

JLFT 010 Lencie Thomas
John LeFlore Oral History Tapes (JLFT), Acc. 328
Interviewed by John Beebee and Sheila Flanagan on November 8, 1996
1 hour, 10 minute audio recording • 30 page transcript

Abstract: In this recording, Lencie Thomas is interviewed by John Beebee and Sheila Flanagan about John LeFlore and the Civil Rights Movement in Mobile, Alabama. The interview begins with Ms. Thomas discussing her and her husband's work in founding the *Mobile Beacon* newspaper in Mobile's Down the Bay neighborhood, and John LeFlore's visits to the *Beacon* on his mail route. Ms. Thomas was in Tuscaloosa when Autherine Lucy attempted to integrate the University of Alabama, and she describes the work she did to support Ms. Lucy at that time, including helping to orchestrate community protective details to keep her safe when white people rioted and drove her from campus. She concludes the interview with reflections on Mr. LeFlore's legacy.

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 010 Lencie Thomas
Interviewed November 8, 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:	Latresha Maddix, 2022
Audit-edit:	Ryan Morini, July 22, 2022
Second audit-edit:	Jada Jones, September 29, 2022
Final edit:	Ryan Morini, August 2, 2023

JLFT 010

Interviewee: Lencie Thomas

Interviewers: John Beebee, Sheila Flanagan

Date: November 8, 1996

T: At this place? Since 1969.

B: Oh, okay. What year did you start—

T: 1943.

B: Wow, that's great. Now, you were with it from the very start, is that right?

T: Yes. My husband and I started it.

B: That's great. Tell us about—there's another interesting question I wanted to ask you. But let me ask you this—kind of warm up questions. Can you tell us where and when you were born, that kind of stuff?

T: Oh, sure.

B: Okay.

T: Beatrice, Alabama. Monroe County, Alabama; that's in Monroe County. February the 5th, 1917. [Laughter] 1917.

B: Great. Now, what brought you down to Mobile?

T: Newspaper: my husband wanted a newspaper in Mobile. And he always liked Mobile. So, he decided to come back to Mobile when he came out the Navy. He was discharged from the Navy. And so, he wanted to come back and pick up his paper. Really, he had just started the paper when he volunteered for the Navy. He left that paper and went to the Navy because he said he wanted to serve his country; so, that's what he did. And he came out with a disability. So when he came out he—we were **checked** to Mobile, because that's where we wanted to come. He had just left a paper in Mobile, and he was not gone but about a year, see, because he soon came down with bad health. And we **checked** to Mobile from Chicago. He wanted to stay in Chicago for a while, which he did. He was **checking**. Everybody had always told him—he had no problem with race relations in the North. [Laughter] So, I say “the North,” because that's what everybody called it. So he said, “Well Lencie, let us stay in Chicago.” We were living outside—I was—in Great Lakes, near Highland Park. And I had a lovely job there, of course. [Laughter] Most of my friends said, “Why, Lencie, would you do that when you are a teacher;

you have a teaching certificate?” Because really what I did, I don't know yet how those ladies knew I was there. Because when I got to Chicago, they had already sent for me to come by and have an interview with them. It was two old white ladies. They had a lovely house, and they just wanted me to cook for them. And do little chores around the house. So I said, “Okay.” Frank said, “They have called me for you to come by.” So, he carried me by. It was very convenient, first thing. Out here about ten miles on the “L,” whatever they were driving in, riding. And he could come from Great Lakes anytime he was not on duty at night; he could come home. And so I knew it was convenient, so I told them, “Oh yes, I love it.” So I did. I really loved—and the old ladies were very, very nice. They really regretted when he was discharged. So, when he—I went by there and I decided I would work for them. And I enjoyed it, because all the money I made was free money. I didn't have no expense, you know. And *he* didn't have no expense. So I decided to stay there. And they say, “Okay Lancie, you got an apartment”—this apartment he gave me, a lovely little apartment: “This is yours.” But it still was in the same house with me. They say, “When Frank is off, he come home, when you cook; cook enough for him, you have no problem with that. We want you to have his food when he come.” So therefore, I didn't stay there when he was discharged. [Laughter]

B: What about, now, when you started the newspaper here? You're starting a newspaper for the Black community in Mobile. What was it like in Mobile at that time? What was it like to be an African—how do you prefer—the “in ' term now is African American. What do y—?

T: We were saying “Colored” then.

B: Well, I'm not going to use that term now. [Laughter]

T: We was saying Colored then. I has changed three times since we been in—

B: [Laughter] I know—whatever term you prefer. What was it like being a Black American, African American, at that time during the 1940s? What was it like—I can imagine that was kind of a challenge to start a paper during that time. What was it like—like, a typical day for you? Like, as far as where you ate, where you, you know, with the restaurants, or drinking from the fountain, or restroom fa—. Tell us about what kind of prejudice you faced back then.

T: Well, it was quite a bit. Well, you just went to—since we say “Black” now, we went to the Black cafeterias and Black cafes; wherever you want to eat, that's where you went. You went to the restroom? Likewise. If you traveled? Same thing. You would have to go to those restrooms in the back, because we did a lot of traveling

at that time. And you just knew that's where you went. Because you were not welcome anywhere else. Of course, I never was afraid. [Laughter] Because I would frighten my husband sometimes, because where it was convenient when I wanted to go, I just walked right on, didn't look back, and didn't say nothing. And I never had any problems. Because I really—see, we talk about integrating the bus; I rode the city buses here in Mobile back in [19]42 and [19]43. Because when I wanted to ride on a bus, I would just pay my money, get on the bus, and whatever seat was vacant, that was where I sat. I sat on the front seat a lot of times in the [19]40s here in Mobile, on the front seat. The driver never said anything. And I didn't say nothing because I didn't see how I need to say anything; just sit, and ride until I got ready to get off.

B: They never gave you any trouble for that?

T: No, I never had any trouble.

B: That's good, that's good. What about—tell us about the first time you met John LeFlore? What was that like, do you remember that time?

T: I don't really remember exact.

B: About what time was it?

T: Probably back in the—in the [19]50s.

B: What do you remember about him when you first met him? What impressed you about him?

T: Well I was impressed that he was always looked forward and didn't mind saying what he wanted to say about things. And he always—he was never afraid. So that's just about the way it was.

B: When he was talking with you, or—I've heard he used his hands a lot. What was he like? Can you kind of give me a picture of what he was like when he was talking, or—? Did he use his hands a lot—or, what was he like when he was talking?

T: Well, he would be pointing at what he—like he was in motion of what he had in mind. He used that to make you understand that he really meant business, I would say. What he said, he really was concerned, and sincere in what he said.

B: Okay, that's good.

T: I didn't talk with him as much as my husband, because they spent all the time talking. I had to keep the paper moving. [Laughter]

B: Got to do the important—

T: That's just the way it was. I didn't have time to sit in the office; I had to keep moving.

B: What do you think—what was driving Mr. LeFlore? What do you think—what was it—was there an incident that set him off, or was there something—what I'm picking up from all these interviews, he had a tremendous drive—I mean, from back in the [19]20s, he was doing civil rights work. What was it that was driving him to do that? What do you think it was?

T: Well, he felt that everybody should have the same rights. And everybody should have the same opportunities as whoever, regardless of what color it was. He just felt it was open for everybody, and that's what he wanted to see happen. And he just kept working with it. And of course, with the people he had *around* him, he had a lot of folks, I'd have to say, around him. Because now really, when we first came back to Mobile, even before we met LeFlore, Alex Herman and **Danny** Moore: those were two of the people who really encouraged my husband to come back to Mobile after he came out the Navy. Because he would go to meetings—everywhere he met those people, they were begging him to come back to Mobile. And after he got here, he met LeFlore. But those are the people who had a lot of influence on his coming back to Mobile.

B: Did you ever—by the way, just a little quick aside—did you ever have any trouble, did you experience any threats or any danger in having this paper? I mean, from the racist element, did you ever have any problems with that?

T: No. Directly, we did not. We had very good cooperation from our white merchants and the white people. Everywhere, all through Alabama. See, because our paper went from—came Tuscaloosa all the way through to Mobile. We went through the small cities like Uniontown, Demopolis, Linden, Greensboro, Selma; wherever, we went there. And we never had any problem with those people.

B: That's good, that's good. What—did Mr. LeFlore ever confide in you? Did he ever talk to you about what his dream was for civil rights—what his dream was for the future? Did he ever kind of talk with you about stuff like that, or—?

- T: Yeah, well, that's the same thing I was saying a few minutes ago. That he wanted everybody to have the same rights. Because when they integrated the buses, for instance, he wanted everybody to be able to ride wherever they'd like to on the bus. When you go to the cafeterias, or wherever you went to eat, he wanted everybody just go in and get served, just as everybody else did.
- B: When was that? When did the—I understand he fought for integration of the buses. Do you remember about when that was?
- T: I believe—I'm not sure, now, I'll be frank—I think it was the early [19]50s. Yeah, the early [19]50s, I believe it was. About middle [19]50s. Probably around middle [19]50s.
- B: So, it was actually before the main Civil Rights Movement, which was in the mid-[19]60s.
- T: Right.
- B: I mean, he was, like, way before that time.
- T: Right.
- B: Whom did Mr. LeFlore regard as his close friends, close supporters? Do you know who he—I imagine one was your husband?
- T: C.H. Montgomery, and Alex Herman, and Danny Moore. Mm, I can't think this other name. A couple more I have in mind, but I can't think of the name right now.
- B: [inaudible at 10:33] **were talking**. Tell us about those test-ins. Now, your husband participated in those, is that right, with Mr. LeFlore, the test-ins?
- T: Yes.
- B: Tell us about those. And can you tell us a story about one of those test-ins, or—tell us a story about that. If you would.
- T: Well, they would just get on a train and ride it so far, and see if they could eat anyplace on the train where they'd like to eat; and if they had any problem where they sat, and how they would be accepted on the trains. But the only thing they

would do is ask them up, you know, out of the seat if they was in the wrong place. But they'd had no fights or, you know, lot of big arguments or fights on the train far as I know. Because some things they may not have told me. [Laughter] Because my husband was kind of afraid for me sometimes, because he knew I didn't take no back seat. And some things I know he did not tell me! [Laughter] Because he said I didn't have no more of the sense than to do it. And I just did the way I felt. So I know some things that the folk might've said to them; I didn't get that. But I do know one thing they did—one of my ministers, who was a white minister. Presbyterian minister at Broad Street Presbyterian Church. He rode on the bus *with* the Blacks the first time they rode on that bus. And his elders in the church told him he could not preach to them. Now, he had a problem—that's right, a white guy had a problem—since he rode on the bus with the Black people, then they didn't want him in that pulpit. That's right. And he left that church. It's still the building down on Broad Street. And so, he went out and ministered at Springhill Presbyterian Church, took him at that church as his *youth* minister. So, it was a lot of white people had problems as well as Blacks. Dr. Wynn was president of Stillman College, which is a Presbyterian college; He finally had to leave Tuscaloosa, because he helped to protect Autherine Lucy in the mob when we integrated that university. So, it was a lot of white folks—it wasn't just the Black. We had a lot of white supporters. That's for sure.

B: Can you describe, maybe—and you said about the trains, was there anything else? Do you remember any other test-ins, like, for any restaurants, or lunch counters, or anything like that? Do you remember anything like that?

T: Yeah, they did test the restaurant downtown here in Mobile. And likewise, I said they just wouldn't serve them. And they were really making the test so they can have a legal suit to go in against those things. So, it never was no big fights—far as I know. The lunch counters were the same as the trains; they were doing it all at the same time, see. During that period, it was all the trains, the lunch counters, the city buses, and so forth. See, they were testing all those at the same time.

B: About what time was this, what era?

T: What—it was still in the late [19]50s and [19]60s. It was still between that Civil Rights Movement, all through there. It started—well, it's still going on. I **try to say**, “Till what?” [Laughter]

B: That's right, that's right.

T: Can't end that yet! [Laughter]

B: That's right. What—how successful was the test-ins, as far as the strategy? How successful do you think they were?

T: Well, I think it was successful. Not all the way, but it helped a lot. Because as we are doing now, and as was the beginning: you can go anywhere—*mostly*, I'll say that again. And eat if you want to eat. If you're traveling, you can go in any restaurant. Now you can go in any hotels—*mostly*, I'll say that. Because I just have a news release now from Ohio where a man is being sued for burning a cross in front of a man's house for the same thing. That the reason I say it's still not over. But it has changed a lot. Our young folk don't know it; they think it's been this way all the time, but it hasn't. And we need to get more of it into our schools, where we had to have the integration. So our kids can understand what has happened. The young kids, both Black and white—it ain't just the white—don't understand where we have come from. And they don't know how to appreciate a lot of thing that has happened. Reason I know, I spoke at a school over here in Prichard, and the Black kids would not believe their teacher—incidentally, the teacher was a white lady—so, they was giving her so much problems when she tried to bring up what we had discussed. It was about four Black people went into this program for school. And so, this teacher came back and said, "Will you please come in here and tell these kids?" Say, "They won't listen at me. They don't believe what I'm saying: that at one time you all could not eat at any counters; you could not go in any restrooms when you travel; you could not do a lot of these things that they are enjoying now. But they don't want to listen at me." What I could see it; she was a white lady. [Laughter] And they felt that she was covering, you know. And so I went in and talked with them a while, and told them exactly what had happened, and they didn't believe it. Oh, they just couldn't believe that at one time it was that bad. And it was not just the Black kids, it was the white kids likewise. So, you'd be surprised. It's a lot of it going on.

B: Tell us about his work here at the *Beacon*. Kind of paint us a picture of what it's like—he came by—what was his relationship at the *Beacon*? What did he do at the *Beacon* and that kind of thing, and—?

T: Well, he would write stories—his stories on the buses, and the trains, and the counters. That was his main thing he liked to do. Just to tell what happened when he would go ride the train, or ride the bus; that was his concern. He just loved to write those stories. And natural, a newspaper that have anybody who like to write? You'd be glad to get a good writer. And a person who is really concerned, and he

was definitely concerned. And naturally, sometimes he wanted to write editorials on it. So my husband said, "Okay, you want to write it? Help yourself." But he would always check, to be sure. You know, you have to do that in a newspaper, period. So that's just the main thing he would write about. His concern, and the concern of the people and what is happening.

B: Is there some record of those articles—do you know? Are there somewhere?

T: I imagine I can find a few of them. As I told you, we've had a lot of problems since, you know, we been in business. We've had fires, we have had hurricanes and a lot of our files have gotten destroyed. And we had a windstorm July the 9th, 1996. That's right. And I mean, when those storm come—the water was all over the floor from here to the front. No roof was on the center of that building, and that's where we keep files, in the center of the building. [Laughter] So we still lost some just a few months ago.

B: Mm. That's something. Let me think here: what was it like when he came—did he come by here frequently?

T: He would come by the office. Now, at that time his route—he was carrying mail. His route was Down the Bay, we call it, down on Cedar and Augusta. Our office was on the corner of Cedar and Augusta. So, it was on his route. He had no problems stopping by the office all the time. But see, that's the reason—now, I'll tell you: see, Gerry was in the office. Geraldine was in our office at that time.

B: What's the name?

T: Geraldine Clarke; you interviewed last week.

B: Okay, Geraldine, okay.

T: She was at the office, so naturally, she would be *in* the office when he came by to bring the mail. So she would have more contact with him, really, than I had. Because as I said, I was downtown selling ads and doing other things. Because I kept moving. I did some of everything on the outside. My husband came out with a disability, he didn't have the energy that I had. And so, I just kept going outside. Because he would always say, "Well Lancie, you can do it better than I can, you can do it faster than I can." So he would stay inside; I'd rather him stay inside. Because I could do more—. [Laughter] I could move more on the outside than he could. And that's another reason he had more contact with LeFlore, because they

was in the office maybe two or three hours at the time, and I would be outside. I would come in and do what I had to do, and say, "Okay, I'm going again." So, I really didn't stay in the office all the time, or not that much.

B: What did they talk about? Do you remember some of their conversations or what it was like, or—?

T: Well, they'd be still talking about the same thing. They were having a meeting of such and such a thing. They would have a voter registration, or a vote-in. Well, John loved that voting. What we was talking about not long ago; he was going see that that vote was okay. Because we were printing the ballots for him, that they was printing and put out. [Laughter] So, he and Frank had so much problem, because he would change it. If it was the night before the election, he would come and say, "Frank we got to change this ballot!" And Frank say, "John, we cannot change that ballot now. Folk got to vote tomorrow." "That's all right, I want you to change this ballot. You print this ballot over for me." So Frank said, "John, I'm not going print this ballot for you no more," [Laughter] "because I cannot keep changing this ballot! You got to decide who we going vote for and who we not going vote for. Because I can't change it." But he would change it—but that's what they'd be talking about, something like that. Most time. They caught by from one election to the next one. Now, right now they'd be planning for the next one.

B: Tell us about the pink ballot. How, how—do y'all—

T: That was the pink ballot. [Laughter]

B: You all were the printers of that, that right?

T: Yeah, we printed it for a long time. But you had to change it all—in fact, we didn't sleep that night before. Because he was going change it up until time to go vote. He had to change it in time enough to get it back on the streets, so to speak.

B: Why was he changing it? What was his motivation, what do you think?

T: Something happened that he changed his mind on who was going run, and he didn't want to support this person or that person or whatever. That's what it was. Something he did not want to support. And he changed his mind, that's all. When he changed his mind, he changed the ballot! [Laughter] It was just that simple.

B: How many of those did you print?

T: Scott was one that—whoo! Thousands of them. Probably 40-50,000, something like that. It was a lot of them. That what I'm saying; you work all night.

B: Now, how did you get—how did you get them out in the community? What did—how did you—

T: Well, I don't know; that was his problem! [Laughter] I said it. It was so many, he had so many workers. They would have so many workers out there to get them out. And when you got that organization, it can be done. See, they have so many precincts where they had people in charge of each section. Maysville in this section. Toulminville had somebody. He had to see that everybody working their section. Down the Bay, we call it; they had somebody there. They just had it so organized, that with the organization, they could do it if they work all night. And they did it.

B: Now, how effective were those pink ballots?

T: They were good. They really had a lot of effect. Because one thing about back in those days, the state of Alabama did like this during the election: the state of Alabama would have a meeting, and we met in Birmingham because we didn't miss a one. We would carry at least two buses from Mobile on that Sunday before that election on Tuesday. And they really screened all the candidates, all over the state of Alabama; they really did. They did a wonderful job. And then, what they would do, they said, "Now we going"—some of, of all of these folks are evil. [Laughter] That was their motto. Everybody is evil; we don't have nobody on here that's not evil. Definitely where the Black folks are concerned, and the poor whites. Because nobody left the white people out, because those poor ones was just as bad as the Black ones, but they may not have realized. They would screen them; they would work all day. They had these committees from every section of Alabama who knew who was on the ballot. And at the end of the day, before the day is ended and they going get ready that everybody head back home—because we had some buses loaded everywhere; every county in Alabama was represented there. So, they took, but we—I say "we" because I was there every time [Laughter]—we had control of Birmingham on that Sunday. And the people knew they were coming in. And what they would do when they got at the end of that day, before they got ready to leave for maybe a couple hours: all these committees came back in and made their report. And then, those people in charge of those committees—head of the committees—would screen those reports and see who they think we should vote for. And everybody voted for the one that they selected. Because everybody knew that they had really done the groundwork, and

they knew what they were talking about. And at the end, when they said, "Okay, we going mark the ballot: we going vote for such-and-such-and-such." Then they say, "First of all, let us let all of you all know: we not saying these folks are good, or are the best; we going vote for those that are lesser of the evils." [Laughter] Now, that was their motto: "Vote for the lesser of the evils." And that's what they did. And that was the pink ballot. So now, everybody didn't have pink ballot; that was for Mobile and Mobile County. All of them had their type of ballot, whether they were blue, yellow, green, or whatever. But all the counties had that ballot.

B: Now, who organized all this?

T: The head of—that was of the state. It was really W.C. Patterson was head of the state. And Arthur Shores, and it was another guy—he was a doctor. Doctor Nixon. They was kind of the head. But they had some more. Oh, Emory Jackson was one. He was the editor of the *Birmingham World*; he was really good. So, that's what; they had about five or six of those head people that really knew the state, and they traveled the state. They didn't stay in one town. They would go to state *themselves*. They didn't support those peoples in those counties as such, unless they checked it out.

B: Now, how was the League involved in that, as far as—were they just working in conjunction with that?

T: In conjunction. All organizations worked in conjunction—the Voters' League, the Non-Partisan Voters' League; NAACP; just name it. If it was a part of a Black organization, they were there. Even the women's—Federated Club Womens; they had everybody. The ministers of the churches. That's right.

B: That's something.

T: They really had them, no question about it. [Laughter] They covered Alabama.

B: That's something. There's some disagreement about if Mr. LeFlore was—in his quest for civil rights, if he too accommodating with the white establishment. He kind of went along with whatever—you know, that kind of thing. And he was maybe not militant enough. What's your opinion?

T: I think he was. See, that's the trouble: we always think of in terms of that. But you got to still work with people. You get a job done by working *with* people. You don't take over and do your little thing, and forget about there are other peoples involved.

Anything you do, you still got to think about the other people. And that's where we make a lot of mistakes—all of us. Whole population, and the whole world. We don't want to work with other people. We don't want to consider the other person's feeling. We don't want to realize that everybody has an idea or thought of their own. As my motto, God gave all us five senses, and we supposed to use them. And you can't take that other person's sense away from them. Let them use theirs. And when you get their ideas, weigh it out and get the lesser of the evil, as we say. And that's the way you have to do it. And we as Black people can do a lot—which I've always said. I'mma tell you this, now: God bless them, but from a part of my Church. When we integrated our camp—see, Presbyterian have a camp up here at Bay Minette. And we thought we was going have problems; and we *did* at first. But I could have gotten the negative side, but my children—when I carried them up there, I carried a station wagon with ten and twelve of my kids from Hillsdale every Monday, for four Mondays in a week. I would go back and pick those kids up on Saturday. We went all the way from kindergarten through high school. Carried the high school first, because that's the way the white people felt: they'd carry the high school first. [Laughter] And the high school reneged more than anybody else. I never will forget the first Saturday I went up there to pick up those kids; ooh, they was so furious! “Mrs. Thomas, we didn't like this camp! We didn't enjoy it!” Lord, they were fussing about the white kids. And then I'd say—I let them say what they wanted. I say, “Okay, now wait a minute: what did you all do to make it better?” “Well, we didn't say nothing. They didn't say nothing to us, and we didn't say nothing to them.” I said, “That's not the way to do it.” I say, “You together, and those white kids didn't know how you all reacted, and y'all didn't know how they did. Because y'all have not been together. So, you don't know how to cope with situation. I tell you what: next time you go, first thing you do when you get out my station wagon, you say, ‘Good morning, how y'all doing? What school do you go to?’ And ask them questions, then that open up your conversation. Once that conversation is opened up, you will see it'll make a lot of difference.” And see, that is true with all of us as leaders. And so next Monday, I carried the junior high. I told them what to do when they got here. I told them ahead of time. And when I went to pick *those* kids up that Saturday, they didn't want to come home. [Laughter] The white kids didn't want to leave mine, and mine didn't want to leave them. “Mrs. Thomas, wait a minute; will you give us thirty minutes more?” I say, “Okay.” They was right in the yard where I had to park, playing. I let them play, until they finally say, “Okay, we guess we'll go home.” And that made the difference! See, now that's what LeFlore would be doing. He would be making the difference, because you still got to be part of the thing all the way. We live in this world that God intended for all of us to live here together. And we as leaders got to pave the way right. And never since then I had

any trouble with those kids, and that was in the [19]60s. And they get along beautiful together. And it makes the difference.

B: What was—you min—

[Break in recording]

B: Anything like that would be good. Any kind of stories.

F: John I just wanted—at this point now, are you going to get some specific information from her about authoring most of the—

B: Yeah, that would probably be a good point. Let's do that while we're thinking about it.

F: Maybe if you want to use her comment before Vivian Malone's—

B: Got it. That's good.

F: Because she can paint the picture of how it was for Autherine.

B: Okay. See I did that. Okay. Mrs. Thomas, tell us about—you worked with Autherine Lucy, is that right?

T: I sure did.

B: Now, she was—tell us about her role. Now she was the first—?

T: She was the first.

B: The first—

T: To enroll at the University of Alabama and attend class. She attended class for a week.

B: This was in graduate school, or—?

T: Yes.

B: Okay. And she attended for how long?

T: A week.

B: Okay. So, she was the very first. Now, what was your connection with her? And we'll kind of relate this to Vivian Malone down the line, but what was your relationship with Ms. Lucy?

T: Well, when she came to register, me and my secretary was there to support her, to give her support from the Black community, so she knew she was not standing alone. And so, she did register, because we were there. She did attend class for that whole week, because she had lunch in my house *every day*. Because she could not eat on the campus. And two men would bring her down for her class every morning. And all three of them would have lunch at my house.

B: What were the, the men—why were there men that were, would bring her down—

T: Because they were supporting her. They knew—they was afraid of the Klans and the mob, which did eventually run her off the campus. The Black community was expecting something to happen. And that's why they was protecting her by bringing her down every day. She had to have somewhere to stay, she couldn't stay in the dormitories. They had not opened those things up at that point. So, they just brought her down every day. That's right.

B: Now, what eventually happened? Why did she have to leave?

T: Well, the mob came and ran her off campus. And only the folks at the university protected her by carrying her—I think they carried her up to about seventh or eighth floor in one of the building where she was having class. And of course, it was all over the world; because every day, when I got back to my office on the next morning after they had lunch in my house, I would get calls from all over the world: Washington, New York, California—wherever. “Mrs. Thomas, we understand Autherine had lunch at your house yesterday.” I said, “She sure did.” And they wanted some information on her. I say, “So, what's the problem?” “Well, just want to know—.” Well, this was reporter news folk that wanted a story on her. And so that particular Monday, we thought everything was okay, had settled down, because she really had gone to class that week. And so, when we heard that the mob was there, I was at the office and I had to go uptown. I say, “Oh, goodness, I wonder where is Autherine?” So, I went on uptown to pick up my ads, and I came back; oh, it was terrible! Tuscaloosa was *covered*. But thank God the Black folks was covered, too. [Laughter] Those Black men—I don't know where they came

from, but the whole block where my office was, it was covered. And they brought guns, pistols, and whatever they found that would shoot in my office. My office was filled with guns and pistols. But I felt that I was not going use them, and I told the men, I said, "Okay, appreciate it; but we not going use them if we can get around it. We do not want no bloodshed." I said, "No matter what color peoples are, they're still human. Everybody want to live. Now, let us take it easy, and—we going protect Autherine, don't misunderstand me!" I said, "But, let's be easy with it." So, they listened. So then, we had a call that one of the men had gotten hurt and was in the hospital. I told my secretary to call the hospital, we only had one hospital there, and see if this person was there. And so, they said no. Then the next news we got came in: one was at the police office. So, we called the police office—he say, "Yes we have one here, but he is just here for safekeeping." Then one of my young men came in, I said, "Well, what we need to do now—we know one is not in the hospital. Let us get somebody to go to the campus and see if you see that car, that they came in. If you see the car, maybe you'll see the man who supposed to be with the car." So, that's what this young man—"Okay, Mrs. Thomas. I'll go, but I don't have my car. It's in the shop." I said, "Take my car and go find him." He went and saw the man walking down the street, but even the man was afraid to come to the car, because it was so rough in Tuscaloosa. He was afraid he may have got in the wrong person car. So finally, he say, "I am with Mrs. Thomas. I am at her office, and she sent me for you. Did you come with Autherine?" He say, "Yes, I did." He say, "Well, come on. Get in the car. I'll take you back to the office." And by that time, the folk—two highway patrol cars, now—brought her to our office, and put her out in front of the office. They were state men, they were supposed to been the ones get her back to town—to Birmingham, safe. Not us at our office. Because we was not paid servants—[Laughter] by the state of Alabama! But it took two of them—now, two of them brought her to the office. They wouldn't've—one of them would not trust one of their cars, to bring two of them. So I was sitting at my desk, and I looked out. I say, "Oh, Lord! I wonder where Autherine is. I sure hope she doesn't get hurt." That time when I looked out the window, I saw these cars pull up to the door. So I got up and walked to the door, and Autherine walked in the door. And I was so happy. That was the happiest moment of my life. All these years I've been in this world, I've never been as happy. Because I knew that life was saved. So, she came on in. I say, "Well, how are you doing?" She's, "Oh, I'm doing okay." I say, "You didn't get hurt in any way?" She said, "No, I didn't." But she had eggs thrown all over her back, in her hair and all of that. So, they had thrown a lot of eggs on her. But then I said, "Well, okay." I say, "Well, have a seat for a few minutes and rest." She say, "Well, no, I want to call my lawyer." Arthur Shores was her lawyer in Birmingham. So, she called him. And he told her just to stay there at our office and wait until he called her back. He checked out everything, and he still tell

her, "Well, you just stay there until we see what we need to do." So, she stayed there. So finally, I asked the men to go to the police office and get the man that was there for safekeeping. And I said, "Four men, four cars, and four pistols in every car!" [Laughter] Four cars, four men in every car, and four pistols. That was my orders. I said, "*But*, please don't use them unless you have to, for your own safety." So they said, "Okay." So, they went on up to the office, and this police chief said, "Okay." And they say, "Any charges, we will take care of it. Whatever it is." He say, "Oh no, no, no charges. Y'all can have him, it's okay." And then the old man was 60 years old, he say, "Well chief, I think you should give us a patrol car to get him back to Jefferson County safe." And he said, "Okay." And he looked over at one of his officers and say, "You—." And he said, "I'm not coming down there to that office, that newspaper office. I'm not coming down there. Y'all meet me up on 15th Street and 26th Avenue." We was on 14th Street and 27th Avenue. Well, I started counting how many blocks that was. They could have pulled a whole car off the street before they got to him. When I thought a minute, I said, "Oh, wait a minute; no, they not going with that car. Unh-uh. I wouldn't trust him, because he is a part of the mob gang." And I told my secretary, I said, "Will you call the chief and tell him he can release his officer, because we do not need him." So, she did. And I don't know what the chief did, but the man stayed down there. And they kept calling me and telling me he was still there. So finally, I said, "Men, let's load up. Four cars going to leave, and we not going put Autherine in the car she came in. Because they going watch that car." I say, "Because the mob is up there on that highway." They looked at me. They say, "Are you for real?" I say, "It's up there on that highway. Where the intersection—y'all remember if y'all don't travel the highway as much as I do"—because I was going to Birmingham every day, every week during that time. I said, "Bibb County—Tuscaloosa County, going to Bibb County; and Bibb County, you go back into Tuscaloosa County, then you get into Jefferson County." I say, "You get them in Jefferson County, they can't identify tags." That's what I'm thinking about. They said, "Okay." Started getting a little dark; I said, "Hurry, let's get away from here so y'all get the Jefferson County before it get dark!" Because see, that mob can pull this car off the highway if it get dark, because they can't tell who's coming on them. So they did, they went on. But they stopped at that intersection—or well, first, when Autherine got ready; when I walked across the street to put Autherine in the car, she was coming. That cop came down there. He came then, he wasn't going come and patrol the car. So when they left, I said, "Please don't stop there." But they did stop there anyway. I don't know who was smart, and I didn't want to ask them, because I didn't want to know which man said, "Let's stop here." [Laughter] So I didn't even ask them who did it. But then, the mob cars, about three of them mob cars came down that intersection—see, they was waiting for that car, on that intersection. And they

would've pulled that car off and killed all three of those folk that was in that car. And so they, two of our cars trailing, turning trail of those mobs off the highway; then they carried on to Jefferson County. Then they called us all that night, for the next two or three weeks: everybody on the block was threatened by the mob.

B: By "the mob," you mean—?

T: The mob that was out there to run Autherine off the campus.

B: Okay. You mean, like, racist element? The white racist element?

T: The white racist—well, it was really the Klan element. The Klan was there in Tuscaloosa from Mississippi, Georgia, Florida, Alabama; as far as Tennessee. The white Klan, that's what it was. The white Klan had come into Tuscaloosa. Of course, you know, Tuscaloosa is the wizard county. You know the head wizard of Alabama lived in Tuscaloosa not far from where we were. [Laughter] That's right. So, he had his Klan element to come in. That's what happened. But they carried on to Jefferson County, and she did okay. But why she was expelled—she was expelled from the university.

B: How would that—was she physically removed? Or, how was she expelled?

T: Okay, well the trustees. I reckon that's what the trustees do, don't they? Okay. Trustees, okay. What happened, it was some janitorial people was up in the building, and they heard the trustees making their plans. And they told—made the statement to Autherine. And when she made the statement to her lawyer, that's what threw the fat in the fire. So, the trustees then got together to expel her. That's why, I thought; said she accused them. So, that's why she was expelled, because she made the statement about the trustees were with the Klan group. That's why.

B: The trustees were with the Klan group—

T: Yeah. You know, they was in cahoots with the Klan—whatever we called it. [Laughter]

B: Uh-huh. And how did she—she knew that because—?

T: She heard—well, the people up there, the janitorial people in the building, were talking about it. And naturally, she made the statement to her lawyer. And that's how that came over.

B: Now, let's compare that with—that's remarkable. Tell us about Vivian Malone. What do you know about that case? I understand that Mr. LeFlore chose her as the one to go up there, and that was the stand in the schoolhouse door, is that right? Vivian Malone? With Governor Wallace?

T: George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door, but he didn't mean anything. Governor Wallace was only doing—I'll tell you, because the reason I'm saying, I'm repeating Governor Wallace words, now. [Laughter] He—down at our office on Cedar. He wanted to be elected governor. He had lost one time. He came down to the office and was talking to Frank, my husband. And he told Frank, said, "Mr. Thomas, I tell you what: I lost the election this time, but I'm going show you I'm going win it the next time. Frank laughed, said, "What you mean, Governor"—or, "Mr. Wallace?" He was Wallace, it wasn't Governor then. He say, "I'm going show you. I know how to do it. I depended on the Black vote to put me in this time. But y'all don't have enough votes to put me in. So, I'm going with the Klan element that can put me in." And that's what he did. Therefore, Governor Wallace *had* to do that to protect himself. He didn't intend to stand in the door. He did just what he intended to do, stand there and move out. See, if he was going stand in the door, he'd had stayed in the door. That wasn't nothing but a sham. That's all that was.

B: Now, what about Vivian Malone's—do you have any connection with Vivian Malone, or her role in that? Or do you remember talking to her, or—?

T: Well, I don't know particularly what they did to get her there. Nah, I don't know her just like as I say with Autherine; I didn't know what they did to get her there, but I just protected her because I was there. But far as what happened between LeFlore and Vivian, I don't know. But I do know he was ahead of it, you know, and he maneuvered the—knew what had to be done to help her get there. And of course one of her uncles, Joe Malone, worked very close with LeFlore.

B: What do you remember about the Birdie Mae Davis case? That was the case that Mr. LeFlore started, is that right? That's what I've heard. What do you recall about Birdie Mae Davis going to school there at Murphy? Do you remember that, or do you remember hearing stories about that?

T: I remember, but I can't—I don't know too much about that story, really. I just can't remember too much about Birdie Mae Davis. Not enough to help any, I don't think.

B: Okay, no problem. What about any other major accomplishments that Mr. LeFlore had, like—you told us about the buses. He started trying to integrate different kind of companies around Mobile, and businesses. Do you remember about that—

T: Well, he did that. But you see the main thing, he was—that was public transportation. And he worked more with public things than just ordinary—like, private businesses and things. Because see, those buses were public transportation. And everybody was paying taxes to operate those buses. And see, that's a lot different than public transportation, and *private* transportation and private businesses. And just like those stores downtown, those were public cafes, public counters in Woolworth's and Kress's and all those kind of stores. See, it's a lot different in those kind of businesses than even the train—that's another thing; the train is public transportation. So, he started with those public places because that was most important, and that is the best places to start.

B: That's good. Tell us about—do you remember—what was the danger surrounding the movement in Mobile, civil rights? I'm sure you reported or you heard stories about the danger, maybe the Klan element, or different things they were doing, or different people that were threatened, or attacked or whatever. What do you remember about the danger surrounding the whole Movement during that time?

T: Well, if you was involved, you was in danger. Because our pastor carried some of the kids to Murphy every day from Hillsdale. And he had crosses burned in front of his house. A lot of times. So, you were—

B: This is your white minister, is that right?

T: Yeah.

B: He was transporting Black—

T: Now, this was a Black minister then. But the other white minister I first mentioned, he also pastored our church, too. But at that point, that was a Black minister.

B: And he had crosses burned in his—

T: Right, he sure did.

B: —front yard, for taking his—that was after Birdie Mae Davis, is that right? Or is that—

T: That was afterwards.

B: Okay, so he's transporting kids—

T: Kids to—

B: Murphy.

T: Uh-huh.

B: And he had—wow.

T: Carry them down there and take them, and go down there and bring them back home. But they knew that he was doing it, and so he had crosses burned in front of his house. A lot of people had that to happen. So, they were attacking anybody who helped. And naturally, Mr. LeFlore had other people who had to help him to do those things, because he couldn't do it all himself.

B: What about—were there any—was there any cases of—

T: Violence? I don't believe we had. I don't remember any case of violence here on that account. I can't think of any.

B: Why was that? I mean, up in Selma you had problems there, and you know about that because you had a newspaper there. Birmingham, Montgomery you hear about the violence. You hear about people getting murdered. Why didn't that happen in Mobile?

T: Because we were a little bit more secret, I would say, about it. Those folk were more open and frank; because I was up there around Selma, Montgomery, and Birmingham at those times. Here in Mobile, we did not come out as *open* as they did there. And you see, when that bus—when Martin Luther King came, it was no choice. See, when Martin Luther King did what he did up there, he had to do it because they had arrested that lady and that lady had not done anything. See, it was no reason that they should have attacked her as they did. And it was just hot at that time. It was much hotter than it was in Mobile because that open up a head. And the folks was just tired of it, and they just went wild. That's what it was. I can tell you that. People was just a little more calm here in Mobile. That's all the difference. They were just *calm* here and they were not calm in Selma,

Montgomery, and Birmingham. For two or three reasons: you have to remember, those are Black Belt counties. And you got far more Black folks in all of those counties that I just named than you have in Mobile County. See, white folk is a majority in Mobile County. Black folks are the *minorities* in those counties. That make a difference. And those Black folks, I tell you; when you got a group—see, in Tuscaloosa, like I said, when Autherine came, it was no two or three people. It was over one hundred people within 30 minutes that covered the block where my office was. They don't get together that fast in Mobile. I can tell you because I've lived in more places. I've lived in Montgomery. Those folks did something that the average person wouldn't have thought of. You know what they did in Tuscaloosa? It came over the radio within an hour's time. "No more ammunitions in Tuscaloosa to be bought." Now you see—and they say, "Who has them? They say the Black folk got them. Now that's the way they was thinking, you understand me? And they went in droves to get those ammunitions. In an hour, they couldn't buy no more in Tuscaloosa. I don't think we would've thought about that here in Mobile as fast as they did. See, that was moving *fast*. [Laughter] Now, that's why you have the difference in those elements.

B: What about, was the—do you think the white establishment here, maybe certain elements—certain people were more willing to work with the Black community? Do you think that was a factor, too, or not? Tell me what's your perspective on that.

T: I don't think so. I really don't. Because we had no trouble in Tuscaloosa when that was there. A lot of folk wanted to know if we lost business; most of our advertisements were white—still is, and still was. Because you could speak up in Tuscaloosa, and I did, because sometimes, and I'd say one day I went uptown; a man from Wilcox County—if anybody know about Wilcox County, it used to say "Black, read and run." That's how they welcome Blacks in Wilcox County. Okay, and I would go through Wilcox County to my home in Monroe County every time I got ready. Drive right through there, and didn't nobody bother me. But this particular day, this man who owned one of the big furniture stores was one of my good advertisers. I never will forget that day. I went uptown to pick up the ad. His name was Mr. Monroe. He said, "Mrs. Thomas: I want to tell you something." I said, "Okay, Mr. Monroe. What you have to say?" I stood and looked at him. [Laughter] He say, "Y'all running too much NAACP news. I don't think y'all should run it—so and so and so and so." I said, "Listen, Mr. Monroe. We appreciate your business. But we own this newspaper. That's why my husband wanted to own his own newspaper; so he could write what he wanted to write. And let his folks, and the white folks too, know what the Colored folks are doing. Because nobody—the white papers don't say nothing about Black folks unless they doing the wrong thing.

And that's why he want to speak what he want to do, and run what he want in the paper that will help enlighten the Black people. That's why we in business." He looked at me. He said, "Well I just think y'all run too much NAACP news." And back in that day, Black folks looked for that NAACP news, because it was leading the light. It really led the light for Black integration. So I told him, "Okay." I say, "Okay, appreciate your business, but it's up to you. You can make up your mind." And he kept that ad in the paper until he died. But see, if I had backed up, he would have thought I was a coward, that I was afraid of him. I went back over and told my husband what I had said to him. He looked at me; Frank said, "You mean to tell me you told him—?" I say, "I sure did." He say, "You going lose that account!" "I don't care. If I lose it, it's okay. I was living and eating before I got that account; I'm going still eat." I say, "Next thing, if he take it out, I'll go somewhere and sell me another." [Laughter] My husband looked at me, he say—. [Laughter] I said, "It's just that way. And I'm going go back up there next Monday." Went back up there the next Monday, kept going, he gave me that ad. He didn't say nothing to me about those stories, you understanding me?

B: Isn't that something.

T: But now, that's the difference. People up in Tuscaloosa, and Birmingham, and Montgomery; they just go out, and most of them would say what they going say. But the folks here—I'm telling you what I know, because I deal with them—I've had more Black folks afraid to stand up and speak since I've been around here in Mobile than I had in those other places. That's the reason I can talk. I'm talking from experience all around. That is the difference. Vivian probably wouldn't've gotten into University of Alabama if Autherine had not already opened the doors. She had already opened the doors. Because she had two people—it was supposed to been another young lady to come, but they didn't want but one to come at a time so they could intimidate that one. But Autherine stood up. I don't care what nobody say; she really stood up. And Folsom, Jim Folsom was governor at that time. And Folsom didn't do a lot of things that was not right. He had to carry out the duty of his office, and he did that. And Wallace had to stand in that door, because he was playing all these Klan folks that what he going do, so he could live. Wallace didn't want them to kill him. Shoot, who ain't going try to live they self? Wallace was trying to live. Now, that's just the way I see it! [Laughter]

B: That's good.

T: And the Black folk was just as bad. Look, because they attacked us on the first issue that we printed in Tuscaloosa. Frank had the *Alabama Black Citizen*. I never

will forget that; Frank came back and said—and he changed it, though. Ooh, they had a *fit!* And then later, they were talking about the Black—because he had *Alabama Black Citizen*. That was the first issue in the paper that we printed: the *Alabama Black Citizen*. And those Black folks had a fit. “Mr. Thomas, we don’t like that name you got on that paper! We don’t like that! We don’t like that!” He changed it. But he say, “Now, what it is, y’all don’t understand *why* I used ‘*Alabama Black Citizen*.’” He say, “This is the Alabama Black Belt, where more Black folk live than any other kind of counties in Alabama. That’s why it’s the *Alabama Black Citizen*; it’s the Alabama Black *Belt!* Well, he went on and changed, but I’m just showing you; see, we been attacked by Blacks as well as the white. So, but up there, we didn’t—most of us didn’t. But it’s some good folks here, Black; bless they little hearts. They afraid to speak out.

B: So, Mr. LeFlore kind of really stood out, then.

T: Yeah, he would stand out.

B: He’s the one that stood—

T: But he didn’t have enough support; that’s what I’m saying. You saying, why they did that in these other counties. I’m just explaining why that happened. Because you didn’t have a big group of people that would stand behind those folks who was in the front. LeFlore had to almost stand by himself, and with very few people that would help. But up there, you had plenty help!

B: What about his relationship with Mr. Langan? How did that work out, as far as establishing—changing racial prejudice in Mobile, changing some things in Mobile? How did he work with Mr. Langan? How did Mr. Langan work with Mr. LeFlore?

T: Well now, I don’t know a whole lot about that because I don’t believe in—I didn’t never fool with politics a lot, because to me they dirty anyhow. And I’d been got my head knocked off. [Laughter] So, I didn’t fret it—politics are too evil for me! [Laughter] It’s a shame to say it, but it is! Ooh! I don’t know exactly what on that. And I don’t want to say the wrong thing. I’m sure some people have said enough about that. I guess I’ll leave that alone. [Laughter]

B: Okay, that’s fine. Take us back, now—I think it was [19]67; I think it was. I’ll have to look up my dates and all that. Mr. LeFlore’s house was bombed. Okay, tell us

about, what do you remember about that? Or, what do you remember about the circumstances surrounding that and all?

T: Truthfully speaking, I can't remember exactly what happened on that, in that case. I know it was bombed. But what caused it? I'm not sure I remember it now. I feel like somebody else have told you enough about that.

B: No no no, do you remember how the community responded after the Mr. LeFlore's house was bombed? Do you remember anything about—

T: That's what I'm trying to remember. I just can't remember right now.

B: I've just heard stories that the communities kind of really rallied around and helped rebuild the house—

T: Oh yeah, well I'm sure—I *know* they did that. But I thought you meant other point that it was.

B: Do you remember some folks talking about that at all? Did he ever talk about the bombing, or—?

T: I didn't talk with Mr. LeFlore, really, after that time; I'll be frank with you. See, because my husband was a little ill, and I just had to do a lot to carry the business on. So I talked with him occasionally, but what I mean, I didn't have a lot of contact with him personally after that time. Because see, my husband passed in [19]74, and he was kind of ill, and I had to do in and out work. So, I just really didn't—I lost track of that, really.

B: How did—looking back at other civil rights leaders at the time, how did Mr. LeFlore's tactics compare with, say, Noble Beasley, or compare with the NAACP, or whatever? How did his tactics differ—Martin Luther King. How'd they differ, how are they the same? How is he different from them?

T: Well, I believe I've already mentioned that in my talk somewhere up there, though; he just was, had a little more tactics in it, and he would kind of go the easy way, you might say. That he would know how to talk with the people, and get them understanding his motive and which way he was going, rather than just to hit head-on, and nobody knew what was happening. That's what I would think would've been the difference. Because Beasley just wasn't, I don't know about Beasley. I can't compare nobody with Noble Beasley, really. [Laughter] I knew Noble

Beasley, but honey, mm-mm. I couldn't compare LeFlore or nobody else with Beasley, bless his heart. But that's the only thing I could see. He just had a different tactic; the way he would approach situation, and the way he had to work with it. See, it's more—but we have to always remember: God made everybody different. Everybody going have a different approach, that's why the world is the type of world it's in. See, if Beasley had been the same type as LeFlore, LeFlore had the same type as Beasley, we would've had more uproar, maybe. So, it's just good that that's the way people are. And some good come out of everything. That's my motto. Good come out of everything that God has to happen to those who love the Lord. Regardless of which way it is. There's a reason for everything that happen. That's the way God instill it in these particular men or women, or whoever, to react that way. Because God knew what was going come out of it. So, he don't want all us to be just alike.

[Break in recording]

B: Because she's just about to close up here. [Laughter] Okay. Who is—back in the [19]40s—okay, you started the paper in [19]43 or something like that?

T: Right, uh-huh.

B: Okay. Who else, besides John LeFlore, was doing work for civil rights? Were there other people, were there other organizations, doing anything for civil rights for Mobile? Was John LeFlore alone? Were there separate—were there other people pushing civil rights in Mobile?

T: Well, I thought they were more—some of them were working together. I don't know how much separateness they had. C.H. Montgomery did a lot.

B: Who was he?

T: Walker Scott did a lot. Because Walker—I think it was Walker Scott—he worked a lot with LeFlore. Wasn't that Walker Scott?

F: Raymond Scott.

T: Raymond Scott, uh-huh. I know he worked a lot with LeFlore.

B: Mr. Montgomery, was he a part of the League—the Non-Partisan Voters' League?

- T: No, he had the voter registration committee. He was with the NAACP. But you know, they outlawed the NAACP in Alabama for a while. And that's when—in fact, that's when LeFlore really got the Voters' League started; when they outlawed the NAACP.
- B: Do you remember anything about Dr. King and his—do you know of any famous relations with Mr. LeFlore? Like Dr. King, or Thurgood Marshall, or anybody—any other famous, notable people. Do you know of any connections there?
- T: Yeah, well they had some connection, but that's how far it went. I can't answer that, because I was much younger then. And I didn't keep up with it like I do now. But he did. Yeah, I'm sure he did have some connection with them.
- B: Now Dr. King, he came to Mobile, is that right? Or did he ever come to Mobile?
- T: He came once, but far as I understood, they didn't let him come out in the city. They sent him back to Atlanta—or Montgomery, I think. Went back to Montgomery. But he did come once.
- B: Where'd he come? Did he speak here, have a rally?
- T: That's what he was coming for, but he did not.
- B: Oh. So he didn't make it all the way.
- T: That's right.
- B: Okay. What happened, do you know?
- T: Well, they just decided they didn't want him in Mobile. He might've “stirred up something;” that's the term they used. He might have “stirred up something,” get the folk disturbed. You know, separate motives.
- B: What was Mr. LeFlore working on at the end of his life? What was he working on, what was he doing?
- T: He was still carrying mail.
- B: But I think he had retired. He was a part of the state legislature or something like that?

T: Oh, he was that, but I don't think he had retired—I don't believe he had, now. I may be wrong. I don't think so. Yeah, he was. Yvonne Kennedy has his position that he had. Dr. Kennedy. That's where LeFlore—when he passed, she was elected.

B: Do you remember about the day he died, what that was like?

T: I really do not.

B: Do you remember what people said about him or anything like that?

T: Oh, they said a lot. I went to the funeral, but—

B: What was the funeral like?

T: But I'll tell you the truth: I'm not going say a whole lot about no funeral. Because I get sick of folk going to a funeral; they going put you up here, and then when you—I just don't like to comment on a funeral. [Laughter] Because what people do, they'll talk about you and pull you down when you out here living; then when you dead, they going put the flowers all the way over your head. That's the reason I don't talk about what they say at no funeral.

B: There's a lot of truth there. I just heard a lot of truth there!

T: [Laughter] I tell them all, when—I tell my children, and I *mean* it; I tell them if y'all do different from what I tell you, I'm going come and pull your eyes out if I can reach it. They laugh at me. Make it simple. Because all this remarks and thing over a person dead body does not mean anything. Now, that's just the way I feel. Give that person those flowers while they live. That's just the way I feel. Because folks started calling when Frank passed. Television threw it on before I could get to my house. And everybody, "Mrs. Thomas, we want to say so-and-so—." No remorse, no expression, no nothing. I say, "He has lived his life. And nobody don't have to plant no flowers on him." I say, "So it's just that way." Now see, that's the reason I don't pay no attention to this person, I'll be frank with you. I sure don't. Because I don't believe in it.

B: That's fine. But there were a lot of people there, weren't there? A whole bunch?

T: Oh yeah. It was a lot—the church was filled. It was plenty folks there.

B: Were there any famous people there, or any notable people, dignitaries? Do you remember anything like that?

T: I don't remember. Don't ask me that question.

B: Okay, I won't ask you that question.

T: I believe—you know what, though? See, I'm a funny person. People don't really understand me: everybody is important. Everybody is dignitaries. So, *all* of them are dignitaries what they are to me, because if they hadn't been, they wouldn't've been there.

B: That's good.

T: That's the reason I say some questions I just *cannot* answer! [Laughter]

B: Let me try this one: this'll be easy. What do you think—I'm getting a lot of interesting answers, here. What do you think—I'm getting a lot of wisdom from you! That's good. [Laughter] Lot of things I'm thinking about now. Tell us about—what do you think, in your opinion, what were Mr. LeFlore's greatest accomplishments? What did he really accomplish for Mobile or for the area, for—what was his greatest accomplishments?

T: That is hard to answer, too, because I think he accomplished a lot of things in the way he felt about situations. Well, he accomplished the integration of the counters downtown at the five- and ten-cent stores. And he had the riding of the buses—integration of the buses, I would say. And helped with the school integration. Because the school integration came, but it had to be more than one force behind it. See, one person could not have integrated the schools by themselves. Because that was a big—as my momma say—hen to pick. [Laughter] So, it was taking a lot of folks to coordinate the activity, is what I mean. But he was, he helped to do it. And it was done in his lifetime. It was done under his leadership. So that would have been an accomplishment for him.

B: What's—this maybe can tie into that question about his leadership, or that kind of thing—but what do you think—what's the lesson we can learn from John LeFlore? What's the story that his life tells us about how we can relate today?

T: Well, don't be so selfish. That's one thing. Too many of us are too selfish to reach out and do things to help others. If you not selfish, you really going feel like

reaching out to help! And be concerned about things around you, and whatever you can do to help those situations, you just go ahead on out there and keep working at it. And don't be too easy to give up. Because wherever there is success, there is work. And there is a problem, you got to work to it. But above all, all of us got to first have faith in God. We don't do any of these things on our own. We got to have faith in God and be willing to work at it. And trust him in knowing that all these things will come if you believe in him. And we are most of us, in this day and time, have lost our faith, and don't trust God. And that's why we having so many problems in this world. We *got* to turn back to him. And we—that's the only way we going turn the world around, is to turn back to God. So that's the main thing, I think. But he was a good leader. But he just kept at it. If he had given up, it wouldn't have been successful.

B: What made him a good leader? What made him such a good leader?

T: Because he stayed working and kept working, and didn't give up. See, a leader *can't* give up. And he had the determination. See, that's what is all about, success is all about: have leadership first. I said faith in God. Leadership, willing to work, and keep at it. And don't give up. Because people going discourage you and all of that, but you got to have the willpower to keep at it yourself. And he had that, and that's why he was able to do the things he did. So you have a lot of things in life make you may want to turn around, but he didn't turn around. Just kept going, till death did us part. That's what you do. So you going to do this until death do us part, and he did that.

B: Anything I haven't asked that would help us better understand John LeFlore, or the Civil Rights Movement that he pioneered? Anything else I can ask you—any other questions that will help us better understand him, or a story or something that you could tell us about him?

T: I really don't think so. I might think of it tomorrow. [Laughter]

B: Well, give me a call. Okay, we'll turn it off for you.

T: No, I'm just kidding you. Tomorrow, you would have to call me at Auburn. I'm going to Auburn tonight to the dedication service that they have when they inducting my husband in the hall of fame at Auburn University.

B: Oh wow.

T: By the Alabama Press Association. So, we will be leaving later on tonight to go—

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Latresha Maddix
Audit-edited by: Ryan Morini, July 22, 2022
2nd audit-edit: Jada Jones September 29, 2022
Final edit by: Ryan Morini, August 2, 2023