

CH: The following interview was conducted with Reverend Mitchell Cheatham on behalf of the Putnam County Museum. It took place on January 14, 2005 at the Putnam County Public Library. The interviewer is Courtney Haig.

CH: Would you please tell me your full name and when and where you were born?

RMC: My name is Mitchell Lee Cheatham. That's M-I-T-C-H-E-L-L-L-E-E-C-H-E-A-T-H-A-M. I was born in Big Rock, Tennessee. At the age of one year old, we moved to Indiana.

CH: Awesome. So, why did your family come here? Do you know why your family came to Greencastle?

RMC: I know why my family came to Indiana.

CH: Okay.

RMC: Well they were going to lynch my father.

CH: Oh, goodness.

RMC: And so, one of his white friends let him know that. And so, they hid him in the woods. And he come to Indiana without the family. And was here a year before he sent in for the family.

CH: Okay. So, did you live here in Greencastle or?

RMC: Lived in Indianapolis.

CH: Okay.

RMC: Until 1976. And then I moved to, I married. And then moved here to Greencastle area. I live in Reelsville, Indiana.

CH: Okay, I thought so. And you are the Reverend of Ed?

RMC: I'm the pastor of the Pentecostal Church. It's Bishop G.T. Haywood Memorial Pentecostal Church. And the reason we named the church Haywood Memorial because Bishop Haywood was born here in Greencastle and become one of the founders of the Apostolic Pentecostal Movement.

CH: Awesome. Where did you attend grade school?

RMC: I attended grade school in University Heights grade school. And in the Indianapolis area.

CH: Okay, and did you like it?

RMC: Yes, it was a nice school for that time. It was little, small.

CH: Was the school segregated?

RMC: Very much. Very much segregated. There wasn't but about four or five blacks that went to the school. Went to University Heights at my time when I was there. And we were very segregated against, looked down upon. Really, it gave me a very inferiority complex that I had to deal with for years. Feeling that I wasn't, because I wasn't white I wasn't accepted like some of the other children were.

CH: And then where did you attend high school?

RMC: I attended high school in Southport. Southport High School.

CH: And was that segregated as well?

RMC: It was, as time went on it became less segregated. They, I was not allowed to play basketball. I was not allowed to play baseball. But I could run track and play football. Now I don't know why that was. But at that time I was six foot. And I was about, at that time that was tall. And I was a good basketball player. But they, now before that they let blacks play. But then I don't know in that era where I come up at they wouldn't let, wouldn't allow blacks to be on the team. I don't know why.

CH: That's interesting. Did you, what opportunities were available to you after high school?

RMC: I got very, I really enjoyed high school more than I did grade school. I had great opportunities there. The skills that I learned there at University Heights and especially the skills that I learned at Southport High School is really what has caused me to be able to survive and to maybe go a little beyond of what is normal. Because we, in the shop class we had to learn how to well, we had to know something about plumbing. We, and all these things I had perfect grades. I had A grades. So, it was like those skills have helped me out through my life. When I hired on in International Harvester back in 1955 they gave me a test, a maintenance test. And I made a 96 which was one of the higher grades ever made. And it's all because of what I had learned at Southport High School.

CH: So, did you go straight from high school to International Harvester?

RMC: I went from high school straight into the army. I failed the second grade in grade school. I failed the fourth grade in grade school. And so when I got out of school I was 20 years old. So, it's like from there, from high school, six months later I got my papers to go to the army. So, I was in Korea.

CH: So then how long were you in Korea?

RMC: I was in Korea for two years.

CH: And then you came back and...

RMC: Yeah, I came back from Korea, got married, raised 12 children, 8 boys and 4 girls. And now I have 44 grandchildren. So, life has been exciting for me. It's been a good life and I enjoy, I enjoy. I'm 73 years old. I'll be 74 in February of this year. I'll be 74. Still got my health, my strength.

CH: That's good. So did your children attend school here in Putnam County?

RMC: Yes, my... Eight of the children attended school here in Putnam County. The oldest one was David. And then from there on down they all attended South Putnam and Reelsville. I've got, I've got some very intelligent children. My son Mitchell, he was the youngest boy. They give him a, I don't know what I'll say this or not, but they give him a test. They wanted him to take the test. When he graduated from grade school, going into South Put, what they call the middle school now, they called me to the office at the grade school and wanted to know if I would send him to Putnam University with the ongoing seniors to take the college entry examination. And he went. And he said, "Yeah, I'll go, Dad." And I think he ranked somewhere around 15 or 20 in the state.

CH: Wow.

RMC: Yes. So Barry now, he's an engineer. He graduated from Rose-Hulman. He's an engineer out at Navistar.

CH: So did your children have good experiences here?

RMC: They had some minimal, I would say, racial problems, but nothing that I would really fret about to the extent of where they would cause a lot of trouble. They had some racial problems. They absolutely did.

CH: So, were the schools here in Putnam County segregated?

RMC: No, I wouldn't say that. I would say that Putnam County schools was not segregated at all. I didn't see any segregation in Putnam County schools. Not in South Put and not in Reelsville.

CH: So you've worked for International Harvester.

RMC: Correct.

CH: And then now you're the pastor at the Evangelical Church in Reelsville.

RMC: No, here in Greencastle.

CH: In Greencastle.

RMC: Yeah. I worked at International Harvester from 1955 to 1976 and 1971. And I had 25 years. So they have it 25 and out. They give you one year for every five in the foundry because it was so hard, dusty, dirty. And the mortality rate of those who worked in the foundry and those who worked in the machine shop was a five-year difference. So they give us, who worked in the foundry, an extra year for every five. So I got out at 25 years and retired. And then we moved out here in the country.

CH: Did you feel that you had the same opportunities as others?

RMC: No. No, I didn't have the same opportunities as others. I had to show that I, my skills had to surpass a little bit more than others. And I have to contribute that because I was black. And at that time, at that particular time, blacks were not supposed to be intelligent. We were not supposed to be smart. We were supposed to take the back seat. And because some of the men that hired in with me, after I got into maintenance, then I trained them. But yet, and still, when we applied for the job, applied for the same job, they got the job and I didn't. It took me five years to be able to show my abilities.

CH: Were there any businesses that you knew you couldn't work for?

RMC: No, I've worked. I've worked for just about, I practically did every job in a sense, especially in the maintenance field. I worked for a certified plumber. And I learned plumbing. I worked for a certified electrician. I learned how to wire houses and businesses. I worked for a certified carpenter. I learned how to build houses. I learned how to run bulldozers, backhoes, heavy equipment. And all those skills come in handy when it comes to raising 12 kids. I always find a job. Like if I got laid off, the next day I'd have another job. So it helped me in my skills. Being able to do just about whatever needed to be done.

CH: Excellent. What organizations have you been affiliated with? Organizations?

RMC: Well, now I'm a bishop of an organization called the Churches of Our Lord Jesus out of Texas. And I also own the old junior high school in Brazil, and I turned it into a community center. So, I've been on a lot of boards. I was a committeeman and International Harvester. I also was a safety man, safety inspector, and International Harvester. I was also a union steward at International Harvester. And that set in a lot of meetings and things.

CH: Have you ever been associated with the NAACP?

RMC: Only parts, only part. Had a lot of contact with the NAACP over some racial things that we would try to get straightened out. But before then, I'm a member of the NAACP, but no offices.

CH: Do you know anything about the role that the NAACP has played here in Putnam County? The role?

RMC: Yes. I've sat in the meetings and I've listened to the president of the NAACP and the other officers that are there. I think they're doing... Well, I'll say they're doing probably all that they can, but I know that more could be done. Now, what... We've had some racial, some really some racial problems with my brothers. He lives in the country also and he's had crosses burned in his yard and no one ever did a thing about it. They threw racial slurs on rocks through his windows. They painted signs on his gas tank outside, never go home, but there was nothing ever done, nothing.

CH: How were you affected by the Civil Rights Movement?

RMC: The Civil Rights Movement was a good movement and it was during a time when I was at Navistar. Sometime I wonder if it was the right thing to do rather than to push blacks into positions and just to be able to get the money from the government or should it have been that they had to earn it? Because they tried to... After I made this high score on the maintenance test, they tried to put me in supervision, but I didn't want to go into supervision

because at that particular time, I didn't feel like I was supervisory material. I didn't think that I could do it, but there was a lot that they did put in there that wasn't really qualified for the jobs that was during the Civil Rights era when you had to have so many blacks in certain places, some in management, and they just put them in there. But I think that it was almost a necessity or I feel like it would have never been done.

CH: So it's kind of a... You have mixed feelings on that.

RMC: Yeah, it helped in one way and hindered in the other and I think it probably might have helped in a better way to put them in positions where they could actually see that they could qualify for those positions, but then some of them just didn't really qualify.

CH: How would you describe the change from before the Civil Rights Movement to after?

RMC: Well, it has... To me, being under both eras, before the Civil Rights Movement, during the Civil Rights Movement, and now. I was just thinking yesterday, and I don't think it was because of this today that I was going to meet with you, but my mind thinks a lot, I think a lot, and that is that... And the reason I thought this is because when I come home from church the other night, my nephew, who I thought lived in Indianapolis, was at the gas station, and he said, Uncle Mitch, Uncle Mitch, he said, and meet my girlfriend, and she was white. Now that didn't shock me, you know, that didn't... But it's like, here he is from the Indianapolis area, has moved here, I think he's already got a job, he's living with his mother. Now that was unknown back when I was in grade school. See, that was a... That was a no-no.

RMC: That was a... If you did, you slipped. You know, if you didn't, it wasn't open, it wasn't open. But now, the change, it's like nobody noticed it but me. It's like, from that time, because I remember, I'm 73, almost 74, and I can remember, even in Indianapolis, as a young boy, getting on the bus and had to sit in the back seat. I remember that. And if anyone come to sit in the back seat that was white, you had to give them your seat, and it made no difference, for they were young or old. And that was a common thing. It wasn't... It wasn't disgusting at that time, because it was just what you're supposed to do, the way you've been taught to do. But now, like when I saw this, and I've got children, I've got boys that are married to white girls, if you want to say. I don't like that. I don't like to describe it like that. I don't see black and white. But, the only way to describe some things, you have to use those words. But anyway, it's like now, it's becoming more common. It's not a \*gasp\* You know, look at that, and staring, you know. But back... Back in 1951, 49, in the 40s, that was... That was a no-no. So, there's a change, there's a change even in the mentality of the blacks, that they have got away from this, I'm nobody. And now, sometimes to me, I think they're trying to take it too far, instead of staying even, like, just we're just people like everybody else.

CH: Um, do you still experience any segregation now?

RMC: Well, there are... There's the word segregation. There's still a lot of segregation. I see it constantly at school. Where I have the community center, I see it. I know one of the pastors of the Rio Vila area. I rented the gym out, you know, to churches, and want to have a fun night for the children or something. So he called the secretary and set up a meeting, set up a night. So I come walking to the gym, and he said, oh, you're the custodian. I said, no, I own the place. Man, the look on his face, and he's never been back.

CH: Um, uh, do you have any other comments, um, stories that you'd like to share?

RMC: Well, I can say this, and that is that, um, during my time what I can remember from three years old, I can remember all the way back from when I was three years old. Up until now, there's been a great change between blacks and whites. And I say, if the world will last another 73 years, there will be no difference. Let's all be one big, I hope, happy people wherever we live. Because it has changed that much since I was a young boy. And, um, there's certain places I couldn't go. I couldn't go to the movies. There was only one movie I could go to. Uh, certain restaurants you could go to. That's all changed, see. So, these changes that have taken place over the past 70 years, if another 70 years, it'll be, there will be no such thing as race. Because it's gotten, now the world, that it's, uh, a whole lot different than what it was when I come up. It's like I'm looking at my own cousin, you know. Uh-oh! Everybody else. Pay no attention.

CH: Well, thank you very much.

RMC: Um, we were addressed as niggers. "There's a little nigger boy." We accepted being called niggers because that's what we were called. No getting mad, they just called us niggers. All right, as time went on, in grade school, about 7th, 8th grade, they started using the word colored. Colored people. Each one of those phrases at my age, I detested that. Why do you want to separate me? Then you come on up a little further, they called us black Americans. You see, and now, now we're called people of color. So, I was in a meeting here in Greencastle with, and I asked him this, because I don't like the phrase.

RMC: I don't like Afro-American, and I don't like people of color, I don't like negro, I don't like nigger, call me who I am, a man. So I said, now if we are people of color, I said, you are people of no color. If you want to phrase it that way because of my skin, and you call me a people of color, I've got color to me. Then the whites are people of no color. Now that's, I don't, I wish they could get away from that. I wish we could finally, as time goes on, we could get away from dressing people with black and white and red and yellow. Just people. We work together, eat together, we're marrying now.

RMC: I read a book, can I say this? The book was named Tontane. I can't find it nowhere. It was a book on slavery, and the slave masters was betting on how long their slaves would live. They had bets. And so that was during the Lincoln years, President Lincoln years. So this book states that there was a black man who was about two-thirds black. No, he was about two-thirds white, run for President of the United States. And he was very well, his slave masters and all had sent him to college. He had graduated and had given positions within the city. So he ran for President of the United States. Now this was in this book. It's supposed to be true. And someone ratted on him. And so he lost the nomination. So then is when the book says that they had this meeting, the White House had a meeting and said that if we don't stop slavery because of the interracial stuff, because even my parents, my great-grandfather was the son of a slave master. See, that's why my children all have blue eyes. See, so it's like all along that went on, see. So it got to the place of where now is. "Here it is, a man that's black is getting ready." And so in this meeting they said, If we don't stop slavery within a hundred years, we will not know who's who. We've got to put them in their place. Whether they're black and we don't fool with them.