

AS: The following interview was conducted with Charles Miles on behalf of the Putnam County Museum on January 12th at the Putnam County local library. The interviewer is April Sutherland. First of all, I'd like to begin with some brief background information.

AS: Will you please state your name?

CM: Charles Miles.

AS: And where and when were you born?

CM: I was born in Troy, Ohio.

AS: When?

CM: October 13th, 1929.

AS: First of all, I'd actually like for you to tell me, what do you know about the Great Migration of African Americans coming from the south to the north? Do you remember around when this was and maybe why they began to migrate to Putnam County?

CM: I believe that this started in, let's say, the 1940s to 1950s. I believe that they migrated for better opportunities and better jobs.

AS: Okay, why Putnam County specifically then?

CM: This was a farming area for one thing and there were jobs, menial jobs, but there were better jobs than I'm sure that these people had in the south.

AS: Okay, and where have you lived in your life?

CM: Well, initially I lived in Troy, that's where I was born. I moved to Greencastle with my family when I was about 13 years old and then I went into the military in 1951 where I served in Korea for two years. Then I lived in Chicago, Illinois for approximately 10 years.

AS: And then you were back?

CM: I went back to Greencastle in 1961.

AS: Okay, can you describe the neighborhood where you lived here in Greencastle?

CM: Well, it was non-segregated primarily but there were a large number of Blacks living in our neighborhood.

AS: Okay, would you have liked to live in another neighborhood or?

CM: No, I really wouldn't. I enjoyed where I lived and I enjoyed the non-colored neighbors in our neighborhood. So, do you think there was pretty much equal housing opportunities and things like that? There was no segregation or discrimination in housing policies or anything like that here in Greencastle?

CM: Oh yes, there was. I think that when IBM, this is in the late 1950s, 1960s, when IBM began to bring in other Blacks in managerial positions, they demanded they live in different areas of where I lived, which were different sections of Greencastle.

AS: Okay, I guess we'll move on then to your educational background a little bit, unless there's something additional you'd like to add about Greencastle neighborhood. Where did you go to school?

CM: I graduated from Greencastle High School. I then went to Indiana Central, which is now Indiana University. Then I was drafted into the military.

AS: And how was your experience at school?

CM: Good, as good as good could be.

AS: Was there segregation when you were in school?

CM: Well, the Greencastle school system wasn't segregated, but we knew what we could do and what we couldn't do, and we more or less stayed together as a group of Black people.

AS: So what type of things could you not do? Well, for one thing, my sisters desired to take Latin and typing, and they were told by their teachers, and we discussed this many times at home, there was no need of them taking these courses because they weren't going to be anything but domestics anyway. So this was very discouraging to my sisters.

AS: Were you allowed to participate in extracurricular activities?

CM: Yes.

AS: So which ones did you participate in?

CM: Basketball, track, and baseball.

AS: Very active. Were you friends with anyone on your team?

CM: Yes, yes.

AS: In traveling or going out where there's any discrimination among between you and your teammates?

CM: Yes.

AS: Can you describe that a little bit?

CM: I would say Martinsville, and probably you aren't aware of Martinsville. This is in the southern part of the state. This was the former home of the Ku Klux Klan, and we were given a choice by our coaches, do you want to go to Martinsville or do you not want to go to Martinsville? This is just how intense it was in this particular area.

AS: Did you go?

CM: Yes, I went.

AS: Can you describe that experience?

CM: Tense. We were heckled at different times, but I always went.

AS: Did you play sports in college?

CM: No.

AS: Have you ever had an interest in DePauw athletics with any specific players?

CM: Well, I have a brother-in-law, Russell Freeland, who lives in Naperville, Illinois. He was inducted into the DePaul Hall of Fame. So he graduated, I'm almost sure, in 1951. I used to go and see him play, and I don't miss too many of the DePauw football, baseball, basketball games.

AS: Okay, I think I'm kind of going back a little bit maybe to the first topic, because I want to know, you told me you lived in Chicago for some time, and I want to know about the difference between living in Chicago and living in Greencastle. Was it more racial, tense city, or no discrimination going on in Chicago than Greencastle? Well, when I lived in Chicago, I worked at a veterans hospital, and this was some of the experience that I acquired in the military. I worked in a trauma unit in a VA hospital, and I worked around professionals, and I don't, I was thinking about this the other day before I came here. During those 10 years, I don't ever recall hearing the N-word. As I said, these were very professional people that I worked around, and I just didn't run into any or hardly any racial problems in Chicago.

AS: Did you run into a lot of them in Greencastle?

CM: It's here every day.

AS: Okay. Do you have any specific stories you'd like to share about that?

CM: Well, I belong to Gobin Memorial Church, which is predominantly white, of course, and there have been incidents where I have felt like that I should go somewhere else. Things have gotten better. I have belonged to Gobin for 23 years now, so naturally things have gotten better than they were in the past.

AS: Okay, and what about the military? What was your experience like in the military?

CM: I had a great experience. Probably you aren't aware of this, but in 1948, I believe Truman was the president. They were made non-segregated, so all the soldiers and servicewomen, whatever, they could bunk together. Previously, it was segregated. All the blacks stayed in one area, white in theirs.

AS: Okay, next. I want to ask you a little bit about your work experience. What employment options were open to you after you completed your education?

CM: Well, in Greencastle, prior to IBM coming here, black men in particular had limited opportunities for employment. I know DePauw would hire a few, but most of the factories didn't hire black people.

AS: Okay, and you worked for IBM?

CM: Yes.

AS: Prior to IBM, where else did you work in Greencastle?

CM: Well, I just worked, as I said, whatever jobs that we could get as black people.

AS: And generally, what type of jobs were those?

CM: Name it. Farms, cleaning people's homes, doing parties for the more affluent white people here in Greencastle. Just anything to make a decent, honest living.

AS: And how long did you work for IBM?

CM: Almost 25 years.

AS: Approximately how many other black employees were employed when you worked at IBM?

CM: Initially, about a dozen.

AS: Okay, and how were you treated by your co-workers?

CM: Well, you must understand geographically, we live in a community that was once infested with Ku Klux Klan people. And so, at times you could feel some of that at IBM. But as a rule, we got along alright. It was just like one big family. I'm not gonna say one big happy family, but one big family.

AS: And what kind of impact has the company – has IBM – had on the Putnam County community?

CM: I think as far as harm management is concerned, they've always supported the community. They've always come to our NAACP meetings, dinners, you know. They did support you. They were supportive.

AS: Were there some things that you wanted to do, and could afford to do, but couldn't do, because of your race?

CM: I think so.

AS: Do you have any examples?

CM: I wanted to advance more into the management aspect, but I knew the minute that I walked through that door, that this wasn't going to happen.

AS: Why did you feel that way?

CM: It just wasn't the thing, in Greencastle, at IBM. But just knowing that in other areas of the country, blacks advanced.

AS: So, have you ever moved for a job for reasons such as that? For better opportunities for employment?

CM: No, I just felt like at my age, and I was about 32 or 33 when I hired on, it was the best job aside from working in Chicago, that I'd ever had, and the best money I'd ever made, best health benefits, etc. etc. so I thought I'd better hang in there, and that's what I did.

AS: Okay, next I want to ask about the organization that you've been a part of in Putnam County. First of all, what organizations are you involved with currently, or have been in the past?

CM: NAACP. Kiwanis Club. (intelligible). AARP, RSVP. I have been involved with Operational Housing. I have been involved with Habitat for Humanity. I've been a prison visitor for 17 years. Currently, I'm teaching, co-teaching smoking cessation and prevention at the Putnamville Correctional Center. I belong to the Community Correctional Group, which is a group that works with young people. I serve on a committee with Dr. Bottoms in DePauw, an advisory committee. That's all I'm good at right now.

AS: Sounds like a very active person.

CM: Very much so, too much so.

AS: Okay, so is there one organization that's impacted your life more than the rest, and if so, how?

CM: I think the Kiwanis, because we're working with, we work with young children, help young children. We're one of the sponsors of Raleigh Hospital, and we just do a lot of things for the community.

AS: And where are most of the meetings held for your organizations? You're involved in so many, so maybe.

CM: Well, our board directors meetings are held here at the public library. The Kiwanis meetings are held at the Walden Inn. Oh, and one that I forgot to tell you about is our new community center. This is for youth and older people, and this is on Crown Street. We meet there for our meetings.

AS: Have these organizations ever been segregated?

CM: Not really.

AS: I think that's all I have to ask you about. Is there a special story you'd like to share? Maybe your most memorable event from any particular organization?

CM: No, not that I can think of, but I have brought you some things to show you that didn't you say you wanted to?

AS: Yes, I would love to see them.

CM: You want to see them, you want to see them.

AS: Okay, I see that you have quite a few things you brought here to show me. Most of them look very interesting. Can you describe a few of the objects that you have?

CM: Well, the one that I have, the service award, this is the highest award that is given to an IBM employee, and we were given a trip to Florida to one of the more famous hotels. I can't recall the name of it now, but it was in Florida, and we did have a good time. This is the highest award that IBM gives to their employees. This diskette is something that we made, and they were distributed to companies throughout the world. The next thing I have from the Western Indiana Community Action Agency is a certificate from RSVP, which I'm involved. The next thing is not about work, but for many years I've participated in a Cloverdale 5k walk and run. This happened every year for, well, it's still going on now, but I enjoy doing it. I guess the other thing that I have, I was essay chairman for the NAACP, where we selected young students from grad school and high school for their essays. That was very interesting. I think that's it.

AS: Okay, you also have some family pictures that you brought.

CM: Yes, I have a family picture. This was taken when we were all very young. This is the mother and the father, my brother and my five sisters. The other photo I have is a sister, Hazel Barnett, who is a school teacher, has been a school teacher in the Milwaukee school system for a number of years. She teaches kindergarten now. She was the first black teacher graduate from Greencastle High School.

AS: Very interesting. Thank you for bringing those to share with me. I know that you are a member of the NAACP in Putnam County. Can you tell me what role that has played in the community, NAACP?

CM: Well, I think that the role that played the community, and I guess I'm speaking of the non-black community, is aware that this is an organization that does specific things in the community. The different things that we stand for, I think that they're aware of that.

AS: What was it like to live here throughout your life?

CM: Well, in actuality, Greencastle is a segregated community. We all get along with each other, but I think in many instances we are aware of what we can do and what we can't do. For instance, the reason that I joined Gobin Church is because our black AME church lost its charter, and my mother and I had no place else to go. So, I asked her one day, I said, where are we going to church? Because we'd gone to church all our lives. She said, well, we're going to Gobin. She said, we're Methodist, and we're going to Gobin. And I said to her, I said, Mama, they don't have any black people at Gobin. She said, well, they will have when we go. And so, with her encouragement, we went to Gobin. She eventually joined. I didn't, but when she passed away in 76, it was one of her desires that I belong to a church. I'd gone all my life, as I stated, but I'd never belonged. So, I joined Gobin in 1976.

AS: And comparatively, what is it like to live here today?

CM: Well, it's much better for me because I'm retired and I'm on Social Security. I have a very good pension. I've invested wisely, I think, so I don't have any problem. I do what I want to do, and I travel quite a bit, and I enjoy life.

AS: Okay. Are there people who were precious toward you in the past that you still know today? And, if so, what types of relationships do you have with these people?

CM: Well, for instance, one of the protests, if I can go advance a little bit, for 50 years, and I'm speaking of myself personally, we had to go out of town. I had to go out of town to a barbershop, and when we made the protest and we went around the different barbershops in Greencastle, the barber said, well, they didn't know how to cut black people's hair. Right now, I go to the styling station, which is a white establishment, and I have a young white lady that cuts my hair, and we get along fine.

AS: I actually think those are all the questions that I have for you right now. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

CM: No, unless there's something that you.

AS: Well, you did mention that you were a member of the city council sometime here.

CM: Yes.

Can you describe the experience for me?

CM: Well, when I went on the the city council, I just retired from IBM, and the mayor then had been driving through my neighborhood, and he said to me, he said, had you ever thought about becoming a council member? I said, here in Greencastle? I said, no way, and so he said, well, he said, I think that you should very seriously think about it. He said, there's hardly ever been any blacks that have served on the council, and he said, I think you'd be doing a service to the community, and to yourself, and to your race, and so I talked to family members, and I talked to friends, and they said, go for it, so I did, and I won. The only bad experience I had was, I was on the council with persons that had been there for a number of years, and my say-so wasn't that really important. I mean, I'm not going to say that I was a rubber stamp, but they primarily made the decisions, and I could say what I wanted to say, but the decisions were made by other people.

AS: And you just think they didn't have anything to do with the race, or was it just rank?

CM: I think there's always something to do with race. That's just my own personal conception. I don't care. I don't know whether you ever had the opportunity to read the AARP article by Danny Glover, but I think that every day that we wake up when we are black, that we recognize that, at least I do.

AS: Okay, and when did you serve?

CM: 1991 to 1995.

AS: Let's see, looking back, maybe what kind of advice did your parents give you about dealing with prejudicedness, and if you had to give some advice about dealing with it today, what would you say?

CM: I can remember, like yesterday, my father would always say, especially when we played basketball, and some of the opposing white players would call us names, this was to agitate us. I

can see now what that was all about, and my father always told me, now don't ever get in trouble, always respect your family, etc. They were loving parents, but they were very low-key.

AS: And what kind of jobs did your parents have?

CM: My father was more or less of a bartender manager at the Elks Club here in Greencastle for many, many years.

AS: And your mother?

CM: Dietitian at the Theta House.

AS: Well, I'd like to thank you for your time, participating in this interview.

CM: You're more than welcome. I've enjoyed it. Okay.

AS: Okay, we're back just for one last question. Can you tell me what you know about the Needlework Club?

CM: The Needlework Club was a predominantly black women's club. They met, if I can remember, once a month. They were all dressed very nicely. This was just one of the things that these black ladies in the community enjoyed doing. As far as specifics are concerned, I was never at a meeting, so I don't know, you know, exactly what they did, but it was called the Needlework Club, and it existed in our community for many, many years.

AS: Was your mother part of this club?

CM: My mother was a part of the club. My aunt was a part of the club. My great-aunt and my other aunts were a part of it.

AS: And what type of things did they do?

CM: That's what I don't really understand, but they did community things. They raised money for projects in the community.

AS: Thank you.