UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA
THE DOY LEALE McCALL
RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY

JLFT 007 James T. Strickland
John LeFlore Oral History Tapes (JLFT), Acc. 328
Interviewed by John Beebee on November 18, 1996
1 hour audio recording • 21 page transcript

Abstract: In this recording, Judge James T. Strickland is interviewed by John Beebee to discuss John LeFlore and the Civil Rights Movement in Mobile, Alabama. The interview begins with Judge Strickland discussing how he became a judge in 1965, and how his career advanced from there. He describes John LeFlore's leadership qualities and his work with the Non-Partisan Voters League, and contrasts him with other civil rights leaders. Judge Strickland offers his own reflections on the legacy of John LeFlore, and the things that people should remember about him.

Sheila Flanagan and John Beebee led the interviews for this project, recording the reflections of relatives, friends, and colleagues of Mobile activist John LeFlore for an Alabama Public Television documentary released under the title, "A Quiet Revolution: The Story of John L. LeFlore." The project was funded through an Alabama Humanities Foundation grant.

Preface: This is a transcript of an oral history recording archived at the McCall Library of the University of South Alabama. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, which has been minimally edited for readability.

Use Rights: This interview is provided under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License. The interviewee(s) retain copyright, but the recording and transcript may be used for noncommercial purposes (research, education, etc.), so long as the narrator and archive are appropriately credited. This interview **cannot be used for commercial purposes** without the express written consent of the individual(s) providing the content for the interview.

JLFT 007 Hon. James T. Strickland
Interviewed November 18, 1996

This is a verbatim transcript of an oral history interview recording, composed and formatted in accordance with the McCall Library transcription style guide.

Verbatim transcription is a style of representing as closely as possible the exact wording and phrasing of the speakers on the recording, though false starts, repetitious phrases, and other minor edits have been made as needed only for the sake of clarity and readability. Readers of this transcript are strongly encouraged to listen to the recording.

Please note that if any text is **bolded** in the transcript, this indicates uncertainty of either spelling or accuracy of transcription regarding what was said. Italics indicate emphasis, or are applied to titles and similar proper nouns.

This interview was transcribed by:

Draft transcript: Alondra Mabien, June 30, 2022
Audit-edit: Latresha Maddix, July 7, 2022
Second audit-edit: Ryan Morini, September 22, 2022
Final edit: Ryan Morini, August 2, 2023

JLFT 007
Interviewee: James T. Strickland
Interviewer: John Beebee
Date: November 18, 1996

B: Just relax, and if you could just tell us some of those wonderful stories that just makes it come alive. I would really appreciate that. What, first of all, tell us a little bit about yourself: when did you become judge and that kind of thing, can you tell us about that?

S: Well, I was first appointed judge, I served in the District Attorney's office for approximately ten years. And then in 1965, I was appointed juvenile court judge, which was a part-time job at that time. Then in 1970, I was elected to full-time circuit judge over the juvenile division of the circuit court. And remained there until my retirement in 1982. Which time, I took off some time and then went back, and at the current time I'm still hearing cases a couple days a week to help out because of the load we have that's taking place, as a result of changes that have been going on for a number of years, in the juvenile division.

B: Were you born in Mobile, or—?

S: I beg your pardon?

B: Were you born in Mobile?

S: No. No, my family moved here when I was five years old. I was born in Louisiana. Papermill folks, and my father was transferred here, with then-Langston Paper Company. And I went to school here from grammar school on up, graduated from Murphy High School, and subsequently finished at the University of Alabama as an attorney, and practiced law from the time I finished in [19]52 until the time that I went on the bench in [19]65.

B: Tell me about—you were telling a funny story, I wasn't able to hear back there, if you could kind of recount for us, how did you first meet John LeFlore? Tell us about that.

S: Well, I met him when I was relatively young. I didn't know him. I was a little brash, I suppose. I just decided I wanted to meet him because I had heard a lot about him. And I walked to his, went to his house on Chatague Street. He had a little white bungalow there; just went up and knocked on the door, and his wife came to the door. I introduced myself, and told her I wanted to talk with Mr. LeFlore, wanted to meet him. And I think I caught her off balance a little bit, but she was very gracious and invited me in. A few minutes later, he came out. He was shaving. And

he was wiping the shaving cream off his face, and I think he was a little surprised to see me there, because he didn't know me. And to make a long story short, we started talking, and we talked for about two hours there. I got to know him, we became very, very fast friends, and worked together on many projects and many changes that we were trying to make, and *he* was trying to make in the community.

B: What prompted you to go want to see him? What was—

S: Well, what I'm afraid at that time was important, it was because of politics. I had a friend that was running for the legislature, Judge Joseph M. Hocklander, who was subsequently elected to that position as a result of Mr. LeFlore's help. And who was also a circuit judge later on. And I went in there to try to persuade him to help us get Joe Hocklander elected to the legislature. And through those efforts, and his agreement, and his understanding of the process, it was a successful race. And he was elected; Mr. LeFlore and I got to be very close friends and worked together many, many times on other projects. Mostly community work.

B: Did he interview Mr. Hocklander, is that correct?

S: Yes, he interviewed him along with other members of what was known at that time as the Non-Partisan Voters League. They distributed what was commonly known as the pink ballot, as an endorsement of people they felt would be people to vote for, for the community effort. He did a very thorough investigation, and he concluded that Joe Hocklander would be a good candidate. And supported him.

B: There's some kind of—I wasn't able to hear it, there's some kind of a neat story about the pink sheets, something about that?

S: Oh yeah. [Laughter] Well back in those days, back in the [19]50s and [1960s, the pink ballot was an endorsement of the community to vote for a certain candidate. While it had it positive effects, if it was exploited and got in the newspaper, as to who was being endorsed, it would also have some negative effects. And as a result thereof, I told him one year—actually, it was in 1962—I went to him and told him that I thought that we should make an effort to see that the pink ballot was used as it should be and could not be exploited. So, I told him that I was going to pick up all the ballots, place them in my car, and hold them in there until about 10pm the night before the election. And then the ballots would be turned out and distributed to the community people through the leaders, to help them in the decision of who they want to vote for. And he didn't take to it too well; it had never been tried before. But we did it. And when it got out that it was the first time in the

history, at that time, that the publication of the pink ballot did not appear in the newspaper before the election. And it turned out to be a very effective tool.

B: Okay, thank you. What was your first impression of—of course, you first saw him with shaving cream on his face. I'm sure—[Laughter] But what year was that, by the way?

S: That was 1958, the spring of 1958.

B: Okay, what was your impression of him as you were talking to him, and what—

S: Well, Mr. LeFlore was not what you would call an imposing man. You had to get to know him to appreciate him. He was medium height and just normal in weight, but he would make quick decisions based on his impression of you. And he had a way of using his hands to demonstrate how he was feeling and what he would expect you to do and not do, and to do those things you had to understand him and listen to him. But the main thing about him was he was an excellent listener himself. He did not, in my opinion, have a prejudiced bone in his body about anybody or against anything. He was willing to listen to all sides and then try to make a decision that he thought was best for—not himself, but for the community and the people he represented. He was always thinking in terms of what was best for his community and the people that he was trying to represent.

B: Can you—just for fun, what—how did he use his hands? He seemed to be very expressive. Can you kind of give us a picture of, could you just kind of show how he did?

S: It's hard to do that, because Mr. LeFlore was just such a unique individual. He just would express himself with his hands, and the way he would use his fingers, and he would use it around his face at the time he was talking to you to impress you with what he was trying to get across to you. It might be a simple matter, or it might be something complicated, but you had a way of watching him, and when you got through watching him, and the way he would deliver it with his hand motions, you knew what he was trying to say, and you understood him perfectly. There was never any doubt about what his intentions were. He was very—he was the type of person you wanted to listen to, because you felt like he was telling you something that could be very important to you at that time and also in the future.

B: Wow. What do you think was driving him? He seemed to have a passion, from what I'm finding out. He seemed to have passion for what he did. What was inside

him that was driving him? What do you think that was? Was it some kind of incident, some kind of a sense of some—what do you think?

S: Well, when I met him, he was probably in his early 40s. And I'm sure the way he thought was fairly well established at that time, but he was a man who was so unselfish, so dedicated to trying to do what he felt was the right thing to do. He was one of the few people I've met in my life that just was totally incapable of being prejudiced. He did not let the color of a person's skin affect him in any way whatsoever. He would take them based on what he thought their values were, rather than what somebody else might have told him. He made his own decisions, and he would decide that, "This is the way to go," and he would stick to it. But he was certain of what he was doing when he would do it; it wasn't speculative.

B: That's good. What—how would you describe your relationship with Mr. LeFlore?

S: Well, of course our meeting was a little abrupt, as to how it came about. But over the years, we developed a relationship of trust. I think he knew I would not try to mislead him in any way, and I certainly knew he wouldn't try to mislead me in any way. We didn't always *agree* on everything, but we would have the ability to express each other's thoughts, as to what we thought was right or wrong with a certain problem. And discuss it, and then come to a conclusion with that, and go forward with it in a fashion we felt was appropriate with what was best at the time.

B: Were you able to help him on some the cases that he was doing? Which cases would those be? Were you working on some cases with him or helping him, advising him in any way, or—?

S: Well, it was not only—cases, yes, but it was mainly normal, routine things that you wouldn't think would be difficult. To give you an example, back in the [19]60s, at that time there was virtually no representation of the Black community in the courthouse; no secretaries. And a young lady that came to our department and interviewed for the job, was **certainly** appointed to it. Her name was **Mrs. Tamana Agee**; I think at this time she's retired or in the process of retiring after having served since that time. And she first came in here, and it created some problems with some of the other parties. But she was the type person that understood that she was the beginning of something. And she handled it very well, and did a fantastic job with the other employees in there and they all got to like her. And she was the beginning of opening up many positions for the people later on that had been basically a closed deal up to that time.

B: Now, how was she—who hired her?

S: Well, I hired her, but Mr. LeFlore had sent her as a prospect. And she was extremely qualified for the job. The only negative was, as far as they were concerned, was that she was of the Black community. And it was right at that time it was difficult to get someone in like that. But she was hired and did a fantastic job, and she sort of broke the ice, you might say. A lot of people don't realize that, how that started; but Mr. LeFlore was the one that pushed it.

B: Now was that risky for you in any way, politically, to do something like that, to hire—?

S: I guess if you had had to go to court to break the ice, yes, it would've been. But it was just the decent and the right thing to do, and when you do the right thing, people accept it, and they go on with it, and it doesn't bother them anymore.

B: That's good. How did you—what kind of advice did you give him on cases that he was working on?

S: Well, not so much the legal aspect, but the proposition of how it would affect him, or how it would affect his family. And in those ways, we discussed things concerning what the ultimate outcome might be. Some of the matters that he was working on would be used during the election period of time; people tried to use it in a negative fashion. And you try to anticipate things like that taking place, and do something that would help lower the potential negative aspect of it, and not so that it would not override the positive part where it would help elect the person to office that was willing to work in the community to try to bring these things about.

B: What cases do you remember him working on?

S: I can't give you the citations, anything like that. It was just more or less community matters that he would work on. Back at that time, you may recall, Vernon Crawford, I think—to my recollection—was the first Black lawyer in Mobile County. So if there was something legal to do, you would have to go to someone else to get it done, and that was not that simple to do back in those days. It sounds like ancient history, but it really isn't when you think in terms of the years we're talking about. And he would ask for help like that, and we would try to accommodate him.

B: How would you compare—how do you assess his effectiveness in using the courts to advance civil rights? How effective was he in using the courts?

S: Oh, I think he was very effective. But I think his talent was really that of being able to communicate with the average person, and explain the problem, and get them to sit down and look at it in a different light. Not like we're trying to take over or anything, but we're just trying to get involved and share things. Let somebody come up on their own merits, let them come up on their own ability, and not based on what color they are or what color they are not. And he was just the type of human being—I'll repeat myself again—he just did not have any prejudices. He did not look at anything in a Black and white nature. He just as a human being, and a person who was qualified for something.

B: What was the reaction in the community back then? This is a man responsible for the Birdie Mae Davis case, the change of government in Mobile. What was the reaction of the community? What were you hearing on the street, or hearing about him?

S: Well, I think one of the biggest things you would hear is Mr. LeFlore wasn't that well known in the community; we didn't have the communication subtleties that we have available today for people to get to know one another. And I think in certain parts of the community, people mostly thought he had horns. And that he was some sort of a terrible person. But he was one of the most compassionate people you could ever want to know. A person who did not do anything for his own self-benefit so to speak. You would think you hear rumors, people, "You can buy this and buy that"; you couldn't've bought Mr. LeFlore with all the money in the world. What he did, he did from his heart and what he thought was best for everybody. And not something that was going to lead him to have front page headlines, anything. He was the type of person would sit back and let other people take credit while he was doing the legwork. Doing the stuff that was the most unpleasant part, the part that would make you look bad to some people, but you know, be a hero to others.

B: What do you think was the secret of—he effected so much radical change in Mobile in a peaceful fashion. What was his secret, how did he do that? This is like, we're talking about decades of prejudice and segregation on—how, what was his secret?

S: I guess everybody would have a different idea as to what Mr. LeFlore represented. My own personal opinion is, is that he just was one of those people who're blessed with a personality, a disposition, a mannerism, that was all congealed into one great, fantastic human being, who knew how to communicate with people and make them feel good about themselves. Even though he would be the person that

was doing it, he would not appear that he was trying to take credit for anything; he was just trying to simply guide people and lead them in the way that they knew *how* to do it, but they didn't know how to go *about* doing it. And he provided that momentum for them.

B: Do you remember—I've heard that he was—he really researched cases and all that. Do you remember anything about that as far as his—?

S: No, his research that he would do was as a result of what I just described, what I described about the lack of legal resources for him at the time. He did that mostly on his own. If he had wanted to be, I have no doubt that he could've been an extraordinarily good attorney, and would've been most capable and qualified to practice in the courts of this community. But at the time, he did not do that; he was a postman, and he used that position, along with his ability, to enhance his ability to do the things he was able to do for everybody. He was a very quiet man. He did not seek publicity; he just went about his tasks on an even keel, and just constantly working. I'm sure that he stayed up many a night till late in the morning doing things, because he was one of very few people that were doing it. He did most of the direction at that time. There were other community leaders, but he was just a driving force and the man doing the guiding.

B: How did—practically, how did he—you talked a little bit about that—how did he get a case in court? How did he go about doing that? I mean, there were—

S: I'm satisfied that during this period of time Mr. LeFlore had contacts outside this community. Because of his reputation and his knowledge, he would be able to get help from other areas, probably as far as Washington D.C. and the government. And he got help that way. And he had other local people helping him, too. You know, there were a lot of people involved. You had Mr. Clarence Montgomery, and you had Mr. Wiley Bolden, and you had Mr. Randolph Scott, and all these people participated in this; but he was the impetus behind everything. He was the man that pushed. He was the man that guided with patience and understanding, realizing that he was asking some things to be done that he knew would be unpopular. But he just was determined to try to do the best he could for those that he was representing.

B: How would you compare him with other civil rights leaders of that era? His style or whatever.

S: Well, in this general area, in my opinion, he would've been the top man in the state of Alabama. I don't know of anybody that could even come close to holding a candle to him. I'm sure there were others in the rest of the country that I'm not aware of; but not having worked with any of them, I worked with Mr. LeFlore and he's just the type person that when you work with him, you have tremendous respect for him, and know that he's not doing it for something that's going to be helping him on a personal basis, but it's going to be to make the community a better place to live for everybody.

B: Can you recall, just for fun or whatever, a story or some kind of anecdote about John LeFlore, kind of give us some insight into who he was? Maybe a little humorous thing, or something, something you remember about him, some kind of story?

S: One of the few times that I can remember that Mr. LeFlore and I differed on some things was in an election back then that—I don't recall the year, but I think it had to do with Governor Wallace. And he had problem with it. A friend of mine was running for the legislature, and he was a friend of Governor Wallace. And that created a little problem with Mr. LeFlore, and I tried my best to convivence him that the fact that he was a friend of Governor Wallace doesn't necessarily mean he *thought* exactly like governor Wallace did at that time. And he said, "Well, if that's the case, I think I can probably accommodate him. But you're going to have to convince me." I said, "Mr. LeFlore, with what I've told you up to now, if I haven't convinced you, I know nothing else I can say is going to do it." He just smiled and he said, "Well, I think, based on our prior record here, I will agree with you on it." But there were a lot of stories about Mr. LeFlore. He just was a person that I think a number of people were probably jealous of him, because they could not do the things that he could do, they did not have the ability to do the things he would do. And for that reason, some of them would give him—they would talk about him behind his back. But nobody really paid attention to it, because if you knew the man, you knew what he was dedicated to, and you knew what he was telling was from his heart.

B: What do you think Mr. LeFlore should be remembered for?

S: Oh gosh, that's hard, he did so much! If it was one thing that you could count on, you could count on his sincerity of effort. If he would introduce a bill in the legislature, it was not a bill necessarily designed to affect one person or one group of people, but it was designed to take and affect the entire community in a positive fashion. He did not think negatively. And for that it was difficult in those days for

someone not to think negatively about certain things. But he would avoid that. And he was always positive in the way he would approach everything. It might be a difficult task, but you'd never get the impression from him he didn't think he could complete it in a successful fashion.

B: Do you remember the case with Birdie Mae Davis, you remember them—I've heard stories of them taking Birdie Mae into the school. That was your alma mater, Murphy High School, is that right?

S: Yeah, I finished at Murphy.

B: What was going through your mind, or what was your reaction to all that? Here's your alma mater and they're trying to integrate it, and what was going through your mind at that time?

S: Back in those days, it was more or less just a case. It was something that was in court, that subsequently went on for many, many years. And it was a very slow process. It wasn't something that occurred overnight, or took place in a week or two, it was something that took place over a number of years. People—if they sit back and listen, and watch something gradually happen, and they see that the world's not coming to an end as a result of it, they gradually accept it. But it takes a long time for these things to take place. The Birdie Mae Davis case did not make changes overnight automatically. It was a process of elimination. You eliminate one aspect of this problem, and you pursue it on down the road, and little by little, people accept things like that. Even though it may not have been the way they were taught or the way they were brought up. They understand that the world cannot always run the same as it has for the last hundred years, or whatever period of time we're dealing with. And he made changes in such a fashion they took effect, but they didn't devastate anybody, and they didn't devastate anything. He just gradually opened the door for things to take place in a normal, everyday fashion, so that it didn't create chaos.

B: You might've just answered this question, but comparing the Civil Rights Movement in Mobile, to Birmingham, Montgomery, Selma, the other areas around Alabama; you may have just hit on this, but if you could kind of expound on it, maybe. What—why in Mobile was it such a peaceful transition as opposed to those other cities?

S: If it was one thing that I would credit it to was Mr. LeFlore's understanding of people and human nature. He knew that if he went into court on every little thing and filed

a a suit, it would be constant headlines and could turn certain parts of the community against it. Rather than do that, he worked with certain elected officials, and would go to them and explain the problem. And show them and try to explain to them so they would understand: “This is a normal routine thing. If we do it and we do it just by doing it within the system itself, rather than making headlines in the newspaper, it'll take place, and will not create all the problems of people coming out and having these strong feelings against it.” If you see something develop over a period of time, you get to accept it as what is normal and routine. And that's the way he operated. And that was, in my opinion, the success he enjoyed so much, because he was not trying to create somebody talking about what he did and didn't do, but he was trying to create a feeling of everybody working together to accomplish what appeared to be the appropriate thing to do, rather than giving it headlines in the newspaper through court suits.

B: That's something. What kind of elected officials was he approaching? Like, they were—?

S: Oh, it could be anybody. It could be people in the legislature, where the bills were passed; it could be someone in the county commission; it could be someone in the city hall complex. At that time, you didn't have the setup we had then. We had three commissioners, they were rotating as far as who was mayor in the city of Mobile. You got to understand, back then everybody was elected at large; they were not elected by districts. And the vote that could be distributed through the Non-Partisan Voters League, which Mr. LeFlore certainly had a great deal of influence over, could be the difference between a candidate winning or losing an election. And that made an impression on people—certainly people who were seeking office. And as a result of it, they would certainly work with him in trying to do things that seemed to be appropriate to do. Little things, one thing at a time. Little things that add up and gradually build. It's just like building a temple. You start with one brick or one block, and you gradually put them together, and then you have a house to live in.

B: There are some that say that Mr. LeFlore was too willing to be accommodating to the white community, that he was not militant enough. What's your take on that?

S: Mr. LeFlore had some very strong feelings about things, but he was not one to go out and agitate. I think his attitude was that, if you sit down and talk to people, and rationalize with them, you can get some of them—not all of them, but some of them—to think your way. And then, after you get a few thinking your way, those people can go out in the community and they can express the same feelings, and

they adjust other people’s thinking—the thinking of other people like that. And if you could compare today with what it was 30 or 35 years ago, you would see that he knew what he was doing and that he did it in the right fashion. He didn’t create a lot of animosity. Like I said earlier, that some people felt that he was a demon. But he was a normal human being who had feelings and who had desires, and who had ambitions in life. Other than just, I want the opportunity to be able to do with what God gave me, and accomplish what I’m here to try to accomplish while I'm here. But he never used it in order to enhance himself financially. I know that he could've easily accepted many gifts, but he always refused. He could've accepted things that would've meant a little nicer automobile for him, or maybe an enhancement to his home, but he just wasn’t the type of person to do that. He believed in what he was doing, and he was doing it because it was a strong part in the way he felt in his heart.

[Break in recording]

S: Well, when he was in the legislature, he died while he was in the legislature as a representative. He accomplished a lot up there, but not by getting up and making fantastically flamboyant speeches. He went in a quiet way of, you know, making friends with other legislators, because you had to have other people to help support the bills you would bring about, and explaining to them why they should or shouldn’t do something. And he was very effective in that fashion.

B: You’re talking about his—you said he was just a smart man; can you talk about that again?

S: Yeah!

B: As far as his insight and how to play to people’s—what were you saying about that?

S: Golly, I don’t know! [Laughter] It was just coming out, because that’s—

F: I think that’s human nature.

B: Human nature.

S: Yeah.

B: He had insight into how people—what made him—

S: Well, I think that was his strength. His strength was—he had many strengths, but his main strength was that he never talked down to anybody. He always let *them* approach the subject, and let *them* set it up, and then he would guide them gradually and in different ways, in a very masterful way, of understanding what the problem was and what he was trying to solve. He just had the ability to talk with people, put them at ease. When he was in the legislature, when he was serving as a representative, he didn't get up there and try to introduce some bill that seemed wild-eyed. He would do his homework, and he would lay the predicate with the other representatives there. And explain to them, and explain to them what he was trying to accomplish. And he would get bills passed in the legislature that you would never think would go through, because he would take the time to let them know it was a normal routine procedure, rather than something that was going to change the whole state of Alabama. But it was for the community project, which would benefit *all* the people, not just a certain group of people. He had that knack to—I guess you're just born with it. It's not something you can develop, to put people at ease. And that he was not trying to pull the wool over their eyes or trying to set them up for something that he was going to do. And then they would come along and say, "Well, he really suckered me that time." He just didn't do things like that. He was straightforward and honest with you.

B: You said he went around—he made friends in the legislature to—to help?

S: Oh yes. Yes, when he was first elected. He was elected district-wise, and he would go around, and he knew that he was in the minority as far as the voting aspect was concerned. And if you're in the minority in the legislature, you've got a problem if you can't convince some other folks to go along with you. And he would go around and make friends with these people. Let them meet him, find out what type of person he was. See his personality. And the one thing you could count on: if he ever gave you his word on something, you knew he was going to back it up. He would *never*, ever say anything to you that he knew he did not mean, or try to sway you a certain way because he was trying to say something he thought you would like. He was very straightforward, very honest, and people knew his word was his bond. If he gave it, you could go to bed that night, put your head on your pillow, and know he was going to do it. And you can't say that about many of our legislators in the old days.

B: That's powerful. What kind of bills was he introducing? Do you remember some of the first bills that he was doing, or—?

S: No. If I'd've thought about it, I could've gone back and done a little research on my books. But I can't give you any citation of a specific bill right now, but they were just bills that were making things easier for people to get jobs; opening doors that were closed to them; making it easier for them to run for public office, by changing the specifications and districting, rather than at-large-type things. He was one of the first people they brought in that got involved with that. It's the little things that are done in the background, in what people like to call the "smoke-filled rooms," where most of your legislation is passed, and where most of your legislation is thought up and decided on at that time. Not necessarily on the floor of the House, when you're talking. That's for publication, and the people that are going to read it in the newspaper.

B: If you could—

S: He was just a good, smart man that got the maximum out of what he could do, and what he could accomplish. And was probably—in Mobile County, was responsible for more changes that have come about in this day and time that you see on a regular day-to-day basis, that were not taken for granted 35 or 40 years ago. And that man just was just capable of doing those things, and you just had to have the privilege of knowing him and being around him on a regular basis to appreciate his talent in that respect.

B: Can you take us back to what Mobile was like in that era with segregation, what Blacks were facing? Like, just simple everyday tasks, or simple everyday—where you ate, how you walked, and that kind of thing. Can you kind of take us back to what Mobile was like during that time? And what we're trying to do is paint a picture of how—what Mr. LeFlore—things we take for granted nowadays. What you're saying, can you give us some specific examples, can you kind of help us with that?

S: Well of course, Mobile really was no different than most other cities in the state; maybe only in terms of, Mobile was always spoken of back in those days just a big country town. And in those days, like the places on Dauphin Street where you would go to eat, it was segregated. The restrooms were segregated; the lunch counters were segregated; the movie theaters were basically segregated. And he would do things like going in and eating in places where technically he was not supposed to, as far as the accommodations were at that time. And he would place himself in jeopardy; and as a result of it, he would eventually get it in court in some fashion, either directly or indirectly involving him, and the test case usually would come out and he would usually win. But it was just so many facets, it's just one little thing at a time that you have to do in order to bring changes about in a

community. I guess if I'm—I guess over the years, you forget, and things you used to remember on a day-to-day basis, they escape you. If I'd put a little time in on it, I'd known in that respect, I could have given you more examples. But those were the general things.

B: What—can you give us some examples of things that people take for granted nowadays, that are a direct result of what Mr. LeFlore helped push, helped bring about?

S: Well, one simple, very little thing: going up and getting a sip of water out of a water fountain. Just going up to a water fountain and drinking out of it; you just didn't do it. Sitting down at a restaurant and ordering a meal, any restaurant you wanted to go into. Going into a movie theater: you had certain sections of the theater for different parties, white and Black. It was fairly prevalent throughout. It was accepted. It was understood. That's the way life was then. And over the years, by placing his own being in jeopardy at times, he *changed* a lot of that. Everything has to have a start, and he was basically the start of most of the things that developed in this community, that brought it to the present state of affairs.

B: Did he actually get arrested in those cases, or did he get sued? How did he—?

S: I'm sure Mr. LeFlore got arrested. As far as being able to give you a specific instance on what he did, I cannot recall that. But that was not uncommon back then, he would get arrested. But he would place himself in that position, where he knew he would get arrested. But at the same time, I think he was fairly safe in his own thinking that nothing was going to come to him as far as any harm or anything of that type. He was not a physically imposing man. His strength was north of his neck, and he used it. As a result, the good Lord gave him that ability, and he used it to the best of his ability to do good in the community.

B: That must've been something to go into a lunch counter for the first time, and sit in an all-white section for the first time. That must've been—I can just only imagine.

S: You had, I can only remember one area where that took place, where there was a problem, but it was being picketed at the time because of that taking place. It was at Woolworth's, the old Woolworth store on Dauphin Street, where they used to have a lunch counter there many, many years ago. And that was the process that was going on at the time, and it was being picketed by a group of people over that taking place. And he was part of that.

B: How did his—the League, the Non-Partisan Voters League—how did their tactics compare with—there was another group called NOW, the Neighborhood Organized Workers. What—and there're some other, might've been one or two other groups—how his tactics compare theirs, as far as their approach?

S: Well, I don't know when he first started the Non-Partisan Voters League. I got involved in it, I've stated, really in 1958. This is not going sit too well with some people, but the big difference is, Mr. LeFlore started the Non-Partisan Voters League along with others. His desire was to educate the community as to the people bringing themselves out to be voted on for certain offices. Who was, if you want to call it, the best qualified to serve the total community as opposed to serving a *segment* of the community. Now how does that differ from today? Well back then, all you had to do was go before a group of people and convince them that you were trying to serve the community in the capacity to which you were seeking an office. And you didn't have to do anything other than that. Today, you have to do that, but in addition to that too, you have to be willing to put up a very substantial amount of money to get the endorsement. And we're talking about a *lot* of money, depending on the position you're seeking, and depending on whether it's a local election, district election, or state-wide election. And depending on which one it is, the price goes up. And while I know in the old days, candidates made contributions to the Non-Partisan Voters League, was to take care of the printing cost and the distribution of the ballot. But none went in—and maybe to help take care of the operation of a little office they operated out of, such as electricity and things of that type. But now, the money that paid into these various groups that participate in the election, the money *may* go for some of the expenses, I'm sure it does. But it's now used in some extent help people on a personal basis, to some of—the leadership is not what it was, in the day of Mr. John LeFlore. The dedication to what you're doing for the community as opposed to what I can get out of it myself is different nowadays. I don't want to get into names, because I don't think that'd be appropriate, and I don't think it'd serve any purpose.

B: That's fine.

S: But I *know* that's a fact. [Laughter]

B: In 1967, I believe, I think it was early in the morning, Mr. LeFlore's house was bombed. Can you take us back to that time? What do you remember about that? Can you tell us a story about that, what you remember about it, how you first heard about it?

S: Well, I think I first heard about it, probably—I'm sure what happened, at that time I had just been serving the DAs office as an assistant district attorney, and I knew a lot of the police officers and other people in law enforcement. And I feel sure I got a phone call, somebody probably called me and told me about it. I don't recall who it was at this time. And of course, I was surprised and shocked; I mean, even in that day and time, that seemed impossible to take place. But the community was very upset about it, and I'm talking about the *entire* community. You just, you had a very small number of people who could be involved in something like that, they did not want to be considered as representative of what the entire community, Black and white community, thought. And it was something that people didn't think was the appropriate thing to do, and were shocked that it would happen in this community. We didn't believe a little community like Mobile could have people in it that would go to that extreme.

B: How did the community respond—how did they respond right after that just practically, as far as that goes, just with Mr. LeFlore, and his home, and all that. Can you tell us about that?

S: Well, I think people were very sympathetic to Mr. LeFlore and his family. Because he was just like other people, he was a normal human being trying to go through life, and trying to live his life. And they did not like it. They did not like that type of demonstration. They don't like that radicalism. Mr. LeFlore however, though, handled it like he handled everything else; he was not offended by it. He did not come out, you know, wanting this done and that done. He just simply wanted it to be handled in a normal, professional manner, and disposed of in that way, and whatever the legal aspects of it were and however it was finished, was satisfactory with him. He didn't want any special treatment as a result of it. He just realized that was part of what he would have to endure in what he was doing.

B: Amazing. I understand, like, somebody—there's a fund started for the house or something like that, Is that right?

S: Yes. But I don't have any personal knowledge of anything as to how much or what was done. I know there were some changes made. I think the house—I didn't know this, I was just talking to Ms. Franklin a little while ago, and I didn't know that the house was vacant now. That's where I first met him. And she tells me that they're trying to get some type of grant started so they can have a memorial there for him. Which I think will be an excellent way of doing it. But I haven't been in that house in, gosh, a long time. I just remember my first time in there. I think when you go into a place, on a particular expedition so to speak—which I was at that time—little

things make an impression on you that you later on kind of forget the big things. And you go back and think of how it got started and the years that have transpired during that period of time, and what was accomplished, or what failures that were. His life was such that I think you could've put his brain and his thoughts and his mind in anybody's body, white or Black, and they'd been a successful person in anything they endeavored to do.

B: You said little things that you remember about the house, can you remember—I understand one of the places he worked, and we were in his dining room, where he had all his papers, and—. Do you remember, what did it look like when you were—?

S: Actually, we were in the living room when I first met him, and his wife so graciously invited me in; here's a young fellow that they didn't know, and wondered what I was doing there. And he came out wiping the shaving cream off and sat down there. And he didn't have a shirt on at the time; he just had on a pair of trousers. And for the next two hours, we just sat there and talked. And it was just amazing: I was fairly young at that time, didn't know him, and got to thinking, "Here's this man here talking to me. He doesn't know anything about me; he doesn't have any reason to talk to me." But he took the time out to talk to a total stranger, and as a result thereof, a friendship developed. And I think that was his strong point. He did not think that he was so important that he could not sit down and talk to somebody, or learn something from somebody else, which would enhance his knowledge. He was willing to take the time and effort to do that. And that in itself, in my opinion, is what made him such a fine person, such a different person, from a lot of people.

B: You were DA at the time, is that right? Or you were in the DA's office at the time?

S: I was in the DA's office from 1955 to 1965. To try and give you a little bit better perspective: while I was in the DA's office during that period of time that I knew him, he came to me, and he had one basic project that he wanted. And he was concerned about the fact that when a Black person was killed in a homicide-type arrangement by another Black, their sentence was usually either suspended or a very low term in terms of time to spend. And he felt that was unfair. And as a result of his efforts, and his communication with our department, from that moment forward, we treated—well at least, *I* did anyway, and I think most of the other members of the staff did—we tried to treat cases like that just as important as any other case they came across that had not been treated in the same fashion before. And that was beginning of time when those type of murders or assault would happen, they were sentenced on the same basis as anybody else would've been

sentenced. It wasn't as though it had left an impression that the person who was killed, their life was not important because they were not receiving the proper punishment if it'd been a white person killing a white person. And that was one of the little things. It wasn't *little*, but it was little in comparison to all the things he did. To make little changes along the route with his influence with people, and him bringing just simple things like that to your attention that you might not have thought about.

B: Did he ever come here—this is the court you presided over right here, is that correct?

S: Well, this was the domestic relations courtroom in the juvenile division at that time. We didn't hear those type cases here. We heard those in the courtroom down there when I was in the DA's office. I was an assistant DA at that time, and I tried most of the homicides, the killings. But that's just one of the little things that he did.

B: Did he meet with you down here at all?

S: Oh yes. Yes, he came to my office. When I walked in here, that was my office at that time. But that was after I had been appointed to the juvenile division position; I wasn't in the DA's office, and I left there in 1965. He would come down here and we'd sit down and talk. And those are the things that we would talk about. Just everyday things that other people take for granted.

B: That's good. Let me think here. What do you remember about the day that he died, do you remember that? As far as how the community responded?

S: Yeah, I remember. Well of course, I didn't know he had any problems. I had no idea that he had any heart problems. So, I was just shocked to find out about it. And people that had before in past times had said things that were not positive in his favor, realized that here was a man that spent his life trying to help the community appreciate what they had, and trying to make it available to all parties and people who wanted to take advantage of it, was no longer among us. But he left a legacy that should've carried on for a long, long time. I would've thought because—there would've been a memorial to him. That was an effort made, but it just simply didn't take off for whatever reason, I don't know. But he certainly deserves the recognition that the young people should know about today, that do not realize the footprints and the steps he took to make their life better. They take it for granted today; it wouldn't have been like this today if it were not for that man, *especially* in this community. He's the one that opened the doors that had been

closed, and allowed to people to go out and get jobs that they were qualified for because they *were* qualified, not because of any other reason or issue. And it's kind of unfortunate that it's gotten to the point where history does not give him his due, and does not allow young people to understand the problems that have gone before to open the doors that they have just readily open to them today.

B: Specifically, as we wrap up, what would you say are the major accomplishments that he put forth that they enjoy today, these young people enjoy today? What major things?

S: Just the simple fact that you can go and apply for a job and get it based on your qualifications, as opposed to *who* you know. And many of the jobs back in those days, you might be able to get a job even though you didn't have the qualifications, because you knew the right people, so to speak. And therefore, if you didn't know the right people, you couldn't get in the front door to get an interview, even. And he set it up where now, people who, if they're qualified, they can go and apply for a job and know that they going to have the same opportunity as everybody else to get it, regardless of where they come from or where they live. They're going to be judged on their ability, rather than some other factor that would not be that important.

B: Can you tell us, just to wrap up, is there any other story that would help us to better understand John LeFlore? Just maybe your favorite story or anything like that, to wrap us up here? Kind of give insight who he was, what he did.

S: Golly, I've told you. Trying to think of something on it. This is really not pertinent to what you say.

B: That's fine.

S: But back then, they had an office—there was an office on what we called Davis Avenue; it's now Martin Luther King Avenue, but it was called Davis Avenue at that time. And they had a little office, I think it was over at the Franklin building. And that's where they would interview the candidates. And since I was not a candidate at that time but later was, I was interviewed there. Many of my friends were interviewed there. And it was a little office, not too large, maybe a desk and a main chair, and a few other chairs sitting around, and it was hot. Because all these things took place in the summertime; that's when the elections took place back then. And it was stuffy and hot, and you were very uncomfortable. And I remember making a deal with him once. I said, "Mr. LeFlore, it won't tie you down," but I said, "If you

will supply an electrician that will bring the electrical supply to this office so we can put a 220 outlet in here, I will supply the air conditioner to go in the window so we can sit here and not sweat every time we talk." And he laughed, and he said, "Well if you can do that, I've got a friend that'll wire it up for us." And from that moment forward, we were at least comfortable when we talked. We didn't always agree, but we were at least comfortable when we were disagreeing. And it was the beginning of a new end, far as I was concerned.

B: That's great, that's really good. Sheila, is there anything else?

S: Couldn't tell you what his religion was, I'm not sure. Ms. Franklin probably knew.

F: He belonged to Big Zion Methodist church.

S: Well, I'm Methodist, I guess I should've known that. [Laughter] He didn't carry his religion on his shoulders, though. He did that in a private fashion. That was one subject that was never, ever approached in the entire time I knew him—as far as, you know, going into detail on it. He just, that was a private matter, I guess, with him. I know he raised some good kids, at least the ones I knew. I didn't know *all* of them on a personal basis, but the ones I knew, I think certainly a credit to him and his wife.

B: What about, he had a good relationship with Mr. Langan, is that right?

S: Oh, he and Joe Langan were very close friends. Joe Langan probably was the only white male or white person that could have ever run against a Black person and had a chance of winning out there, with Mr. LeFlore's backing. Because Joe Langan, he completely trusted him in every respect. In fact, he gave Reverend Tunstall, I believe it was, a pretty good race for the city commission when he was in the Black district.

B: Mr. Langan ran?

S: Yep. That's my best recollection. Ms. Franklin can correct me if I'm wrong about that. Yeah. And he gave him a pretty good race, too. But Joe had put some years on him by that time, he was not as young. I remember the first time he ran; I remember him coming out of the old Battle House Hotel, waving to everybody on Royal Street when he had gone down and qualified to run for the commission, city commission. And the reason and the way he won, was he got the support of the Black community. That's what won for him. That was the thing that Mr. LeFlore

developed as a very, very powerful weapon, and he used it for good. He didn't use it for selfish reasons, he didn't use it for anything for himself personally. Everything he did was designed to be something that would spread out as far as bringing benefit to everybody. I forgot about Joe.

B: Yeah, it's important. Martin Luther King, do you remember his relationship with him, or do you remember anything about that, or—

S: No, I didn't know about their personal relationship, I just knew it was a very close relationship. And Joe Langan was probably about 20 to 30 years ahead of his time in thinking, things that he was trying to do. He was always in favor of the city and the county trying to combined into one governmental process, rather than having the county commission and the city council and things like that. He thought it should be combined. And he thought that back in the [19]50s. So, he was thinking in those terms long time before it was ever considered otherwise.

B: The changes taking place in Mobile, about the integration and all that, was that before the civil rights of the mid [19]60s? Was that before that or after that, what time period was that?

S: You talking about Joe Langan?

B: Joe Langan and John LeFlore, what were they—they were instigating a lot of changes in Mobile, when was that? Was that before the—

S: Well, I can only speak to Mr. LeFlore after I really got to know him. I knew *of* him. But I didn't really know him personally, I didn't know his personality, I didn't know his thinking, I didn't know anything about him till I met him that first time. And from that first time, of course, we developed a very close relationship. I'm sure he was involved in things prior to that, but there was only what I would read maybe in the newspaper, something of that type, rather than knowing on a personal basis. He was just a unique individual, he's just what you would call one of a kind.

[End of interview]

Transcribed by: Alondra Mabien, June 30, 2022
Audit-edited by: Latresha Maddix, July 7, 2022
2nd audit-edit by: Ryan Morini, September 22, 2022
Final edit by: Ryan Morini, August 2, 2023