

Robert Woodford
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Interviewers: Clair Bopp, Kalamazoo College
and Chloe Westley, Portage Central High School

On Growing up in Kalamazoo

Chloe: So, what was it like growing up in Kalamazoo?

RW: ... we moved out of Kalamazoo when I was in sixth grade and at that time my folks moved out into Portage. At that time it wasn't Portage City it was Portage Township- they call it. We moved out to Gourd Neck Lake. So, I lived on a lake. ... Things were a little bit different out there.

Chloe: How so?

RW: Well there wasn't very many black people. ... And, at that time there was a lot of prejudice. In the schools and ... - in the neighborhood, in the schools. That's something you had to deal with. By only being two black families out there at the time, it was kind of rough. You know. You get through it.

Chloe: Did you interact with- you said that there was only one other black family- did you mainly interact with them. Or did you have friends?

RW: Oh no, I had white friends. I probably had more white friends out there. You know, neighbors- the neighbor kids. I never had any trouble; the neighbor kids were great. All around the lake. I mean once everybody got to know ya. You know all the kids. But I interacted with the black families too.

Clair: What kind of lessons or values did your parents pass on or try to instill in you?

RW: Well, one thing: get an education. You know. ... I didn't like high school. ... My grades weren't all that good in high school. ... So, I went to college for about a year and then I dropped out and then went to the service.

Chloe: When you say you didn't like high school, did you not like the school aspect, or the academic, or the social?

RW: No, it was just the academic. And you know, sometimes the social part puts a lot of stress on you. ... You're being called names all the time. ... you have to kind of get past that.

CW: Was the name calling all racial discrimination?

RW: Racial. Yeah. Not, it kind of slacked off in high school. In junior high there was a lot of it. Because when I was in junior high I was there by myself. The other black girl in the neighborhood- she was behind me, you know, in grades. So, when I first got to junior high there was a lot of name calling at first. And then, .. even when I got in high school, like a sophomore, the first year or so. ... after everybody got to know you, it kind of slacked off. Once in awhile- somebody ... would call you the 'n' word or something.

On Life in the Service

CW: About what year did you enlist?

RW: I enlisted in November of 1964.

CW: ... maybe you could talk a little bit about what race relations were like while you were in the service.

RW: They were good while we were in the service. There was still prejudice in the service, even in the service there was prejudice. I can remember when I first enlisted they sent us down to Texas for basic training. Well, I can remember being on a plane and they were flying us down to San Antonio, TX. And we stopped in Shreveport, LA. I think the plane had to refuel or something and go in the airport. I never seen up here on the drinking fountains it said "white" and "colored," "white and colored". You know, up here you had never seen nothing like that up here in Michigan. I can remember that. But, you know, I mean, once you got to basic training there was many whites and many blacks. And then, you got out of basic training, even when you got back to your first base, you still had a certain amount of prejudice. A little bit. There was plenty of black people on the base, but still. To me, it was still a little prejudice.

On Working in the Paper Companies

CB: ...what were race relations like at the paper company when you first started?

RW: Well, that was a little prejudice too. Even back then, in the '60s you know. ... there was more blacks working there when I started than when I quit. ... But we had a few radicals- a few radical blacks that worked there. ... sometimes the bosses would give the black guys the dirtier jobs. I guess, depending on what department you were in, especially the maintenance department because there was never very many black guys that got into the maintenance. The maintenance was the highest paying department. You never had very many blacks. I might have been only number 2 that ever got into the maintenance department out there. ... I had a black friend that worked there and was, I think he'd been in the maintenance department the same time I did. The guys that he was working with treated him so bad that he just, he bid right back out of there. But I hung in there, you know. Like I said, I was in that department for 13 years. As time went on it was alright. One of my friends, he was in the mill wright part - when you're new in the department you're always in there as an apprentice. They put you with a journeyman, somebody who's been there for years to work with you. Well, the guy he was working with, he told him: "don't touch none of my tools. Don't do nothing." Cause at first you don't have any tools. You have to buy these tools through the years.