee Town.

DANDRIDGE: And so you attended Topeka High School?

REED: Uh, yes after I attended junior high school, which was a traumatic experience because we were shifted from this grade school into junior high late and then we were put in classes with younger children who had been in junior high for a year or so. So I didn't like it a bit and then we went to—from there went to the mixed—and the junior high was mixed and then the high school was mixed. That was Topeka High School.

DANDRIDGE: Okay. When—you know, Buchanan School went through the eighth grade and they were keeping all the African American students through the eighth grade and then shifting them to the junior high, is that correct?

REED: To the junior high, yes.

DANDRIDGE: Right. And what junior high did you attend?

REED: Boswell.

DANDRIDGE: (overlapping) Boswell.

REED: Uh-huh.

DANDRIDGE: Right. So in that—What—was that, what years was that, in the thirties?

REED: Yeah, that was in the thirties. That was in, should have been—

DANDRIDGE: Oh that's okay, just in the thirties because that was before one of the cases that they challenged with the junior highs.

REED: Oh yeah.

DANDRIDGE: Okay, so after—So you graduated from Topeka High and then what did you do?

REED: Well after I graduated from Topeka High the—Europe was in a turmoil and there was not too much for high school graduates to do at that time but to either go to school or try to get a job somewhere. And, let's see, I—

BURNS(??): Yeah, I'd say so.

REED: Okay, I was biding my time while Hitler was ravaging Europe. And—

BURNS: (interjecting) What were you doing?

REED: Like, uh—Oh, nothing, I was just out of high school. And, so I was doing nothing, but I do remember what my high school principal said—One of the reasons I called him such a great principal because he knew how to keep me busy and whereas many teachers didn't know how to do that. He said, "Well, Bobby," they called me Bobby in those days, some people still do in Topeka, and, "One day Hitler is going to have big problems. You have to look at this globe as a big apple and one day Hitler's going to take too big a bite out of this big apple and it'll probably be Poland and when that happens we're going to be—have some big problems." The next year, Hitler marched into Poland and that's when everything happened. So there was such a thing as the NYA (clears throat) and the NYA was training us to have some kind of skills because the call was out for workers to go to the various plants in the United States. And—So I took up welding in the NYA and I became a welder and was told by my teachers that I would do well on the West Coast. So, I went to Seattle to work in the shipyards and because I also had an uncle there in Seattle. Well when I got to the shipyards, as with all minorities, men and women, they still wouldn't allow us to be complete skilled welders because they would have to pay us the same money as the white people. And women, too, the black women went west and they invaded from the south, many Southerners rode west, women and men, and they got jobs in the plants, but the black women their job was cleanup work. I was a welder partially but I was what you would call a tack welder, which paid me less than a full time welder; a tack welder is one who puts pieces together and tacks 'em in a short space and holds it for the main welder to come along and weld the whole seam, the whole line. And, of course, they got away with that. And, of course, let's see was it 1940 that A. Philip Randolph went to, had this great march on Washington telling the country, you know, what we needed to do. Then there was Kaiser who went and spoke personally with President Roosevelt and said, "Now we can't get this production done unless you allow blacks to work on these assembly lines." So it was a—even though we're fighting the enemy, we had to fight for jobs then. So, okay, I worked at that job until my number was called for the draft. And I tried to get a deferment for a while because I knew if I obtained a deferment, I may do better when I went into the service and besides I actually was accepted to Washington University because I was a tennis player and—But I couldn't make it into Washington University for the simple reason that my number was up and they called me into the draft and I had to go into the service. And that was in 19—and 43.

DANDRIDGE: So this is Wash U. in St. Louis?

REED: No, in Washington State.

DANDRIDGE: Okay, in the state of Washington. Okay. What did your family or friends, what did they think about the war at the time, before you left?

REED: Before I left?

DANDRIDGE: Right, uh-huh. Were they talking about it? What was your family or your friend's attitudes?

REED: Oh, yeah they were talking about the war, everyone was talking about the war and, of course, one the famous words there was about Jody. I don't know whether you heard of Jody, but Jody was the fellow who was always left behind. Jody's got your gal and gone because we had to go to war and the 4Fs, a person who couldn't qualify to go to war, was left there and he had all the gals. But, no, it was— The job situation in Topeka was the same as ever and that is that blacks only had menial jobs and we had waiters jobs and women could only get jobs working in Ms. Ann's(??) kitchen or being maids. That was it.

DANDRIDGE: Did your parents support the war or how did—before you were drafted, did they support it or—

REED: Oh, yes, they supported the war. Most parents supported the war at the time in my time. There was no rebellion as I have ever heard against, any blacks rebelling anywhere against the war. Blacks were very supportive of the war, anytime in any town. Whenever we got to any outfits there were no blacks saying, I don't like this, or, I don't want to do this. No.

DANDRIDGE: What were race relations like in Topeka and at the shipyards where you were in California, what was race—how would you describe, what was relations like?

REED: Race relations in Topeka is—was, first, you know your place. You're not going to get to do anything but work for the man in whatever menial jobs he had for you. And—

DANDRIDGE: (interjecting) But, what—okay.

REED: (continuing) And then, back to my high school situation, we had slight race riots in the high school. And I might have instigated some of it or talked about it, because I was an athlete and we had a black basketball team and—Also, I was the only black in the school who knew how to play tennis and I wanted to play tennis; I was a good tennis player but I would go watch 'em practice in this big, beautiful gym and playing tennis and I couldn't play. So there was an uprising. The principal at that time was named Principal Van Slack and he was a nice man and—but he used to call me in the office periodically and say, "Well, Bobby, what can I do? Why is all this uprising going on?" I said, "Well you have the best football players in the high school that you won't let play on the high school football team. You have separate basketball team; we only get two basketballs to practice with. But we have our little team the Ramblers," and, of course those records are the Ramblers at Topeka High School. And, I said, I never will forget telling him, "We just wanted to be a part of the school, just let us be able to participate and then everything will be all right." One year after I graduated they finally let one person play on the football team and then they, took a while and then they finally saw the light and integrated things. And after our little Rambler basketball team of which only a few blacks knew about basketball, they ever saw or heard of a basketball, ran the varsity off the court one day, beat 'em playing. (chuckles) Then they decided that maybe they may make a change. One other very important thing about the high school. You see, in the high school at the time, when we went in to choose our subjects in the school, they advised us to just take the easiest subjects and get out of school because we weren't going to be anything or not going to

do anything; they always advised all the blacks to take social studies and whatnot. There were a few geniuses in the school of which one of them was my brother; he was a stone genius. And he was—Saul Dice, a Jew, was his homeroom teacher and noticed it and guided my brother along the proper paths. And, of course, he graduated, he was my older brother so he graduated before me, so, therefore, he put in a little time in school before he went into the service. But for most of us it was, you know, just, No don't take physics or chemistry or math or anything, just get out of school, you know. So this is the way it was, from what I hear, across the country. That's why it was difficult to get started in the proper professions where we want to be. And, of course, I wish that I had got in that one year of college so I could have got with the Tuskegee Airmen because many of them came from—were my friends in my hometown.

DANDRIDGE: You know when you said that there was a little uprising and you wanted to be part of the tennis team at Topeka High? Can you kinda describe to me the nature of that uprising?

REED: The nature?

DANDRIDGE: Uh-huh, what was it? Was it a petition protest or—

REED: It was—there were a few little skirmishes, it's—We, the black students congregated on the—

DANDRIDGE: (interjecting) Second floor?

REED: (chuckles, continues) Second floor, so here we are on the second floor. The white students would have to go around us and I don't know what really caused it, but at one time during this possible uprising the white students—I never will forget it—were here and they were all, you know, glaring at us and everything. There were just a few of us, just, say two hundred black students, they weren't all on the floor, all of our big men weren't on the floor, there were just a few of us. I was just tall and skinny, I wasn't bad, you know. (chuckles) But they didn't have the nerve to come and get us. But, then, outside the school, when the police became involved, you know, we were loitering outside the school, you know how kids do to either start something or see what's going on. And the—I never will forget this plainclothes policeman hit me on the spine with his blackjack and, of course, my grandmother raised a particular Cain about something like that. But, then, there was a good friend of mine who later went to the Marines and he was pure gut and he didn't want anything happening to his friends. So he picked out one of the biggest fellows in the school, football player, when he was coming up the steps, he laid into him and, so, they had their little skirmish for a while. And then, afterwards, it began to clear up. It was just unrest that we knew that we were not getting a fair shake at the school. Um—And then the cafeteria was another thing. At noon the cafeteria smelled oh, so delicious. White kids had money to go to the cafeteria and buy the nice dinner—oh, I can smell it now, you know—we didn't, we—a lot, most of the time I went home for lunch, which was good for me anyway because I ran, I was getting in shape. But I would smell the cafeteria and sometimes we would go in there and maybe order mashed potatoes and gravy and that was a helluva good lunch.

DANDRIDGE: So the cafeteria was off limits because of the money not because they excluded African Americans from—

REED: Yeah. Just—you just didn't have the money to purchase the—to purchase lunch.

DANDRIDGE: Who was the gentleman who you referred to as having a lot of guts and going into the Marines? Do you remember his name?

REED: Yeah, William Kennedy. I grew up with him; he lived around the corner from me. (clears throat) We would get up early in the morning and ride our bicycles all over town and just have a good time.

DANDRIDGE: So, um, tell us—you had described to some detail, I don't know whether you want to add to it, but what were your circumstances surrounding your entry into World War II?

REED: The circumstances?

DANDRIDGE: You've already said you were working in the shipyards, right?

REED: Yeah, I was working knowing that I was going to be drafted from Washington State, Seattle, because I was working there at the Bremerton Shipyard. And, so, I was just drafted in the service and was sent to Fort Huachuca, Arizona for basic training.

DANDRIDGE: When—Did you, how did you—Did you have to go to your—you received a draft notice?

REED: Yes.

DANDRIDGE: Did you have to—where was your, where did you go to the draft board?

REED: In Seattle, Washington.

DANDRIDGE: Okay. What was that like? Was the board comprised of whites? What did it look like? Who were the—

REED: Oh the people who ran the draft board, everything was white in those days. (laugh)

DANDRIDGE: So you brought in your draft notice and then what happened?

REED: I was in the Army.

DANDRIDGE: What did that process involve? What did you have to do to get ready to get into the Army?

REED: Oh you had a physical to see if you were physically able, able-bodied man, so to speak. Or kid, rather. You went into the service and they issued you your clothing and all and before you know it you were on a train headed to Fort Huachuca, Arizona.

DANDRIDGE: When you were headed toward the training camp in Arizona, was this a training where only African Americans attended or was it a training camp where everybody attended but there was segregated units?

REED: No, Fort Huachuca is a big camp with, yeah, segregated units.

DANDRIDGE: But there were white units on the, at that camp, and black units?

REED: I think, I don't recall, you know, seeing any. But that's a big Fort, that's a big desert.

DANDRIDGE: Right. So what unit did you train with?

REED: I trained with the 780 Military, Combat Military Police.

DANDRIDGE: Okay and everybody in your unit was African American?

REED: Yeah, all except the officers. Yeah.

DANDRIDGE: What did you, what particular attitude did you have as a soldier participating the war? What attitude, how did you—What was your perception of your being drafted and serving in World War II?

REED: Oh, I just knew it was one of those things that we were supposed to do for our country. As far as getting along with my fellow man, well it depended on what outfit I was in.

DANDRIDGE: What did you think about your military training? Do you want to say anything about it? What some of your experiences were with your training?

REED: Yes. Some of my military training was a continuation of my Boy Scout training. The soldiers who didn't have the Boy Scout training were, sometimes—couldn't handle certain situations that we were taught. Sometimes they ate C-rations and I would cook a complete meal because I knew, from Boy Scouts, how to find certain things, you know. Dig up a potato somewhere and find somebody's chicken and bury it in a, in the coals in the ground and I've got a perfect meal.

DANDRIDGE: In terms of your training, what did you like the most about it?

REED: I can't say I liked any part of my—I didn't like any part of my basic training. It wasn't really anything to like. I got along with it. When I transferred out of that outfit, I was able to get into certain

jobs that I had responsibility and that was the important thing to me to have responsibility, believe it or not, that kept me busy. And it's always been that way with me.

DANDRIDGE: When you—so you weren't fond of the training, but what was your daily routine like with that training? Do you remember or—

REED: Oh, yeah, sure, the daily routine was marching and—some long marches, and drilling and, of course, marching never bothered me for some reason. I didn't have foot problems like some had, I was fortunate, and when we had long marches and we would stop for a break, I and another fellow always decided this was a good time to have foot races. (laughs) And the sergeant said, "Why don't you guys sit down? It just makes me tired." But we were fortunate to be in exceptional health.

DANDRIDGE: Was your sergeant black or white?

REED: Sergeant ____ (??), yeah. All the noncoms were black or we would have really been in big trouble, if we had had white noncoms at that time. It was bad enough having white noncommissioned officers, but we were—that was just the way it was. It was white noncommissioned officers and black noncommissioned officers. And the black noncommissioned officers were normally older soldiers that had, maybe some of them had volunteered but they were older than we were and many of them were ignorant. And, so you match that with a person who has a decent education and you're going to have fire. And, so, I had a few ups and downs with some of the black noncoms until I was in a productive outfit.

DANDRIDGE: What was your relationship with some of the white officers, both noncommissioned and otherwise? Do you remember anything?

REED: Oh, yeah, I remember a colonel who ran the, uh, was a battalion commander; that is a god(??) in the outfit. And we were in North Africa and at that time, you know, that was a French colony practically and the Arab people there were hungry and everything and they were hustling to do whatever they could. And our company commander, this colonel, called the men together and said, "I want you to know," (clears throat)—"I want you to know that this is what we do to people who steal from our outfit." And he, they had beaten these Arabs and everybody was quiet but me, the whole battalion. (laughs) And I jumped up and said, "You mean you're going to let this damn colonel say that and do that to these men? That's against the war—the laws of the war," or something, you know. And, of course, next minute I was in the guardhouse and it didn't matter to me, but there I was in the guardhouse.

DANDRIDGE: What was that like?

REED: Oh that was okay, that was—Let's see the building about this long, yeah it was exactly this long and you couldn't stretch out in it. And it was tin and it was out in the sun in Africa.

DANDRIDGE: How long did you have to stay there?

REED: A week, on bread and water. And, of course, the third day you—we got out and got more bread, I think maybe on the third day we got food or something like that. I lost a little weight. But then—Oh, yeah, and then before that time, too, when we were in—I guess we were in Fort Devens, Mass, we had transferred, I think, from Fort Huachuca to Fort Devens, Massachusetts. And we had come in off a march and I had gotten wind of the fact that the sergeant might have been selling some of the food or something. And, so, I accused him of it and I was pretty boy, so he thought he had a push over so he was a big bad sergeant. So he cold-cocked me while I wasn't looking, right in the mess hall, and, so I grabbed him from behind the counter and dragged him out and I was beating on him and I ended up right under the captain's table. And the captain said, "Don't you know you can get a general court martial for hitting a noncommissioned officer?" I said, "Yes, sir." So—I didn't like the outfit and when we were sailing over to France from Africa then I saw a colonel and told him my story and I said, "You know, I want a transfer, I want to be doing something. I'm doing nothing here but having troubles, there's nothing to do, and some people trying to take advantage of me. I'm not a good soldier; I'm—I would be if I was leading or doing something." "Well, I'll see about it," he got me a transfer. I went to this quartermaster outfit and the battalion supply sergeant, the highest rank you could get as a noncommissioned officer—now I'm a lowly private, but this warrant officer looked at my record, he said, "Well Reed, you can do most anything." I said, "Sure." He said, "Okay, you take over supply. You have now the highest rank of noncom in the United States Army." I said, "Yeah? Where's the money?" He said, "Ratings are frozen." But I didn't mind because I was busy; I was supply over everything. He said, "Now go down to the motor pool, get you a car, because you're going to have to go into tow to pick up supplies, food supplies," half a cow here, and you know a hundred of these, a thousand of these. I said, "I can't drive." He said, "Well there's a thousand cars down there, go wreck 'em until you learn to drive because you're going to take over this." And I was happy. That's what I did, I took that over and I was happy doing that job.

DANDRIDGE: I hate to keep going back to the training, but do you remember—what were some of your off duty activities when you were at this training camp in Arizona?

REED: Uh—

DANDRIDGE: Or do you remember?

REED: (continuing) I didn't go to the border. Naco(??) was a terrible border. We used to send some of our troops down there to bring some of the men back from Mexico because, you know, they'd get across the border and really get messed up in the head with what they were drinking. And I wasn't drinking that much at the time. And, so, I didn't go out from Fort Huachuca Base; it was a wild base.

DANDRIDGE: So what kind of—how did you spend your off duty time?

REED: Oh, in the tent on the base with most of the young soldiers stayed right on the fort there.

DANDRIDGE: What were some of, you remember any of your buddies that you met there or any of the people you were fond of?

REED: Well, let's see, there was one little fellow and I used to remember his name, I met him in Omaha. I ran across him and he was a good buddy. He stuck with me through—I had to laugh how he stuck with me through thick and thin. He said, "Yeah, you should have hit him again." I said, "You better get away from me, you'll get in trouble too." And he was a nice little guy.

DANDRIDGE: Were there any of your friends from Topeka in your unit with you?

REED: No.

DANDRIDGE: It was all, everyone was from other places?

REED: Yes. Most of these guys were from—no, a lot of 'em were from California and Texas, Mississippi and—

DANDRIDGE: Now you've mentioned, and I don't know whether this is correct, after your training you went to Massachusetts?

REED: Well, yeah, we trained in—See the Army sometimes gets things mixed up. We were training to go overseas in Fort Huachuca and we were training, at the time, probably to go to Africa because Fort Huachuca is desert, just like Africa; both of 'em hot as hell. So we went to Newport News, Virginia to get on the boat and they changed their minds and brought us back and shipped us up to Fort Devens, Mass, into the cold. And, of course, that's where I liked it, where it was cold because the heat was a little too much for me. And, then, from Fort Devens, Massachusetts, to show you how mixed up they were, then they shipped us to Africa, from Fort Devens, Massachusetts.

DANDRIDGE: So what unit were you in when you were—when you shipped—

REED: Fort Devens?

DANDRIDGE: Yeah.

REED: I was still in the 780 MP.

DANDRIDGE: What about when you were on the ship? Was it a different unit?

REED: No, it was the same unit going over. But then when I got to France I was able to transfer to this other outfit, in Vaux-sur-Mer, France.

DANDRIDGE: Okay, do you remember what was the other outfit?

REED: I don't remember the number; it was a long number of—

DANDRIDGE: Okay. So what did that unit do, what was that responsibility that you had?

REED: It was a supply and—

DANDRIDGE: Tell me what that—

Tape 1, side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

DANDRIDGE: --Mr. Reed about your travel on the, across the Atlantic, from Massachusetts.

REED: Um, just a lot of guys got sick on the way over. And me being a chowhound it—I would tell the fellow, "You know, you look mighty ill, you really don't want that food." (laughs) So I ate pretty good and got sick every now and then myself. But it was okay. It was crowded.

DANDRIDGE: What were your sleeping quarters like?

REED: Oh, crowded, but that's okay. You know, bunk beds. Here and the next guy here and the next guy here.

DANDRIDGE: When, uh—

REED: (interjecting) Typical troop ship transportation.

DANDRIDGE: Did you all encounter any trouble traveling across the Atlantic with the Germans or anything?

REED: No.

DANDRIDGE: What was—Who were the Navy people on this ship? Were there any Na—not Navy, but people in the Navy who were, you know, manning the ship?

REED: Many—That would be civilian because a lot of 'em were merchant marines and—Yeah, my brother and law to be, before we left Seattle, Washington, I got him in the Merchant Marines cause he wanted to go to the Merchant Marines and got him in that just before he would have been called into the service. So—which was a very dangerous job, more so than the Army.

DANDRIDGE: So, when you got to Africa, do you remember what some of your first experiences were? You've already mentioned some of them, but—being incarcerated in a tin can, but—

REED: The first experience was, very first experience when we got to Africa, I was eating lunch and was hungry as usual, me being the chowhound, and the sands were blowing and the sand was blowing into your mess kit, into your eating utensils, and you're still eating it. And then I looked out, up, and said, "Just what the hell are you looking at?" and I was talking to this camel. (laughs) This camel was looking at me.

DANDRIDGE: So you were eating outside?

REED: Oh, yeah. We were camping out outside, this was hundreds of thousands of men landing on the landing areas, they called 'em staging areas where we were. Yeah.

DANDRIDGE: So what did the camel say? Anything in particular?

REED: Yeah. Oh. (REED and DANDRIDGE laugh)

DANDRIDGE: So once you got there then what other things happened? Do you remember? What kinds of things did you engage in?

REED: Well, no, we went to our quarters and settled in and then we were, our job was to guard certain areas, certain food supply things of—our ammunition dumps and everything so that's what the MPs were doing and so—we were doing that.

DANDRIDGE: And you were serving as an MP?

REED: Yeah.

DANDRIDGE: Any incidents happen while you were there? What's your favorite memory of that experience in North Africa?

REED: No, except that, uh—There was one thing when we were on guard duty in Africa, North Africa. It could get so dark that you almost couldn't see your hand in front of your face and you're trying to guard a big operation of food and whatnot. So sometimes you couldn't do a very good job of it.

DANDRIDGE: So, from Africa, where did you go?

REED: From Africa, after—as I say, after we left Africa, we went to France, yeah. We took a boat and went into, landed in Marseilles, France.

DANDRIDGE: What was that like when you first got there?

REED: Oh, just another supply port and that's where we were for a while until I was able to get my transfer to that other outfit.

DANDRIDGE: And that's where you got the transfer?

REED: Yeah, um-hm.

DANDRIDGE: So, what was it like when you transferred to the other unit that you wanted?

REED: Well, like I said before, when I transferred to that unit and I never will forget the warrant officer looking at my record and saying, "Well, Reed, we know you can do anything and everything and our master sergeant is leaving and so you go down and take over his job. You have that responsibility." Well I was very happy, I was busy and, so, that—And from that time on, they never lost a pound of meat or a gallon of gas or any clothing or anything because I had recorded and kept everything in line.

DANDRIDGE: What was it like when you were doing—Was that duty twenty-four hours? What was your duty like? What kind of hours did you spend doing this?

REED: Oh, I suppose ten hours or more. You know, as a youngster you don't worry about hours if you're doing something fun, if you think you have the responsibility and all.

DANDRIDGE: What did you do for social life? Were you ever on, you know, have free time?

REED: We were stationed in this little town of Vaux-sur-Mer and that was, means False on the Sea, and it was a beautiful little peaceful town. And, yeah, there were other people there. (laughs)

DANDRIDGE: So what I'm trying to get at Mr. Reed is what did you do socially?

REED: Well I was a swimmer also, so we're on the sea and the—I used to go swimming and even at night I wouldn't sleep, I would go swim in the sea. It was nice and peaceful. And one of my friends decided that she was going to make some swimming trunks, so she made swimming trunks for me and I would swim up and down the water along the beaches, along the shores there and have a great time.

DANDRIDGE: And, who was she, again?

REED: Hm?

DANDRIDGE: Who was your friend again? Who was your friend?

REED: Just a woman there in Vaux-sur-Mer.

DANDRIDGE: Okay. Did you go to parties or anything like that? Or restaurants or something like that?

REED: Some, but not that much social, not that much social life with the natives, so to speak. I guess we could have, they were very sociable. Sometimes they would keep us up. See the French like to party and in all the little villages there you always had a, um—what do you call the circle?

DANDRIDGE: Oh, the town square.

REED: Town square, yeah, they all have the town square. And they all—the French would work three days and party two or three or four. And they'd have this party and they would play this accordion and they—oom pah pah, oom pah pah, oom pah—and they all danced around the square and it's the same dance the whole time—oom pah pah, oom pah pah, oom pah pah, oom pah. They're going around the square just dancing. And, of course, we would watch and because you couldn't get any sleep that night and, so, that's what it was. And, of course, we went into the bar and drank, of course sometimes I drank a little too much in the bars as many young soldiers did. The cognac was wonderful and it was—I never will forget it was called eau-de-vie, but many of my soldier buddies I didn't try to keep up with because many of 'em were getting too much of that stuff and they were probably coming home alcoholics. So—

DANDRIDGE: Was there any sort of thing, direction, coming from the US about your socializing with the—

REED: From the US?

DANDRIDGE: Uh-huh, or from your unit.

REED: Oh we had fights with white soldiers. Oh, yeah, we had fights with 'em, we had—And, then the Army discovered the town, I never will forget, and then they decided to make it a total resort for the soldiers coming back to rest and, so—Of course my name in the town was *le gran soldat*. (laughs) And, uh, so this guy—so a white soldier came up to a—and this happened all throughout the war, everywhere, and told this girl that knew me, said, "Yeah, they got tails." She said, "Well, I'm going to go get him and I want him to see his tail." And, so, that would end that, they would never proceed any further.

DANDRIDGE: When you were over—Now were you any other place other than France?

REED: The European Theater, some places, sometimes I didn't know exactly where I was.

DANDRIDGE: (overlapping) So you kept moving around.

REED: I moved around a little bit because, you see, towards the end of the war they began to dismantle these outfits, some of these outfits, and so they would place us in various spots and—But it was the European Theater listed on my discharge.

DANDRIDGE: When you were there, any particular danger did you encounter? Were troops from opposing forces there or were you away from the confl—

REED: No I wasn't in combat itself. And, of course, there were situations that you get into sometimes or you may get too close to the enemy or something and back off or there's a nut someplace. But generally no I wasn't in that. And of course, being a crazy kid, when the Battle of the Bulge came along because that year it was a very—I forget the year, but it was very cold and it was very uncomfortable everywhere, so I said, "Well, hell, I'll just volunteer for the Battle of the Bulge," and that was the fiercest battle, one of the most fierce battles of the war, that was the last push of Nazi Germany to try and break out. And, I don't know, you may have seen part of the movie of the Battle of the Bulge, but one thing about it was the Red Ball Express. You see blacks could drive much better than the white kids, for some reason, the timing. I never will forget sitting in my town there where I was and I knew when it was the Red Ball, because when they would approach a hill it was perfect timing They would approach a hill and it would go vroom and then I'd sit and count, one, two, three, vroom, one, two, three, vroom—in other words, each Red Ball Express trucker knew when to shift that gear to carry, keep that supply line going at a decent pace. And in that movie, it was where the German, the general was showing this other general this fresh cake and he said, "You see this fresh cake. They're getting a fresh cake of supplies through here to keep things going, so what do you think they're going with ammunition and guns and what not, if they can get a cake through, they're getting everything through." And it was the Red Ball.

DANDRIDGE: So, as a supply officer, you met with the Red Ball, you had to, that's who you—

REED: Oh no, I didn't meet with 'em, we were just an extended arm, whatever we—if we had to do anything with them, I didn't know about it, I just used to hear them from afar.

DANDRIDGE: Right. So you volunteered for the Battle of the Bulge?

REED: Um-hm.

DANDRIDGE: So, did you—

REED: I didn't go because—what happened, they had it—they had broken out and won it.

DANDRIDGE: When you volunteered, they were looking—there was no exclusion of African American's serving in combat? Or was there?

REED: Oh, yeah. The reason that they were taking everybody for the Battle of the Bulge at that time is because they needed people up there. They were, we were losing and, so, Yeah, we'll take you black boys. And they started taking blacks, but normally, no, they didn't take us in those outfits. And, of course, when I went into, when I was drafted into the service they asked me what I wanted to be. I said, "Preferably, I want to go into the Air Force." I said, "Because I have the eyesight and everything; I can see like an eagle. I can see a thousand miles." So—But if I had just that one year of college, I probably would have gone with some of 'em. But then I said, "Well okay I can't get that, I want to go into the tank corps." No, you can't do that. Most of the tank corps were white, but they did have a black tank corps,

which was very famous in Italy. And one of the stories which I believe was true, of course that—should I tell if it may or may not be true?

DANDRIDGE: Whatever you want to do. Yeah, go on and tell.

REED: Well, if you're familiar with Italy you know there's nothing but hills and mountains and whatnot. And a white tank commander came up to Patton, and you're familiar with—you've heard of Patton?

DANDRIDGE: Um-hm.

REED: (continuing) Outspoken.

DANDRIDGE: Right.

REED: And tank commander said, "We can't get our tanks over those mountains." "We can't get out tanks over those mountains." And Patton said, he said, "Well bring me my niggers, they're going to bring—they can get any tank over those mountains."

DANDRIDGE: Sounds good, sounds good. Let me—

REED: And they came over the mountains with the tanks.

DANDRIDGE: When you were over there, what other things did you experience, in terms of race relations among the US soldiers? Any experiences that you had there that you remember?

REED: Uh, no. Course the white soldiers were, you know, taught to be—have their own outfits and they didn't want to have anything to do with us. And only in service positions. And then the Navy, especially, that was really a white situation for a long time.

DANDRIDGE: Well, you're working as supply officer, who was around you? Were there other whites working in that same capacity or similar capa—

REED: Oh, no, this was a black outfit. Now I worked with a German prisoner; I was able to use German prisoners. And this German prisoner was about seventeen years old and smart as a whip so I could just turn him loose on my supplies, large fuel tanks and he knew how to figure them just like I did. We both know when trucks came through and got so much gas, end of the day everything checked out perfectly.

DANDRIDGE: Where did he stay?

REED: In the prisoner's quarters.

DANDRIDGE: Was that near where your unit was?

REED: Yeah, uh-huh.

DANDRIDGE: When did you—want to ask about your leaving the European Theater, you remember anything about your leaving and how you left and that sort thing?

REED: When I was coming home?

DANDRIDGE: Yes, uh-huh.

REED: Well, yeah, I do. I was anxious to come, which everybody, everyone would be. And I had this infected right hand, but—I don't know how I got it, but you know, young kids, things happen. And I wanted to be sure and get home so I stuck my hand in my pocket and was able to get on the plane. And while we're flying, I said, "Oh, I hope this thing doesn't blow-up." And it's getting bigger every minute; I couldn't hardly get it out of my pocket after I got it in. Then when I got to, uh, Fort Lewis, Washington, they immediately put me in the hospital and the, you could see the discoloration of the veins going up the arm to my shoulder. They said, Well you are just about to lose this arm, and they said, You could lose it but we're going to take care of it. And, so, when they lanced it the puss hit the ceiling and, so, I was there a couple of weeks or more. And then I was discharged from there and started home. I stopped in Chicago first because that's where my mother and aunts were and my sister was.

DANDRIDGE: What was that homecoming like?

REED: Oh it was, you know, I was king.

DANDRIDGE: You came home on the train?

REED: Yes, uh-huh.

DANDRIDGE: Did they meet you at the train station in Chicago or—

REED: I don't know, probably somebody did, somebody had to pick me up. And then I got home to—from there to Topeka and I was already married at the time.

DANDRIDGE: You were married before you went overseas or—

REED: Um-hm, before.

DANDRIDGE: When—Did you write letters home during the—while you were overseas?

REED: Yeah. I remember writing one letter to my sister; I said, "If I ever get out of this, I'll do the dishes from now on for you." (laughs)

DANDRIDGE: So, in your view, how did you view your participation in the war? What were some of the chall—what were the things about it that you didn't like?

REED: That I didn't like?

DANDRIDGE: Um-hm.

REED: I didn't like the—definitely the main thing was the lack of opportunity and the ignorance of some of my superiors. And it's just a fact that I had a high school education and sometimes—I never will forget sitting with a group of black soldiers in another outfit and one of them was a sergeant. And we were talking and whatnot and they all agreed, we were all frustrated because they all agreed, they said, Yeah we wish we could've had you as our officer instead of these nut pots that—And of course they would make white officers, they get the job easy enough. But—And also many of the black noncommissioned officers were not qualified because they were picked by the white, Southern officers.

DANDRIDGE: When you—In general, how did you view your participation in the war, then and now? How did you view it?

REED: Oh, it was an educational experience. It was something that we had to do and, so—I saw part of the world that I never would have seen and I'm lucky and thankful to be back.

DANDRIDGE: When you got back, how did you pursue work? What was that like, pursuing work?

REED: Well I pursued work for about a year and I had, I had several jobs. I went to work for the Santa Fe because that's where we could get job, in the Santa Fe shops as laborers. And—

DANDRIDGE: Did you join the union?

REED: Probably so.

DANDRIDGE: It was a union shop, I think, by that time.

REED: Uh-huh.

DANDRIDGE: So what kinds of things did you do at the shop?

REED: Well, we were in the warehouse and that was just lifting heavy objects. (laughs) Moving train wheels and two hundred pound kegs of nails.

DANDRIDGE: When you came back did you find it difficult to find a job because you'd been in the war? Did you find it difficult or had you?

REED: No, didn't find it difficult. And, also, being a hustler too, there were waiter's jobs, after one job I would be able to wait table and things like that.

DANDRIDGE: So who did you marry and where and—

REED: I married the prettiest woman in Topeka and her name was Opal Mitchell and she was a high school sweetheart. She also could play tennis. She lived on the south side of town. Before I went in to the service, while we were pretty close, and when I was in Fort Devens, Massachusetts getting ready to go overseas, why I had her come to Fort Devens, Mass and visit me and she stayed with me awhile. And it was in Ayer, Massachusetts that we got married. There was a colonel that was a chaplain—let's see, did the chaplain marry me or what? There was a colonel that was a chaplain in one of the black regiments, I think maybe 366th, I'm not for sure whether it was 366th, but it was a black infantry regiment. But he was, you know, still a man without morals and tried to keep my new wife in Fort Devens, Mass, you know, tried to keep her from going home before I left. Wanted me to leave and all that, so I had a little go around with him, and this was the black outfit. So, uh—And, you know, you never know what's going to happen, but then I finally got her on the train and got her out of there, but he tried to make it official.

DANDRIDGE: When you got back home, so, where did you live when you got back home?

REED: I lived with my mother-in-law; living in Mitchell, on the south side of town. And I lived with my, where I grew up, with the mother who reared me was my grandmother, actually.

DANDRIDGE: And who was that?

REED: Hm?

DANDRIDGE: What was her name?

REED: Her name was Lulu J. McAllister and her husband's name was William McAllister. And the reason being that it happened that way is that my mother was a schoolteacher and, being a schoolteacher, she had to take whatever job she could find. Schoolteachers, all of the local black schools were filled so she was a schoolteacher for a Pierce Edition(??) school in Topeka, which was a big one room schoolhouse out on the east side near Highland Park.

DANDRIDGE: And it was outside the Topeka district at that time.

REED: Yeah. But then my grandparents had to adopt us so that we would be able to see the country because my grandfather worked for the Santa Fe Railroad and that gave us passes and they took us around, we saw every part of the country, it was really beautiful and they were beautiful parents. But my mother and my aunt and my other aunt and they all, we all lived, during the thirties, in the big

house, as I say, on Lincoln Street. And with all those providers there we were able to make it through the Depression and, of course, my house still stands on 1125 Lincoln, so—

DANDRIDGE: So did you and your wife remain there in Topeka after you came back from the war?

REED: Yeah, we remained in Topeka and I worked in Topeka doing various jobs. Then I worked in Kansas City and then—Well, I guess before that I entered Kansas University—no I entered Washburn College before that, in 1946, because I only worked a short time when I came back from the war and then I went to Washburn College. And then in '48 I transferred to Kansas University and received my degree here, Kansas University.

DANDRIDGE: So you went to college on the GI Bill?

REED: Yes, uh-huh.

DANDRIDGE: Why'd you shift from Washburn to KU?

REED: Well because there was a lousy psychologist in, at Washburn. Washburn all in all was the better school because of the fact that your classes were small, we could learn more. In my history class, Ralph Bader(??), and there was say twenty-three or four in the class. My friend, Art Fletcher, was in the class and Art Fletcher had a good career as a public service servant in Washington, DC and framed the term, "A mind is a terrible thing to lose," he did that. And then the other one was very nice young man, he's deceased, Ownin Burnett, and William Harris was in that same class, all these guys, and we just got along famously. But then—And of course I knew Redman, Donald Redman, he was younger and he's a friend of mine now. And Richard Ridley is a friend of mine now, I see him periodically; he was at Washburn at the time. But, and I wish I had changed my major, but I thought I wanted to be this psychologist at Washburn had a book this thick, that's all he had, and he would drone on about nothing. I said, "It's time to go," so I packed up, went to—came to KU. Classes were a hundred and fifty in a class and no professor teaching just the teacher's assistant reading notes and at the end of the week you had to have a test on those notes. Well I was glad to get out of KU. Immediately upon getting out of KU, I went back to what Washburn University told me I should be in and that was business. And I went in to business without the business background that I should have had.

DANDRIDGE: So you got your degree from KU in psychology?

REED: Yes. Well, Kansas University shifted me back from a senior to a beginning junior, so I have so many courses under my belt it's not even funny.

DANDRIDGE: Okay, let's take a short break there.

Pause in recording.

DANDRIDGE: Thank you for a short rest here, Mr. Reed. Carol had some questions that she wanted to ask you about our previous interview and then she's going to—Carol Burns will now have a series of questions that she will ask you. And we may also want to elaborate more about your business and your career in business as well. But we'll start out—

REED: Okay.

BURNS: Let's go ahead and look at that question about the noncommissioned officers were black, "If they weren't then we would have been in trouble," you said earlier, my question to you is how. And you had just started to answer that with, "If they had been white there would have been"—

REED: A problem. It would have been a problem for the simple reason the blacks, including myself, would have said, well why aren't some of the noncommissioned officers black. You have some white commissioned—noncommissioned officers over us, some of these commissioned officers should be black. And, uh, because separation in anything, it always has been, saying that's not right. You understand where I'm coming from?

BURNS: I do. But you also said, that some of these noncommissioned officers, they weren't—they weren't very smart. And you said they were chosen by the southern—

REED: Yeah, southern white officers, I can imagine; or they were officers that had been in the service for a longer period of time, oh yes they were, and having been in the service for a longer period of time, then they naturally would rise up through the ranks. But that didn't make all of them worthy. I can give you an example if you want one.

BURNS: Sure.

REED: Well, the captain came over and told this corporal—Corporal was—I could tell he was part Mexican because of his name. I can't think of his name, I always tried to remember it. But, anyway, the captain explained to the corporal, "Now corporal you tell the men do this and you do that," and the corporal said, "Yes sir." And then—

Tape 1 ends; tape 2, side 1 begins.

BURNS: —the corporal was—

REED: Yeah, he was a corporal.

BURNS: Okay, and he was—

REED: So he had this, you know, you could tell he hadn't been through grade school. And I said, "No, corporal, that's wrong." Well, as a lowly private you're not supposed to "question the superior," quote,

unquote. But I did. I said, "No that's wrong." He said, "Well, you know so goddamned much, you come out here and do it your damned self." I said, "All right." (laughs) And I did and, of course that didn't set too well with him anyway, but I did. That was just one example. And maybe there weren't that many more but there were—Don't misunderstand, there were many good black noncommissioned officers, but every now and then you had some of the older ones who weren't that good. But, it was difficult for me to cooperate in that type of situation. In other words, I guess in making a long story short, I wasn't that good of a soldier. Just telling it like it is; I wasn't that good of a soldier unless I had some responsibility. And when I moved to this other outfit, I was perfectly happy, I did a good job.

BURNS: I also asked a question earlier. When you were in the combat military police, were there ever occasion—were you—Was your authority respected by non-African Americans or was your position of authority respected in any case?

REED: Uh—

BURNS: Or were you given the opportunity to practice that authority?

REED: (overlapping) No I didn't have that much of an opportunity to and I don't—The jobs that we had were more or less guarding facilities and whatnot, so we didn't run into any white counterparts or, to tell them what to do.

BURNS: When you first got in, when you were—when you found you were being drafted, that you were going to go into the service, did you ever have illusions that you would be a warrior or did you feel like your position there was just—

REED: That I would be a warrior?

BURNS: Yeah, was that an expectation that you had for yourself? Or did you see yourself as a warrior? Do you feel like your services, your talent, your skills were you utilized to the fullest? And, did you want to be a warrior?

REED: Warrior?

BURNS: Um-hm. In battle, did you have that kind of a feeling about—

REED: Oh, yeah, because I volunteered. I told 'em I wanted to be in the Air Force and, then, since I couldn't be in the Air Force, I wanted to be in the most dangerous job in the service in the tank corps. But we couldn't be. In other words, they put us where they wanted to put us and most of the blacks were put in service organizations. But the—One place that I did, as I say, I liked, I liked the quartermaster because the quartermaster you don't fight a war without a quartermaster. And I was busy, so as long as I'm busy doing something that was it. But—

BURNS: Do you feel like your combat training had gone to waste? Were you ever able to—or did it not matter because of your position of, being a supply officer, that you felt that you were valued as a serviceman?

REED: Oh, well yeah, I felt I was valued as a serviceman. You're giving service. Everybody can't get into combat or anything. But I had some good combat training plus the fact I was—I take marksmanship from my parents, my grandparents who could shoot better than Annie Oakley, and that's no bull. She could. Also I was a good map man and that's something you needed, so, in case that was ever needed, I would be good at it.

BURNS: Let's see. I want to go ahead and go back to this list of questions I was writing down earlier. Oh, that's my father's ring, that's the only thing I have left of him.

REED: Oh.

BURNS: My nephew gets it after me. My mom she's full blood Lakota; my dad he's a hillbilly, a white guy.

REED: Is that right?

BURNS: (overlapping) _____(??) half and half.

REED: Yeah. Lakota, huh.

BURNS: I was wondering if you have any Indian blood in you?

REED: Uh, yeah. The Indians who were never defeated.

BURNS: (chuckles) The Lakota or the Cheyenne?

REED: The Seminoles. Don't you remember? The Seminoles, they could not run the Seminoles out of the Everglades, they finally just gave up on it and—Is that on? Or do we want—

BURNS: Yeah, it's on. That's fine.

REED: But anyway, I'm trying to find my bearing on the Seminoles because I have enough Indian blood in me to qualify for the Indian part of bidding on government projects and what not. Just like I have the, for bidding on service-connected disability; I'm a service-connected disability veteran. But, with that, I need to find it but a lot of my papers were lost and my grandmother was proud of being the African American and when the Indian representatives would come to the house and say, Well your kids can go to Haskell or get facilities at Haskell—and Haskell has great hospitalization and everything—And one other Seminole guy told me I should be getting three thousand a month from the Seminoles from—but

having to prove it. I've been going to—That's one of the other things I have to do, I've been going down to the archives in Kansas City, looking things up. But one of my half-sister was Dillinger's girlfriend.

BURNS: Wow, that's interesting.

REED: And yet I can't find it; I think she went back to the reservation and died or something. But my father—it's on my father's side.

BURNS: You should be able to trace those things.

REED: Well, see my sister was just, "Everything is all right," and didn't keep—"Well, you know, I'm in touch with our half-sister." Well, I keep forgetting to get it marked down and she's dead by now I would imagine. I didn't get to go see my father when I should have, but that's one of those things.

BURNS: So your sister was living in Florida?

REED: No, unh-uh. My sister was living in Chicago, but she was in touch with my father's daughter which she was our half-sister. Her name was Henrietta. I'm going to have to remember that, because I'm going to have to try to get down there again and find that.

BURNS: Yeah, that'd be good. You were saying for your business that—Well, let me ask you about your business. When did you start your company?

REED: Oh, this has been in operation, this company, RWS, it was Reed Water Systems for years. But its RWS, now, Incorporated to enable, to work in conjunction with my kids because they have a construction company and construction management company. So, having my company too, that gives us another platform to bid on. And, as I say, about eight months old and—eight months or a year, something like that.

BURNS: So, from Reed Water Systems to Reed Water Systems, Incorporated or just RWS—

REED: RWS Incorporated.

BURNS: How many children do you have?

REED: Two. I—One daughter's deceased. So I have Cindy and the office is 839½ Massachusetts, its Win Construction, that's what she has. And her husband works with her and he's Willone Eubanks.

BURNS: Let me go back to these questions before we run out of time. I don't want to keep you here all night.

REED: Oh, no. I'm—doesn't matter. I wish I had taken some cough drops so I could talk clearer.

BURNS: I think all I might have left in here was a Big Red gum; I had several of those—

REED: Maybe that Big Red will do it.

BURNS: Help yourself. It was sitting in my bag for a while so it might be a little bit hard, but help yourself. I was wondering, as a veteran and a community elder, how do you view the United States' military actions post-September 11, 2001? In general. How the military has responded in the engagements that we've been involved in.

REED: I think they're doing fine except for politics that's not taking completely care of veterans. I think it's necessary to do what we're going. I'm not an isolationist; I think that's a silly attitude for the greatest country in the world. We're supposed to be here to help other countries and to, if we can, put other countries on the right track with, one women's rights, for one thing, democratic action. Now that people know what's going on in the world because of computers, they know that there's such a thing as liberty and they want it and we have to be a part of it and it's too bad we have to intervene. So—yeah.

BURNS: Do you have any family members who are active military now?

REED: No, I don't.

Pause in recording.

BURNS: Sorry for that interruption. Next question: did you have anything else that you were thinking about on this question that I asked you or did you—

REED: Right now, I can't think of—

BURNS: Okay, let me go ahead and get through the next one then. How has the African American experience in the military changed since World War I? In your opinion. Oh, I'm sorry, World War II.

REED: Okay, World War I, boy, I was going to say totally. World War II it's changed considerably because of Harry S. Truman. He changed things, integrated the services and the servicemen began to know one another. Before that it was propaganda keeping blacks and whites apart. And, also, it has shown that some of your greatest generals can be black, and they are. So—

BURNS: Did you ever expect, in your lifetime, that you would see a black president?

REED: No.

BURNS: How do you think he's doing his job, by comparison? Or, I guess, not by comparison. But he's got a lot on his plate, or we all do.

REED: Oh I think he's doing an excellent job. And there's a lot that we don't know of what he has to do to try and make progress for the whole world. And—Because we're just a small part of it. He has more work to do around the world than just the United States and politics. And this is the—one of the worst eras of political divisiveness that we have ever seen. And—Every now and then, I suppose, in many presidencies there, some of the crazies come out of the woodwork and especially in racist America. We understand that we're still racist, we're still working on it. So, therefore, we're going to have problems, we have had problems, and you're going to have some of the crazies believing what some of the crazies in higher positions are saying. The hate groups are growing, they're doubling, and this always happens during recessions and hard times. And servicemen are getting out of the service with no jobs and they are being enticed, some of them, into these hate groups. And these are trying times. And we just need to cope with it and the President is trying to cope with it. He has good people around him, trying to cope with the—all the situations at hand and every one is a powder keg. So, it ain't no easy sliding. (laughs)

BURNS: You're right about that. Has the portrayal or representations of African American World War II fighting forces been accurate in the mainstream media and in Hollywood pictures?

REED: Every now and then. Every now and then it has been but—and they have talked about what Red Ball did and they have talked about what the Tuskegee Airmen did. But there weren't that many fighting forces, black fighting forces to say that these troops went here, these troops went there in World War II. You didn't have to say anything about Nam or Korea because they were mixed. So I supposed it was an accurate portrayal of what has happened, yeah. The Tuskegee Airmen were talked about but that was just a small part of the Air Force. I didn't get in that; I wanted to, might not be alive today, but that's where I wanted to go. And they had, but you didn't hear much about, the tank corps and they were some bad dudes. They were good. It goes back to the black fighting man. We can go back to after the Civil War, when the settlers came across the plains. And when they came across the plains they were guided by one of the best cavalries in the world and it was the black cavalry, it was the Ninth. Every now and then you hear about the Ninth, but in the movie portrayal? No you don't hear about who's carrying the settler's across the plains. Of course the—I think the black cavalry didn't like too much about fighting Indians. (laughs) But that was their jobs and they had to do it.

BURNS: Do you have a favorite war or antiwar film?

REED: Uh, I can't think of any of the names, probably do. Everybody likes to see them blow it up and shoot em up.

BURNS: That's probably why they didn't have many movies on the support teams behind the combat units.

REED: Yeah. (laughs) Yeah, that's right.

BURNS: Let's see—I think I kind of asked you this before. Were you satisfied or dissatisfied about the amount of action that you participated in? Do you feel your talents and expertise were sufficiently utilized?

REED: I think my talents were utilized, naturally, once I was in the quartermaster outfit, yeah. I was able to contribute there. But I don't think my talents were utilized when I was in the MP battalion _____(??) I was not satisfied with that.

BURNS: What was your rank when you left?

REED: The service?

BURNS: Uh-huh.

REED: Private because ranks were frozen.

BURNS: Oh that's right, you said.

REED: Yeah, I had the job of the highest ranking sergeant in the service but they were frozen.

BURNS: During your time in the military were you able to make meaningful contributions or innovations in policies or practices? If so, can you elaborate?

REED: Oh, I remember one thing on troop train. Traveling across Europe, they had these cattle cars; they called 'em forty-and-eight. They either carried eight cattle or forty men. And you've seen in movies, they're short, they're not long railroad cars like you have here. But, anyway, we had men—Our troop train was rolling across some place and we had these men crowded in there and everybody was trying to lay on the floor of the troop train and it was crowded and everybody's mad at one another, you know, packed in there like sardines. I said, "Well, you guys don't have to do this." I said, "Half of you hang your blankets"—the Army blankets are tough—"Hang your blankets up from one side to the other and the other half lay on the floor." And we did that and, boy, guys started really—everybody wanted a hammock instead of laying on the floor then because it was a lot of fun. A sergeant came along and saw it, said, "Hey this is a good idea," and he went up and down the line of the train and made everybody in the whole battalion change that way because people were getting in fights and everything because they were so crowded. I never will forget that. Yeah, I did that.

BURNS: That's a good story. I bet they still have that in practice now; they probably even have it in the manual.

REED: (overlapping) Yeah, they would, probably have it.

BURNS: You mentioned early and I have a question here, what was your nickname?

REED: When I grew up?

BURNS: In the military.

REED: In the military?

BURNS: You said they called you something in France.

REED: Oh, in France *le gran soldat*. Yeah.

BURNS: *Le gran soldat*?

REED: Yeah, the big soldier.

BURNS: So did that catch on? Did everybody call you that?

REED: Oh, you know, some of the townspeople when they would point me out. See I have shrunk or shrank—anyway, I've shrunk three and a half inches because of my age. I used to be 6' 3 ½", 6' 3 ¼".

BURNS: You're still giant.

REED: Well, yeah, I was a big dude.

BURNS: So did you have any other nicknames in the service? Or growing up?

REED: Oh, Doc Doey. I was always—or Rodney the Rock. Doc Doey because I was always doing some—I was always busy and to this day I can't figure why a child would say they're bored because I was never bored, I always figured a way to do something. I could go play by myself. I made my own kites, my own tops that I could spin, my own bows and arrows. I had a pretty good time. I was fortunate.

BURNS: I think you already answered this, but I'll go ahead and ask it anyway, in your tour of duty overseas, were your experiences with non-Americans positive or negative?

REED: Oh, positive, very positive. I—well to make it positive you learn to speak the language and I almost learned it and then when I came back forgot a lot of it. But French I used to—I learned. And when I was in Africa—on, no—When I was in North Africa, see I looked like an Arab and the Old Medina they didn't allow any whites or foreigners in Old Medina, you could get killed. And that was the place of refuge for some criminals would hide there. You're not old enough to know of the famous movie *Casablanca*, are you?

BURNS: I remember that, I've seen it one time.

REED: Okay, well *Casablanca* was—and *Pépé le Moko*? Pépé le Moko was the fellow who hid in the Old Medina, he was able to hide there, no police could find him. You know the—you go in and the narrow passageways to Old Medina where people lived? Maybe you forgot some of it, but anyway—I would be able to go in there because of the fact that I looked like ‘em and all I had to do was take my clothes off and get a sheet, and get my feet dirty, a few onions in a basket. Because I wanted to see the area and go up in there and sometimes I would, might even have a friend and go up in there with my service clothes on and wander around. And then I did go into some of the Arabs tents in Africa, which was interesting. You know they were off by themselves and you know you never knew who your friends were. Well you know I didn’t care, I’d just go in there and they’d say, “Well if he’s got enough nerve to come in here, then we may as well get along with him.” And they may be blowing hashish or whatever they’re—or marijuana, they had good marijuana over there—and I would go in, sit for a while, and then go out. They became my friends. One welcomed me in the tent even though we couldn’t even speak to one another but I would visit, I was sociable.

BURNS: That’s good that you had good experiences. Do you know if your pay or compensation for your services was comparable to non-African American servicemen?

REED: Yeah, it was comparable. Yeah it was the same. If you were the private, you made so much; if you were a sergeant, you made so much. But getting there in the—I say in the black company’s they already had their setups, who was a noncom and what not.

BURNS: We’ll be _____ (??) shortly.

DANDRIDGE: Take your time. Have you gotten through all your questions?

BURNS: I got through all the questions. I’m just going to see if there’s anything important down here.

REED: I’m in no hurry.

BURNS: Okay, um, let me see here. Let’s go ahead and go down to this other set of questions here. What has changed in terms of the character of African American community since racial integration began?

REED: Well, you’ve heard of urban renewal, do you know what it was called? Shall I use the term?

BURNS: Say it.

REED: Oh well it’s been called nigger removal. In other words it broke up, urban renewal broke up all the black communities, all over the United States, that’s what has changed. Like in Topeka—you live in Topeka?

BURNS: Kansas City.

REED: You live in Kansas City? Kansas or Missouri?

BURNS: Roeland Park, Kansas, right outside of the Plaza.

REED: Uh-huh, oh okay. Well it wasn't there. They still have quite a bit of the ghettoish(??) in Kansas City, down in the heart of Kansas City, down near _____(??) Street and whatnot like that. But in Topeka, for instance, there was Fourth Street and it was quite a little community. There was a pool hall and beer parlor and chili parlor, drug store and some of the black professional men's offices. Charles Scott and Sean Scott, and Eliza Scott their offices—you're familiar with that name? Okay, their offices were there. Sam Jackson was in there with the Scotts and all. And then urban removal—I mean renewal comes through and they built highways through there and stuff like that. And, so, then we start living, can live all over town so its no certain gathering point besides church. It makes it a little different, I guess its okay.

BURNS: Yeah, we kind of experienced that too, Indian people, when they busted up our communities—

REED: Uh-huh, yeah.

BURNS: Kids go more wayward without that influence of granny or auntie sitting on the corner.

REED: Uh-huh.

BURNS: Um, were there any drawbacks to desegregation? For example, were there any instances where you felt like you had to start over again or prove yourself in a changed situation?

REED: Well not me, but I would imagine some others did. I would imagine, and I guess it did happen in the teaching profession where they would have to, especially with the —You know prejudice looms and it's difficult to get a job back when you're facing prejudice and if—Well the jobs for the teachers, they're naturally going to use more of the white teachers than the black teachers. This is what happened during *Brown v. Board of Education* many of the teachers didn't want to go along with that because they knew that the schools would be closed, the community schools would be closed, and the, they wouldn't be needed in the junior high schools or the high schools. And I wonder sometimes about that. You see when you have your community schools—you know there's pros and cons on this—We need to integrate, we need to have that to have experience with the other races, but the community schools like Buchanan School for instance where if I got out of line my grandmother all she had to do was call the school, only a block and a half around the corner. And most kids in the area, the principal had his finger on 'em, if things weren't going right with that student, you call the parent and, boy, that was it. They'd come up there and took care of the situation. But integration is good, it's a—what we needed to, for jobs and whatnot.

BURNS: We've all got to get along; we all live in the same place. Let's skip down to—What Kansas specific African American history do our younger generations know very little about?

REED: What did you say?

BURNS: What Kansas-specific African American history do younger generations—

REED: (interjecting) Know little about?

BURNS: Yeah.

REED: Well they know little about, I would think they know little about from whence we came. They know little about my great-grandfather and other great-grandfathers who—Well, mine, came out of Kentucky and brought his daughter, my grandmother, in a covered wagon from Kentucky to Kansas and he founded, was the co-founder of the only black town in Kansas, Nicodemus, Kansas. He was a pastor there and raised his three daughters and—I don't know, raised his daughter rather; then my granddaughter raised her daughters in Western Kansas. And I don't know—The past history of the NAACP, for instance, young blacks don't know about and many of the old blacks don't know about, the past history of the—how the NAACP, how it's a constant fight and it's still a constant fight whereas a lot of us say—

Tape 2, side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

BURNS: —want to support that, financially support.

REED: They don't want to support it and it's something that we need to always support as a race. And know what they have done and the sacrifices that the lawyers have done over the years to help us in the schools; and also how they have to start over again helping us in the schools because the schools are trying to re-segregate themselves. And the black NAACP lawyers with the *Brown v. Board of Education* verdict they—or whatever it was, they had to go to every school system, practically, in the South and sometimes get run out with the threat of death to plead their cases. And they finally, the NAACP finally won with Thurgood Marshall through the biggest case, through the best attorney, biggest and best white attorney in this nation named Davis, the black NAACP beat him, won out over him. And our kids should know that. And that was the culmination of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Through many smart black attorneys who gave up almost their life and their time and they weren't making any money at it. And for us to sit here and say we don't support something like that, I think it's a lack of understanding what has happened in a hundred years with the NAACP. I will get off my soapbox.
(laughs)

BURNS: Who is the African American you most admire?

REED: Living or dead or what?

BURNS: Either.

REED: Either? Oh I guess my grandfather. Grandfather and grandmother, they were great, great people.

BURNS: I remember the story you told earlier. What does Black History Month mean to you, personally?

REED: Well, it means a time to learn more about our past and about black history. About people in the past that I was saying, answer to one of the questions, our kids don't know about our past and I think Black History Month helps us to know more about from whence we came.

BURNS: Uh, oh—Did you join any veteran organizations or activities after the war?

REED: Oh yeah. The, uh, let's see what was it? The AVC? I think that's the one that they were trying to call communistic. Then the, it escapes me, I don't know why.

DANDRIDGE: Can you explain to me just a little bit more, when you say the AVC what was that? What organization was that?

REED: Well it was called the—

DANDRIDGE: I mean what was it—what were some of the terms(??)?

REED: It was called the American Veteran's Association, I believe.

DANDRIDGE: Okay, all righty.

REED: Oh, yeah, the word that was escaping me was the main one, which is the American Legion.

DANDRIDGE: But the AVC or something you said—

BURNS: (interjecting) A-V-C.

DANDRIDGE: (continuing) —was claimed to be Communist?

REED: Um, what was his name back then that was putting communist on everybody?

DANDRIDGE: Oh, yeah, uh-huh.

REED: Can't think of his name.

DANDRIDGE: McCarthy.

REED: Yeah, McCarthy. I think it might have been in that time too. But, yeah, the AVC was and they were trying to call it that. And the AVC was just dissenting and one of the up and coming lawyers—the family I grew up were P. Burtons in Topeka and I remember Phil Burton at the time was running the AVC. He became a quite renowned lawyer in Seattle, Washington later. You remember him? Yeah. And it was one family that refused to turn white because all of ‘em looked like white kids, practically.

DANDRIDGE: The Burtons.

REED: Yeah, all the Burtons. And they were quite a family. And Barbara Burton, I think she’s still alive, she came back and her kids built her home, a beautiful home right in Tennessee Town, right there on Buchanan Street. Do you know them?

DANDRIDGE: Yeah, I know the Burtons.

REED: Oh you do?

DANDRIDGE: Yeah. Um, are there any more questions? How do you, how do you think military life influenced your life? Military experience influenced your life?

REED: I don’t think it influenced my life. It was something—I guess part was an adventure, it was an experience, something to do, but to make me a better man, no I don’t think so.

BURNS: We talked about it a little bit, but you might have a different question.

DANDRIDGE: Yeah, so just tell us just the background of your business. When did you get it started and how did you get it started.

REED: Which one? (Laughs)

DANDRIDGE: Oh, well let’s say your current one.

REED: Oh the current one? Okay. My children are in, have construction business at 839 ½ Massachusetts. My daughter has Win Construction, Cynthia Eubanks. My son-in-law had a construction business in Kansas City several years ago which closed out and he came and is working with Cynthia with Win Construction. We found out that there were—pardon me—many bids to be had by disabled veterans and, so, I’m a service-connected disabled veteran. And being a service-connected disabled veteran with business they decided that we should change Reed Water that I used to have into RWS and have a disabled veteran business, the advantage there being some of the bids that the federal government has they open only to the service-connected disabled veterans. For instance the last bid that we were able to bid on as disabled veteran, there wasn’t a slue a bids, there were four and so we won the bid. And so with the service-connected disabled veteran then the Veteran Administration itself will accept bids from

only service-connected disabled veterans. And I was trying to prove that I was service-connected disabled veteran because of the knee and they wanted to turn that down and they did. We're going to reapply, but the thing that happened, I kept saying, "Well"—and this guy, I don't think, wanted to cooperate with us anyway, thought I was trying to get some money—and I said, "Well, before I got out of the service I had a, almost lost my arm I had this bad hand before I was discharged." And then I went to the American Legion and before we couldn't get the zero percent disability that we needed for service connected. Went to the American Legion and the American Legion representative was able to call someone in the American Legion and they pulled the record from the file and found out that I had been service-connected disabled veteran since 1946.

DANDRIDGE: Oh my goodness. So you were more than qualified.

REED: Yeah.

DANDRIDGE: Did you—were you able to list, in your other, list the kind of businesses you had preceding this one?

REED: To list that—

DANDRIDGE: Yeah, how many—what are the names of some of your other businesses that you maintained(??)?

REED: Well, when I got out of school, as I said, and I graduated in 1951 from KU, I got out of school and almost immediately after a few odd jobs I almost immediately went into a business selling food freezer plans. And they weren't hiring blacks as salesmen in 1951 anywhere, but I went down to this place and said I wanted to sell. And I looked at this sales manager and told him that I want to sell to the black people in the neighborhood. Well you see I had to do that to get his attention because he was a white cracker from California. He said, "Well I can't hire you, but you go down to the people that own the place and maybe they can hire you." Now, any sales organization, they're always looking for salesmen but this black person they couldn't hire. I went down and talked to the owners and the owner said, "Well sure Reed. Yeah, you're hired." I went to work for them and in the first week after I spent two weeks learning about the products and all, the first week I went to work I was the second highest in the company, in the city, in Topeka. Now I got a wife that remembered the black culture, the black culture was at that time especially, security is working for somebody. Ain't no way in God's green earth you can work for yourself and do anything; you need a job from eight to five. Well, I'm not going to go into the whole story, I don't think you want to hear that, but anyway I continued on until—Of course my mother came to see me and she was very happy and congratulated me because I had won this beautiful rifle, you know, that was the second prize. But I continued working and I knew that this was the time in my life that I could do it. I could—I could actually(??) become a millionaire with some help. I went out and worked and I'd come in late and, of course that was insecurity for my poor little wife, I hated that. And I guess I didn't handle it right but I'm the only black in the company, this is a national company, I'm the only black in it throughout the whole United States. Within the year, I was number one. I went—I

happened to be in Memphis, Tennessee at one time while I still was doing a little bit of it, and in Memphis you can walk across to Mississippi and I walked into the Mississippi office of this Rich Plan Company and the guy said—and I didn't say anything and he looked at me and said, "You're Reed." I said, "Yeah, so?" "You come and work for us." I said, "Is you a fool? This is Mississippi." He said, "You could sell to anybody." (laughs) And wanted me to come and work in Mississippi, it shows you what the dollar'll do. But I didn't. But from there the communications didn't go too well for my wife in that business, I did something wrong, probably, I didn't explain things to her right and one thing led to another and I, rather than being home, I just went out on the road and come home on the weekends and things like that. And drank too much, also. But I took most of the—You know, you've heard of the Pied Piper? Well I was the Pied Piper and most of the salesmen wanted to go wherever I went. And, at that time, there was no place for a black man to stay in a white hotel, so we all congregated at this one black hotel in Manhattan, Kansas. Which I shouldn't have done that; I should've opened my own food freezer plan and not told these other white folks about all the opportunities I had up there to sell people this—you know, the Big Red One, the first division had come back and they wanted the food freezer plan. So I was telling everything, everybody. And I came down to Lawrence and bought a new Buick Super off the floor and paid cash for it; I was making some big dough. All my friends had bought the unit from me except a few who felt that the white man could give 'em a better deal and I was damn near running the company. (laughs) That was the first business.

DANDRIDGE: Well, can we continue this conversation with another time? Would that be okay? Bring you back up—

REED: You can see how windy I am. I don't care.

DANDRIDGE: We appreciate all your time. It's just that, we think, you know, you've gone a long and we promised not have people go this long. So why don't—

REED: You're tired, I'm not.

DANDRIDGE: Well, we've all got to get back. But we will be back; we will bring you back next week if that's all right, sometime.

REED: Yeah, that's okay.

DANDRIDGE: And we thank you very much for this interview, Mr. Reed, and thank you Carol. Thank you.

Tape 2 ends.

End of interview.

WORLD WAR II ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS SPENCER RESEARCH LIBRARY, KANSAS COLLECTION

Interviewee: Robert Reed
Date: 26 August 2011
Location: Lawrence, Kansas
Interviewer: Deborah Dandridge, Field Archivist

REED INTERVIEW NO. 2
Tape 3, side 1 begins.

DEBORAH DANDRIDGE: —August 26, 2011, My name is Deborah Dandridge and this is our second interview session with Mr. Robert Reed for the African American World War II Veterans Oral History Project. Thank you very much, Mr. Reed, for coming with us.

Pause in recording.

DANDRIDGE: How are you Mr. Reed?

ROBERT REED: Fine, good to be with you today.

DANDRIDGE: Okay, thank you very much. Mr. Reed in our last session you had just completed talking about your first business enterprise. And do you want to continue on and what was your next business enterprise about—after the salesmanship that you were involved with refrigerators?

REED: Well that was food freezer plans; freezers full of food and monthly resupply in those freezers for customers. And then from there I went to insurance. Yeah, from there I went to insurance.

DANDRIDGE: Was that selling insurance?

REED: In selling insurance.

DANDRIDGE: Do you remember what insurance company it was?

REED: No, I don't. I started out in the Arkansas state area; I was coming from Memphis after being involved with the savings and loan there, the black savings and loan there, I was public relations director there for them for a year and it's a job that I sincerely didn't like. And, uh—

DANDRIDGE: Why didn't you like it?

REED: Well because, back to my schooling, I wasn't looked after—I blame my teachers for this, to make me become efficient as a speaker. I always was deathly afraid to get up in front of an audience and speak to them unless I was selling something. In college I made a C minus in speech, so you can

understand where I was. And, yet, I needed a job so that's the reason I went to, went south to work in the savings and loan.

DANDRIDGE: Was it a job advertisement? How did you happen to know it was a job opening?

REED: Well, one of my friends said that they needed the—needed a person there and they figured I would be a good person for that. I reluctantly took the job because I knew my, I needed to feed my family at the time and it was a year of nightmares. But after I went around to a hundred churches in Memphis—there's more churches in Memphis than service stations at the time and at that time there was service stations, gasoline service stations on nearly every corner in Memphis. And many of the preachers there were very friendly and pushed me to get my point across, to try to get our people to put their money into the black savings and loan. And Benjamin Hooks, who was one of the former NAACP Presidents, was one of the owners of the savings and loan at the time. Well, anyway, I came back up through Arkansas and got into sales in the insurance and investment business, where I sold insurance and investments, mutual funds together with the insurance. And, then, after a stint in Arkansas moved my business into Kansas City, coming closer to home.

DANDRIDGE: When you were in Arkansas, was that business African American owned? Or was it some other?

REED: Well, no. I was an agent for a white insurance company.

DANDRIDGE: And this was in the fifties or the sixties? Do you remember?

REED: That would have been in the sixties by then.

DANDRIDGE: You want some water? What—Did—Okay, hold on just a minute.

Pause in recording.

DANDRIDGE: —from Memphis to Arkansas?

REED: Oh from Memphis to Arkansas, you go right across the bridge from Memphis and you're in West Memphis, Arkansas.

DANDRIDGE: But what made you go there? What was the drawing card?

REED: There were some customers in West Memphis and I was thinking, since this insurance company was in Arkansas then I would work in Arkansas for a while and then, later, move on into Missouri because the owner had license in Missouri, also, and that would be close to my home and my family.

DANDRIDGE: How did you exit from your job as a PR for the black savings and loan?

REED: Quit. I resigned.

DANDRIDGE: Was that creating a problem for them?

REED: Oh, no, not for them. I think it was good for them. And I think, possibly, they might have been relieved. Because, as I say, I wasn't the greatest spokesman for them and I accomplished some but I think a better spokesman could have accomplished a lot more.

DANDRIDGE: So salesmanship was your forte?

REED: Yes.

DANDRIDGE: So the insurance company in Arkansas, you combined several things that you were doing? Selling insurance and doing other things?

REED: No, no, I was only—when I went to Arkansas I was only selling insurance.

DANDRIDGE: Who were your major customers?

REED: Individuals.

DANDRIDGE: Okay, were they African—

REED: (continuing, overlapping) Homeowners, homeowners.

DANDRIDGE: (continuing) Were they African Americans?

REED: African Americans.

DANDRIDGE: Only?

REED: Only, um-hm. African American only customers at the time.

DANDRIDGE: Is that your choice or was that the company's choice? That your customers only be African American?

REED: That was my choice. And also at the time there was a discrepancy as far as the type of policies that African Americans could get and white people could get. And the type of companies, the main companies today that sell insurance did not sell auto insurance or any other type of insurance to blacks at that time. The type of insurance—I take that back, the type of insurance they did sell to the blacks was the industrial insurance. Industrial insurance is where you—don't you recall when the insurance

man would come around weekly and collect premiums? That was industrial insurance, that's all we could get, and we paid through the nose for that insurance.

DANDRIDGE: What did it cover?

REED: Industrial insurance?

DANDRIDGE: Mm-hm.

REED: Industrial insurance covered your life insurance. If black people wanted some coverage, some life insurance coverage and that's what it was.

DANDRIDGE: Could you, if you continued to pay out, could you take a loan out from it like you can on—

REED: No. They said so, but at that time, the industrial insurance didn't build up that much unless you were putting in quite a bit of money. And I don't recall the technical aspects of the industrial insurance.

DANDRIDGE: So the comp—So you deliberately chose to sell only to African Americans. What kind of insurance were you selling to them in Arkansas?

REED: Well, as I said before, I was selling the—a new type of insurance that was not industrial, where they could pay monthly or pay yearly and also connected with the mutual funds, which would give them more of a monetary advantage later on down the line. And was educational to them and it was interesting to them to see that if they could afford that. And then I moved up, on into Little Rock, Arkansas and this was after the Little Rock Nine had been accepted to the schools. I met, at the time, Daisy Bates who, you know, Daisy Bates and her husband who had the newspaper and fought, she was quite a colorful character.

DANDRIDGE: Were they your customers?

REED: I approached them to be, to make a pitch to them to be my customers, but they weren't but there were many others who were my customers. An interesting person there was—speaking of black history—was a person named Dr. Jones, who graduated from Kansas University in 1924 and he was a medical doctor there at Kansas U—in Little Rock, Arkansas. And many other people of distinction were living in Little Rock at the time, which made it an interesting place to be.

DANDRIDGE: So you had plenty of customers with working class and middle class blacks, I assume?

REED: Yes, I had some customers. I was struggling along with the insurance business there.

DANDRIDGE: Who were some of your competitors? Were there black insurance companies also competing with you?

REED: No. This was relatively new at the time. I had to take an investment-type examination to be able to sell the investments, the mutual funds with the insurance. And, uh, that—From there I moved on, took the company on to Kansas City and sold the funds and, the mutual funds and the insurance in the Kansas City area. And, actually, we opened the first all-lines(??) insurance agency, black insurance agency in Kansas City, Missouri.

DANDRIDGE: Where was it?

REED: The first—it was on, it was called Statewide Insurance, and the reason we were able to call it all-line was because we had life insurance that people could pay by the month or the year, which was not the industrial insurance. And we had auto insurance, but at that time, in Kansas City, the auto insurance companies were not insuring the inner city blacks so we had to, we had to use off-brand insurance companies, auto insurance companies because getting insurance, being an agent for one of these insurance companies, we just couldn't do it. They didn't allow it.

DANDRIDGE: Even though this was after 1954?

REED: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Insurance was quite a prejudiced business back then. It was—

DANDRIDGE: Now this company that you started in Kansas City, did you own the company or—

REED: Yeah. We—there were four, three or four or five of us who owned it. We all chipped in and worked together in it. And we hustled and went out and got customers and whatnot.

DANDRIDGE: Who were some of your partners?

REED: I can't think of their—McConnell was one of the names, and, uh—

DANDRIDGE: How did you happen to meet them?

REED: I happened to meet them—I don't rightly recall. Just, naturally, in the street an insurance person is going to meet other insurance people. And then from there, you've heard of Jones Mortuary in Kansas City? Okay, Jones Mortuary in Kansas City—

DANDRIDGE: (interjecting) That's on the Kansas side, right? Is that J. W. Jones?

REED: Yeah.

DANDRIDGE: Uh-huh, that's on the Kansas side.

REED: Uh-huh. Uh—were interested in one of the plans I had. I worked for a white funeral plan for a while and got the idea that if you draw premiums from an individual and connect it to the mortuary, then that mortuary is going to be able to bury you when you die because you're paying premiums to them. So it's sort of an insurance deal. So I had one of those things going with Jones Mortuary and we buried a few people.

DANDRIDGE: So after—How long did you stay with the business in Kansas City? Do you remember a couple of years or—

REED: Uh, yeah maybe a couple of years.

DANDRIDGE: So do you remember what you pursued after that?

REED: Well, yes, after that (clears throat) was—what was it?

DANDRIDGE: That's okay. What other businesses were—

REED: I lost my thought when I came back. Oh, I know what it was. After that, about that time the—one of my insur—the insurance companies did not want to pay for a wreck that one of my clients had. And it disheartened me and I left that business and said, "Well, it's time for me to go to work for somebody." Never will forget him, he was quite a colorful preacher in Kansas City, name's Reverend Rutger. And, so I walked into the office of the state vocational rehabilitation office and said I wanted to make an application to become a counselor for the rehabilitation for the state of Kansas. Well I was taken aback. Now, as you know from my record, I had never worked for anybody, I worked for myself because before that time, you know I may have worked for someone but it was menial jobs and what not. And I didn't think, at the time, that anyone was going to give me a job in my field because they just weren't doing it. But when I walked into, the times had changed and I didn't realize that. And, so, when I walked into this office, the red carpet was rolled out. Yes Mr. Reed come in. I almost ran out the door. (DANDRIDGE chuckles) Because they were going to hire me as a voc rehab counselor for the State of Kansas, which they did. And I took that job and that went on for, maybe, about a year but then—

DANDRIDGE: Do you remember anything about that job? Did you like it?

REED: No, it was quite boring because I was inside and it was quite depressing because I had to interview people who were recovering from terrible accidents. People leaving part of their bodies on the pavement from riding motorcycles carelessly and then you're trying to rehabilitate them. Or drug addiction and things like this. And I had to travel to the offices throughout the—the county offices throughout the state of Kansas. And it was boring. But, then, along came the poverty program and, of course, people knew me in my hometown and Charles Scott was—

DANDRIDGE: (Interjecting) And your hometown was—

REED: Topeka, yeah. And Charles Scott was on the board of the—

DANDRIDGE: Coordinating Committee of the Black Community?

REED: (continuing) —of the—Well, of the poverty program in town. And they had had a white director before named Dr. Harder and, of course, Dr. Harder didn't do anything as far as I'm concerned. But, you know, cater to the white community and say, We're here; and they never expanded their operation, they had three people in it, a secretary named Henrietta Shepard, a black lady, and a Mexican, I forget his name, he was the vice chairman of the poverty program. Well Harder moved on up in politics and they needed someone to replace him. And, so—Oh, before that time, because I was a counselor, I worked a while in Kansas City, Kansas as a voc rehab counselor for the poverty program and then, but after that they called me from there to come to, go to Topeka to be the director of the poverty program because I was head counselor, finally made head counselor of the poverty program in Kansas City. But before that time they had head counselor for the poverty program there, too, as a white person who didn't know what he was doing. But, where the money goes you—with these new programs that come up, you always place the white person in that first and the black person underneath. This has been the history of the blacks moving up in the social structure. Wherever we make a new program for the black person, that has been the history of the—And, so therefore after that I came to Topeka and they employed me at the director of the poverty program.

DANDRIDGE: So what did you do as director? Do you remember stuff about that?

REED: Oh, yeah. As the director of the poverty program, my assistant director said, "Well you know ____ (??) what you do is we meet with the council in town that meets weekly. We go and meet with them and see what they have to say." I said, "No, we don't go meet with them. We're here to fight for jobs; we're not here to go agree with the white council."

DANDRIDGE: You're talking about city council?

REED: Yeah. I said, " ____ (??) not what we're supposed to do. We're—you guys haven't done anything." "So," I said, "from now on, you stay here. We're doing other things. We're trying to find jobs." And, with that, the Labor Department came in and said, Well we're going to give you as much money as you need to train people and whatnot. We had no office, hardly, the office space was about this big. I said, "Okay. ____ (??) we're getting office space. We're going to hire workers. We're going to hire trained people," which we did. And, then the churches, one of the churches that stuck by me through thick and thin of what went on were able to—I forget the name of the church—

DANDRIDGE: Was it Calvary? Antioch? Shiloh? Was it Baptist?

REED: Well, black churches were able to assist me somewhat, but for the big space that I needed to have classrooms for people to train them to just go to work and be there for eight hours a day rather than calling in sick and—

DANDRIDGE: (interjecting) Was this church white?

REED: Yes, uh-huh, it was a white church.

DANDRIDGE: Grace Cathedral? Or was it—

REED: No, it wasn't Grace. I think it was on Huntoon—near Huntoon and Buchanan.

DANDRIDGE: Wasn't that Reverend Harder's church? Methodist, United Methodist? Well, that's okay.

REED: It could have been; it could have been. Anyway, I was able to get cooperation from there. And then began the so called power struggles with that total situation. It was going pretty good for a while and then I said, "You know, I really want to get back to working for myself." (laughs) And, so, I was having problems at home and I thought maybe if I went to work back, again, for myself, things may straighten out. So I went in to the water conditioning business after I left that business as the director of the poverty program. And, uh—

DANDRIDGE: How did you—Why did you choose water conditioning?

REED: Well I chose water conditioning because I was looking for something to do and to be able to do myself, eventually myself rather than working for someone. But there always has been, with me, something about water. I can stick my hand in water in hard water and I can itch all over. Or one thing I hated about water, coming up when I was a kid, is you—we had to take a bath, we didn't have showers. Black folk didn't have showers, we didn't know what a shower was, that's too expensive to have. And you know the curd that forms in the water and you try to push it away from you? And we didn't have the money to be able—or, I don't know whether they had even invented it at the time, the softening liquid that you could pour in water and make the suds and you didn't see all that curd. So, I hated that. And so I was looking for something to do and when I saw, went to this meeting and saw a water demonstration, I said, "This is what I want to do the rest of my sales career. I have finally found what I want to do." So, to do that, you had to work with someone, so I was working with this company and always been the best salesman and being the best salesman means you work hard, you don't sit down. Well, I never sat down; I worked, I made appointments, I'd come in late at night much to the disdain of my wife, wondering where I've been. I've been selling. And so this one company they were happy because they were making money off of me. I quit them and, oh boy, they wanted to sue me because I quit them. And I went to this other company, a fellow named Ralph Geddy, and he was selling water softeners in Topeka and surrounding towns and I was interested in his system and so I went to work with him. And, then, he got happy with all the money I was making him and when I quit him he didn't, he tried to sue and I said, "Well I can't work on my own here, I have to go to another area." So I had to come to Lawrence, and he tried to maintain that was his area too and the company said, Well no, Reed can work in that area. I didn't know many different water conditioning companies at the time, I just knew what he had that I wanted to sell it. So I did sell it and eventually start selling that and eventually

he came around to be a friend or acquaintance. So he sold in the Topeka area and I sold in the Lawrence area. (clears throat) And finally chose other companies to sell for and learn more about water conditioning to sell all over the state and even out of the state.

DANDRIDGE: So, after—did you just continue into that form of work or did you?

REED: Yes, I continued into that form of work. And, um, in fact RWS, Incorporated now with the—which works with construction, which is Reed Water Systems, works into construction and I'm the president of that company and—

DANDRIDGE: So how did you jump from Reed Water Systems to RWS?

REED: Well, Reed Water Systems was practically into retirement and RWS was something that was needed because my children are in the construction business and I'm a service disabled veteran and, being a service disabled veteran it gives me the advantage of contracting, bidding on contracting because the federal government sets aside certain bids of—that only a service disabled veteran can bid on, which would eliminate the competition substantially. So this is why my business is there in the same office with my daughter's business, Win Construction, and all and it works quite well. We have a contract going now that is repainting and repairing buildings at Fort Leavenworth and we're bidding on, we're looking to bid on other contracts as the years go.

DANDRIDGE: Do you bid for the state or do you bid only for the federal government contracts?

REED: Oh, state also, both.

DANDRIDGE: So you bid on both? Have you gotten some state contracts?

REED: Um, not as yet, we hope to. Plus the fact, with my experience with Reed Water Systems, it will lead me to be able to bid on some of the state and county water contracts.

DANDRIDGE: What is the Reed Water System like? What was it like? What were you selling?

REED: Water softeners.

DANDRIDGE: Was that something you created or—

REED: (clears throat) No, water softeners have been a part of the, of water treatment for years, it's just beginning to come of age where you are able to take iron out of water, arsenic, everything out of water where you're able to—

DANDRIDGE: (interjecting) So how did you develop your product?

REED: Well you have suppliers, you don't have to develop the product—in other words you don't have to reinvent the wheel, the wheel is already there, you just have to be able to market it and know how to market successfully. In other words, nose to the grindstone.

DANDRIDGE: So what kinds of things did you have to do to market it?

REED: Well, you have to get on the phone and call and say, "Mrs. Jones how are you today? We would like to show you something that could be very interesting for you, as far as to ease your cleaning and, also, we want to bring you a nice gift."

DANDRIDGE: Okay. So did you run advertisements of your business?

REED: Yes.

DANDRIDGE: Where was your business located?

REED: The Reed Water Systems was located, for a while, on 7—about 725 Massachusetts Street in Lawrence, here. You know where the Eldridge hotel is?

DANDRIDGE: Right, uh-huh.

REED: It was next to, it was the next building.

DANDRIDGE: How were you able to get that? Were you renting that building?

REED: Yeah.

DANDRIDGE: How were you able to rent it? Was there any prejudice against you being African American?

REED: Well, no, there wasn't because the fellow who owned it was the, a good friend and a customer. I liked him. He is a noted past athlete of Kansas University, his name was Wes Santee and he was a great track man here. He's listed in the KU Hall of Fame.

DANDRIDGE: What kind of struggles did you have in starting your businesses, cause you had the insurance in Kansas City, what struggles did you have in getting loans and getting started? What were some of the barriers of race that you encountered?

REED: Oh, the barriers of race, well my goodness, strange that you should ask that. So happens that it was very difficult. I happened to have, just happened to have a few dollars, not too many, when struggling with sales in Topeka and then coming down here. The finance companies—Culligan was right in the next block. Finance companies were begging, so to speak, these other water conditioning companies, Culligan and all, Well we can lend you the money to promote your business. And, actually it

wasn't the lending of money that I was interested in, it was the banks handling the dealer paper. Now dealer paper is something that makes it easy for a salesman to sell; in other words, I sell you a product for a thousand dollars, but you say, "Well I have to make payments," well okay, if you have to make payments to me, then I don't have enough money from you to go out and buy more equipment to sell to someone else. What I needed at the time, as a dealer, was the bank or someone to take the dealer paper—pardon me—pay me for the equipment and then put the individual on payments and the individual pays to the bank.

DANDRIDGE: So was Culligan your competitor?

REED: Yes, uh-huh.

DANDRIDGE: How did you fare in the competition?

REED: Oh fine, oh yeah sure. Sometimes he would get—

Tape 3, side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

DANDRIDGE: And the question I was asking you, was Culligan your competitor?

REED: Yes, that was one of the competitors, there are many competitors in the water conditioning business. But back when I started, almost forty years ago there weren't that many competitors. But Culligan is a franchise, I was not a franchise I didn't want to be a franchise. A franchise is where you pay money in and then the franchiser takes care of you and teaches you everything and provides you with certain things but you pay for that. And, quite often—

DANDRIDGE: (interjecting) How come you didn't want to do that?

REED: Well, I'm coming to that. You pay for that being within the franchise. But, in a franchise, then there are times and at that time there were, where the franchise people have to charge more for their equipment and many franchisees didn't really know how to take care of their systems. Some of 'em relied on the franchise so much that they didn't study what they were doing and know about water quality and water chemistry. Whereas I felt, as a non-franchise person, I can depend on myself. Reed Water became a big name in the town; it was a household name, for instance, in Eudora, Kansas because my customers were satisfied. They knew that I knew how to take care of them, take care of their water properly, and set the systems up properly. Yeah, there was trial an error in the—Forty years ago the water softening business was not near as complete and good as it is now, water systems weren't; I lost some big money on some water systems. But then there is an example of one of the other dealers that, most of the other dealers were able to get the financing and whereas a lot of times I couldn't—

DANDRIDGE: (interjecting) How come you couldn't?

REED: Because I'm black.

DANDRIDGE: Okay.

REED: (laughs) Now, however, you could argue, others could argue that point, but I have proof of that and I can go into that. Sometimes I can tell you—

DANDRIDGE: Well, I'd like for you to go into it now.

REED: Well, okay. After I finish this sentence, I'll go into it. Um, what I had to do was, I would sell you a system, okay here's your system, and then you would sign this contract with me. I would have to then take this contract, rather than me just sending it to the bank and them sending me the money, I'd have to take it to the bank myself and sit there and give this to the bank and see what they could do about it and have them check it out and then go back a few days later to see if it was okay and see if the bank could pay me and then I'd have to take papers back out to these people and have them sign something and then bring this back to the bank again. Now, that's the way I became one of the top salesmen in water conditioning in Lawrence; I had to do all that because I couldn't get the dealer paper. But you wanted to know about that financing. Well, that financing several years before happened to me in the food freezer business where I decided that, well the best thing for me to do is to go this on my own. And, so I went into a finance company and presented my program to them. I said, "Now I'm going to buy freezers and I'm going buy the food and put it together and I'm going sale to these people and you can take this paper, like they take paper in Topeka, Kansas for this other food freezer plan." "Oh, no, we can't do that, we can't do that at all." So I said, "Okay," I walked out.

DANDRIDGE: Did you ask them why they couldn't do it?

REED: No.

DANDRIDGE: Why didn't you?

REED: Because I walked out, let me finish. I got my friend and sent him in, this was—I was like the Pied Piper because I was the best salesman in the nation and people followed me. I sent my white friend in, I told him what to say, how to say it and everything, and what did this same man say? "Oh, yeah, sure, we'll take all the papers you can—Sure, everything's fine." This was the way it went. But then when I came—So that's so much for paperwork, as to whether you could get papers, no you couldn't, yeah it's a prejudiced field. Probably still is today, let's face the facts.

DANDRIDGE: What kind of funding experiences did you have with your water business?

REED: Uh, well—

DANDRIDGE: Did you even bother to ask?

REED: Well, yeah, I did. Periodically—I'm coming to that. So back into the water business. Periodically I would get, uh, some of the banks to take some of the paper and this happened in Eudora I had pretty good cooperation in Eudora for a while. But then the banks closed down on you, you never know when they're deciding to close down on you, and you have to be careful because I had salesmen working for me. And when you have salesmen working for you that's the only way you can pay them. You can't depend on cash sales. And at that time people weren't doing cash sales; now more so they're just paying for things cash. So we—I even went to the SBA and the SBA gave me a loan, but as I left the SBA I let them know, "You gave me just enough money to fail, just enough." In any business you need a certain amount of money to keep yourself afloat and to make the positive purchase that you need. And of course I took it and was able to ride it for a while, but, still, I wasn't able to get the permanent financing from the banks or the finance companies at the time. And let it be said, at the time, my financial rating was okay, it was fine. I think I even had, came up with several thousand dollars that would have helped the financial ratings but couldn't get the money for it. And then another bank came along, Lawrence National Bank, and at the time I was, had my membership at the Rotary in town here. And knowing other businessmen and whatnot and the president of the bank said, "Well, Reed, we're going to take on your paper and, also, we're going to go to the SBA and get you another loan." And, so, they did and the SBA again, and the bank, just enough to fail, as far as I'm concerned. Okay this could be my excuses however others I felt that they were able to, when they got an SBA loan they got enough to carry them so that they couldn't go down. But if you get just enough to fail, that means after your salesmen sale so much and then the bank stops taking that paper, you've got to fire everybody. One of the biggest wholesale water conditioning companies in this area were small forty years ago and I taught 'em how to buy wholesale. (laughs) They weren't buying wholesale and I taught 'em how to buy—and we bought, wholesale, we bought carloads of mineral. And when I had my shop downtown here, I had it stacked to the ceiling with—and you know those old buildings, high ceilings—with thousands of pounds of salt, whole truckloads of salt, and hundreds of cases of soap. I tried to hire some of my people. Some girls came up and wanted to work. I said, "Yeah, there's a way to work here but you work for yourself." I took 'em all out to dinner and, "You work for yourself and if you work hard enough you will have a career that will take you into your retirement, if you want to do it." I said, "I have this woman in my Thunderbird. She drives that Thunderbird," and in those days the Thunderbird was the same as the Lincoln Continental, I don't know whether you remember it or not—But because she was bringing in business. I said, "Now you can do that too." So after I explain all this glorious good stuff to them, what they could do, "So you guys come in Monday morning and we'll see what, if you decide you want to do this, you come in Monday morning, we'll see what we can do from here." Nobody.

DANDRIDGE: Wow. Tell me this, when you were—RWS was started by your daughter you say?

REED: My daughter and husband said that they realized that that was a good thing to do for bids, to be able to bid on certain projects.

DANDRIDGE: Who is your daughter and son-in-law?

REED: Cynthia Eubanks, with Win Construction. And—

DANDRIDGE: (interjecting, overlapping) Okay. And did they start Win Construction?

REED: No, Cynthia Eubanks started, my daughter started Win Construction.

DANDRIDGE: How did she happen to get into that?

REED: Well, she got into Win Construction because she worked in Win—in construction companies several years before. She worked with Leland—what's Leland's last name?

DANDRIDGE: That's okay. What's her husband's name?

REED: Well, Leland. Oh, Cynthia's—My daughter's husband?

DANDRIDGE: Uh-huh.

REED: Wilane, W-i-l-a-n-e.

DANDRIDGE: Okay.

REED: Or—W-i-l-l-o-n-e.

DANDRIDGE: Okay and how do you spell Cynthia's last name?

REED: E-u-b-a-n-k-s.

DANDRIDGE: Okay, so she just followed in her father's footsteps in going into business?

REED: I guess. (chuckles)

DANDRIDGE: Tell me—Give me the names of your children, besides Cynthia.

REED: Well, deceased is Bobby Jean.

DANDRIDGE: Bobby Jean is your—

REED: Mm-hm, Williams.

DANDRIDGE: Yeah I knew Bobby Jean.

REED: Yeah, small world. You didn't know that.

DANDRIDGE: No.

REED: And you knew about Cindy being in your sorority?

DANDRIDGE: Yeah, I knew that. Somehow I knew that, I don't know why.

REED: And didn't know about her sister. (laughs)

DANDRIDGE: No, uh-uh, didn't put the two together. Okay, so who are your other children?

REED: Those two.

DANDRIDGE: Oh, just the two girls?

REED: Yeah, just the two girls. And that construction company that she works with was Leland Anderson. And you knew Lucinda who married Leland Anderson. Oh, you didn't? Oh, okay.

DANDRIDGE: So Leland Anderson was African American?

REED: Uh-huh. Yeah.

DANDRIDGE: The only people I know is, out of Topeka is—you know the kid who has his construction company—Alonzo Harrison.

REED: Uh-huh, oh yeah.

DANDRIDGE: I know—He's young, but I knew him. Now who was your wife?

REED: Opal Mitchell.

DANDRIDGE: And, so in terms of business, what advice would you give to young African Americans going into business themselves?

REED: Well, I can write a book and might write a book of how to succeed and fail in three businesses without trying too hard. (laughs) The advice, first, that I would give them is when you go to college and they tell you that you are, you should go into the School of Business, do it instead of doing what I did, going into, starting out into the School of Business and then being hardheaded and not wanting to add up those figures. Because, in the days when I first started with Accounting 1, you didn't even, you didn't have any adding machines, you were just doing adding and subtraction. I said, "I don't—I know this adding and subtraction, so why am I doing this?" I should have stayed there. So, therefore I made many mistakes. And, then, know your adversaries; know your friends. There was another person who helped

break me up, I won't mention his name he lives in Topeka. He worked for the Internal Revenue Department and, at the time, the Internal Revenue Department was giving bonuses to people who went into businesses and, then, they would audit those businesses and find a way to say that they were doing something against the law and charge them big fines. Did you know that happened?

DANDRIDGE: No. But I'm not surprised.

REED: Okay. Now. So this fellow came up to Lawrence here and, "Yeah, Doc"—Doc's my nickname because Doc Doey, I was always doing something as a kid, busy. "Yeah, Doc, how you doing?" "Oh, fine." "It's good to see you." "Well nice friend, yeah. How's things?" So we talked and whatnot and the next few months or so I had this audit and by not taking the business courses and whatnot I overlooked certain things, the thing that I overlooked was the—actually the human nature of the business. My secretary had left, gone to another job. My bookkeeper died so I'm there holding the bag, but what I didn't do, rather than—I listened to the IRS and rather than get a lawyer and contest things, I let them roll me over. Later got a lawyer and—who looked at my books and said, "Well Reed, you were in the right. They just got to you." And it actually—

Pause in recording.

REED: Uh, so, the next time something like this came up, I had a lawyer in Topeka; I think I was going into one of my bankruptcies. And, so, we went in this room—this lawyer came up to about here on me—we went in this room and, lo and behold, there was the same IRS guy that had fouled me up before. He said, "Reed, I want such and such and such." And my lawyer pushed me back, "What the hell are you talking about? You mean, you're going to talk to my client like—Don't you ever raise your voice to my client. What is it you want?" "Well we want—" "Well, you can have it, when do you want it? Well you'll get it on that day. Don't ever raise your voice to my—You understand?" And I said, "Well I'll be damned." If I had had a lawyer the first time—And you see the ads on TV all the time and every time I see one of those ads on TV I think about it.

DANDRIDGE: Well I appreciate your time. I'm going to have to end this, but we'll pursue some other elements of your life experience—

REED: I hope I didn't get off on the wrong thing.

DANDRIDGE: No, you did just perfect and I thank you for your time once again. Thank you, Mr. Reed.

Tape 3 ends.

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