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JLFT 009 Geraldine Clark
John LeFlore Oral History Tapes (JLFT), Acc. 328
Interviewed by John Beebee on October 31, 1996
1 hour, 4 minute audio recording • 24 page transcript

Abstract: In this recording, Geraldine Clark is interviewed by John Beebee about John LeFlore and the Civil Rights Movement in Mobile, Alabama. Ms. Clark begins the interview describing her experiences at a test-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter, and her additional work helping Mr. LeFlore to test equality in hiring practices at other locations in Mobile. Ms. Clark also describes some of the work she did with the *Mobile Beacon*. She shares her memories of the complex relationship between Dr. Martin Luther King and Mobile during the Movement. She also describes the aftermath of the bombing of Mr. LeFlore's house. Ms. Clark concludes with remarks on the legacy of Mr. LeFlore.

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.



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JLFT 009 Geraldine Clark
Interviewed October 31, 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.

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JLFT 009

Interviewee: Geraldine Clark

Interviewer: John Beebee

Date: October 31, 1996

C: My husband spent four years in Oklahoma City with the Service, and after we got back, I started looking for a job, and I was sent over to the *Beacon*. You know, and they trained me, and that's where I met John. He was delivering mail, that was his route, but he also wrote editorials every week for the *Beacon*. So, he would be in and out of the *Beacon* all the time, you know. When he came by there, that would be his lunch stop. And he'd spend that hour there and that's where I met him, and that's where he recruited, I guess is a good word—they were just going through that desegregation process. You know, getting people out to vote, desegregating lunchrooms; they started with the little things first. The little lunchrooms, you know, and on up the line. And that's where he would say, "I want somebody to go and eat at Woolworth." And it was like, "I'll go! I'll go!" [Laughter] And he sent—he talked to Mr. Tate, he was an older guy at Woolworth, but he was very sweet, and he understood that the process was going to happen. So, he and John worked together, and Mr. Tate just asked him, "Send one at a time. Don't indawn [read: inundate?] us with 50 at a time. You know, send one." So, I was selected to go to lunch there, and I took a girlfriend, Veronica. She was petrified! So, I ate her lunch and mine. And she just wanted to go—you know, "Let's get out of here!" And I just prolonged it by just sitting there eating her lunch, and eating mine too. And it was a blast. Nobody—they already knew we were coming, so it wasn't any hostility. But once, we went to the train station. John really, really zeroed in on that, because they were riding in separate coaches back then, and sitting in separate rooms, waiting and eating at separate places. So we went to the GM&O. And we ordered, and this lady was very rude. She got the food from the back, and she stood at the end of the counter. And we were on one end, and she was down there, and she *slung* the plates down. Mine first. And it came all the way down, all—just rattled. If movies had choreographed it, they couldn't have done better. And it just rattled, rattled, and sat right in front of me. Then she slung his down there, and it did the same thing, and it sat right in front of him. And of course, I wanted to laugh, and I kept saying—[Stifled Laughter]—and he would, "Don't do that, don't laugh. This is very serious." You know, and it was so funny: have you ever been anywhere where you're not supposed to laugh, like in church?

B: Mmhm.

C: I think I wet myself. [Laughter] I did. But she sang, "Go back where you came from / We don't want you here." See, in this day and age, kids would've gotten up and started dancing with her; but it was very unnerving in a way, but it was funny in a way, to me. And he was very serious. Of course, she was fired. But that's the way

John did things: he worked through the governing body of the courts, and not—he's very high on nonviolence. He had to pick people who he'd send to places, because we couldn't raise our voices, we couldn't get angry; we just sat there, and quietly, pleasantly, took whatever they said. And then we'd go write it up, and type it up, and turn it in. And he worked through the courts. And once, I remember, he sent me down to Southwestern, Southwest Technical College on DIP, Dauphin Island Parkway. And Clay Knight was his name. *Big* guy. Huge guy. And I filled out an application in the room, and Mr. Knight interviewed me.

B: Can you hold on for a second, let me get that phone, hold on for a second, okay. And any time you need to take a break or whatever you need, a glass of water, we're here: you're the star, okay. So, we'll take care of you, okay? [Laughter] Okay, tell us about this story, go back to it again?

C: Okay, he sent me down to Southwest Technical College, on Dauphin Island Parkway. We were trying to integrate that school. And we had one over on this side of town—in fact, right down the street here. So, after I filled out the application, I had to talk to Clay Knight; that was his name. Big, huge guy. I mean, like Samson, I mean *huge*. To someone who was 22 years old, this guy looked like he was eight feet tall. Big red guy. And so, he interviewed me, and he asked me—and he would shoot questions at you. He wouldn't let you answer one before he—*pow!* So, he says, "Who's going to pay your tuition?" And I said, "Does it matter, as long as it's paid?" "And who's going to keep your children?" And I say, "Do you ask everybody that? What difference does it make? As long as I show up, get the work done, pay the tuition." And he kept firing them, you know, just firing question after question. And I'd just wait and wait, till he ran out of steam, and I'd go back and answer: "Question number three," and I'd give him the answer, then I'd call it out; "Question number four." Because he wouldn't let you answer before he'd fire another one. And I know it was supposed to be intimidating, you know, and to get you all shook up. So, I just sat there and sat there, and finally, when he couldn't shake me up, and he couldn't make me cry—oh Lord, no! I don't cry. [Laughter] Then, you know, he said he'd let us know. And I had no intention of going; John just took me on these interviews because I would not fold under the pressure. And then, after that particular school was integrated, they sent kids who wanted to go there. And that was not my prime reason just to get in, I was the first one in to do the interviews. So, because he took some other kids out there, and they cried, so. And we went to South Central Bell. And up until that time, we had no Black telephone operators in Mobile. So of course, I had to go through the same thing again; different people, different techniques, but that was the position. You know, I go in, and I break the ice, and I do an interview, and they get to see me and talk to me, and, "Well maybe

they just not so bad,” you know, “after all.” And I did a lot of those: Mobile Gas, Alabama Power. You go in and do the groundwork for them, and then they—after they get in the mindset of, “Really, we got to open this up. It’s coming anyway,” then he would send some people to work there. And he did it with my husband at Scott Paper. He used him to go in Scott Paper. There were always—well, let me say this: I worked for the *Beacon* all day, and then I would go over and work in his office, two or three hours at night. And he would always, always have somebody from Washington, from the justice system down, to check on these things he—these test cases, I call them. And we’d type them up and mail them off. And see, a lot of places, like Scott, had government money, so they had to come check it out. No discrimination with the government funds, taxpayer money, blah blah blah. So, John always had somebody from Washington in his office: detectives, and FBI. And it was just family. It was just like you got used to them, so it was never anything, “Oh, the FBI is here!” It’s just somebody passing through town, knew about him, stopped in to see how things are going. And the Justice people were always there, always somebody here. There was always a test case going, always. So, for about three years I worked with John very, very closely, and we did this not on a *daily* basis, but continuously for those three years. And I sort of lost track of John when I moved on from the *Beacon*, but we would call; if I needed a job, needed to work somewhere, I’d call John and he’d send me. He tried to get me to work at the housing board: that’s when he was the first Black on the board, and they were going to hire a secretary. But I told him I didn’t feel qualified, so I went back to school, and then we kind of drifted apart. But he—I don’t know. To describe John, I’d say he was fearless. Because sometimes at night, I’d be up there typing, he’d be dead asleep. And I thought, “Suppose somebody comes up here,” you know? But I didn’t feel real bad because it was in a Black neighborhood, but it was dark, and everybody was gone. The businesses were shut up, and he would stay there. And after I left—my husband would pick me up—he’d still be there by himself. I think John, he persevered. I think all the kids need to know, all the young people need to know, that if anything is worth—his theory was, if anything’s worth fighting for, you needed perseverance, you need to stay with—. You know, John worked over 50 years with integration and segregation, and it didn’t happen overnight. It took a long, long time for some things to happen. And I think kids now, they want things *now*. They want it yesterday. Even my own kids, you know. And they take all this for granted. Sitting where they want to, going where they want to; people worked hard, people took chances, people had—I mean there was somebody—people died; if you go back and look at all this segregation and integration in the South. And they just take it for granted; it’s theirs, you know? “Give me more, more!” And they don’t do anything to enhance it, to bring it about. And I think John, he had a—I’m not going to say piercing eyes; he had a piercing

stare. And when he talked to you, he looked you dead in the eyes and it made you want to look away—until you got used to him, see? It was like, “Uh-oh!” And you couldn’t lie. It was like, “I know when you’re lying” kind of look. Everybody, he’d just watch you, stare you down while he was talking to you. He’d be smiling, but that stare. I never known anyone to do that in my life before or since. And after you got used to him, you could—. But the first couple of times, you’d be uncomfortable; you’d look away while you talking to him, because that stare. It was there, and he held you with it. And he had command of the English language. He used multi-syllable words, flowering language. And he’d always make you—if you asked him, “What does that mean?” He’d make you look it up. I’m not telling you, you’ll remember, if you have to do the work. It was the work, okay? So, he’d make you look it up anything and everything—every time you say something, you’d be scared to say, “What that mean?” Because he’d make you stop on somebody else’s job, go to the dictionary, and look it up. And then, if you needed some help with it, he’d explain it. But he had a command of the English language that was beautiful.

B: You did what at the *Beacon*, now?

C: I started out at the *Beacon* typing, and I could do layout. I just worked at the *Beacon*, getting a paper route.

B: Now, what years did you work with John LeFlore?

C: From [19]60 till the end of [19]63.

B: Okay.

C: That was continuous. Continuous. But after then, it was whenever he needed somebody and he was in a bind for a secretary, he’d call me. And I’d come over for a few days, or a few weeks; whatever. But I worked in his office, that’s about seven months before he died, for a couple of weeks, because he was between secretaries. But he was relentless in his drive for equality. Because of the Birdie Mae Davis case—which you may get some feedback on, you know, integration of the schools here was directly through John, and some other people. When I say “John,” he was the driving force, but there were other people working with him in the Non-Partisan Voters League, and when I use the word John, I mean all of them together, collectively.

B: You talk about his drive. I keep picking that up when I’m talking—what was that inside that was driving him? Was it something that—?

C: I don't know where it came from. John used to tell me that, even as a young boy. I think John was born in 1911 or so. So, you know, even as a 22-year-old, that was way back in integration, because I was born in the late [19]30s. So, he said he would never—. A practice in the South is, way back then I can remember: if I was standing at the bus stop, and you walked up, I had to wait back and let you get on first. Oh yeah, that was the practice, and you just knew to do it. That was the way we were brought up. And John said he'd never do it. He was surprised he lived that long; he told me, "If I lived through my early 20s, I'll make it. Because," he said, "I'm not going die when I get on the—." [Laughter] You know he would just—I don't know where it came from, but it was there, and it was the driving force that kept him focused on this. And he believed in everything going through the court; there was no picketing. Later on there was, I think as we moved forward, up into the [19]60s there was some picketing. But he put everything through the courts. And I'm sure he had—how do you say this—help from the white persuasion. You had to. He couldn't have done it all without it; who wanted to help, who believed in him, believed in the cause, and would help him under the table. Because years ago, when you got ready to vote, you had this packet of stuff you had to fill out. So, he was handed a lot of these forms, and when anybody wanted to vote, they would call Mr. LeFlore up. And he would come over, or they would come over to him, he'd come to your house, and they'd go over every line, so that you would remember when you went down there what to put on every line. And he couldn't have done that unless somebody in the registrar's office handed him those slips. So, he had a lot of help from the white persuasion. He had a lot of help from certain judges, certain lawyers, who advised him on what to do; "Don't do this, do this." So, it was an effort on a lot of people's parts, but he was the driving force. It was something in John that said, "Man should not be treated like this, because of the color of their skin," or whatever. And he said he could never practice racism, because of what had been done to him. He said, "I couldn't bear to do that to other people." And he took cases where whites had test cases, and they couldn't do something; he would take those. And he worked on both of them, night and day, all the time. I know he did other things, but to me, looking back as a youngster then, it seemed like all he did was work at this Non-Partisan Voters League. And if you ever got involved, you were never completely let go. He'd call you back, and back, and back. My husband once remarked, you know, "John's—you going to get killed over a sandwich." Because he would always say, "Let's go down here and eat," and "Let's go down there and eat," and I was—*tchoo*—there! And I think I ate my way through the [19]60s, you know? With these test cases. [Laughter]

B: That's something! Tell us, when you were typing up some of these papers and stuff—here you are typing, I can just see you at the typewriter there. Was that in Franklin or—?

C: Franklin!

B: Okay.

C: Franklin Street.

B: Okay. Here you are, typing these cases: did it ever impact you—

C: No.

B: What you were doing—

C: No, that's the sad part. I knew something was happening. You know, integration was coming about: the buses were integrated, the water fountains had no more "White" and "Colored" signs; and this was good.

B: What year was this?

C: This, I don't know exactly, between [19]60 and [19]63, when all this started coming about. And all this was going on in the rest of the world. You know, Kennedy—oh, let me tell you about Kennedy! Kennedy sort of courted the Black people in the South. "If you do this, I'm going to see that this is done." And all of them came out in force: John and NAACP and all of them got the Black out, got them to vote for Kennedy, "He's going to do this and this," and nothing happened when Kennedy won. Nothing happened. And I can remember John and Mr. Thomas here at the *Beacon*, and Mr. Bolden, and Purifoy, all met over there one day. And they were fired up. You know, because time was going on, and Kennedy wasn't doing anything. And they were calling him all kind of names, you know: "He lied to us, blah—." So, they decide to go to Washington. And a few of them went. I don't know who went besides John. And Kennedy didn't or couldn't meet them that day, and Bobby met them. And Bobby took that on himself. I think Bobby was the force that got John to sign this, and do this, and do that; but they came back with an elevated opinion of Bobby, more than they did John. So, a lot of people give John Kennedy credit for signing this, and signing that, and getting integration; and Bobby was the driving force behind that. And they came back and talked about how he listened, he just stopped all calls, and leaned back, and listened. And then, agreed with

them, and got his brother to do all these things. So, you know, I know how politics works and I know how history will record it, but it was Bobby who did most of that for them.

B: What kind of stuff, like what kind of—

C: Well, I think—I'm not sure. Like I said, it's sad that you don't pay all that much attention when it's happening. I really didn't say, "Let me write this down," or "Let me get a copy of this, because thirty years down the road somebody's going to want to know about that." That's sad when you're young; young people don't see any further than next week—or immediately. You know. But I'm not sure what they were talking about, specifically. But it was like they were trying to get things integrated—schools, whatever—and Bobby was the driving force. And when Vivian Malone went to the courthouse [read: schoolhouse] door up in Alabama, Bobby sent the troops. Bobby called out all the militia, whatever, whoever was there, Bobby was the driving force behind that. And any litigation, anything like that, he was always calling Bobby on the phone. So, Bobby was the one, not John; Bobby was the one. So, for all of you John Kennedy—well, he did sign it. He'd have to have signed it, he'd have to agree with it. But I think Bobby got to him. I think Bobby listened first. And they were in love with Bobby then, you know. [Laughter]

B: That fascinates me, just that little insight there that he's fed up; John LeFlore, he's fed up, so he's going to go see the president. [Laughter]

C: Go see! You sent your people down and said, "Look, if you all will stand behind me as soon as I'm elected, blah blah blah." And you know, like, months have passed; they couldn't get anything from him. They wrote, they couldn't get in touch with him. He didn't answer. So they went to see him, and they instead got to see Bobby—which turned out to be better. Because the president, I guess, is busy, he probably wouldn't have given him the time; and Bobby just cleared his calendar that day, and listened, and agreed, and did something about it. Went to his brother—he could get to his brother. So, he went to his brother and say, "We need to do this; it's deplorable how people live, how they have to do, blah blah blah." So, I think that came out of that.

B: So, John LeFlore talked with Bobby Kennedy?

C: Yeah, they went up—I don't know who went with them, it was a group of them. But they did get in to see Bobby.

- B: That's neat. What—tell us, what were his—can you tell us about some of the things he—now, he wrote some editorials, right? Is that right?
- C: He wrote editorials every week.
- B: Okay, he would come by and drop off his editorials?
- C: Drop off—no, he'd come by and write them.
- B: Oh okay.
- C: Or he might even had some notes. But he'd come by and write them. And it's sad; I'm just, you have to realize I'm an old lady now.
- B: You aren't. [Laughter]
- C: Right! That was like 35 years ago, and it's sad that I don't even have an inkling, except they were all attuned to—they all had the tune of civil rights. 90 percent of them had the tune of civil rights, where we need to go. And he had a lot of trouble with the post office. Because see, he worked at the post office. And back then, I don't think you could do anything politically—I guess you'd have to look that up to make sure, but they investigated him, because his work was—and he would take off, and they said he spent too many days off, and he'd have to go to court with these test cases. But he persevered, and he retired from there with all his benefits. So, whatever hassle they gave him didn't really amount to much, now. But at the time, everybody who could hassle him, hassled him. He was arrested at the Junior Miss in Mobile; people were picketing, and I'm sure he sent them. I'm just sorry I wasn't there that day, but—. And they wouldn't move on when the police told them to move on. So, there's a picture of him being arrested in Fort Conde, if you go down there and look at that.
- B: What were they picketing for?
- C: Because there were no Blacks in the Junior Miss. And I mean, it took how many years to get a Black in there, and I suspect it'll take that many more before one will win in the South. You understand? So, that's what they were picketing. Anything that excluded the Black man, that was his cause. Going to the back of the bus; drinking out of fountains that said "Colored" and "White"; going in bathrooms that said "Colored" and "White"; eating at lunch counters; going to movies that excluded

us. The little—he started at the bottom. And he figured, “Oh, they’ll give up this little thing. As long as we don’t want to marry them, as long as we don’t want to move in their neighborhoods.” So, each thing—it would start with a little thing. “I want to eat at that lunch counter.” “Okay, we’ll let you.” So, it kept on. Kept on. Until he was—he didn’t start up here, and I think that was very smart back in those days, to start where they wouldn’t mind giving up the least. And then he’d get that, so he’d go to something else and get that, and he’d go to something else, and something else, and something else. It was amazing the way he did it. I don’t know if that was all his idea, or a collective, you know, group of people who did that, but it was great. It kept down any violence; there was no rock throwing in the street like in Selma, you know. It kept down a lot of violence in Mobile. And I don’t think Mobile has that reputation now—good or bad. I don’t know whether that was good or bad, but we never had that here. And partly because of John. And I think—I *think*, from listening to them, the powers that be didn’t want it here. So, they would tell John, “Well, if you can keep them from doing this, this, and this, we’ll concede over on this end.” So, John agreed—later on, John agreed, and he got more that way than letting people like King—they wanted King here. They wanted this big, massive parade, and blah blah blah, and the powers that be didn’t. They didn’t want that publicity, and that stain on Mobile. And so I think, if I remember correctly, the people at the Non-Partisan Voters League got together and they met with the powers that be—whoever they were back then—and they struck a deal. “You can kind of keep him out of here, we’ll concede, and we’ll make this available, and we’ll help you here, and we’ll help you there.” And I know a lot of Blacks were angry that King didn’t come. And they blame John. And like I say, maybe—I don’t know if that was a good decision or not. It was good for us in the long run. But at that time, they saw King going to Atlanta, and King going to Selma, and they wanted King here. And the powers that be didn’t. Because it would’ve been disruptive, they thought; they would’ve had the stigma on them forever, that King had to come to Mobile to get something done because nobody would do anything. So their thing was, “We’ll do something, if you keep him out.” And he never came and marched. I don’t know if he ever came here, but he never had one of those marches here.

B: Do you know who Mr. LeFlore worked with in the white community?

C: No. Really, like I said, some of those things that he would be talking about, it just—*tchoo!*—went right over my head. It was just, “Get this typed, and go home, and get ready for the next day.” And it’s sad: I wish young people would stop and observe. We don’t observe, you know that? John would turn around and say, “What color tie do I have on?” I’ve seen him all day; when he’d go home, take off the uniform, and he’d come back to work in a suit, or just a shirt and tie; and I

couldn't say. You know, I'd say "Pink-striped," "Yellow polka dot," and he'd say, "You don't observe. You look, you see, but you don't observe. And what color is the building next door?" "Uh—." [Laughter] You know? "You sit here every night, and you watch these things; you pass by in the daytime," and we don't observe. And it's true. We don't! We see it and we don't—[Clap]. And I think young people are really bad at that. And they need to stop, and watch what's going on, and listen, and retain. Or keep it in a file somewhere: you don't know what's important, or what's going to be important down the road. And I missed so much of that, because it got to be an everyday occurrence. "This is what I do: I go to the *Beacon* every day, and three evenings a week, I go type for Mr. LeFlore." And you're typing test cases, and they all run to—they just have "South Alabama," or "Mobile Gas," or—different names in the same texts. And we're trying to integrate this, and it got to roll into each other so that it became commonplace. And you're used to doing it. And you just type it. And we didn't pay, really, any attention to the content.

B: I was just thinking about this the other day—did he have any connections or any work that he did with the University of South Alabama? Because it started at the time.

C: That was behind me, I had stopped working with him then.

B: Yeah mid [19]60s.

C: When I left the *Beacon* and moved to another job—well, I didn't go to work for about three years after that, and I just got away from—all of it sort of was back there. And I didn't work with him that closely anymore.

B: Why—I think you mentioned what he was like to work with, I think you've kind of covered—

C: John was dedicated. No nonsense. It didn't mean he never enjoyed a joke or something. Or he'd stop sometimes and talk about this, or that, or—. But mostly, he was focused. And you were focused with him. He didn't get away from that too long, he was focused right with you. And once and a while, he would let his hair down, and he'd be tired, and you know, and he would talk about other things—not important things, but other things. Not his personal life or anything, but other things. And once in a while, he'd do that. But mostly, I remember him as being very focused. And he'd come by the *Beacon*, now; Mr. Thomas there, they'd laugh and talk, and they would—it went over my head again, because I'm doing this see and I didn't—you just don't know. A lot of us just let stuff go by because we don't pay

attention, and I wish people would pay attention. Young people: pay attention to your family, your heritage, what goes on day by day; little—who you work with. You don't know if it's important or not. I knew what we were *doing* was important, the whole overall picture was important, but the little day-by-day things. Somebody say, "What kind of editorials do you write?" I don't know! Do I remember? I'm 60 years old. Do I remember? But most of them were geared, really, toward civil rights, and people's rights, and schools, and Blacks using secondhand books—the older books that the whites don't need anymore, we got. And then they got new books, and we got the old ones; and stuff like that. He wrote about issues like that, I hope Mrs. Thomas can find you some.

B: Yeah, I'm going to be looking.

[Break in recording]

C: If I were working with somebody, I would be on the ball, because I understand that you've lived, you understand what this means. But when you're young, you have two kids, you have a husband, you got to get home; you got to cook, you got to come back. It was all just—had a knack. And when he talked to you—

U2: I'm rolling.

B: Okay, go.

C: —when he talked to you, it was like, the hand movement, and the eyes; always, he held you with that stare. You could not look away. You *wanted* to. You were, like, uncomfortable at first, until you got to know him. But that stare, he would hold you with it. And if you would look away, he was still there when you got back. So, "Don't go, because I'm going to be here," you know. "I'm going to be focused on you." And he would point, and pierce the air, and the hand movements. His body was not so much; he would just stand there, and he would talk, and that stare. If you got past that stare, you were in, buddy! You know, you knew: we're friends now. But he would never let you get away. He would stand there. And I can't even describe it; it was like, it was as if he's saying, "I know when you're lying, so don't even try." That's what the stare told me; now, I don't know what other people got from it. It was like, "Don't even try. I know if you're lying. So just look at me, now. And listen, and answer me." And he wanted you to speak correctly. Especially young Black kids; get away from that old syndrome when grandma used to talk, you know. And he was very high on education. This is where he was self-taught; he did not graduate from college, but I bet you, he could've held his own with

anyone. The way he wrote, the form, the way he phrased words; it was just great to listen to. You enjoyed listening to him. And he had a command of the English language. It was always a new word. And sometimes I would see him five days a week, coming by the *Beacon*. And he always had a new word. And once, the young man Ulysses and I were there, and he said, "I don't discommode you," and so we start snickering. "Discommode" like the toilet? You know, and he says, "Now, what's funny?" And he really berated, I mean—*pshoo!*—"Look it up before you start grinning, and stop laughing at everything. And everything isn't funny." You know, woah! We felt about—*tshoo!* But I never made that mistake again. When he said a word, and I'd run and look it up; he didn't have to tell me anymore. And almost every week, Ulysses and I had a new word, and we would use it over and over all day. You know, people would get so sick of us. And we would just use it all day long, over and over, until it sunk in. But that's just the way he was. He played sometimes, but mostly it was, "I'm helping you. You may not know it, but this is helping you: speak correctly, talk correctly, look at people." You know, this isn't sleepy time down South anymore; stop looking down, look up. You know, you're a beautiful, or a gorgeous, or a handsome Black person; you don't have to look down. You don't have to bow your head. Look up and talk. And he's very, very polite. If a white man talked to him, he'd say, "Yes sir." And we were getting into that mode of thinking back there with the Black Power. And, "We don't have to say 'sir'." And he says, "It doesn't hurt me to say sir. It doesn't hurt anything for you to say 'yes ma'am,' 'yes sir,' 'please,' 'thank you.' Regardless of what they're thinking, regardless of how they feel about you, *you* are the one you concerned with." You know, whatever, "They can go off and laugh and call me all kind of—. It's me I'm concerned with. It's me." This is part of him. And it wasn't because he grew up back in those old days, because we had gotten to a little place in time where we wouldn't say "Yes ma'am," we would say "Yes." "No." We thought we were doing something, when we were talking to white—"Yes." And oh man, we'd give each other the look afterwards! *We* didn't say, "Yes ma'am." And he says, "What does that prove? Do you feel better?" And we would say, "Yeah." He said, "But you don't look any better. You don't act any better." It was always improvement: improve yourself, don't worry about them. They're already there; you trying to get there. So, you be nice, you be polite. You know, what does it hurt? And he's right. And I just stopped doing that. And you know, you came away learning something. You never was around John for long that you didn't pick up something. Old habit you let go; new words; a way talking, looking, walking, thinking; all that. And that stare. If you could get past that *stare!* [Laughter] And I tried to cultivate that myself; it doesn't work. Because I'd start laughing. I try to stare at you like that, you know, I'll start laughing. But he was sincere. I don't think he did it on purpose, I think it's part of John. It was just a part of John. Like, he wanted to absorb every word you were

saying, and he couldn't do it unless he was looking in your eyes. And he never looked at your nose or your mouth when you were talking, or your hair; he looked in your eyes. And it works. And I started doing that: look at your eyes. I'm talking to you, so why am I looking at your ears? And that, I learned everything from him. And you're not conscious of it at first. But as time goes by, and I would think, "John used to do that." Years later, when he was still living and I was doing something else: "John used to do that." And he really made an impact on anybody he was around for a length of time; had to pick that up, had to pick up something like that from him.

B: Tell us about how—going back to the test-in for a moment. What did that, do you remember what that felt like to walk in to that place, was it the Woolworth? Tell us about that.

C: It was like staring race hate directly in the face. Now, we understand now that all whites don't like you. They were kind of under the table with it. But back then, you were face to face with it. It didn't bother me. [Laughter] I'm sorry, I'd like to say that I felt crushed, and I—. It didn't bother me at all. And boy, God must've been looking out for me, because I was just right up there. And John was, too. He was never intimidated. I don't know where his came from, but I was never intimidated. So, it was not, I had realized what was going on. I had sense enough to know that you could get hurt here, or people hate you and they're showing it. They're blatantly showing it. You know. They're staring you down, they're scowling, and—I mean, it was there. It was there for you to see. And people would run up behind you and get his tag number and all, trying to intimidate you. He would say, "Oh, don't worry about it. They do that everywhere I go." So, you know, it was like, "If you not worried, I'm not worried, bro." So. I wish I could say that it was really terrible, and I felt awful, and—. It could've been unnerving, but I just wasn't intimidated by it. And some people were. He would send some people, and they would, "I can't go back," and they would be all shook up and couldn't sleep at night. And it just never affected me that way.

B: Do you remember what meal it was, by any chance?

C: Meal?

B: Yeah, what did you have for that lunch?

C: Always sandwiches, always hamburgers. I don't think John took you to restaurants where they laid out—. [Laughter] No, it was, they were really sending a lot of

people, and they were paying for it. So, it was like hamburgers, or sandwiches. And Walgreens I think, years ago, used to be in Mobile, and we went over there. They had a drugstore—I think it's Walgreens—they closed up before they'd serve us. They closed the whole store. I think they took out the lunch counter first, and then they closed, they sold out. But they were determined they were not going to serve us. So, that was all right too. Nobody's going to eat there; that's the theory. If we're not going eat there with them, nobody's going to eat there. And they closed it up.

B: Wow. So you're talking early [19]60s when this, with the—

C: Yeah. Because I started, I met him at [19]60, [19]61, and I left the *Beacon* in [19]63.

B: Did you go there every day for the Woolworth thing, or once? How did you—

C: Oh no, he sent different people. I went—the first day that they started, I went for lunch. So, I wasn't the first one in there, I was the first lunch customer they had. And then they would send a group, and then I'd come around about a week later and I'd go again, and all like that.

B: What did they say to you when you walked in?

C: Smitty is her name—and I worked at Woolworth, that same store, later. John got me a job there when I had to go to work. When I decided to go back to work somewhere. And she'd been warned by Mr. Tate that, "They are coming, you take their order; you don't have to talk to them, you don't have to do anything, just—." And she was very polite, she took the order, brought it back, and that was it. Took the money. And years later I told her, I said, "Smitty, you remember that?" She said, "I don't remember *you*." But she remembered doing it. Uh-huh. And once it got to going, people aren't all that hostile. You know, there are a few diehards, now, but they aren't all hostile. But somebody had to start it. And it wasn't easy, must not have been easy for John. You know, they bombed his house; somebody drove by and shot in his front window and blew it all out. That could not have been—you know, he had a family at home, a wife at home—that could not have been easy. But I just say he's fearless. He was fearless in that particular way. He just did not seem to let it bother him. I don't know if it really did; he didn't seem to let it bother him.

B: What were the dangers y'all were facing? I mean, what were the dangers?

C: I don't—you know, I thought about that. And because I did not—I don't say I didn't put an importance on it; to me that's not the big factor. I didn't go anywhere where there was obvious danger. You know, we'd go to lunch counters. And like, the only one that was ugly was at the train station when she slung the food and sang her song. But the rest of them were—knew we were coming. It was sort of a—she knew we were coming, too, but I guess she just said, "I'm going to do my thing and show them that I don't want them here." But the rest of them weren't that obvious. You could tell from their mannerisms and their facial expressions they didn't want you there, but they didn't do anything threatening. You know, even when I went out to the trade school, this big old guy; he was huge, and he stood up over you, and he fired these questions, but he didn't make any threatening moves. You know, he didn't do anything threatening. So, that didn't bother me, that little—you know. I was never in a situation like they were in Selma, where they had clubs and throwing rocks and stuff; no, that never happened, that I know of, in Mobile—at least, while I was working with John.

B: Did any of the test-ins lead to any litigation?

C: Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah, that's how people were hired here. That's how you got on at the South Central Bell. See, when I put in for it and got an interview, then we would go back and type all that up. And then, he would send somebody else. And then when the power got higher and higher, the phone company had to do something, you know. Because a lot of them were getting contracts from the government, and he'd bring somebody in from the Justice Department. He'd bring somebody in that was over that, and they would go in and talk, I assume. And finally, maybe six months, a year later, you would see a Black or two in there. And a lot of people—someone asked me today, "Where are you going?" I told them where I was going. And she said, "Mr. LeFlore is responsible for me getting my job at the city." And she'd been there like 20 years, and, yeah. There are pockets of people in Mobile, that John himself is responsible for them—either through advice, or actual hands-on getting work, or going to school; whatever.

B: Wow, he worked with white people, too. You said "white test cases?"

C: Yeah, I mean if—if *you* went somewhere—and it wouldn't be like integration. Somebody, maybe he got the job you wanted, and you were better qualified—another white guy got the job. You better qualified, you been there longer.

U2: Let's stop.

[Break in recording]

B: Hold on for a second, is that—were you running? Could we talk about the dangers—tell us about the bombing, how did you first hear about that?

C: Oh, that was after I'd left. And that was in the papers. And of course, the city helped him build the house back, and they were very helpful with that. And they never caught him, they never found out who did it. Or if they knew, they preferred not to tell it. But that was after me. You know after that three years with John, I was like he moved on to other people and other projects, and I moved on another direction. So, after those three years, I really didn't keep in direct contact with him.

B: What do you think is the story there? You just said something significant there: the city helped him—what does that say about John LeFlore? What does it say about what he did, his work?

C: I mean, they raised I think over ten thousand dollars. Back in those days, that was a lot of money to repair, and I think they eventually bricked it. But he *worked*. See you understand, now, he couldn't have done this like that in those days, without the help of a lot of whites in Mobile. Now see, I didn't even know about Judge Strickland when you were doing it the other day. I didn't know he was one of the ones who'd helped him. I never was privy, or did not pay enough attention when he named people. And I'm sure he talked about them over at the office. But I wasn't paying that kind of attention at the time, and these people knew—I think they really respected John, they really respected John. And they helped him, you know, repair all that.

B: Were you ever at the League meetings, no?

C: No, because like I said, I had two kids and I had to go home. And my husband worked then in insurance, and while he was making those callbacks to people who weren't home during the day, I would be working with John. Then he'd pick me up. And I don't think I ever—I might have. If they had them on the nights when I were working, I might have, but not enough to remember what went on.

B: Something else I wanted to ask you, but I let me ask you first: any other kind of stories you remember about John LeFlore? Any other stories that you remember about working with him, or something he said to you, or something that—?

C: No, not really. Not really. I think I've exhausted it all.

B: You've done a lot right now, that's great, it's good! What do you remember about the day he died? What do you remember about that?

C: I was at school. I had gone back to college, and I was at school when it came over the radio, and someone at school repeated it. And it was like—my father had died from a massive heart attack later on, and that's, I think, what he had, and he was at home—but it was like when Kennedy died. It's an era that's over. No matter what you do from now on, no matter who takes over the helm, it's an era—it's sad, because more than just John dying, it was like this part is closed, and it's over. It's like when a child leaves home; you're glad they gone, but—I don't mean that in that respect, I mean—it's like your home life is not going to be the same. It might be better, it might be different, but it'll never be the same when you first move out and go. And that's what it felt like. It felt like a whole era was over. And that you couldn't bring that back again, regardless. And I had wished that John, we talked to him about slowing down; I think John thought he was infallible, that he'd go on forever. And he was a representative then. And he did get a driver to drive him to Montgomery all the time, a guy drove him, Mr. Lucy. But we would beg him to slow down. Every time I'd see him, I'd say, "John, you don't look good." He says, "Oh, yes I do. I look better than ever!" You know. And he just thought he wasn't ever going to, I think, wear out. John was not a baby when he died. I don't think, I don't remember how old—

B: Was in his mid-70s.

C: But he always talked about writing his memoirs. And he had a lot of stuff. Because he said, "We're going to get together at night, and we going to sort it all out, and I want you to help me put it together and help me type. And I'll have other people helping me." And he'd just talk—every time he saw me, he would say that. But he would never stop to do it. And I'm sorry about that. He would've had a lot to say that's probably not in his papers. A lot of one-on-one with other people like Judge Strickland; whoever helped him back in those days. And a lot of little tidbits that I wouldn't have privy to—. [Laughter] Oh, there're some things you just can't put on tape. You need to cut that off!

B: Okay. Let's cut it off for a second, I want to hear this.

C: Okay.

B: We off? [Laughter]

[Break in recording]

B: Okay, we're back on. Tell us about—okay, the day he died, you said it was like the passing of an era.

C: Yeah, I was in school. It was like, it was saddening, because it felt like you can't get this back. This whole thing—that's how it felt when Kennedy died. You know, never be another Camelot, or whatever you want to call that. And that part was really sad. But because I hadn't—I had talked to John, I had worked for him about six months before that happened, and we talked and talked. Tell him, "John, slow down. Please slow down." Everybody: "Slow down, John." And he just wouldn't. But that was what I remember feeling, all that day. It was like, I don't care who comes next, I don't care what you do, and all these John-come-latelies with these programs after him; he had laid the foundation. Now, I don't care who came after; unless that foundation was there, you can't build upon anything *but* a good foundation. So, they thought they were doing stuff, in the [19]70s they had all these little organizations sprout up from everywhere. And you would say, "Well John—" "Oh, we don't—John's gone, he's passed," you know, and they thought they were hot stuff. But I know they couldn't have done—they couldn't ever have started something. And they didn't work, they didn't last. Everybody had a little organization after that. Yeah, I won't call any names. [Laughter] But none of it worked. They were just footing over stuff he'd already done, stuff that had already been accomplished. And there's still a lot to do. But nobody has stuck on that yet. I want somebody—we all talk about it; we seminar to death. We meet, and we greet, and if talking did it, we wouldn't have *any* problems today! Nobody wants to do the footwork. And you got to do it, and it takes time, and it takes effort. Everybody, all these big organizations, all they do is talk; they have summits. They used to be "meetings"; now they're "summits," you know. And they talk. And they meet in Chicago, and thousands of people come. And when you go back home, the problem's still there. Nobody goes back to the neighborhoods and put anything in to—including me. Because I don't meet anymore. But John just had that—maybe he came along at the right time, you think? What he did over a period of years—when you're talking about John, now, you'll think: "Oh, for a few years, Mr. LeFlore was on the scene, and he got this done." No. LeFlore was on the scene from his 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s; he worked in civil rights over 50 years. And things that I worked with him in didn't come about overnight. Like I might've done a test case at the phone company. It might have taken two years before that came to fruition [read: fruition], before somebody was actually hired. So, I just don't want people getting the notion that John came on the scene, and he helped segregate [read:

desegregate] the schools, and he helped integrate restaurants, and bathrooms, and water fountains. And the Mobile County Commission where I work today, he was instrumental in opening it up so Blacks could apply. Because the lines were drawn so in Mobile, that the Black man just had a little piece where he could get Black votes. So then, they spread them out so he could encompass another area. So, that didn't happen overnight. And I want people to understand, especially kids to understand: nothing good like that, worthwhile, happens like that [Snaps]. And they want everything *now*. So maybe his legacy is that—persevere. Keep at it. Anything worth having is worth working for. And just give it some time. And work within the law. That was what he believed wholeheartedly, is working within the law, within the courts. And now, we've got Blacks on courts now, we've got Black judges; so it should be easier. And whoever, if these kids listening want to come along and be a politician, or a civil rights activist, they've got a lot to draw on. And just *do* what they did. I know it's a different time, but some things work forever. Some things work no matter what era you in, you know, who you are. And I think if they could draw on that, I think John would be very proud of that. Very proud. He'd probably be grinning right now. Yeah, he would—smiling; he wasn't a grinner. He'd quietly smile and say, "I hope they get the message." He'd be very proud, I think.

B: That's good. What—tell us about—why did he talk to you about the memoirs? Why do you think he did that?

C: I don't know; he would always bring it up.

B: With you, I mean, why do you—

C: Yeah. I guess because I worked with him and I typed, but he would say—I never brought it up. He would always say, "I'm going to write my memoirs one day. And I want you to help me. I want you to help me get them in order." And he kept notes on everything. John scribbled, and if he would come to the Beacon and write out his editorial, he kept—when he wanted that back, he wanted a copy of that. And he kept all this stuff. And I have no doubt, at all, that he had it all together. But I just don't know where it went after he died.

B: That's something we got to work out. Okay. What about, do you remember working on, do you remember the Vivian Malone case?

C: Yeah, I remember typing it. I remember typing all the info and all that that needed—all the litigation, all the things they filed to get her up there and all, yeah.

B: Do you remember him talking about that, or saying anything to you about it, or?

C: No, not really. Like I said—most of the time, now, when I was working with John at night, there were always people milling around, most of the time. There were always people, and he would be talking to them, and I would be over here focusing on this so I could get through, so I could go home. Sorry, it's that mentality of a 23-year-old, 24-year-old; they just saw home after a whole day's work and half a night's work. But no, they would be discussing it: what steps they would take, how they ought to go about it. I know they talked to Bobby about sending the troops up there; they had that in place. Everything was in place before they sent Vivian. I don't know how they chose Vivian, at all.

B: Let me back up, I'm sorry: you said they talked to him about the troops or whatever beforehand?

C: Well, they talked to Bobby, yeah, to make sure they would be there. That he agreed to—you know, they anticipated a lot of—which didn't happen, maybe because the troops were there. But they had talked about it, they knew what Wallace was going to do. And he sent them, Bobby sent them. And they had all that worked out. See, everything—John didn't do anything half-heartedly. He did everything step by step; thought it out, worked it out, whoever he had to contact. I don't think he would've sent Vivian into that without all those people there. Now, Vivian had to do her part; I mean, she was the only Black there. I'm sure it wasn't easy for her. But he was instrumental in that.

B: Did he actually go up there, or he sent somebody?

C: I don't know, he might have. He might have. I didn't—sorry, I'm always apologizing for not paying attention to details.

B: That's fine.

C: I surely didn't.

B: That's something he was working on—

C: Yeah, he was working on it, I had to type it up. [Laughter]

- B: He was getting you to observe, that's good. What did you think of other civil rights leaders back at that time?
- C: You know, we did not discuss that at all. He did not discuss it. I'm sure he discussed it with somebody; Mr. Purifoy might remember, Mr. Bolden's dead now, Mr. Montgomery's dead now. He had a lot of people that he worked with then. But I don't know, I really don't.
- B: I was wondering what he thought of Noble Beasley, or Dr. King or whatever.
- C: No, well see, when Beasley was out there, John and I were not seeing each other every day talking about specific things. If I saw him and talked to him, it was about something special, you know. But not specific things. I wasn't around him then.
- B: Do you think people today recognize John LeFlore properly for his work?
- C: No. No. I used to say that all that time. Of course, I didn't know how to go about starting it; I didn't know where his papers were. I don't remember but a little segment of his life. And there's just so much more to John than what he did—worked at the *Beacon*, and me working with him a couple, two or three years. And I didn't know how to start it. But I went over to the library. I don't guess—it's the African American Archives now, on Martin Luther King Avenue. And I looked in there one day, and there was nothing in there about John. And I left a little note—the people weren't there. The guy downstairs in audits, he rents the downstairs; he let us go up. And they were—nobody was there, it was locked, and I left a little note: "Where's John's legacy to this work? You know, you've got people in here who—Black doctors, the first Black doctor; fine. He was the first Black doctor, and he treated a lot of people. Where's, why—where is this man who did so much? Where's his picture?" But nobody ever got back with me. And I left my address and phone number. I went over to Fort Condé, and there are like three pictures in John in Fort Condé, way before I knew anything about him. That happened before I knew him. So, nothing tied into what—why isn't something going on? I got a booklet from the department of tourism in Montgomery where they had highlighted, it said "Black history." And they highlighted from all of Alabama, what people done: the march in Selma, and Dr. King, and Jesse, and—"Where's John?" You know? The local Mobile thing, they would tell you about the oldest church in Mobile. Where's John? My thing was—and I called the lady up. And she said, "We will include that. If you can get me something, we will include that in the next issue," which comes out like every other year. So, I need to get something to her about that so they can put that in there. And I was always—in the back of my mind, it just fleetingly says,

“They don’t have anything about John LeFlore, nobody, you know, blah blah blah.” Once in a while, it would go through your mind, but I didn’t know how to put it together. I didn’t have the resources to put it together. So, I’m glad this is happening. I really am.

B: You’re doing it right now, how about that? [Laughter] And that’s something.

C: I wish I had remembered more, but—

B: Well see, you’ve got a message there to young people, about remembering—

C: Yes! Pick it up and record it. I mean, you can’t remember everything. And I have some test cases if I can ever find them, where we—they were typed up, and I had a packet of them. And I was looking the last couple of nights. But I know they’re there. But I kept on me and my husband; just us. And all of them were in the same vein, you know.

B: If you could find those, I’d appreciate it. That’d be great.

C: Okay, you can have them. Uh-huh.

B: What can we learn today, looking back on the accomplishments of John LeFlore? What does his life, what does his work, what does that teach us today? What he did he do, what does it teach us?

C: That one person can make a difference. We always say, “Well, I’m just one.” If one person is dedicated and has a vision, and perseveres—I love that word, with John; it describes him. Because when he started back in the [19]30s, he could’ve easily been dissuaded; you know, everything was against him back in those days. He could’ve gone on to something else and done something else, but he persevered and kept at it. He just kept at it. And he never let up. And we need to—we start things, and nothing happens in a year, we let it go and go on to something else. And you get don’t get everything accomplished like that. You don’t get a lot accomplished like that. And I think that’s what he impressed upon me—after I met him and worked with him, and then later on, you have to look back and say, “John didn’t do that in three years that I was with him. He didn’t do all that in four years, or the three years the next group was with him.” It started way back, and I don’t know what that did to him years ago when he was forced to stand back and he wouldn’t; he just never did. But he was only one, and I guess they said, “Well, let him go.” So, something happened to him back in those days that made—“This is

what I'm going to do. I'm going to see that we all have a fair chance, that we all have some dignity, we live with some dignity, and not have to stand around like cattle at the back of the bus." Same thing with Mrs. Ro—

[Break in recording]

B: —talking with you. Really enjoyed it. You just made it come alive. That's what I need. Your heart's in it, too, because I hear what you're saying: we've got to remember, we've got to—. And you're part of that. I happened to call you, and you said—

C: Well, who told you, how'd you find me?

B: I didn't know! I had no idea that you worked John LeFlore. I called you up asking for permission to use the old county courthouse. I had no idea you worked for John LeFlore.

C: Oh!

B: I said, "We're doing a story on John LeFlore," you said, "Well, it's about time." I was getting some really good stuff that we haven't gotten before, especially the test cases. There's something else that you wanted to say.

C: Yeah, the way I remember John is, he was a man of conviction. He wasn't just content to say what should be done. He got out there and did it. And I think that's what young people need to know. If you want to do something, and you feel right about it, it's something that needs to be done, you ought to do it and not just talk. See, now we—John came along, and a lot of people in a lot of cities just like John. He wasn't *one* of a kind, he was one of a kind in Mobile. And King and all the rest of them. Then they stopped doing and they started talking. So, for 20 years they've talked about what went wrong, what didn't do, what we still need to do; they're still talking. And see, talk doesn't do anything. You know, we meet and greet and talk; talk, and talk, and talk. John just didn't talk about it, he did something about it. He followed up. He took the rough road. He went out there on his own in that old, raggedy car that I was always scared of—not afraid of, *scared* of. And I mean, he did all of this on his own. And he used a lot of his own resources, his money out of his own pocket, to do this. And then, he formed the Non-Partisan Voters League. Because he belonged to the NAACP for years before he formed the Non-Partisan Voters League. But just I think we need some more conviction. We need to stop talking and start doing. That goes for me, too. My kids, too. And I think if we can

do that, it would keep what he believed in going. Because there's still some things need to be done. And you don't have to even go as far as he did years ago; he's already paved that way, just act on it. Build on it, and do it. And every time I go somewhere and start something and do something, I remember him, and I just take it on. But it's just benefiting me. You know, it's not really benefiting the segment of Mobile that needs it the most. Because I'm not a leader, just a little follower. And don't want to be a leader, cannot lead, but there are some good leaders out there. And if they would just step forward, somebody will back them up.

B: Good. Do you ever get together with other people that worked with John—do you ever run into somebody that just worked with him, or knew him or whatever? What do you talk about when you—?

C: No. No, not really. Except Mrs. Thomas once in a while, people like that. But that's people that work and they go their own way, you don't see them, you don't—. Yeah, I don't, no. And some of the people I worked with on the test case he would send us out to? They scattered, they left town; this one's gone this way. You don't really get together with them much anymore.

B: Is there anything else you want, just add anything else to just kind of wrap it up here about John LeFlore, about his life, his work, his accomplishments, what the important things?

C: I think I should have covered all that now. Anything else would be repetitious. So, I don't really think so. I'm winding down, too. [Laughter]

[End of recording]

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