

## **Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County, Illinois**

Bryan Mathis Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Lesley Thomson-Sasso

Venice, Illinois

October 18, 2016

**Lesley Thomson-Sasso (TS):** This is Lesley Thomson-Sasso, oral history interview with Mr. Bryan Mathis, a longtime resident of Venice, Illinois. Today is October 18th, 2016. So how did your family come to reside in Venice?

**Bryan Mathis (BM):** Uh my grandmother migrated from the South, Clarksdale, Mississippi, and then she moved in what's called Madison at the time. So uh, then uh, my mother was born, they moved into the projects, Lee Wright Homes which is considered North Venice.

**TS:** What made your grandmother pick Venice as a place to live? Like from the South

**BM:** That I really have no idea how she actually ended up here, uh, as people migrated I guess they stayed wherever they fit in, ya know, and so, or they felt they had the greatest opportunity uh, and so I guess that's why she ended up here.

**TS:** Okay, um, you said that your family moved into the projects, uh, and that there were two projects here in Venice, there were the Lee Wright Homes, and then eventually there were the Venice Homes.

**BM:** Correct

**TS:** Um can you describe what the housing project was like, your memories of growing up there?

**BM:** Well first of all, there is a train trestle down the street there, and that was dividing line, the color line uh, for lack of better words. And the Lee Wright homes were right uh to the north of that, and then you have the Venice Homes, which were, there's a vacant lot right over here. That's where the Venice Homes used to be. There's one apartment building still there, but that was not part of the Venice Homes, but that is the area where the Venice Homes were. So um, the government controlled the Lee Wright Homes, and the Lee Wright homes like a little city as far as I was concerned. It had everything basically you needed, it had a rec. center there, Head Start was there, then uh, there was the school, Dunbar Blair, was there for a um, Kindergarten through I think, 5th grade, and then after 5th grades, 7th on up to 8th, no, what is it? 6th, 7th, and 8th went to Dunbar, and then after that you went to Madison. Um, when my parents, where you lived depended on how much money you had and how many kids you had in your family. So, at the time, my parents were on government assistance at the time, and so we were placed down here in the Lee Wright Homes. And my grandmother lived in the Lee Wright Homes. So, and then uh, all my friends and you know, so it was really nice. I didn't know any better; I never knew that I was poor. Really didn't care, I just had fun, and all our needs were met, and that's the only thing we really cared about as kids. So, uh um, I never understood the color issues. I never understood why I couldn't go past the train trestle back there, but if I did go past that train trestle you got in a lot of trouble.

**TS:** What happened if you passed it? Like were there, did your parents tell you not to go past it? Or was it just like a social norm you knew not to go past it, or...

**BM:** Both

**TS:** Okay.... [laughs]

**BM:** 'Cause my cousin and I, one day, because I didn't understand it, I think I was about 7, maybe 7 or 8, I rode my bike up to the train trestle, and my uncle, who was actually getting off the bus right here, outside on the sidewalk, saw me from that, me and my cousin, that far away, all the way down there, and I got a spankin' and punished and uh, 'cause he saw us.

**TS:** What types of like, what types of uh, kind of things were told to you about not going on that other side of the tracks? Like was it just like "stay away," or was it, "things are going to happen to you" or...

**BM:** Well, I can almost remember, I can hear his voice almost really. [chuckles] he said, I'm like, "What's the big deal Uncle JB about us going on the other side?" He said, "Because you can just simply come up missing." That's all he said.

**TS:** Really.

**BM:** And that's what they would always say to us, you don't need to be in areas you're not supposed to be because you simply just come up missing. You know, and I guess that was in reference to the Emmett Till, what happened to Emmett Till, so, I didn't know anything about Emmett Till 'til I was grown, they still never, all they did was give you an overtone, uh, you know, they basically kept you shielded from the worst, you know. Even when Martin Luther King got shot, my grandmother just like, she said, "Uh uh, I knew somebody was gonna eventually get him," you know, and that's the ter - her exact words was, "I knew somebody was eventually gonna kill that N-word,"

**TS:** Mmm

**BM:** That's what she said.

**TS:** Wow

**BM:** Yeah.

**TS:** Um, Emmett Till was a very, you know, prolific moment in, in history, in Civil Rights History

**BM:** Right

**TS:** Because that was you know, really this first instance, that went you know, public in the news...

**BM:** Right, right

**TS:** ...um, so that, you know, growing up as an African American in the 50s and 60s, Till was murdered in '55, um, that was never really addressed? Or do you think it was something that was always in the back of your parent's mind, because you lived in a community, that was, like you mentioned, you know, it was split?

**BM:** For the most part. it, you know, we didn't know about violence and stuff. We didn't see a lot of television we weren't allowed to watch certain things, you know. We had never hardly ever watch the news as kids, so we didn't know what was going on in the media and in the public. Our world was basically, that side, and even when we would come up here to the park, uh uh, we knew there was segregation in the park, we knew that people would look at you funny, white people, I'm not talkin' about the blacks, so, but still, they would tolerate, you know, us being there, you know, so, and you know like I said, because I was having fun and I let, my parents always said, "Let the grown-ups deal with the grown up issues, you just stay a kid," and that's what we did. We let the grown-ups handle a lot of stuff, so we

really wasn't aware of racial issues that were going on. Uh, I remember a lot of stuff, just like when we were talking about that, but... being at such a young age, it's like "Mmm, que sera sera," you know.

**TS:** Yeah.

**BM:** You know, so (5:52)

**TS:** When you went to the park, you mentioned that, you know, sometimes, uh, whites would look at your funny. Were there any instances in Venice where you could actually see Jim Crow segregation, like signs that said, [phone rings] to your memory?

**BM:** This uh, used to be gas station right here [phone rings] on the corner, and my grandmother said they didn't take that sign down 'til 1963. Now I was born in '59, so me being 4. But I never physically saw it or remember it, but it was there. So the signs were there, and they let you know stuff is especially slow to change in small towns, but the people of Venice were quiet about and very subdue about how they dealt with issues of racism and stuff like that, you know, they weren't like in the South where people are all in your face and you know, stuff like that. They were here, would just look at you, and make you feel very uncomfortable, let you know that you weren't welcome in that area. That's how they would do it.

**TS:** Okay, um, so if you were born in '69 I know that Kennedy

**BM:** '59

**TS:** Or, '59, I'm sorry, uh, Kennedy came through in '60.

**BM:** Mm-hmm

**TS:** Do you remember your parents or grandparents like as you were growing up ever discussing...

**BM:** Mm-mm

**TS:** ...that at all?

**BM:** I know people loved him, they loved him and his brothers and everything, that's all I knew.

**TS:** Mm

**BM:** They had, uh, you know, never really talked like I said - my parents really and grandmothers really didn't talk politics much at all.

**TS:** Okay, interesting. Um, so, the housing - the housing projects that you grew up in, uh the Lee Wright Homes...

**BM:** Yes

**TS:** ...um that was basically like a self-contained uh, community, for, for only African Americans in Venice, so did you feel like

**BM:** Yeah 'cause stuff was real segregated back then

**TS:** Right, and so do you feel like that community provided you with like a good, like a good upbringing, like you had a positive time there?

**BM:** Oh yeah I had fun

**TS:** Yeah

**BM:** Everyday you know, you know you might get into a couple of fights or something that'd be the most that you know, but you know, being, it was a lot of people in the projects back then, you know, you talking about, like about 2, about 2,000 2,500 people lived in the projects over there in that small four block area you know, so.

**TS:** Yeah, 'cause it's changed a lot now, um, but

**BM:** Yes it's not, it's only a fourth of the size, there's brand new ones there now, it's a fourth of the size of what it used to be

**TS:** Wow

**BM:** Same amount of land, they just spread it out, made it a little bit more posh, and spread it out, with less people, far less people.

**TS:** So, when do you think that um, so, for your elementary school experiences, you were with all of your friends from Lee Wright Homes

**BM:** Madison

**TS:** Okay and then um, I noticed that in the 1960s, even though you were small, certain cities in Madison county, Venice included, were facing this challenge of integrating, not only just schools but housing, even the community pool, um, did you feel any of this tension growing up here?

**BM:** Uh, just a little bit. They - you know - as long as you were in your area, by nightfall, like the saying when the lights came on, be in your area, you know, as long as you were there, you were tolerated, you didn't get too much hassle, when I was growin' up, you know, uh. My brothers and I used to walk up to downtown Madison to shop and buy stuff. They had the 10 cent store, but then Granite City, which is, uh, on up the road, now they were a lot more, uh, in your face and and would, you know, you really come up missing in Granite City. So, you know, they didn't allow us to go there, and if we did go to Granite, you'd have to be 5 to 7 strong, no less, because you could come up missing so, uh, you know, it was, you knew it was there, but you were taught what to do, where to be, and and how to conduct yourself.

**TS:** Were there any stories that you remember hearing growing up, like you mention, like that you would come up missing? Like were there any instances of where that happened? Where your parents, you know, were able to kind of say to you, like if you do this...

**BM:** You mean, were blacks being abducted in this area?

**TS:** Yeah

**BM:** No, I never heard any of a...

**TS:** There's just kind of like this social, like norm that...

**BM:** Yeah, you had more uh, regular kind of crime. Murder, gangsters, all that kind of stuff, going on, more so than the racial issues.

**TS:** In Venice itself?

**BM:** Yeah, Venice, Madison, not even with Granite City, people just stayed out of, pretty much out of Granite City, and then like East Saint Louis was goin' through the biggest, 'cause I had relatives in East Saint Louis. That was the one where people basically like flew like a flock of birds just fluttered and just up and moved really quickly; you know, they lot of times they would just leave the house and just move,

um, uh, but that wasn't the case here in Venice and Madison. Peoples just slowly and gradually moved out. Quietly. (10:48)

**TS:** So what was the first job that you had in Venice growing up?

**BM:** Uh, the first job I had in Venice was that of a paperboy for two-thirds of the city of Venice. Um, and it covered roughly, I'll say about almost 10 miles by the time you got through walkin' up and down every street on both sides of the street. And all of the city dignitaries uh lived where the school superintendents down by the high school, uh, and the principal, the mayor, which lives just catty-corner to city hall, [phone rings] all this all the way down to that train trestle all the way down to that train trestle, [phone rings] everything back that way belonged to me.

**TS:** Okay, and what the most difficult part about being a paperboy?

**BM:** Um

**TS:** That was a big route.

**BM:** Yeah, real big route, and I tried to break it up. They said when they did finally broke it up, break it up, they had to get three paperboys to do what I was doing. [chuckles] It was just too big, but, uh the hardest part was collecting money. Because when people didn't pay their bill, it directly came off. The paper got paid off the top then you got your money once you got through collecting everything from everyone, so that mean a lot of times I didn't get paid, and to do that for three years, there was sometimes be months and I never got paid because the people were, by being so large, everybody that didn't pay me or if they would stop their service and not do it properly, all that came directly out of my pay. And, uh, as the older I got and more I realized I was basically working for nothing, I quit. Well, and the main thing that made me quit uh, forget what year it was, we had a really bad snowstorm. The snow was uh, 4 feet deep, and on Saturday night uh, people would always look for their paper, and if it took me to one o'clock in the morning to finish my route, that's what I would do. I would stay out there until I got finished. And people would actually look for me, because they knew that for three years, every Saturday they got their paper or early Saturday morning, uh I mean Sunday morning, and there was some mornings, because the paper came late, that I didn't, I was up at 5 am delivering paper. People were very adamant about their papers in this community. So, uh, I was over on Robin Street, and the snow by being so high, was level. You couldn't see any terrain, and so I didn't see this hole which had to be at least two and a half feet deep, so when I fell into it, it went up under my coat all the way up to my chest, and not only crawling out of the hole still had 20 30 papers, Sunday papers are heavy too, um, I was, by the time I got here, I sat, I sat on a radiator for two hours 'cause I was so cold, and that was the turning point, and after that I couldn't take any more.

**TS:** How old were you when you were the uh...

**BM:** 15

**TS:** ...paperboy

**TS:** 15?

**BM:** When, when I finally quit, 15.

**TS:** Okay and um, so now you were covering most of Venice, at that point, so you were leaving the projects where you grew up and you were delivering into like all different parts.

**BM:** We had moved around the corner from the projects on Jefferson in 1973, we moved up to Venice from North Venice to South Venice in 1969. In 1973 we moved from 71 Venice apartments to 507 Jefferson, which was around the corner. When we lived up in the Lee Wright Homes we lived in 90, uh, and 95 uh Venice Homes. And so then when we left there we moved to 70, I mean 90 and 95 Lee Wright Homes.

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** And then when I was lookin' up the other day uh, Lee, which was Mayor Lee, that's where the Lee came from, and Wright was another prominent, I'm not sure if he was an alderman or whatever, but evidently they were the ones that had a lot to do with bringing the projects to that area, and they said Mayor Lee when he was uh the mayor got a lot done for the city of Venice. So... (14:58)

**TS:** Now, you delivered papers to Mayor Lee.

**BM:** Mm-hmm

**TS:** And then now, you delivered into areas that were like predominately white neighborhoods as well, or...?

**BM:** There was very few, matter of fact, there weren't any blacks over when I delivered papers. There weren't any blacks in this area over here at all.

**TS:** So did you feel any like - did you feel safe?

**BM:** Yeah

**TS:** 'Cause you had mentioned, like before...

**BM:** Everybody knew me

**TS:** Everybody knew you so that gave you this sense of security and you didn't feel any of that racial tension when you were delivering papers?

**BM:** I never felt any racial tension in Venice [chuckles]

**TS:** Never? Okay.

**BM:** No, no, we moved up here, it was a little bit, you know, we have projects maybe a couple of the kids or whatever, you know, but I never felt any racial tension uh I mean, I probably, I wasn't an angel my own self, you know, I got into um mischief, um, uh, some of it like ah I actually was a bully one time in my life, and I had to go back and do that again, I bullied a little girl, and if I could, if I ever found that girl again I would beg her for forgiveness and apologize, because now I hate bullies. I was bullied too, but the fact that I was once a bully now I don't like 'em at all, and I'll stand up to bully, I actually come to somebody else's aid because I know what it's like to be a bully and be bullied, and I don't, you know, I just don't like it, it was wrong. My mother took me to the girl's house, made me apologize to her and her parents, and um uh, I was not, you know, and after that I never did anything to anybody after that. And um, my mother back then, my mother made you see what you was doing was wrong, because one of the first questions they ask was, "Why are you picking on her?" and I had no answer. And, I had no logical answer, and I felt like the biggest dummy. I felt like I was mean, we went to church every Sunday, so then I felt evil, and after my mother got through talking to me and taking me over there, it forever changed me.

**TS:** Mmm. The reason why I asked about like you feeling safe um, as paperboy was, you know, you had mentioned that you know, when your friends and yourself wanted to travel into places like Granite City that you would have to go with at least 5 or 6 or 7 of you to travel safely. And you had mentioned that um, you know the...

**BM:** Granite City was, and still is, very racist.

**TS:** Yeah

**BM:** You know, where Venice um, was prejudiced. You know, there were, there were a few bigots here, but not not to the point where they were just out and out racist. And, as I've grown older I've learned the difference between prejudice, bigotry, and racism. The danger, the two dangerous are bigotry and racism. You know, everybody is prejudiced to some form or some degree, but when you implement those other two, now you talkin' about influencing and uh causing havoc on another person's life. And so, um, Venice was just basically prejudiced with a little bit of bigotry. Granite City is bigoted and racist.

**TS:** Mm-hmm. You had mentioned that um, you had to travel with you know these 5 to 7 people because you had said that there were instances or your might have remembered an instance where like people would try to take children?

**BM:** That's from the younger kids um, when we lived in North Venice, okay, in that time, and at that time, hobos and everything, because the railroad tracks were right there, so you had hobos, transients, some of everything coming right through there because that was a truck route, you know, going in and out of the depot, you know, and then you had escape routes, which is, what is now Route 3 right here was a levy, and on behind it was a place called the Island, and that's where you come up missin' at, and I'm for real, you know, and that's what we talking about a minute ago, where they would come in and snatch kids, and then you know, but the community was tight, very tight-knit, and so you always watched out for each other. Unlike today's society and today's neighborhoods, ah you only had each other, so people kind of watched out for each other, you know, to a certain extent, um not, you still had a lot of uh rivalry and stuff going on, but you still had, when the issue came down to self-preservation it was more prominent then, you know. Nothin' like it is now.

**TS:** Yeah (19:29)

**BM:** So, and so, the issues of ah, like the whites didn't really come down there unless they needed something, and they had no reason really to come down there really, but in North Venice there was still a lot of white families down there, ah and store owners and stuff like that, and never had any problems or anything, so when we moved up here to North, to South Venice into the Venice Homes, um, that was a lot of fun too. I mean, you know and as we got to know all the families and everything especially me being a paperboy. At the time I became a paperboy, and because I had all these houses basically at one time or another, every house on this end of Venice was on my route, so that meant every individual in Venice, if they didn't know my name, they knew my face. And all you had to do for a lot of people is say do you remember the colored paperboy? That was me. You know, so, I was the only one to my knowledge. I delivered the uh, Metro East Journal, um, and that was the prominent paper. It covered all the uh, counties, you know, all the way up to Springfield. Had a wide range of everything from Sports to everything, whereas the Post-Dispatch and, the uh, what was the other one? Globe-Democrat where they stopped and what they covered in Missouri, the Metro East Journal covered on this side of the river.

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** So

**TS:** Oh interesting. Um, so you said that you delivered to most of the people of Venice, and um, so Mayor Lee who lived across the street from this building, um, was a long-time mayor of Venice.

**BM:** He was mayor when I was delivering papers, but he never knew my name. He would just say "the paperboy." Everybody just called me "the little colored paperboy."

**TS:** And did that bother, did that bother you at all, or?

**BM:** No

**TS:** Okay, alright. Um, Mayor Lee was part of this like, larger kind of, um, [inaudible] looking at him as a political figure, he was part of this larger Madison County and Venice political machine.

**BM:** Right

**TS:** Um, in particular he was accused of not promoting any type of like anti-poverty legislation or helping people that needed help in the late '60s and early '70s, um, do you remember any of those accusations...

**BM:** Too young

**TS:** ...or did people in Venice react at all or?

**BM:** There was one issue they said let the adults take care of the grown-up stuff.

**TS:** Yeah

**BM:** You know, they never, the parents, they were really adamant about their kids being kids and staying out of adult affairs. Matter of fact, if anything was going on sensitive like, that unless there was a need to know, they would have sent you out of the room. You weren't even allowed to be in the room while serious issues were being discussed with adults. It just was unheard of back then.

**TS:** Hmm

**BM:** So

**TS:** Um, what other childhood activities were you involved in besides the paper route?

**BM:** Childhood?

**TS:** Yeah, or even into like adolescence like what

**BM:** You know, they had, in the summertime we learned how to swim, and they took us, you come up here in the morning time, uh to the rec center up here, and then they take you to depo, where we learned to swim. That was a summer thing they had, park program they had for a little while, uh two or three years. Other than that we just played, rode our bikes, um, climbed trees, BB guns, all the stuff that old fashioned kids used to get into.

**TS:** Okay. Were you involved in any other type of um activities like Boy Scouts here?

**BM:** Oh I forgot about Boy Scout. Yeah, I went through, my brothers and I, we would start out with Cub Scouts. Um, I was a Webelo and Richard and Pat Foot were the Scout Masters. They covered everything from Bobcat all the way up up until um Webelos, and then they were, Mr. Tolliver and he lived on this street 1, 2, 3, down from Mr. Lee. Mr. Tolliver, he was over Boy Scout troop, and they had their own building and everything. Actually one of the better Boy Scout troops in the area down here, ah and I did that for two years, no three years, excuse me. I think I stopped there when I was 16 so, but anyway, so I



went from Webelo to Boy Scouts, and uh, got to go to Camp Sunnen which is down in Potosi, uh, the council still uses that camp site for their summer gatherings and stuff, so yeah, that was pretty cool. Learned a lot.

**TS:** And you had mentioned that you guys were the only African American Boy Scouts in your troop?

**BM:** [chuckles] Yeah

**TS:** And did you did um, was there, how was your experience?

**BM:** Pat Foot and Richard Foot didn't allow any kind of division.

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** They didn't allow any issues of color or race to come up. They were there to teach boys to get along, actually stay true to what scouting was all about, doesn't matter race creed or color. But when I got to the Boy Scout levels and being the only black Boy Scout over there, that became somewhat of an issue. I was kinda shunned and left in the corner, and kinda, you know, and he would have his son Jack, ah, Mr. Tolliver would say, "Jack would you spend some time with him, I can't make the other boys ah, spend any time with him or work with him," he said, "But I'm asking you." And I heard him pull his son to the side and ask him that, and Jack said, "Yeah" and when we were, all through high school, Jack Tolliver, ah ah, was always, I always thought very highly of him because of that, ya know, so, and um, so, Mr. Tolliver, I think his hands were kinda tied because lot of the Boy Scouts, their parents were more affluent people of Venice if it was such a thing, you know, but you know. (25:22)

**TS:** Mmm... Is that when you - is that like growing up for you, did that, like you mentioned like when you were in the homes or even when you moved, like you were just, you know, kids, and you played and you had fun and you know, you were a part of all of these activities. Was that the first instance for you where you started to kinda feel that kind of subversive...?

**BM:** Oh no. The, the, going back to when we lived here in North Venice, ah on Saturday mornings, we, you know, we would get up and watch TV, watch Captain Kangaroo. You saw Romper Room, and I always noticed that you never saw any black children anywhere on television, and I noticed when you go to the stores, you never saw any black mannequins. You know, everything that you saw was white. And so I kept asking my father, uh uh, "How come you never see anything black?" and my father was kinda at a loss for words.... and I remember ah, one time I said, ah, after watching TV and everything was white, and I think we was going through a rough time at our house, and I said, "I wish I was white," and my father got really, really ticked off at me, and you know, and he backhanded me, uh uh, and I'm like, I didn't understand why he got so mad for me saying that. And he didn't nev-, he didn't ask me why I said it, he just, my father didn't lose his temper. For the most part he was always calm, and that was my first time ever seein' my father just lash, I mean naturally it scared me half to death, 'cause I'm like, you know, my father just didn't, he didn't hit you with his hand, you know, and so um, that was a wake-up call then, you know I forget how old I was, but, ah, I wasn't even 10, I wasn't, I know I wasn't even 10, but that's when I start realizing ah, the prejudice and racism and segregation and all that kinda stuff then, but the thing that bothered me was they had no answers. You know, they didn't tell me why, you know, and, and, and so as you grow older, you learn, but see, as a black kid growing up in in so much of USA, even by today's standards you were told what you couldn't do, where you couldn't go, what you couldn't have or wasn't supposed to have, you know what you couldn't be or never be, you know, and so, all this stuff stuck with me, and uh, even to the point when I went to the military, and I remember I was over in Italy, and I saw the coolest chess board ever seen in my life. This chess board was onyx, marble, pewter, silver,

and bronze. It was made up in like castles with knights and everything, so the board was actually made up off the ground and around it was rocks and hills like you had to infiltrate, uh a castle, you know. Just magnificent, beautiful. So it came in 3 different sizes, ranging from \$200, all the way up to \$750 dollars, okay, so, I wanted the middle one, which is I think around \$375. My girlfriend at the time, black woman, from St. Louis said, "Black people don't have that kind of stuff, what would you do with it? You don't even play chess." And that immediate-, I didn't get mad at her, I got mad at the system, because to me she was brainwashed, and it was going back, it was reinforcing this "Black people don't have this, black people don't go here, black people, uh-uh, don't know this," and go on and on and on, and so, my thing after that kinda stuff was, even growing up in Venice was, "Imma show you what I can't do, what I can't be, what I can't have, where I can't go." I can show you better than I can tell you. And to this day, I regret not buying that chess set. I don't have many regrets in life, that's one of them.

**TS:** Mmm

**BM:** and it's always bothered me all this years, and I've known a couple of people that went to Italy and the shop that it was in was right at the base of the leaning tower of Pisa, that's where I lived, two miles from the leaning tower of Pisa. And so, just the fact that I was over there, lived on the countryside, in my own little villa, you know, in the Air Force with two kids, I was single, and I'm like this right here is an opportunity many people have never had, so once again, they say where I can't go, I'm already showing you where I am. (29:55)

**TS:** Sure

**BM:** You know, so

**TS:** Um what uh, by the time that you got to high school...

**BM:** Mm-hmm

**TS:** ...the schools in Venice had been desegregated however.

**BM:** Mm-hmm

**TS:** Right? Um, however, they were...

**BM:** That started before '69 though.

**TS:** Right. And it started with this redistribution of busing.

**BM:** Mm-hmm

**TS:** Um, so can you talk a little bit about, like do you remember that? Like, in elementary school? Um, vaguely, or...?

**BM:** Well I came up here in the 5th grade, and what they said, they started integrating when I got here. They said they started integrating, it was some, blacks actually went to Venice in the uh early, uh late 50s, and there was only a couple of 'em. But they weren't really, because they had the, blacks went to Venice uh Lincoln Technical Center down there, which is now the Venice School, up the street here on Route 3. And, but when uh redistricting came up, uh-uh, that's when blacks would move into the school, and I think, I'm not sure, I'm, I never heard any stories about when they integrated, the people didn't like it, but they didn't make too big of a fuss of it. The biggest fuss came when Madison had all the problems. Venice didn't want to be associated or made like Madison, so Lee said, "Let Madison be the brunt of all the

negative stuff, and we wanna keep ourself positive.” So, but I heard he did his dirt too but he kept it low key.

**TS:** Mm-hmm

**BM:** Just like this [taps at paper]

**TS:** Mm yeah, I remember reading something in a in a newspaper, I think it was the Intelligencer, about how Madison even had like burning crosses.

**BM:** Yeah.

**TS:** When their schools were integrated. Did you hear any...?

**BM:** Too young.

**TS:** Yeah, or any of that friction, and um, you know, any siblings or family members that were older?

**BM:** It wouldn't surprise me, but no, I was too young, and then our parents would have shielded us from it. Uh, because you don't want your kids walking around in fear, but you don't want them to be in areas, you don't wanna put them in danger, but you don't want ‘em to walk around in fear either. So, uh-uh, you know, they just made sure that we were where we was supposed to be, but when I moved up here to Venice, like I said, we moved up in ‘69, uh, in the projects, there was not much. The people that they used to integrate Venice originally were from Eagle Park, which was originally, they had the choice to go to Venice or Madison, because technically they were uh, in the Madison school district, but for some reason, because they were not basically in Madison Township or Venice Township, they was in the outskirts, they had the option of which school they wanted to go to, that's where the busing came from, and it was still there when we were there, until they closed the school, so, um, uh, and I had issues with the people of over there. The black kids of Venice had more problems with the black kids of Eagle Park than the white kids did.

**TS:** Why was that?

**BM:** I have no idea

[both chuckle]

**BM:** They just thought they were tough for some reason, I don't know

**TS:** Eagle Park kids thought that they were tough?

**BM:** Yeah

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** Yeah

**TS:** Okay, now you mentioned that you moved in 1969 up to this part of Venice.

**BM:** Right, mm-hmm.

**TS:** Um, and at this time, actually in 1969, Venice saw a riot where over 30 black youths firebombed the city, the newspaper says...

**BM:** Mm-hmm

**TS:** ...as an attempt to prevent a black police officer from patrolling the black neighborhoods, as he was accused of harassment. Um, do you recall any of that night's events, like you said that maybe, like thinking back....

**BM:** The night that that happened we were, I was in my grandmother's house, because remember all the police uh, and we weren't allowed to come to the park for months, as a matter of fact, after that happened. Um, they used to have, this over here used to be rides, a beautiful park, waterfall, um, uh, manicured trees with tapered, topiary trees and everything, all of it used to be over here. Beautiful baseball diamonds, just a really beautiful park, and when it got down to the point where they would start giving blacks more access to the park, they took it all out.

**TS:** Wow

**BM:** They shut it down, that's why I say they do subtle protests

**TS:** Right

**BM:** Instead of making a big riot or, they took it all out

**TS:** And do you remember anything from that night? Or hearing anything? Seeing anything? Next day in school, friends talking about it? Or?

**BM:** No... only thing I remember what little, 'cause they didn't really say, only thing they said was no whites was arrested, they just arrested all blacks, but that was to be expected, and because it was [fire walkie-talkie noise] nothing outta ordinarily, you know, you knew what was going to happen, it wasn't a big issue, it wasn't a big topic, ya know? Okay, you know, what's the next move, you know, Everything back then was how do we progress to make, to slowly implement change to make it better for our people? That's basically, so they didn't harp on things or talk about stuff for a long time, it was too important to just move on, long as nobody was killed or whatever, you know, you just move on. (35:13)

**TS:** Right, now in the '60s what does your parents do for work? Because I know one of the things that was ah in the newspaper a lot was the NAACP and CORE coming to Venice and talking about how they wanted more African Americans to have opportunities for jobs, be they local factories, or you know, just anything, working.

**BM:** Well my, origin-, ah okay lemme see. Now the first job I remember my mother having was at the depot, which was a government job and, she didn't keep it very long. My mother bounced around, excuse me, on jobs. My dad worked up here at the mill, Granite City Steel, where I work, and, they would lay him off, then when they would lay him off, he would go to the National Stockyards up here on Route 3, and he worked at a gas station. He would shovel cow manure, rinse out, wash out the back of them trailers, what they haul all the livestock in, whatever nasty dirty job that it took for him to take care of his family, that's basically what he did. So, he didn't have time to worry about a lot of issues, that kinda stuff, 'cause he was too, he had five kids and a wife, and you know, so.

**TS:** And now your grandmother lived here as well...

**BM:** Right

**TS:** ...um, and did she work in the Venice area too, or...?

**BM:** She was a caregiver.

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** And the guy, and the people that she care-gave basically within that little project area, so she never had to go very far at all, and that's why I stayed with her a lot, you know, so, um, she considered me her baby boy, so that's how much I was over there.

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** So

**TS:** So, you, so um, the NAACP and CORE coming here didn't affect anything...

**BM:** You gotta understand in the black community, even more so then as it is now, for change to come about takes great effort and years of perseverance, okay, and it was, the only thing that happens to me fast is when people, once the laws are laid down, people scatter outta the area, you know, and that's the only that happen, everything else comes at a very slow pace, and it's not really talked about until social media came about like it is now, lotta stuff was just general conversation. If somebody want to talk politics, and blacks very seldom talked politics.

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** So

**TS:** Um, so, you started high school in the '70s...

**BM:** Mm-hmm

**TS:** ...um, and even though high school was fully integrated, um can you speak to the racial climate of Venice High School in the '70s?

**BM:** Uh... Only thing at the time was there was this little bit of prejudice, ah, as far as any bigotry, ah, I don't know, I never, the teachers were, you never knew it, 'cause they never showed it. We had, I had one teacher I felt hated everybody, name was Mr. Craig, and uh uh, when I was a freshman I swore this man hated, and he, when I became a junior, I went to him and asked, I'm a person that go to people and confront people, so I asked him, why did you treat uh, me so bad or treat my classmates so bad, and what he said, I found to be true, he said, "I cannot stand freshmens and very few sophomores." He said, "Because your hormones are going crazy." He said, "You're complete little idiots." He said, "By the time you become a junior and a senior," he said, "your demeanor and your attitudes and your maturity has done almost a 180 in just those two years." He said, "That's when I can tolerate you." I said, "Well what why you a freshman English teacher then?" [chuckles] He didn't give me an answer either. And he stayed a freshman English teacher, and I never understood that, but he gave me an answer, but, um, that was about the most prejudice that I could think of in a high school. [chuckles] So, that ain't really prejudice he just didn't like freshmen.

**TS:** Yeah

**BM:** You know, but I mean, that still prejudiced, but I mean, it wasn't, he wasn't bigoted, I mean he was that way towards everybody, you know, and then I, but I had some great teachers, but the only thing about Venice, what I didn't like was you didn't have the opportunities there. It was a very small school, the budget was small, and so, it showed. The biggest thing at Venice was basketball and volleyball, and they, when I first got there they had track and baseball, and all that stuff eventually, slowly went by the wayside as budgets were being cut. And uh, but they always held onto basketball and that's Venice's claim to fame, they won the state championship in uh uh, 19 uh, 73 I think, no, no, '76.

**TS:** So right as you were in school?

**BM:** I was on the team

**TS:** Yeah, oh, okay, I was going to ask, what um, what sports did you partake in? So basketball we know.

**BM:** Well, basketball and track when they had it. Those were the two that I played at, I did.

**TS:** What was it like when they met State Championship and all the press, 'cause that was in every single newspaper?

**BM:** Yeah, you really want my opinion on that?

**TS:** Yeah [laughs]

**BM:** It gonna be totally different than anybody else you talk to in this whole city or state.

**TS:** Okay, that's great (40:21)

**BM:** And the reason being is because I was on the team and got injured right before the super sectionals, okay. I worked diligently, worked my rear end off to push those first five guys to the players that they were, and I was like the number seven guy on the team, and uh uh, 'cause I was like, I told the star player, I want your job, I want your position, you know, and that's what I was going for, and I felt I was in reach of taking his position, maybe they woulda finished out the year with them players, but I knew the next year, coming back, you know, I would be a force to be reckoned with. My thumb got broke, in practice, uh, they missed a ball, and it hit my thumb or broke my thumb, and uh, it was like they threw me in the trashcan. So, I wasn't allowed to travel with the team, uh, I wasn't, I didn't, when they won the championship, they didn't recognize me, I didn't get to ride in the parade, I didn't get anything. They basically just threw me to the side, and I'm like, "What did I do to the coach for the coach to hate me so much, you know, and then none of the players stood up and said anything in my defense," you know, and I got a call last year, "We're thinkin' about having a um a reunion for the '73 championship team." Well they remembered that I played on the team, but they had forgot that I wasn't allowed to participate when we went to state finals. So, when, um, they won the championship, and the TV cameras were panning the audience, you know, everybody cheering, only one person in the whole building sat there with a frown on they face and their arms folded, and the TV came straight to me, it was me. I was not happy.

**TS:** No, I can imagine.

**BM:** Because on the other team, there was a guy sitting down there with a cast on his arm.

**TS:** Why do you think that your teammates didn't stand up for ya?

**BM:** They were from Eagle Park, most of 'em.

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** And then the other white guys were out here, you know, and they didn't want to rock the boat.

**TS:** So you think that it was, um

**BM:** I was a outsider

**TS:** Okay, were you the only person from Venice that was...?

**BM:** Only black male from Venice, yeah.

**TS:** Yeah

**BM:** Wait a minute, now I think it might have been one more, no, no

**TS:** Yeah

**BM:** Yeah so, anyway, they didn't let me dress out, and I wasn't happy, I ain't never been happy to this day, that's a sore spot too.

**TS:** Um

**BM:** [woman enters] Hey Tash. Yeah and that ticks me off, but I didn't feel that was right, you know, that doesn't show any kind of sportsman, team sportsmanship, loyalty, and for all the dedication and hard work that I had put in, ah like I said, I felt like they had just threw me in the trashcan.

**TS:** Sure. Um, after graduation and after that experience, um, so you were a junior...

**BM:** Mm-hmm

**TS:** ...and then you graduated in '77.

**BM:** I didn't go to Venice my senior year.

**TS:** Oh you didn't

**BM:** Because of my grades, I was smart enough to enter into a pre-college course, uh class called Upward Bound.

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** Upward Bound was held on the college campus of SIU.

**TS:** Oh great

**BM:** Yeah so I spent my last year and a half at SIU, and um, so... ah, I had good grades when I was up there, got to be a little bit cocky though, because I had good grades even when I was up there...

**TS:** Mm-hmm

**BM:** ...and uh, on the, I missed two of my finals 'cause I got the dates mixed up, and my professor, I begged her to give me 15 minutes to take an hour long test, that's all I need. I know I was that smart, I begged her to give me 15 minutes to take that test, 'cause she knew I would have aced it. And she said, "No Mr. Mathis, welcome to the adult world, you gotta retake the whole class."

**TS:** Oh my goodness. What was it what was it like then going from like a junior in high school you're 16, 17 right?

**BM:** 16

**TS:** And then you're straight to a college campus...

**BM:** [unintelligible]

**TS:** ...what was the college environment of SIU like back then in the 70s? Cause it was relatively a new college.

**BM:** It was, it was [chuckles] Now that was, they was bigoted as hell. [laughs] boy I tell you, but I had so much fun it ain't even funny

**TS:** Really

**BM:** Yeah, once again, like they say, when you learn your environment and you learn to stay in your lane, you just stay in your lane, you know.

**TS:** Okay.

**BM:** When you deal, when you're confronted with issues of bigotry and racism, you learn how to overcome them with social, to me, grace and charm. You know, you can make a person look ignorant by showing them kindness and love. You know, and that's what we, my daddy taught us to handle stuff with, you know, and so, where if somebody is doing wrong by you or trying to call you out a name, trying to get a response outta you, and all you doin' is showin' them, man, you okay, why you talking to me this way, you know. I understand, maybe you came up from a, um, family that's poisoned your mind like that, but dude there's a different way. Well people don't want to be talked to that way when they tryin' to spew evil to you, so, that's always been my defense was um, and then, if you continue to be ignorant, you know, there's two things you do, either get away from em' or either be more ignorant than them, I always chose to just get away from em'. So, so yeah. [chuckles] (45:26)

**TS:** Yeah, was the, so it was more or less like a culture shock then, going to SIU, a little bit, as far as like, like you said...

**BM:** Growing up

**TS:** ...that there ....

**BM:** Yeah basically you growin' up, and you kinda gettin' into the real world, ah, um. Uh, I was kind at that time, I was very athletic, the girls said I was very cute, ah um, you know, I didn't have much fear, so I was very cocky, you know, so, going up to the school, when I saw most of kids up there I'm like "pssh" so what? [chuckles]

**TS:** Yeah what were most of the kids like?

**BM:** Rich kids were arrogant, athletes were uh um, ignorant, um, people that was, 'cause you had your geeks up there, and I ended up with a, I ended up with an entourage up there of about 15 people that followed me around.

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** Now I'm 16 and I got an entourage.

**TS:** Why do you think that was?

**BM:** 'Cause of my mouth...

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** I was very in your face, very witty about what I said, and I watched what I said and how I said it, so most of the kids were from, a lot of 'em from East St. Louis and Brooklyn, and, they were mean and tough, well, mean and tough in a college atmosphere is not gonna get it done, you gotta have somebody that's more of a politician, and able to get around the issues and stuff, and that was me.



**TS:** Okay

**BM:** So I still to this day can pretty much talk to anybody about any subject, you know, when I can go from the rich to the poor, so whether you from the 'hood or from Harvard, you know, we can sit down and have a conversation.

**TS:** Yeah

**BM:** So...

**TS:** What um, at SIU, what was the worst, I guess maybe experience that you had in dealing with this new population of people?

**BM:** The worst experience?

**TS:** Yeah

**BM:** The number of girls up there. It was a total distraction.

**TS:** [laughs] Okay.

**BM:** I mean, that's that was my downfall, it ended up being my downfall. You know, because it took my mind off the studies. At that time they had all these concerts up there, all these entertainers would come in, uh, all these prestigious people would come through, you know, lawyers, doctors, and they had seminars, free seminars, and so, it was just so busy, then you had the youth hall down, I mean the, what's the name center, ah man, you know what I'm talking about, where the downstairs with the tables tennis and the bowling alley is...

**TS:** Oh, the Morris University Center?

**BM:** Yeah

**TS:** Call that the "MUC" Yeah

**BM:** Yeah. Okay. Then they had the gym, the bubble gym, you know uh, the pool, and oh c'mon, there was just so much stuff to do.

**TS:** Overwhelming yeah

**BM:** It was a whole 'nother world, so I stayed busy, um, always into something, couldn't wait to go to school the next day, you know, but here's the thing about it. If you don't get your studies in, you end up flunkin' out, and I did fine during the regular part of the year, but what I made the mistake was, because I was so - my grades were so good during the regular part of the year, when summer came, I took all these hard classes. I took a full load and it had physics and calc – pre calculus in the summer. Yeah, not very wise. And I had um three upperclassmen come to me and say, "Bryan you don't take them kinda classes in the summer, you just don't, it's too much to do up here, you gonna get sidetracked, you gonna end up flunkin out of school." "Aw no!" I said, "I'm different. I got this, I got this, psh!" Then the first two weeks I dropped two classes, and then with the other three classes, five classes really? Calculus, and physics in the summertime? Yeah, not smart. I was so embarrassed.

**TS:** Yeah, but you, but um, it's still such an achievement to be able to go to school, you know at that young age, um, what was, what were, so you said there were great concerts there.

**BM:** Oh there was a group called Nickels, Styx came through, Rod Stewart came through, I saw many, Minnie Riperton and George Benson, Chaka Khan, Rick James, uh um, oh what's the other crazy guy with um, Parliament, P-Funkad-, Dr. Funkenstein, not Parliament came through but Dr. Funkenstein came through.

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** And, it was just group after group, and uh that's just some of 'em 'cause the Mississippi River Festival was there back then.

**TS:** Right

**BM:** Okay, and, and, you know, being a paperboy I had saved up money, so that meant I had my own car, I had money, and that didn't help the issue either. So, it wasn't so much a culture shock, because um, even though the blacks and whites, you ever seen a school that's segregated but everybody get along?

**TS:** Yeah

**BM:** That's what, it's not this bad, they say, there's still some of it up there, but not like it was, but back then it was really badly segregated, and you would still be in the classroom with blacks over here and whites was here. (50:22)

**TS:** Wow

**BM:** And when you went out the room, I mean, they co-mingled, but it still, this separation was there.

**TS:** Mm-hmm

**BM:** And uh the teachers were professors, they weren't pretty much, to me, interested in helping you, they would tell you, "This is college I'm here to present the information to you, it's up to you whether or not you want to get it, you know, if you need help with your homework that's what the tutors are for."

**TS:** Right

**BM:** You didn't even ask them questions

**TS:** Right. What about the community of Edwardsville itself? Like did you feel anything coming from Venice to Edwardsville? Were you commuting, were you living on campus?

**BM:** Yeah actually, the first time ever was taking the bus to school, until I got my car. But uh um, 'cause I wasn't allowed to drive to school when the bus was there, in the summertime, my father let me take my car, but um, excuse me, the difference I notice when I was up there from going to Venice was uh, Venice was uh, was like a little small town school if you watch Happy Days.

**TS:** Okay

**BM:** Right, the high school with Fonzie and all them, that's kinda the way Venice was to me, you know, and then, but when I got up to SIU, it was all these people from all these from all these different places, black and white, and I actually talked to any of 'em, um, and so uh, that's how I ended up with that little entourage, because Upward Bound was desegregated, it had blacks and whites in there, and uh, so, I guess just being a smart ass, for lack of a better word, that ain't bad is it?

**TS:** No

**BM:** Um, okay, um, I just uh, I dunno, I felt more empowered than anything when I got up there, you know? Just stuff that I learned and the people I dealt with, and Venice is basically just carried over up there, you know, dealing with all the people in the paper route and everything, ah, I didn't have no problem talkin' to anybody. One of the things when we uh, I was a junior still here in Venice, we had put on a uh um, we had to pay for the senior's prom. Right? And so we had to go to all these different stores to solicit advertisements and stuff, and I was one of the people that brought back one of the biggest payloads. Uh, and, all the proprietors of these establishments were white, so as a young black individual askin' for money, you had to, oh yeah, being a paperboy, everything became relevant. And so when I went up to SIU, I used everything I had learned here in Venice, so, uh, how my dad put it, "Whether the situation that you grew up in be good or be bad, learn from as much of it as you can, right?" You know, and incorporate it to help you learn how to deal with issues of life. If you don't ever get exposed to bigotry and racism, you'll never know how to deal with it. So, um, when I had um, left SIU, when I flunked out, I went over to ITT Tech, Bailey Technical School for architectural engineering. Now, St. Louis, that's culture shock. Most racist city to this day that I've ever been in, second to London. You know? Uh uh. London the most racist city I've ever been in, and St. Louis was number 2. And, um, everything about when I was over in St. Louis is just constantly on a daily basis was racism, you know? And, I had a job, I got fired off the job because of racism. You know? Uh, the white guy, he came in, and he had the easy side, and uh, he did his little work, and went and sat down, I had the hard side. The next day I got the easy side, got done, went and sat down, they wanted me to go out and help the little white guy. Okay. I told him, "You didn't have him help me, why should I go help him?" So they said I was disgruntled and not a team player and fired me. And the union, they want no part of it.

**TS:** Right

**BM:** Yay for union. Now I'll believe in unions, but all unions aren't good unions.

**TS:** Mm-hmm

**BM:** Okay, so, then I end up working for O'Brien Corporation, there's bigotry and racism again. Only black at this whole company.

**TS:** This was in St. Louis.

**BM:** Yeah

**TS:** Mm-hmm

**BM:** Okay, owned by a Jewish guy, and so was the gas station I got fired from, but anyway, uh, at O'Brien Corporation, I was part time, 'cause I was working, I was still going to school, and they said once I graduated they would hire me at full time. Well not only did they not hire me full time, they hired five other people around me. They had an engineering department, they did exactly what I went to school for. They hired an engineer's assistant, and so I went and talked directly to Mr. O'Brien, "Now you did invite me to your house, haven't been to your house with picnics and everything else, but yet you didn't make your employees keep your promise?" "Yeah when you graduate Bryan, I got a full time position for you." And dealin' with that racism, and when I went out looking for a job, the amount of racism that I dealt with in St. Louis was more than I could stand, because coming from Venice, everything was low-key compared to St. Louis. St. Louis is blatant and in your face, it's systematic, and it works to perfection over there, and I left, that's when I joined the service. I had to get away from this area. (55:59)

**TS:** So you came back to the area, a little, you know, you're in Granite City now.

**BM:** They made me come back.

**TS:** [chuckles] And they made you come back?

**BM:** The military made me come back here.

**TS:** Okay. Um, when you look at Venice now compared to when you grew up...

**BM:** Mm-hmm

**TS:** ...what are your thoughts about it?

**BM:** Sad.

**TS:** Why?

**BM:** Because they, the deterioration of the city, um, there's no infrastructure here as far as monies coming in to uh, rebuild the city. If you, you can't rebuild a city or do anything if the people don't have jobs, you don't have a tax base, you know, you don't have a business space, they took the school out, so there's no school here, there's basically nothing here from what I remember growing up, and uh, now their Mayor Echols, uh, is I think doing a very commendable job of trying to revitalize this area. I look at the park over here, which looks really, really nice, uh, compared to what it did 15 years ago, y'know, and I know the people that's working, trying to revitalize this area, so I also know the developers that they brought through to want to redevelop this area here, 'cause Venice was really, a really nice town to grow up in, uh, between the, even though it was black and whites, all lived to me in harmony, you know, uh, the prejudices was here, easy to tolerate, very little bigotry, very little racism that I had to deal with. I can't speak for others. This is just, you know, my father say I used to look at the world through rosey, rose-colored glasses, you know, uh. I look for things now for truth, they are what they are.

**TS:** Mm-hmm

**BM:** And uh, this city, the potential is still here, and what I like to see in areas like this one, when a house becomes dilapidated, and it becomes unoccupied, you just clear off the land and let it sit 'til revitalization time comes around, okay? Redevelopment, so, this is what I see for this city coming up, but there's still key uh, what you call them? City ah um, landmarks, thank you, that's right, this is a landmark, the library is a landmark, there's some houses down here when you first come over the viaduct, when you look over there, those houses was beautiful as they've ever been, and basically sets the tempo for what people should expect from the rest of the city. And that's what I will like to see. Hopefully the revitalization of this area, that's what I would like to see, all the houses in this city, look like those. If people take their kinda pride in their property, you know, so, hopefully that would bring back schools and businesses and stuff like that. I would like to see a resurgence of this area. I really would.

**TS:** What's um, so you mentioned the high school closed in 2004, because of the, the base for...

**BM:** It wasn't enough people that went to that school to justify the building being as old as it is, and trying to keep it open for the number, it just economically wasn't feasible, I mean, and you know when they say dollars and cents, it's also dollars and sense, you know. So um, it just wasn't feasible to keep it open anymore.

**TS:** Yeah, one last question, what's your favorite memory of growing up in Venice?

**BM:** My favorite memory.

**TS:** Because looking back you have, you know, a great story, um (59:36)

**BM:** I didn't want to graduate high school, I had too much fun. Favorite memory of Venice. I don't know, I guess living in the projects, 'cause I didn't want to move out of the projects either. When my parents bought their house, I never did warm up to that house, it was just something about the environment, would, in the projects, where when you walk out the door, you got your friends to the left, to the right, in front, and in the back, you know, it's just kids everywhere, you know, and um, and so, all of us playin' in Venice Home, they had their field back there where we would go and make hideouts and forts and climb up in trees and, you know, climb up on roofs, BB guns, model cars, I mean it goes on and on and on about some of my fondest memories living in Venice. Mmm... I would have to say when I lived in the Venice Homes, I just liked, I loved all my friends, and all the people that grew up over there.

**TS:** Nice

**BM:** The projects, when you say projects now, people look at it in a negative sense. I make jokes about the projects and sometime people get mad, but I tell people my memories of the projects has always been fun. The number of people that you knew and met, you know, yeah you might have to fight a little bit or whatever, you know, because always power struggle, you know, but uh, basically you fought and then after the fight was over you just go back and start playin' all over again, you know, there wasn't no killin' or nothing like that, you know. So, I'd have to say, and then I got three brothers, you know, and then my brother, between my brothers and my friends, we were everywhere, on our bikes, and that's what I'm saying, when we drove around Venice, you didn't get nobody throwin' nothin' atcha, looking at you sideways or nothing like that. Matter of fact, lot of times my white friends would say "Hey wait a minute, we gonna go get our bikes, and we come join you," you know, so, you know, and it didn't matter whether we was on this side of town or that side of town, or ever over here, it just didn't matter, when I lived here in Venice, so the social change in Venice was not as ugly and blatant as a lot of areas. I now reside in Granite City. The change that's going on up there, it's getting pretty ugly.

**TS:** Mm-hmm

**BM:** The property values are dropping, that breeds anger in people, because now they're not getting the monies uh, outta your property when you need to reinvest when you move on, you know, and, um, and then my only, I don't care who moves into a area long as you conduct yourself like you got some sense to take care of your property. I don't care what color you are. And, um, I remember when I first moved to Granite, I was one of the, my house is, I got two acres of property, and it's a two story house, most of the houses are one story, so, I was a black in an all-white area of the town, and I, they didn't make me feel welcome. Whenever I was in my yard, once again, they used the old subtle ways, traffic would go in both directions for as long as I was out in my yard, people staring at me, letting me know that they didn't appreciate me being out there. But because of the way that I take care of my property, and what I've done to my property, and the people all of sudden say, "We don't mind you being here." And they actually stop and tell me that. And, that's pretty offensive, because what do I care [chuckles] that you agree, that you don't mind me being here, or you approve of what I'm doing to my property, that's my property."

**TS:** Right

**BM:** But I just got told that just four weeks ago. A husband and wife turned around came back, pulled up on the side, while I was edging my yard, and told me, "You know, we really approve of what you've done in your property, and we think it's really pretty. Job well done." And I'm like "Um, thank you?" [Chuckles] 'Cause I'm like, in my mind I'm like, "Lady! What I care?" You know, but I'm trying to be nice so I'm like, "Really?" [chuckles] You simply could have said your property looks nice, and you

know, 'cause it's people in this, and this is what I'm talkin' about, people come by, once a year, even if they live outta town, because they used to be just a vacant ugly field, and they come by my property once a year to see what I've done with it. And take pictures.

**TS:** Wow

**BM:** So should I be flattered, or insulted? [chuckles]

**TS:** Right

**BM:** But I know the issue behind it is bigotry, you know, and I just actually, I just laugh it off, because I'm like, uh to a lot of people ignorance is bliss, and I just chalk it off with that. But you never learn, but if you step out and you talk to me and you give me five minutes I change your perception of black people.

**TS:** Right

**BM:** And that's how I deal with racism, that's what I learned from growing up in Venice.

**TS:** Excellent. Well thank you so much for sharing your story, I appreciate it.

**BM:** Yeah, you're welcome.