

Interviewees – Irvin and Murphy Darden
Interviewer- Margaret Lukhaitis, Western Michigan University
October 27, 2009; November 19, 2009
Public Media Network Studios, Kalamazoo Michigan

On Growing up in the South

Margaret: Well, actually, if we could just go back for a second can you tell us a little bit about your mother? What she did for a living?

Irvin: Yes. She was a domestic worker; she worked for a gentleman named Sam Plant, and she just did the housework, laundry, cleaning, ironing, just domestic work - the cooking. A lot of times my brother and I would go and sit at the table and eat, although he was white, we sat at the table and eat with him. ... my mother did all the cleaning and all the cooking for him until he passed.

Margaret: And you got along with this man?

Irvin: Oh yes, he was a wonderful man. Yes he was. You know, he was a gun collector and he collected guns and hide from animals, but he was good...he was good to us. He would read stories to us...

Murphy: He did have a little cotton patch in the back of his yard, and we would go out there and pick cotton often and put it there. He had a little shed, he had it back there. ...

Margaret: Were you often with your mother when she was at work?

Irvin: Yeah, we would go there from school, after we'd leave school we'd go up there and we'd sit around her and play, me and my brother in the yard, as all the kids come from school. His house was sitting right in front of the white school; you could see the white people there. Of course, they rode buses. We didn't have buses; we had to walk to school. ... after school we would go there and she would cook and we would eat supper there with him. We had a good time there. Everybody treated us nice, but that was still prejudiced, you know what I'm saying? Those kids would call you names and everything, but we got used to it. It didn't bother us.

Margaret: The children from the white school, did they ever talk to you?

Irvin: No.

Margaret: You didn't play with them?

Murphy: Well, we had white neighbors. And we did play with the kids. The whites lived in the black neighborhoods down South, but you couldn't live in their neighborhood. We did have plays as a kid, toys and played together, shot marbles together, just enjoyed the girls and boys - mixed and played.

Irvin: Really, we didn't know anything about prejudice, because we were young, you know, we didn't think anything about that.

Murphy: ... We didn't experience anything like that. One experience we had, I was going to Columbus, Mississippi to see my daughter years ago, and we did get on the bus and the man asked me was I white, and I said "No sir, I'm not white," so he said, "Well, you got to get on the back of the bus." That's the first time I experienced that. And sometimes if you were walking on the sidewalk we'd have to get off the sidewalk if the white peoples passed by, then you could get back on the sidewalk.

Margaret: Was that when you were little kids you had to do that?

Both: Yeah.

Margaret: Did your mother tell you to do that?

Irvin: Even grownups had to do it too.

Margaret: How did you learn to do things like that?

Irvin: It's the law. You didn't learn it; it's just the law. And you know, there's a lot of times where a gentlemens (sic) would tip his hat to all peoples, white peoples and all, and just show courtesy. But, one thing about when you meet these white peoples, they had good people down there that really treat you nice, but you were always on the sides, had to be careful what you say. But after you grown up with kids and played with them, you become friends, and then once you get a certain age you have to call them "mister," or the girl "miss." And you're the same age! You get up to teenager or so, they're "mister" and "miss." As you grow older, say if you're an older gentleman in your seniors, then you're "aunt" and "auntie." They won't call you mister...they call you boy, but to give you respect they call you aunt and auntie; that way you think you're part of the family.

Murphy: You had to say "yes sir," "no sir" too, even to younger kids. And you had to do what you had to do.

Irvin: They had separate bathrooms, separate drinking fountains. Like I said, our school, the high school, we didn't have water; we had outside toilets- if you wanna call them outhouses. Even in our school we didn't have plumbing for water until later on in the years. We had to go outside. The ladies, the girls, had one section, and we was in another section, but that's where we had to go.

On Work Life in Kalamazoo

Irvin: ... my brother sent for me when he came up [unclear] then he sent for me, 'cause I'd have been down there yet tryin' to finally get up here, but he sent for me and I got a job at the same Hotel Harris he got and I worked there about a couple years, and then I was gone for the job [unclear] Drugstore, and a lady there, her husband worked at [unclear] KVP at that time, excuse me. She say, "You got a job?" I say, "Yes m'am, I got a job." She say, "Well, they hiring at the KVP, why don't you go out there and put your application, I think they need somebody." I said, "M'am, what is a KVP?" She said, "Paper mill. It's out in Parchment." ... She say, "Well come on by the house tomorrow morning. You can ride out there with my husband." And I rode out there with him, put in an application, they hired me. Made \$1.25 an hour. Now that's good money, from what I were making.

You couldn't move up until the government stepped in said, you know, "If you want government orders, you're gonna have to hire minorities." And then my brother, he signed for to move up in promotion. But they said, "Naw, you couldn't do that," because that was before the government stepped in, said, "Naw, you have to stay where you're at."

... they only hired black to do janitorial work. They even had a black lady that she worked, we called her a janitress, she did the ladies bathroom and locker room. And the guys, we had about three janitors, all black, and you had about what, 1000 employees white, mostly the three blacks were the janitorial.

Murphy: ... Even at the Hotel Harris. There wasn't too much discrimination there. But more that black was housemen, like that, maids, and uh, bellhops. ... no jobs like, being supervisor and all that kind of stuff. ... at the paper mill, there was discrimination there a little bit. No advancement in jobs. You stayed on the job like you frozen. ... you were either a janitor or a sweeper. Something like that. And then they had women to do that also. But no white, or any other group, nationality would do that. Just black. You can be German, you can be Scottish, you can be Polish, you can be Dutch or whatever. But not black; you don't get the job. We just clean up, after they make the mess. We never was get the high paying job on paper as a machine, die cutting, pressman anything like that. We were kept ignorant of those things so we couldn't advance, until the union. ... But in the '60s with the civil rights movement come in and you couldn't discriminate, then we began to advance because they had government orders and stuff like that. ... So, we finally advanced and to get on jobs, more advance job with better pay ... it finally got so that they can train you on machines, new drivers and loading cars and all that. That's some better jobs. And then some come to be supervisor. When I seen the black first supervisor coming in with a green hat, Wow! I said, "wow, look-it here. Sharp, you sharp coming in supervisor. Wow, now. Wonder how they're going to take this?"

On Finding Housing in Kalamazoo

Irvin: They wouldn't show you houses other than the North side. Matter of fact, you know, in the fifties, I don't think black could buy in Parchment. There was a time you couldn't buy in Parchment, now you couldn't go in Portage, or anyplace like, we was just all on the North side more or less, but that's what it was.

Murphy: ... A black couldn't buy a house on the other side of Westnedge, ...

Margaret: What side of Westnedge?

Murphy: That would be North Westnedge, from South Westnedge. ... they'd keep you right on the Northside. Portage St., down in the bottom, Halston St., something like that. You know they wouldn't take you around to show you new homes... And that's what I wanted to buy, a new home. But I did fortunate enough to buy, I think one of the first black ever, I can remember. In 1948 when we came here, in '49, we bought our first house. Me and my brother we pooled our money together, \$1000 dollars. He paid \$500, I paid \$500. We bought our first house on Rose St. from a white family. And in the begin, I'll tell ya, ... when a black move in those houses- they see a black move in, within a year, they sell out and move out. Because they didn't want to live next, beside a black. Regardless of how you kept

your house up, your property up, eventually, they move out at night, and you don't see 'em. And then black, eventually move in, because you're in a different neighborhood now. You get it.

Margaret: Did your neighbors ever talk to you?

Murphy: Oh yeah.

Margaret: Of the white neighbors?

Murphy: There some good white neighbors. Some just wouldn't you know, wantt to live by you. Even work beside you, some of them. And so they move out. I saw discrimination with that, you know. Borrowing money. Even the bank sometime, you had to prove this and that, what you wanted it for. All that kind of stuff. We went through quite a bit in the '60s.

Irving: Same thing with the ladies too, your wives. They mostly got jobs at Borgess Hospital or Bronson Hospital doing you know, I guess you call housekeeping. But they were limited too. Or they got jobs at like say hotels like that being maids- stuff like that.

On the Difference Between Living in the South and Living in the North

Margaret: Compared to Mississippi were things better or worse, as for opportunities with jobs or discrimination.

Irving: One thing about in Mississippi, you knew where you could go or where you couldn't go. Here, you don't know where you can go. But a lot of times you can go in places where, I wasn't a drinker, a bar or hanging out in taverns or bars or clubs. There was a lot of times when friends would go places and, man, they didn't know they didn't let us in there. They looked at us like we were something from outer space. But you know how you was treated that you weren't really welcome there.

Murphy: But, you know as a kid we played together. The white and black and colored mothers and white lady mothers. We all played together. But when you get a certain age, you don't play. Then they separate you then.

Margaret: Do you remember when it became separate? Your age?

Murphy: Oh my god, that's, through the South, no. You'd have to be least 8 or 10 years old. Because they think, because we shot marbles with the white girls everything but they begin to say okay, here's a time for separation. They may want to get in with my daughter. That's what it was all about.

Margaret: What did you mean where you knew where you couldn't go in Mississippi?

Murphy: Restaurants.

Irving: Well, in restaurants. And uh places like that.

Murphy: Dishwashers.

Irving: All drinking fountains.

Margaret: Did they have signs?

Irving: Signs. Colored here. White people there. Separate bathrooms because we didn't have bathrooms, we had outhouses. But even in the dime stores, or you go shopping there on Saturdays. A lot of peoples come out of from the country from there, working on the farms. They get Saturdays off they come to town, buy clothes for kids and everything like that. But then, if you wanted to use the bathrooms there were no bathrooms to use. So you go out in the back. They finally did, I think, build some lavatories for the colored to use.

Murphy: Then you had holes- if you want water. You got water holes, you could drink water out of that. And that was it, you know. ... Even segregated on the bus. I rode, me and my twin brothers got on the bus to go to Columbus, Mississippi and we got on the bus, paid our fare, I sat right next, didn't go in the back of the bus, sat in the middle of the bus, middle way. The bus driver got up. ... was nobody on the bus, got up and said "you boys white?" ... We said "no sir," ... Said, "well you gotta get in the back." ...

Margaret: Can I ask you, did you ever feel bitter?

Murphy: No that's how it was.

Margaret: Was it better up here?

Irving: Oh yeah, it was better.

Margaret: How so? How was it different? How was it better?

Murphy: You could probably, qualify for jobs and stuff like that. Get the opportunity to buy jobs. Later on then you could buy house wherever you want to buy. It got better for us. You could go and sit at the counters and eat with them. All the opportunities was getting better.

Irving: Just like he said, we could eat in restaurants. Down there, you want something, lot of times, you had to go to the back door to get food. You couldn't sit down and eat in the restaurant or drugstore. They serve you in the back; you have to go to the back. But that's the way it was. What was different here is you could go in the front and sit down and go to the restaurant and eat and be comfortable. Like I said, in the theater in the movies ... you had to sit up in the balcony for the blacks, down below the whites sit, in the lower area. You're watching the same movie.

On What It's Like in Kalamazoo Now

Margaret: This might be an interesting question and you can answer it however you want. What has it been like to be a black man in Kalamazoo?

Murphy: Well, I don't know, that's a good question. What it be a black man be in Kalamazoo? I don't know, its, you fell a little discriminated against, a little bit prejudiced against. But, you know, you overcome it.

Margaret: Has it changed from then to now? Do you feel discriminated against?

Murphy: Oh yeah. Well, now, you see, I'm black and proud. I can buy the cars I want. Sometimes they didn't want to sell the cars or whatever ... Being black in Kalamazoo, we still struggle. We still have, so to speak, bridges to cross. ... loose ends to tie up. ... You have to take the second seat. You have to be better than the white person, twice as better to get the job ... And then when the white person quit or retire ... you have to do his work and your own work.

Irving: Well we've seen a lot of changes since we've been here. We got a black mayor, you know, we didn't have that when we came up in our time, in '48. Now we got black mayors and everything. You can go schools, principals they're moving up you know. So it is different. But being black in Kalamazoo, like being black in Grand Rapids, ... black in anywhere, if you're black they know you're black. You will get a little different treated I think. But it is better, much better now. ... if you're qualified now, I think you can, they will give you a job. Because discrimination now, they're trying to get rid of all the old Jim Crow things. I think there's progress. Right now, there has to be. Look at the president. ... 44th president. I never thought I would live, at my age, ,81 now, to see a black president, elected black president. That's something ... 67% of white votes, young votes. I think that's what put the president in office from the young voters, the white votes I'm talking about. He got a lot of white votes put him in.