Tape 1 - Side A

UB: I was born in Lula, Mississippi which is in Cahoma County. In 1933 there wasn't any expectation of anything different from all other black people at that particular time. At that particular time, people wanted to be called colored people or Negroes or something like that. I was born on a plantation. When I can remember, I always looked up to my father because he had so much love for me. I could feel that all the time in my life starting off. My mother she was the same. They tell stories about what I used to do when I was small. They say one day I was walking down the road because we didn't have streets and she was saying, come on baby, and wanted me to walk and the dust was hot. I said shoots girl, you'd better tote me. She said well, okay. She picked me up and carried me for awhile. Then she put me down and coaxed me to walk. She tells it from the standpoint that I always spoke out or demanded what it is that I wanted. I don't know, I have aunts and my father and all of them tell different stories about me and I can remember doing some of those things. Like, I would climb trees and paint my face out of my aunt's white powder. At that particular time, black people didn't have the browns and all these different colored powders. There was some white powder that the white people used. She had a box of that and I'd go paint that and put on some real red lipstick. The color of my skin, as dark as I was, there was the white powder and real red lipstick and they said I was, I guess, trying to be
ladylike and yet climbing trees. That was a picture that they would see me up the tree with my face painted white and have lipstick on. I felt that my mother and my father loved me. I came up with my sister and my cousins so I came out of, I guess, what people would call an extended family. ( ) came out a report a long time ago talked about that extended family. My first cousins were like my sisters and brothers. My aunts and uncles were another set of parents. My grandmother was the person that everybody looked up to. She kept the money of the family in what they used to call a nations sack. I don't know why they called it that but it was made out of cotton sacks. They used to call it a ( ) sack material. She would sew it and had it around her waist. That's where she wore it and kept the money, the little that we had. It was all family money. One stayed in one house, the other stayed in the other one and people would walk down there at crop time and do that. I can remember some of that.

I had a grandfather. They used to call him Chock Chaw because he was part Indian. He was a quiet man. I don't know whether he was full-blooded or half or whatever there was. It was my grandmother's husband. He was another kind of caring person. He would take us out to, now you would call it a truck patch, but out in the fields. He grew alot of watermelons and vegetables. He would have you walking behind him and you felt with his statute and me as a child, talking about the way I felt. He said baby, look over there and get you one of those watermelons. Then he
told me to ball up my fist and hit which one you want. Pick out the one you want. He knew which one was ripe. I didn't but he would point this way and say how about that one right there? I want that one. Oh, okay, did you say that one or that one, until he got me to hit the right one. I remember hitting this and it bust wide open and it was just red on the inside. He says, put your hand down in there and just sit right there and eat it, as much as you want. I was so excited that I had picked the ripe watermelon. It was those kind of times that stays in my memory.

RK: Did your grandparents live there in that area for awhile so their roots were Cahoma County?

UB: Yes. That's on my mother's side of the family. On my father's side of the family, it was a whole different group. My father came from Louisiana. My granddaddy on my father's side was in Louisiana. They told us the story about what happened to him. He worked in the fields, sugarcane fields and he ran into a problem because he was a person that spoke up and he came up missing. We know that they killed him, white people. My grandmother was left with three children. She was a semi, I guess kind of a slavery type thing because she had to work in the house. She was what people call Creole. She spoke French. But she took my father and my aunt and her next child which is Uncle Joe was born afterwards, and she brought Aunt Rosetta and my father and Uncle Tomy to Mississippi. Her brother came and got her. Families used to do that, take care of one another. When sisters
get left or something bad happens to the family, the rest of them would go get them. That's how my father got to Mississippi. My mother was born in Lumbody, Mississippi in the hills. I guess my grandmother came from that area. I'm going to find out for sure, on my mother's side. This is where people lived in Cahoma County.

When I was coming up, people moved a lot looking for a better place for the white man to treat them better. If he treated them nice and didn't take all their work, because it was sharecropping, my father was a sharecropper. But he got into it with the man that he was sharecropping with. They had a dispute and a lot of it is because the man told him what I should do in the field and my mother. My father said that he was the head of the house. So I saw my father stand up to a white man which is next to death, you'd just soon get killed or whatever. That was passed down through the family. All things happened when I was a little girl.

So, he went to Memphis, Tennessee. That means I was raised up between Cahoma County, Mississippi and Memphis, Tennessee and I went to school in West Helena, Arkansas. That's a long story with that part too. By us being on the plantation and going from place to place we were with our grandmother. My mother would go back and forth to Memphis and my father couldn't come back on account of what had happened. Then another uncle had to leave. He just died last year. He had to leave also because you couldn't talk back to, you couldn't look a white person in the face. You couldn't say anything back or if they told you to do something,
you just had to do it. Uncle Tomy said he just couldn't go no further so he got him a way to Memphis, Tennessee also. That's where alot of the families moved. I was raised up between Memphis, Tennessee and Lula, Mississippi and Helena, Arkansas.

RK: So you spent alot of your time both in Lula and Memphis and West Helena. Did you move in the course of each year or sometime you would spend summers back in Mississippi and school in Arkansas?

UB: No, the way it was is that you would pick cotton starting in August. People used to start picking cotton in August. When I was eight, nine, ten even before I was able to get out in the field and pick alot of cotton, I was the water girl. Then I was the babysitter. I kept my cousins. I would set with them and keep the younger ones. You always had a job. You always had to work. We would stay until October 1. By October 1 we would be in West Helena, Arkansas seeing about Auntie, we called her Aunt Big (   ). She had a tumor but we didn't know that's what it was. One time we thought that she was, what folks used to call, in family way. Some of these words have done passed on now. But she never had the baby so we found out what it was, it was a tumor. Every year at the same time my sister and I would come over to West Helena, Arkansas to go to school until we moved over there. That's how my mother was going to make sure that we learned how to read and write and arithmetic, as my mother used to say. My mother was caught in a situation where she didn't get to
school. That was an era. We've been through these different eras. My grandmother could read and write. That was another era.

She was a great cook and she worked in white people's houses so she learned, the woman taught her because of the recipes and a whole lot of other stuff that she told her. She's ask how you fix that Mamie? Mama used to tell us the story. She say Mam, I don't know, I just put a little bit of this and a little bit of that. So she'd say, well you need to just tell me how to do it. She'd say, well I can't read and I can't write. She'd say, well we're just going to make sure you learn how to read and write so we can get it down because she was a great cook. That's what happened do my grandmother so then here's another group comes along, another generation and that's when they clamped down making sure we didn't go to school or that type thing. So my mother was going to make sure we learned how to read and write because school was going on but we were on a plantation. You just didn't go to school in Mississippi but two or three months out of the year. If the cotton wasn't in season and time to pick or it wasn't time to chop then they would let you go to school a couple of months. Most of the time that would be around January or February and then in March it was time to plow again so children had to stay at home and take care of the children and do all kinds of things. It was a process that my mother wasn't pleased with. She came up with this idea that you go see about Aunt (    ). We went every year to see about Aunt (    ).
RK: It started when it was time to go to school so you never went to school in Mississippi?

UB: No, not until I did some work at Mississippi Valley State. That's what happened. I went to school in West Helena, Arkansas. It's so strange, when you said that I was thinking about my teacher. That's a story within itself. I just went to see her this past weekend.

RK: What was her name and what was she like?

UB: Mrs. Franklin. She was a person that was very highlighted in my life. Mrs. Buchanan was my first grade teacher. She was a warm, light browned skinned woman. She was very warm hearted and she stands out in my mind when I first started to school. I think you need a very warm teacher when you are first starting school. It was behind a church in West Helena. The next one, there were several of them, that is outstanding in my life is Mrs. Franklin. She was the one that told me I could speak and to make sure I would go to the podium scared to death every assembly and stand there with my hands locked in to say some kind of a speech. The only thing I can remember now is that I used to have to turn my head and smile. She encouraged me. It was interesting because she asked me what was my name. I said U.Z. She said that's an alphabet, you can't get through the world with those alphabets. She found an old book of some kind. A lot of our books were old because we didn't get the good books from the white schools. She found my name and she was finding the part that goes
to the initials so I became Unita and Zelma. I took it home and showed my mother my name and she said well, I guess the teacher knows but I'll still call you U.Z. Because my uncle named me U.Z. - Uncle Sonny Boy. We called him Uncle Sonny Boy. His name was John you know but we had those nicknames. They used to call me Two Bits because I was very small. I wish I was back to that. He named alot of us. He named my cousins A.Q. and U.Z. He was the namer in the family. He named my sister Augusta because he wanted to go to Augusta, Georgia. He'd heard about that. He wasn't a person who could read or write but he could count. He could figure in his head more than anybody you've ever seen. That was the way it was. He was her oldest brother and in our families the older brothers had certain kinds of control and say-sos. Even the husbands let the brothers speak. I don't think we are doing this now in this generation. That was sort of the way you come up with people who had authority, who were respected in the family. So, he named his brother's and sister's children. He had one sister and one brother and he named his nieces and nephews. Some of the rest of them put some names to their names too. Mrs. Franklin stands out in my mind. She encouraged me. She used to say that I was smart and so she encouraged me to do my work.

RK: How was going to West Helena? That's a fairly good sized town. How did you feel about going to the city every year after living in the rural part of Mississippi?

UB: It is interesting what you asked me because I've never
thought about it before. I know we had to come back to Mississippi to help with the crop. It was just part of what you did. Then you'd know you were going to go to school and that was part of what you did. I guess you liked to go to town because you'd see things. I used to like to go with Aunt Rosie, another one of my uncle's wives, to Lula. One time they had moved from where I was born which was right outside of Lula, it's there now. We had moved about five miles. My sister was saying the other day that we saw the Highway 61 being built. She's four years older than I and we were children. We stayed on the other side of Highway 61 and we'd see all these people with all this stuff out there. They had a lot of manual labor at that time. We would walk up to the little town part because it wasn't incorporated I don't think at that time to a Chinaman's store and that's when I first met Chinese. It was in Lula. There was the Lee's Grocery. You'd go in there and he would be so gracious and he talked funny and we'd laugh at it. I would go to town and pick up freshness, we used to call it. Freshness was stuff like smoked sausage or lunch meat or stuff like that because we killed hogs and had all the meat salted down so meat that wasn't salted down was called freshness. It is so many words that we used that I know I have to get it down to tell someone about it. A lot of people don't even know what a lot of those things meant and now young people need to know that. First she would get some brown paper on Friday night because we knew we were going Saturday and she would wrap her hair. That's
how she curled her hair. She'd wrap it in a brown paper bag and
tie it and take pieces of it and strip it and wrap it and it would
give you crinkles in the hair. She'd hot comb it and put that in
and I'd know she was getting ready to go so I was going to figure
out how to be the person to help her with the paper and everything
necessary to make sure I would walk with her the five miles we had
to walk to town. So I enjoyed going to town once a week.
Sometimes we didn't get a chance to go every week. When I walked
into the Chinaman's store he'd call me and pat me and tell me to
put my hand down in this barrel which was pickles. I'd run my
hand down there and come out with a pickle. She would try to go
in her pocket to pay and he say no, no, no and give me a pickle.
Then we'd buy ten cents worth of cheese and he'd cut a great big
hunk. That's what I remember of my first encounter. Then when we
would go to Arkansas there was called Wings Chinaman's store. It
was on the corner and my aunt would send us up there and that's
when we would have our treat which was ice cream or something like
that and I never could understand why this lady, I'd see her, and
the next time I'd look around she'd have a baby. She looked like
she never got any bigger. Those kinds of things you remember in
your childhood. We were always treated kind by the Chinese. They
came from Canton they said. At that time Taiwan and somewhere
else they used to talk about.

RK: So it gave you a choice. You didn't have to just shop at
the plantation store.
UB: When I come along, they did have a store that you had to go to to get the basics like flour, meal, and things like that if you did not have money. But my grandmother was the kind of person that would save the money, whatever money was made, if it was three hundred dollars for the whole year or two hundred, you'd get a barrel of flour and a thing of sugar and we raised the corn and the corn would be ground up at the mill. I've set up for many nights and shelled corn by the tubs full. You'd just set there and shell corn until you'd wear out. Then we would take it down there and they would put it in the gristmill and grind it. That's what you'd cook your cornbreads and things out of. What you bought was very limited. It was sugar and flour and things like freshness and cheese and that's what I can remember that we bought because we always had to kill hogs. My grandmother would can alot of vegetables. I just think that I learned how to survive. I learned how to live with less and learned how to take a small amount of something. She used to make gravy and spread that gravy and give you a little dab of something and then you had plenty of gravy and biscuits, a big pan of biscuits. You felt like you had plenty because you had biscuits left over. She would make great big ones and we'd call them catheads. They called them that because they were crinkled in the front. She'd make them in long black pans. I think about some of the incidents. I was sitting on the back of the house, not a porch but on the back of house where the steps go down, because we only had a front porch. I had
one of these cold biscuits in my hand sitting there meditating or
doing whatever I was doing kind of knawing on the biscuit and a
chicken came up and took the biscuit out of my hand and I took off
behind that chicken and run him and my grandmother was screaming.
There was a whole pan of biscuits in there but I'm behind this
one chicken that took my biscuit. I ran that chicken to death
until he gasped and gasped for his breath. I just ran him to
death and he died. My grandmother gave me the goodest spanking
you've ever seen. But I put that to that I really didn't like
people taking anything away from me. As I get older I look back
and say I've been at this a long time, I've got problems. But I
remember that. Or maybe it was because I like to eat. I don't
know what it was. People used to give you spankings and you just
didn't get away with doing something that wasn't what you were
supposed to be doing. So she gave me a good spanking. I remember
one time when I was a little girl and we had to go to church.
That church is still in Lula. They call it Bethlehem. My sister
and I, she was about twelve and I was about eight, were singing.
She told me to sing solo and I said no we were going to sing a
duet. She and I were going to sing this duet and that was the
first time I remember singing outside the house. So we were in
church and I started off with the song and my sister said she
messed it up but I don't remember that. So, we sung the song.
It's those kinds of incidents that I remember.

RK: Earlier you were talking about your father standing up
to one of the owners saying no, you can't tell me how my wife and my daughter work and was forced to leave and later an uncle was forced to leave. Do you remember any family conversations about that?

UB: The family would discuss it and talk about it. My father was called Jake, that was his nickname. His name is Willie Brown. Jake don't take no foolishness. They would tell incidents. My father was a quiet man he never did alot of talking. You could get along with him but he didn't take any foolishness. That's what the family would discuss. My uncles, I always knew that they were people who didn't just let people push them around. They didn't care what color you were. They just weren't going to take it. They didn't pick a fight. They talked about it in the family, it just passed around. They were men that just didn't let you push them too far. They were hard working people and they talked about that. My father worked hard. My uncles plowed mules. There weren't any tractors. They had to walk behind these mules. Tractors came in later. There was always a discussion around that. People were just trying to escape so when one would get up a certain age they would try to leave and go to a better place and find a better job. My father found a job at the ice house on Lauderdale in Memphis, Tennessee. That was a good job. It paid much more. Uncle Tomy ended up cleaning, becoming something like a janitor at WRAC TV. Before that he was cleaning, going to white people's houses cleaning the
rugs and all that other kind of stuff. They had a truck. The company hired him and that was to them a good paying job. Then he got a job on the railroad. So when the time came, he just died last year, he had a good social security. Some people didn't get any. They made like they were taking it out and kept the money. But, he worked for the railroad. My baby uncle which was not completely caught up in all of the ( ) ones, he worked for Firestone. He did well. We were so excited over him we didn't know what to do because he bought a house. He was of the first ones that bought a house. I kind of cried when his wife died. His daughter had to sell the house. She said she had her own house so didn't need the house. But I just know about that house. That was the first house. She kept it up. Thirty years ago when they bought it and they finally got a chance to get that house, he was the first one that got hold of enough money to pay down on a house. Then my daddy finally got a small house. You know when one did it another did it. Uncle Tomy went over there. I still have to check on that house. That's one that is still there and has been there since the 1940s. But Aunt Rosetta bought it. It's an old house but they bought it. They were what I call people who wanted to have something. I had an aunt and this furniture and stuff that was passed down. She worked in a laundry which was a fantastic thing. Coming from Mississippi she went up and started ironing in the laundry. She started to buy furniture that now would cost alot of money.
RK: I was curious as well, it strikes me that this( )

UB: Alot of the older people did not talk to the children and go into details with the children. They would talk and you would listen. You hear and don't hear. It was set up where that every year my mother would say and my grandmother was with it that Augusta and Unita was going to read and write and arithmetic. The best way to do it was to send her to Effie. That was the name of my aunt. Send her over to Effie. Effie Pingston was my aunt. She was a person who could read and write. She took my sister and wanted to teach piano. She was a very poor woman but had musical something. Her stepson played piano and it sounded like opera the way he played the piano. She was going to teach my sister how to play piano and stuff like that. She was a seamstress. She could sew beautiful clothes. She was classified, she was in town in West Helena, Arkansas. That's the way it was. They come up with the strategy to make sure that we not have to sit there in Mississippi and wait until the man said it was okay for us to go to school. So, Auntie would get sick every year, same time. About the last of September Auntie was getting sick. Until we moved from ( ) Mississippi, because it took a long process for all of that to happen. My mother and I was in Tennessee. I would go up there and stay with my daddy and my mama. So I was raised between. That's the way it was. I remember catching the buses and things like that. We'd get in a wagon and they would take us down to the river and then you wait until the ferry comes. Then
you'd get on the ferry and ride across the Mississippi River and Auntie would be over there waiting on us and take us. We'd catch the bus and go to West Helena. (...) ...How do we get involved? And the African-American woman, what does that mean because we can put a definition on that. So that's what I've been doing, kind of pushing and pulling that around. I'll show you the outline.

RK: I'm just saying quickly about some background in this area. Were institutions like the church important? Was there a place where people could meet and talk and share things?

UB: I was raised with going to church. The women in our family were the ushers, the mothers of the church. My grandmother was the mother of the church, and the next generation would either be singing in the choir or whatever. That's why my sister and I, when I was about eight years old, were standing up singing a duet because we were raised up in the church. That was the outlet.

There were two things that I guess people did on a Saturday night. If they were menfolk they went out, and if you were a lady I can remember that you only went into town like Aunt Rosa did. And people would come up and ask you did you want a treat. A treat was, "would you like a treat Mrs. Holmes", or whatever your name was and the guys would offer you a treat. It was not being nasty or trying to flirt or anything like that, it was just the way men showed their manhood. You'd say yes or no and they'd buy you a coke or some people back then maybe wanted a beer or whatever people was having. And that's at the level things were because
women didn't used to be out at night, and if you did you were classified and I mean real classified. You were raised up like that. We went to church. Church was an activity where a lot of the leadership was developed, because there was no other place for it to develop. You'd learn how to speak in the church, sing, talk to people, do plays. The only other thing that was related were auxillaries. Like they would come up if clubs...

Start of Tape 1 - Side B

UB: The black community was made up of its own culture. That culture was developed out of the church, alot of it. If you went to the city you would find the same kinds of things where the churches were bigger maybe and people were a little citier but that whole development came out of the church and out of clubs. I would say that was the root of the development of the community. I think that's one of the things as I look back on my life over the series of things that have happened, even the civil rights movement, that people latched on to things because that it was tied around our church. White people's church was different. They went in at 11:00 and was out at 12:00. We went in at 9:00 starting Sunday School at 9:30. You'd finish Sunday School and stand around and then you would start service and it would go from 11:00 until 2:00 when people would get through shouting. Then we would have dinner. You cooked and brought dinner and folks would have stuff on the yard. Then they'd go back into service at 6:00 for BTU and that's Baptist Training Union for people who don't
know what that is for us. Then you would go to night service and it would last, as white people would say you were in town, maybe until 9:00 or 10:00. In the rural area like I was we'd be finished so we could walk home and get home around about 10:00 so we had to stop. That was what the community was built up around.

Even if the bootlegged whiskey, sold whiskey or whatever, they were protected, I might say, or whispered about whatever was happening, they were sinful even, the church molded that whole situation on how people should act. People would sell whiskey at the church. They'd be kind of a ways out but they would be standing around out there and the ones that drink it knows they were to pick up their bottle or whatever. It was interesting. Because Mississippi was dry and stayed that way for some time, the bootleggers sometimes would get up if some white person came to the door and stuck their head in the door they knew that that person wanted to pick up two or three gallons of liquor and so they would tip on out and go get it and come back and sit right there and rock right straight through the whole thing. People sort of turned their head and went on. But it was a way of life and I think that's what's missing, the lack of understanding of white America of what happened to the black community and how people don't see things the same way. They are not taught because it was the law itself that was coming after whiskey sometimes. It is what has been taught in our society and what is right and how was the survivor, the survivor was there. Mostly any upstanding
person that was in the community and had little extras we knew they were bootleggers. The everybody, I don't care how Christian you were and wonderful you were, everybody had made wine. My folks didn't think nothing about that. I climbed trees and pulled down muscadine grapes every year to collect it and take it home and my grandmother could make wine for Christmas. It was a ritual. You saved all the peach hulls and made brandy and jelly. You didn't throw away nothing. Now most of our young people don't even know what's in the woods. I used to know what was good for headaches and what was good for this and that. There wasn't any way to go to the doctor. You didn't have any money. My grandmother was a doctor, both of them. The other one came out of Louisiana and this one was in the hills of Mississippi. They'd sit down and mix their medicines and talk about what was the best one for what.

RK: So they got together like that?

UB: They knew one another. My grandmother on my mother's side also delivered I don't know how many babies and I found myself doing that one time here. I didn't know I still knew.

RK: Did you go with your grandmother?

UB: No but we'd sit down and talk about it. When I was a little girl they didn't allow you. After I got older mama used to sit around and talk about it and she was still trying to deliver babies even in Arkansas. She would go when somebody was going to have a baby. That style is back. It went out and it's back that
you deliver babies by natural childbirth. She was a midwife also.

RK: Moving to town, of course you moved back and forth, you never lost the connection with the city and rural life?

UB: I never knew that it was disconnected. It's interesting that that is coming up now. I was always rural because you went to town but even in town I did the same thing. The difference was when we moved over to stay longer periods of time I would catch the truck and go pick cotton. Or you would catch the truck and go to hoe when hoeing time came. So you never really disconnected from the work of the field and that way of life. Everybody that was in the small towns also came from the plantations.

RK: Was Memphis different from that?

UB: Yes I stayed in what they call an elephant flat. They called it the white elephant flat on Weatherton Street. My mother and I were talking about this the other day. I used to go and sit out on the front, the stoops on flats. It had a lot of apartments in it so they called it the white elephant flat. I remember that one time my aunt, because I was the only child on my father's side at that time, my aunt didn't have but one niece and my uncle one niece and my daddy one me, so she had me in Memphis and she bought me a white dress for Easter with a lot of ruffles. She got me some red ribbon and some white ribbon. She dressed me up and my father got terribly upset because he would buy his own clothes for his own child. That kind of stuff was pretty interesting.

RK: Your education, you said you were starting in West
Helena.

UB: Yes. I went to school in West Helena. I went to school a little in Memphis, Tennessee. That's the two pieces that I did before. I taught my mother how to read and write. Because I love to read all the time, I read anything and everything. I am fascinated with reading. She would see me all the time with a book. She said I think I want to learn to read. So I started teaching my mother how to read and so now she can read her Bible and she feels very good about that. She can even write a letter. They say I can understand any kind of writing. She writes me a letter sometimes and it makes me feel real good. I did alot of self study. I guess that's what you would call it. I read all kinds of books. I didn't have the opportunity to go to college because my parents didn't have any money. Then I went and took a test and they told me that I passed it and I did some work at Mississippi Valley State. I never did get a B.S. degree. Then in comes this program and I was selected out of about four or five hundred people. They had to see what you knew so I went through all that and I ended up at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. I walked in and told Mayer, which Dr. Mayer is the person that teaches all this calculus, I said I don't know nothing about this calculus, now we're just going to have to sit down and go over this and he said you're one of the most honest students I've ever had. You came and told me you don't know and you want to learn. I just wanted to get a passing grade, just any way to
get through with this calculus. We had to do computer programs to
get ready to printout and all that stuff. Anyway, I told him to
find me a tutor, I'll take him. With that kind of help and the
rest of it I did fairly well. I got out of there with a master's
degree in regional planning.

RK: Yours and Elsie Dorsey's lives are similar. I'm hearing
more and more how similar some of your experiences are.

UB: Yes. We came out of these backgrounds and we didn't
have money to get to the colleges because it costs money. But if
you have a thirst for learning, I don't know, I just like
knowledge. I guess that's what you would call it. I like to
learn and that's how I got into all these things I got into I
guess. I read alot. One of the ladies, she was a young woman, at
that time ten years younger than me, and she couldn't understand
because she has her B.S. degree. She said I can't understand how
you know as much as I do and you haven't got your B.S. How do you
understand what you read as well as you do? Some people can read
it but can you comprehend what it is that you've read and how do
you decipher it? She said you need to go back to school. You
just need to do it. I stepped in there at a late age in my life,
early fifty years old, going to school.

RK: When did you move back here? Was the experience living
in West Helena and Memphis, although you are still having to go
back and work, either come back here or work in cotton around
there - when you moved to Memphis, that's a big city. Do you get
a sense of living in a kind of somewhat freer world or kind of away from the controls of plantations?

UB: I was a young woman growing up between that and it's like you are in the city. Those are what I call kind of the lost years. You're walking around from teen-ager up until a certain age and I got married but I felt that in the city, I just never thought about it. It was just was where my family went and lived.

At that time it wasn't all this stuff in the cities where you had to be afraid. Everybody in the city and the rural were closer together than they thought in terms of economics. The only difference is that if you went to the city, you might find a job.

I don't think it was thought out that you're now in a city versus a rural area to the process that where this is so drastically different. The only thing was that like you stayed in the elephant flat and it was better than the shack that you lived in.

There was the Booker T. Washington school. There were alot of activities. There were lights at night with the ballgames. It was right there across the way and we would see the lights. But I never really thought about it from that standpoint.

RK: Did you go to high school in Memphis?

UB: I just went awhile there. It was in West Helena, Arkansas.

RK: When you got married and you moved back...

UB: I got married and stayed from West Helena, Arkansas to here. That's been it, back and forth. I came down here because
my husband's grandmother lived here. She was all he had because his mother died when he was a boy. That's where I was then between here and there. You follow your husband.

RK: How did you feel about this?

UB: I didn't want to move down here. I said I'm not going back. That's when I can say that I was having too good a time in a bigger place I thought. There I was twenty something and I said this is fun. There are things you can go out to and big stores and all that stuff. There wasn't anything here but I came because my husband was here and I had to come. Besides being poor and didn't have alot of resources. This land is owned by his grandmother and so he said well, we'll have a place that we own. We had two lots in Arkansas that we had gotten because he worked on the boats. I went out and started paying. I paid two hundred dollars for a lot. He asked me what in the world was I doing. I paid ten dollars a month. I went out trying to buy something, to have something. I got one lot and the lady said you can get both of them. So I ended up trying to figure out how to scrape up twenty dollars a month to pay on two lots, 50' x 150'. I think it's 150' long now and 50' across. So I got 100' across and 150' long in a wooded area in West Helena, Arkansas. There were certain areas you could buy and certain areas you couldn't. That was the first major land buy that I did. I went out and bought it and my name was the only thing on it. I went and found my husband to get him to sign and I was so excited about it. We were raised
up that you didn't do anything without your husband. But I jumped up and went and got some land and I went to him and he said you ought not done that until you asked me. Well I just had to catch the land while it was going. If you don't want it, I was really hurting about it because you couldn't build anything without your husband's signature. So I went and got him to sign it so he was part owner of the land. Those two lots in West Helena, Arkansas were the first thing I did I suppose that was outside of asking my husband. Then we came here and back and forth. I can remember his grandmother used to say, she liked to talk to me. She was a very smart woman. She used to teach and she said where did you get this woman from? She said Jemiah, that's what she called him, and he told her over there in Arkansas. She said she may be twenty like you said but this is a forty year old woman because she couldn't outsmart me. She would sit and try to come up with deals and tell me she was going to keep the money and she would do this and so forth and so on. I said well, that don't make any sense. I know you will sign the papers to that effect. She just couldn't understand. I never thought about it until now how she used to get behind my back and talk about me, typical mother-in-law.

RK: What did you do when you came back here? Did you pretty much stay here?

UB: Yes I came down first and after she died, she was sick and I'd come down to see about her. Then she died and so I've
been coming back and forth. I told him that I guess we will have to come and stay on the place because the white people are trying to take it away. First thing they thought they could just walk in and say to him that - Brooksie, a fellow named Brooksie, was supposed to have broken in and took some money or something out of that old house over there. I told him, he don't know that because you wasn't here and you can not file anything against him. They were trying to trap him into finding something against Brooksie. That would tie up this land because we didn't have any money. I said just let him go because we don't know anything about that. Then they came and said she owed them some money. My husband would just sit and look at them. He would say afterwards, I didn't say anything because you were doing all the talking. But he didn't know the questions to ask and he told me that in later years. I said well, I want to understand. You say she owes you anything, why don't you give me some papers or something that she signed because we weren't here so we don't know what happened. We can take the place, they said. You just proceed to do that, I said. They sort of backed away and didn't say anymore. But they tried to figure out how to get this lot. They just didn't want at that time black folks to have this corner lot. That's what they called it, the corner lot. I came down and stayed in that old house over there. By 1962 we were in and out and so he and I left and went down to Florida. They said money was growing on trees there. We went down there and I ended up trying to go to the
tomato fields. They had tomato fields and they said you make a whole lot of money. I went out there and run up on a big black snake. Well, that was the end of that. I had one day in the field. Out I came. They told me they wasn't going to hurt you they were there to get rid of the insects. I said but I'll hurt myself. That's what happened with my career of trying to pick tomatoes and make money. I ended up trying to figure out how we were going to make some money and live. One of the things that happened was that he went to pick up stumps and he run up on rattlesnakes. They'd load them up on those stumps. He said there's got to be a better way to make a living. So I ended up in the canning factory. I went down to the canning plant and they give you so much a bucket for peeling tomatoes. I went in and learned from the ladies and that's one of the times I didn't smoke and I started to smoke. That's when I learned how to smoke. They gave me cigarettes and said the tomatoes would make you sick. I ended up smoking Pall Mall cigarettes. Some of the other folks were dipping snuff. I knew I couldn't dip snuff. They would chew tobacco and do stuff because of the heat and the fumes. So now you are looking at a bonafied tomato peeler. I learned how to peel tomatoes. But it didn't last. I had to get out of there and come back and I came back to Mississippi and that's when they were talking about all the freedom and stuff and the fighters. I said well, nothing ever happens in Meyersville. I had a friend named Coreen and she said the same thing. Nobody is ever coming here.
She and I was sitting on the porch over where the house is torn down now, over there where the new housing development is now, we looked up and saw these two guys coming down the road. We had heard that they were in town. What happened was that she ended up telling me who is those folks, they are walking mighty fast. People that walked fast didn't come from around here. So they walked on by and they said hello and we said uh-huh that must be those freedom fighters. They called them freedom riders at that time. I said to her, I'd like to talk to them folks. She said well, you know we don't get involved in stuff like that. So they came to our church that Sunday. I was teaching Sunday School. We went from God help those who help themselves and the whole thing.

The guy jumped up and he was from New York and he talked funny. At that time we didn't have but one television in the whole town. Didn't anybody know what in the world he was talking about. He had this accent and he got up and went through that whole process of whatever he was saying and he was pointing his finger and the other guy saw that we did not know what was going on. He was from Virginia. He got up and went to talking and he said well, you have a right to register to vote and that type thing. We are here to talk to people and could we come back and they came back for the eleven o'clock service. He came back for the eleven o'clock service and talked to our pastor and our pastor said well, they're doing that in Louisiana. This deacon stood up, Johnny Barnes, and said well, we're not going to fool with nothing like that. I set
there and perked up and said what's wrong with it? The pastor said it was okay. Now, this guy, what is he talking about? The next thing they went on and talked about it and the church voted that we could have the meeting. Johnny Barnes came back to the night service at six o'clock and stood up and told us that Mr. Donnell which was the sheriff at that time said do not have a meeting like that in church. I said, what did you say? Right out in church, you know. Women weren't supposed to do much talking in church. Well he said you're not supposed to. I said well, okay. So I came from that meeting thinking now, I'm going to call the sheriff and ask him what happened. That's what I did. I called the sheriff the next day and I said to him, what we need to do is to find out, Mr. Donnell, what is your situation on this church? He said, what are you talking about? But he didn't like me anyway because I'm having something to do with these freedom fighters at our church. He said who said that? I said Johnny Barnes said that you said that we could not have this meeting in our church. I thought that God was the head of our church. I didn't know that you were. I'm coming and arrest you. I'm putting ya'll in jail for libel. He was so upset. But anyway, Johnny Barnes was chastised I guess by him. We had the meeting. That's when I decided that I was going to go to that meeting, my husband and I. He said well, you just wait I'm getting ready. I was in a hurry to go to church. I got there that night and the man got up and explained to us that if you register to vote, such and such a
thing, well I'd already read all that about going to school. That was supposed to have been white people, the voting and everything else. It wasn't for us it was for white people. That you constitutional rights and this and so on and who would go. I jumped up. My husband was sitting down and he said sit down. You sit down until I stand up. Then he stood up and then I stood up.

I guess I've been standing up ever since. It was getting involved from a standpoint of listening to what they were saying. That we had a right as people in America to register to vote. We were denied that.

RK: Did you have a sense of, even in years before that, the emergence of the civil rights movement in the south? Did you follow or think much about the Montgomery Bus Boycott or the sit-ins in Greensboro, the kinds of things that were starting to happen? Do you think that influenced people? That they started beginning to feel a part of something?

UB: I think that one of the things is, as I've said, I was raised up where there was white town and black town in West Helena, Arkansas. You could go to white town only to pick up mail or something like that because that's where the post office was. You could go down there and do what you were supposed to do and come on back across the railroad track. I always felt that something was definitely wrong with this but I didn't know what it was. Then I used to worry about why was I born black. If God loved me like he was supposed to and the things that we were
taught in the church, why are we so mistreated and what happened? Then when this came along, it's like putting it all together, that you're doing something right. That this is decent. The first thing that came was the freedom riders. That's why they called it the freedom ride because the first group of people that came came from all over the country. They got on the buses and came to Mississippi and they put them in jail in (    ). We heard about this was black and white sitting on the buses together. You hear about it and that kind of stuff but at the time I guess that when somebody comes along and starts talking it to you - and I'm already feeling deep inside of me from the time I was a child clean up until now that my father said it wasn't right, my uncle said it wasn't right, my grandmothers and all of them said it wasn't right - and here's the time for me to make it right. That's some of the ways that some people caught on to it. For me, I had a saying that nothing from nothing leaves nothing. We didn't have nothing so if anything happened to us we didn't have nothing in the first place. I'd say that to people and they caught it. It was kind of corny but nothing from nothing leaves nothing and let's get up and try to get something. People understood it from a standpoint because we didn't have anything. It wasn't sometimes just rights we were talking about. We didn't have decent houses to stay in. We didn't have food. We didn't have the basic needs that people right around us had which was the white people that we worked for. We made them a living. We knew
that they could pay a little bit more or something was the situation. So when all that came about, I was ready to be a part of this movement.

RK: You'd been preparing in some little ways all your life.

UB: All my life. I can feel from the time as Auntie used to say and my grandmother because she was one of these people that registered to vote when folks weren't registered to vote in Arkansas and she was an older woman. When the drive came she explained it to my mother. She said you know, U.Z.'s right. Some of my family was afraid of me because they didn't want you to come around because the white folks would kill them or shoot them and stuff like that. But I could always go to my grandmother and sit down and talk about it. It's that kind of a preparation. Mama would say, they had these conversations on how they outsmarted the white people in certain areas such as, she learned how to read and write. From that, this one would say, we're going to make sure that this happens, if we do this he's not going to pay any attention, he's full of hate so he's not going to pay any attention. That kind of a situation, so now here's the time for me to try to make sure that my son don't go to these schools. It was embedded in me from my mother. This still was going on, that they could pull out of school even up to 1964. In 1965 we filed a lawsuit. We didn't have books and the children would go three months out of the year to school.

RK: That was still happening?
UB: Still happening from the time that I was a child clean up to my son. Here we are the same. Nothing drastically changed in the rural areas and the black community - only in the last twenty-five years. Everything was the same, a repeat. That's the reason my mother and I could sit down and talk about the same identical thing because nothing happened different. Everything started to happening from young people around about thirty-five or forty years old on back down. Other than that, all of us can talk about the same thing. Nothing changed, the way that you did business, the way we were pushed to. But we had never been comfortable with the way we were treated. Some people used to say that we were happy. See the smiling and the grinning and all that was just to get over, to make sure that you made it. I think we've still got that problem in America right now. People don't know what is the real movement and when they see the explosive things happen they think that well, everything seems to be going along pretty good, ain't nobody voting. They should have changed people. They should have done this and they should have done that. But see, they don't have hundreds of years. We've got people registered but when have people been voting? People didn't know nothing about going voting. So after we got the folks registered, we still had a problem. White people took the very votes that we had registered to people and turned in for themselves. We've been through that. But I've been involved in a small way even before I got deeply involved in 1964.
RK: I'm curious too, back to the church where ...

Tape 2 - Side A

RK: It must have been extra hard for a woman at that point in time.

UB: I guess when we talk about the women's movement, first thing we weren't even allowed to vote. Of course, you know that. But it was passed down that you weren't feminine if you spoke out before your husband or you weren't an obedient wife. You wanted to be accepted in your community a certain kind of way so you didn't do certain things as a woman. That's from that standpoint.

The other way was that men did not allow it. My husband used to say to me you just got the food and handed it to somebody and didn't even ask me. You couldn't take food out of the house. If somebody came and said could I borrow some salt or whatever, I'd just say wait just a minute and I'd just go get it. I'd get finished and he'd say, you know, I'm good to you. I said, what? He'd say, you do whatever you want. I never thought that you're not supposed to do that. I didn't know that you were supposed to ask your husband if you could give somebody some salt or sugar or something like that. Then when it was time to speak out or say anything on issues, you didn't say it. They went by what was said in the Bible that women were supposed to be silent in the church. That was something Paul decided. They didn't go into the full text of what that was about because Jesus didn't say nothing about that. This is the way of a culture at that particular time. We
didn't have understanding of that was a culture. So, you're trying to be a Christian woman so you do what you were told you were supposed to do. So that's what happened. I found myself being rebellious or defiant, when you speak out or say something. My husband wasn't mean or nasty about it. He just would tell me about it or correct me. Just like when I jumped up and said I'll go to the courthouse to try to register to vote. He said sit down until I stand up. It wasn't that he wasn't going to do it because he was not afraid to do it. But I'm just one of these people and immediately I hit the floor and then he stood up and then I stood up. Then the same way when we had problems with the telephone. People got to the place they would call when we finally got a telephone. That's a long story within itself because we had to sue to get telephones in this area. We filed a lawsuit and it took about ten years. They didn't want black people to have phones. It was to cut off all kinds of communication. The only communication was supposed to come through white people. It's the whole slavery mentality of keeping up with what the natives are doing. When they would call, they would say Jerry let me speak to Unita. He didn't understand that because if somebody called they were supposed to talk to him. Then he would make the decision whether I talked to them or not. It got to the place he kept saying well, these people are just ignoring me. We talked about voting, getting folks out and what happened to so and so. Let me speak to Unita. Some sister, a certain thing that happened and
somebody's house is on fire, and so forth. He said tell me about it and I'll tell her. It was cutting into the traditional way of that whole thing. Just like this house that I live in, whatever came up, I said I want to get up and get a house. He said well, I don't think we need one. I said, the one we're in is falling down. So, I sued Farmer's Home Administration because they wouldn't give you a house, they wouldn't even let us have houses. But see, I could not even sign for the house. You had to have a husband. That was one of the things I worked on making sure that women could have their own credit cards and sign for houses and buy houses when I served on President Carter's Advisory Board. That was one of my recommendations. We've been through alot of saying to Congress, you know this don't make no sense. Why can't a woman sign to buy a house? Women in 1968 could not sign for a house.

RK: What was the registration effort? Did you end up trying to register to vote?

UB: Yes. I became a snick.

RK: So these were snick workers who came?

UB: I became a snick worker. They had to take me over to see ( ). ( ) said I want you to meet a woman. You and her are similar. He said you all speak up and your spirits are something. I went to see Miss ( ). She told me about how they had beat her. She told it. We knew about it. But she told how they beat her until she was hard. I was very angry and she saw
it. She said you know, we've got to keep that and channel it in the right direction. We can't hate white people the way they hated us. God is calling for us to love them. He is calling for us to love them enough to remove them from office to send them home because they are sick. You don't treat sick people that way. Putting them up and sitting them in offices when they are not supposed to be there. Miss had a sense of humor that was absolutely wonderful. She made me understand that I had to get that kind of love that would get me up above turning into the same thing that I had been a part of for so long, that hate and all that. I went after a way of life that would make me productive. I used to go there and stay and she and Pap, it was wonderful lessons on her thoughts and what she thought about life. That's how we did one another. People like Annie Divine and Victoria Gray, these women, Victoria Gray now is Victoria Gray Adams. She married an Adams fellow. We were part of the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. I remember that Miss ( ) when they put Lawrence ( ) because he was our chair, in jail. We were getting ready to go to Atlantic City, New Jersey. Miss ( ) said we're going on anyway. That was different because women did not move into all these roles. The first time I ever saw that many women doing different things of this sort, Vicky, that's what we call her, was standing and talking and reading off stuff, and Miss Divine was so strong and precise. They always say that I was the organizer, making sure that they do what they were supposed to
do. As I look back, I was younger than them, but they said I was more demanding. I'll never forget, in 1965 we went to challenge the seating of the democratic senator representatives in Washington, D.C. They said they didn't want to go on the floor. They were inside of the Congress building. The black caucus that was there at that time, Diggs and some of the rest of them had told them to come on down on the floor. They said no, we'll just sit here and look. I said, no you won't, you're going to the floor. That was history. That was the first time that any black woman had ever put their feet on the floor of Congress. It was really amazing. Victoria and Miss Divine are still living. They talk about that - Unita made us go. She made us go down there. Those kinds of things you don't think are even making history at the time. You're just part of doing what you feel that you have to do. So voter registration to me was just a need, something that we felt that had to be done.

RK: It must have been also incredibly energizing and exciting to have these few people come in and then all of a sudden you're part of a movement- a part of a group of people that are challenging things.

UB: Yes. To be a part of something, I think this was on a road to my own self development to be enlightened as a young woman. I had finally found a bunch of people that felt like I did. That had been buried down inside of me and they were going to do something about it. You know, we're going to do something.
The whole thing is that sometimes you didn't know if you were going to live or die. That was everyday. You didn't know if you were going to live or die. Let me put it this way, you don't know if you are going to live or die but you know that if you die, you'd have lived. You really are living. You really are trying to do something to help yourself and your grandchildren's children. That's how we'd sell it. They could see it in you. To be an organizer you've got to believe in what you do and be a part of it. The people would say, well, I'm not like you because I'm scared. I'd say I am too. But we can make it. We're going to be scared whether we do this or whether we don't. We'd drive down the road or sometimes we'd walk and walk up to people's houses and they were scared to death. They just didn't want you in there. You had to convince them. It wasn't that we were open arms received. Sometimes we'd just have to coax them along and say we understand you're scared. We know the man may throw you off the place. A lot of times they did. I'd end up with American Friends Services and other organizations. You'd find all kinds of resources if people would throw them off the plantations, could we get a piece of land, and we did that. We got some houses for people to stay in. We drug in things and viewed things. It wasn't just registering people. Everything had to happen because nothing had happened. When they'd throw people off, then what are you going to do? Then people didn't have jobs. They were working for the man. I was picking cotton and the rest of us would go out
there and try to do something. But I was barred from doing anything. I couldn't teach school or do anything because they had people here that gone any further than the eighth grade but they were teaching school. But they wouldn't let people like me do anything. So in 1964 is the last "job" that they would let me do because of my involvement in the civil rights movement. That last job was chopping cotton and picking it. They nailed it down to that because they said she talks to strong to be in a school system or wherever. That's the kind of intense situation that we were in constantly. We weren't only saying come on let's go register to vote, we had to find places for people to eat, what's going to happen to them if they are put off the plantation, what's going to happen when my child gets shot? A woman got shot and someone shot her child's eye out over in (    ) County and then we have to take up there. When people get in jail, how are we going to get them out? It was an intense work all the time. We became closer than a family because all of us were like family. I'm not talking about one of them wayward families, I'm talking about those families that really, really care about what's happening with one another. Now, twenty-five or thirty years later, we see one another and hear about one another and it's the same thing because we know we all been through it. Now people are doing different things. It was so funny I had the mayors from China in Washington. We had left New York and gone to Washington. The mayor and governors from China, I said I would like for you to
meet John Lewis. John was walking because the black caucus weekend was in Washington, D.C. the weekend of the twenty-fourth.

John stopped when he saw me. Hey, how are you doing baby? But you couldn't just stop the congressmen if you weren't who you were. He just stopped and came right around and hugged me and shook all their hands. These were not his constituents, not anything. I'm not even his constituent. But he was head of snick. We were all there as a body. It's that kind of a thing that you see. I was at Harvard last year and there was Julian Bunn. Folks can't even get to Julian Bunn. He's popular. I called him and said I'm here and he said be right over. He come running over there. He came to my class that the folks were just in awe. Then he stood there and helped me sing a freedom song. The great Julian Bunn.

RK: We just had a class that we used a book about freedom summer by Doug McAdams. He's looking at student volunteers primarily. That was a very tense and intense and also interesting experience in Mississippi and you were working with this. I am curious about what that was like or how you saw that whole thing?

UB: How I saw it, because I was twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old, here were students that were from say eighteen, nineteen, twenty and on. Some were in college, some were in universities and so on, and there they were - their life on the line with us - black and white. They came to freedom summer and landed in Mississippi. The painful thing was when two whites and
one black got killed. It meant something. I don't know how to express it yet. Maybe I'm still searching. It meant something that people had been dying for years. But here were people dying for my rights, that I know in my time, to try to register to vote. Students came here to live in my old house over there. ( ) has a black young woman come to teach and my concept of teaching at that time was like at the schools. But she was teaching about who were the people that had been involved in fighting for our rights, Frederick Douglas, Harry Tuggman. She went back and just got people. We would sit and learn about all of these people that were not talked about in our schools. I knew about Booker T. Washington and John Washington Carver but it never was any people like these people. And it was those many people. Then they brought up books with us with our images. Things like that. So we went to school to learn who we were. It came from these students, young people. I was young but they were younger. It was such an inspiration that they didn't have to be here. That freedom summer was really something. We ended up filing all kinds of suits and doing all kinds of things. It ended up with freedom schools and everything came out of it. People came from all over and taught in our freedom schools. My son and alot of other people's children were exposed that they had some intellect that nobody knew about. They did tests and he was classified as extra gifted or whatever they call it. That kind of something happened because of freedom summer for me. I think it's the lasting thing
inside of me that makes me continue. There were so many people that came from everywhere.

RK: Did you have a freedom school here in Meyersville?

UB: Yes down at Rose Hill Church. See we didn't have any other buildings. The only buildings we had to have these classes in about who we were and what was it all about, I used my house. Toby Hight was one of the men around here. Mr. Henry Size was an NAACP person. At that time NAACP was truly radical. That's what they called it. It was terrible. I came to find out that white people was in it. I didn't even know. But we had had so much misinformation. But that summer the challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and there I was had never organized a party or an organization or whatever. We organized a party and organizations and freedom schools and anything that you can think of, ways of trying to survive. We had to create it and we had to come up with it. I guess that's was the leap into feeling I could do other things. I didn't know that I was a creative person. Out of that, seeing these other people around me which I choose to call creative people, I saw that I could continue. Then I formed a Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party ( ). Something as great as that was in terms of this political system, why couldn't I form Mississippi Action for Community Education which is MACE? I started that because one day we were talking, five or six of us sitting around, and we said what are we going to do? The freedom summer was over, people were going home, all these things were
changing. We've got to sustain what we did look at. I kept saying we have to have leadership in the local community because when people go home, who is going to do it? We have to continue to register people. We have to be able to continue to make people feel that they can do something in their own community. I felt that was the job of MACE, to train, that's what we started off to do, local people to know what to do in their own communities. The idea in my head was to make sure that people knew what was a board of supervisors, what do they do, what do mayors do? We didn't know what they did. What do the justices of the peace do? All these things came up and us had running for these offices because they told us to run. In 1967 I ran for justice of the peace. Then I came to find out that justice of the peace was over so much other stuff. So how could we continue this learning process at the local level? We said, get five people in a county that knows what's going on then we have touched the lives of so many other people because they can call other people and have meetings and talk to folks and that kind of thing. So we had ten targets in certain kinds of counties with a population. If ten people knew what was going on, when the election comes up, what does that mean? That's the reason MACE was put together. People were leaving doing the freedom summers, freedom school era and so on, then we had to come up with a way to continue local leadership development. I knew I was left here and other people were left in their communities to either do or die or either go back to
wherever we were which was nothing. Then Ed Brown agreed because he was snick too, and we made him the head of MACE as the project director. He was doing it until we had all these problems with RAP. Things were going on with him which was his brother and ( ) got killed and a whole lot of stuff was happening. Then we tried to figure out, I have it here, the first application that we made to try to get some money to get us started. A lot of people don't know how MACE started.

RK: I didn't know that story and I've read a lot about MACE.

UB: I want a copy of my tape because I never told anybody. The reason for that is because I was going to write it. I intended to write the whole detail, who all was there, each person and what they were about. Amsy Moore, one of the people that was there, ( ), and we got three or four more. Ain't going to give you the whole herd. But anyway, that's what this was all about - trying to find ways to continue. We started off and Citizen's Crusade for Poverty was one of the groups that was going to help us. I went up to testify for the Citizen's Crusade for Poverty before they had organized it about what are we going to do about Head Start. We were trying to get Head Start off the ground and CDGM. So I'm one of the organizers of CDGM.

RK: Could you tell us about how that got started?

UB: It started off with the doctor that started pushing it was from New York. There was a concept to just say we are going to have a six weeks program. It came behind all of the problems
of seeing the children in Mississippi. What are we going to do about our children? Our children are so far behind. We couldn't feed them right and their teeth were messed up and a whole lot of other stuff. So we found out about OEO. There have a lot of things happened between then because I was at the meeting when President Johnson said to fulfill these rights and that whole thing. We had a meeting at the White House, the snick people and some of the rest of us, when he announced the war on poverty. Out of that was the money that was coming out of OEO to do these kinds of projects and programs. That's how it sort of started off with a friend of mine which I'll talk about him. So, because it was hooked to the church and school, then we had Mary Home Junior College. So that's where he was supposed to come through. The state of Mississippi was supposed to sign-off but they wouldn't, you know that. So then Mary Home Junior College became the grantee agency from OEO. We had the first program for six weeks. That's when I met my good friends for all these years, Dr. Josephine Martin and Dr. Robert Swartz. They came down. He's a Ph.D. there in economics. He and her came and she was to test the children because they said all our children were retarded and it wasn't any use to have such a program. The governor said the children were okay because their stomachs were sticking out and fat and they were shiny. That statement was exactly made. That was because of malnutrition that the stomach was swollen. That's when we started the first six weeks program of OEO. Then we had
alot of transition conflicts between movement people versus federal government. We knew if we did it with the government's money that we were going to have a problem of people getting co-opted and what was that going to do? But I had to make a decision, so the next year I became the community organizer for CDGM. So we organized to start off and it worked and stirred up all this stuff. We applied for money for the next year and that's how it all got started. We started applying and we went and testified and done all these kinds of things and they argued and fussed. One time we went up there and they told us they didn't even want to hear the words CDGM. Washington was so tired of us.

They were tired of seeing us and so that's how I went to argue about. The brought in the community action programs. All of this was going on at the same time. So many things happened. War on poverty announcement and then the money came and then everybody's going to get on the money, they cut the money off so they set up community action programs. Sitting on the committees were those same people, plantation owners and all those other folks that had kept us without anything. Then they said they were going to have maximum feasible participation of the poor. That was my question to Sergeant Schreiber. I end up on the front page of the Times with my finger pointed at Sergeant Schreiber asking what is maximum feasible participation of the poor? He had just come from Arkansas talking about hamburgers. They had put him up like a hamburger somebody was something. I told him I'm not interested
in that. All I want to know is what is maximum feasible participation of the poor? So they caught that finger and it scared me to death because I'd come to find out the man was a powerful man and I didn't know one bunch of powerful people from the other one. It didn't matter to us. My concern was that I didn't know who he was. It wasn't important. They told me he was the one I was supposed to ask because he was heading up this situation and that's what I did. I didn't know he was tied to the Kennedys and all them other big folks. It was really funny. That man stood there and looked at me and called his aides to come out to give me an explanation. It hit him - just tell me what is the maximum feasible, what does that mean? For us, we don't understand that. You go to Mississippi and tell these people what is maximum feasible participation of the poor. What it meant is that they would hand pick one person, black and send them there, one that the plantation owner was in control of. That's what we were fighting. Trying to say give us the amount, and what would that mean? That's when I met and we got to be good friends the Crusade for Poverty people.

RK: You said that you were afraid when you first got the money for CDGM or when you were in the process of conceptualizing it and developing the program, you didn't want the situation where people got co-opted into this. You were going out trying to organize communities so that they would take control of the programs and the projects themselves.
UB: What happened was we were caught in a situation where we'd go through all the teachings. Our teachings were that when people get the money, who is in control of the money? Who tells that person what to do? Well with guidelines and all these other kinds of things, there was so much you could do. That cut the folks off from getting registered. If they did they were kind of half way afraid to vote because they come out of mentality of white people saying you can't go down there. If you do I won't let you have my job and I won't let you - so that's kind of the crossfire that we were in. That was saying, look this is the government. You are part of that government. This is the money.

We will follow the guidelines. That doesn't mean that you don't go register to vote or register people to vote or you vote yourself when the time comes. That's where the fear was because alot of people jump in just to survive and wouldn't go register. They did not want to rock the boat. They were saying am I going to lose my job or what is going to happen? I ended up part of a training team of systematic problem solving techniques to train heads of, that's the next year, we're coming in now with other stuff. I went up to Cambridge and we were taught by a German professor on systematic problem solving techniques so that people could start understanding how to solve problems - what they saw as the problem, what was the problem we'd onioned peeled, the whole thing. We were chosen because they gave us a test. So I've been through that test to see who would go to be trainers. I came back
and we trained over seven hundred people throughout the Head Start programs for people to realize that they could take what they had and build rooms and all kinds of stuff and maybe to build their self-esteem more than anything else. We could have this Head Start program in this little cronie over here in this little church and all we needed was two bathrooms and we needed this and so on. We don't have any money so what is the real problem? Somebody would say, well the problem is money. Yes we know that so okay, let's see what the real problem is. Do we have people interested who want to build something or could you find somebody in the community? That kind of opening up. So I've been a systematic problem solving techniquer. You're looking at a systematic problem solving techniquer. We've been through that kind of organizing techniques, anything necessary to get down to, to break through this hundreds of years of teaching and programming people which is the African American now that you can't do or you're not allowed to do or you're not educated enough to do. We had to break through all that and still that process needs to happen. They would say well, we're just trying to get by. All you would do is trying to live anyway you possibly could. So most of us that were in these kinds of roles were classified as leaders. But we also were in that same trap of trying to break out. That's the reason I went back to try to get a degree so people could see that it is important when you stand before young people and say I want you to go to school. My mother was
important to tell me that and push me to do that. But also I can move a little further, I can tell my son look, I went back to school and I got this, and because I didn't have a chance, you don't have to do that. You go straight to school. It is a process that I feel is very needed in terms of education within the black community that we were trying to do. In that process we weren't just educating children about going to school. We were educating the whole community, the mothers, the fathers, the aunts, everybody that you, too, can become a part of the United States citizenship. And that is hard work. That is hard work because it's tied to every piece of being of saying divide and conquer. Like if the white man that owned it, he became on the board of the community action program. He became the very one that told them they couldn't go down to the polls and register to vote, he became on the community action program. So I had to go to Washington to say to this fellow, look, you've set up a (     ) here. What do you mean by maximum feasible participation of the poor? Do we have any strength on the boards that you plan to send all this money down through "to get Head Starts and all these other kinds of programs out to the community?" That's the reason we were holding on to CDGM. That was a fight between the community action program, they wanted to set that up as a government entity. Then here's a group over here that was doing what it was doing. So now we have the Friends of Children in the state of Mississippi and other kinds of Head Start programs. But
they had to change the names because they said they were tired of looking at us strolling in and out of there. They named it CDGM. That's how the organizing techniques of all of this in the sixties. We were so busy with so many things in every piece. That's the time when they came and removed me. President Johnson had to call out the National Guard to move us off the Greenville Airforce Base. We took over the Greenville Airforce Base.

Tape 2 - Side B

UB: But see we've said when we talk about organizing, there were people who were working on the farms from sunup to sundown. The tractor drivers were making five dollars a day. People were working for three dollars a day. We talked about organizing a union. So we organized a union. The union was to say that we weren't going to work, a farmer's union. It is amazing all that stuff that happened. Anyway, we organized a union and the farmers didn't like it at all quite naturally, you know that. The forces we had against us were the farmers, they were upset; the law enforcement, they were with the farmers. So you didn't get anything done that was for you that was right. You might get arrested for standing up saying you wasn't going to work because you wasn't going to drive these tractors or whatever. So then they go and cut off the commodities. They weren't going to give them the commodities. If you were a good black person, what they meant by that was that you didn't raise no sand or nothing, then you got some butter, meal and flour and that was the basics. They
didn't have but about five or six things. So you got that. They would always try to elevate somebody like that so that that person could say to the others, look what I've got, I'm feeding my family. What happened was, we set in Edwards, Mississippi, the Delta Ministry, because I served on the Delta Ministry Board, and snicked people, core people, NAACP people, sitting around down there. I and Owen Brooks and a few other people now go down there and we came up with where is some federal land to demonstrate to the United States government that we need to have housing, food and just pure care for the people in Mississippi? Well they thought about the coast. That wasn't working. So we came up with Greenville. Greenville used to be an airforce base. We said that would have to be government land but we didn't know which one that Greenville had taken over, how much of that land and which was left as still belonging to the government. But we all got in cars and came on up to a church. We had a meeting that evening at the church in Greenville. We got this guy off in a corner. There's always a core in organizing. There are the people who know everything and there's another group that knows another level and then there's another level that knows exactly what's going to happen at the strategic points. Somebody went out and said we can't get in that place. We had them to go and case the place. Okay, we said, tell you what you do. Go take the lock off of one of the buildings because our people would turn around if there was a lot of - they won't act right - they would get upset if the door
was not open. So we got a guy to go there and pick the lock. He just left it hanging in there. That's what happened. The next morning we got in car number one, van number two. I was in van number two because van number two is to go in and take over. The first van is to decoy. The car went on and the man waved. It was full of people and he waved at them. I reckon he said where is all these people going this morning, black folks? We had two or three whites in there. I was in the second van and we went in. He said hey, you're going the wrong way. He thought we were going down there to catch the plane. That building was inside of that fence. They used to have a place in Greenville where they had a guard sitting when you go to the base. All he'd do is just wave you on. He used to ask where you were going. There were so many of us, the first one he waved and they told him they were going inside. He said okay and then he saw the other one, he waved at us and we turned and went to that building. He went to screaming you're going the wrong way, the wrong way. The others took off behind us. We went in and I hit the door. You know how I knew it was open. We went in and they said we took over the Greenville Airforce Base. About two hours later they were everywhere. ABC was there. NBC was there and CBS. That's all they had at that time. Then here comes the head of the Justice Department. He had been down there talking to me several times. He said why didn't you tell me that ya'll were going to do this? I said, if we'd told you we were going to do it there wouldn't have been any need
to do it. In comes people. The word went out all over the state. Whenever they'd stick a microphone before me, why did you take over the Greenville Airforce Base, we need this and so forth and so on and I was standing there in a fur coat that one of them boxers had sent. I was telling them that people were raggedy and they didn't have nothing but I was in a fur coat. Somebody called me afterwards and said Unita, I'll tell you, that wasn't a good image you standing there in a fur coat talking about folks didn't have no clothes. But people came and I stood up that night and told them stories of me and the White House and we knocked out a glass and ran a pipe out and set up house on the Greenville Airforce Base. We stayed there until the troops came in three or four days later. I'm in a book called Black Protest. But anyway, they kept saying to us, well, what are we going to do? I just stood up and went to talking. You have to keep people believing in whatever they are doing. I said you know, I went to the White House. They'd say, you did? Then I went on and told them I was in the White House walking around and they had liquor in the White House. I said and you know they don't allow it in Mississippi. This is a dry state. I said Johnson has got liquor in the White House. You just pass it around. I told them the story that I went in there and they had this big bottle and I asked the man could I get this. I want to take this back to Mississippi and show that it is whiskey in the White House and I know if there's whiskey in the White House the state of Mississippi don't have to
be dry. Two or three years later it wasn't. That was another move we did. There are just so many things. Those were the days when we did so many things because behind the takeover of the Greenville Airforce Base and they physically came to get us, there wasn't anything but white troops. I was on television screaming here come the white people again. It's not a black one to come to remove us. Do you know they had to stop and fly in some black folks. So it took another day for them to find some black national guards to fly in. That was their focus. That's the truth. Then we marched. He said mam, I don't mean no harm, I'm going to carry you. So they picked us up and carried us because we weren't going to get off. Finally they got all of us outside of the Greenville Airforce Base. We started marching and we marched clean on to a place called Freedom Village. A white fellow sold us the land and through all this process that was going on he had to leave town. We got the Delta Ministry, the National Council of Churches and all to buy the land and that's where we started Freedom Village.

RK: This is a tent city?

UB: Yes. Out of that came building of houses out there for the farmers, people that had been thrown off the places. Out of that process are the people like Thelma Barnes. To talk to her about this it would be good. Jake Harris is dead. We all were working with the land and trying to find places for people to stay because they were thrown out of ( ___ ) County, ( ___ ) County, ( ___ )
County. People were just thrown out of places. Because of the union, the farmer's union, out of that MACE was still over here on this side, we're working on this piece, got MACE going, then here was a need. Charles ( ), I went and got him. So I am the person that hired Charles ( ) to come down. He asked me what did I think about having, we started the blues festival out on the Freedom Village.

RK: That's where that takes place? I didn't know that.

UB: Yes.

RK: They don't publicize that.

UB: No.

RK: That's not part of the story anymore.

UB: Let me tell you that the blues festival came out of my head and two or three other folks. We were trying to set up what we called the affiliates. The question came up, do you guess we could get them to help us? You've got to get other to come and say that they would serve and be part of it. Charles ( ) said, what do you think about it? I said well, let's try it. So, we had our first blues festival. That was to help the people that were out there in Freedom Village in those houses. We were trying to get a water system and it was a way to raise money to do that. We had several out there. That's how it started. Now its grown into all this monstrous situation.

RK: They don't tell that story for the national press.

UB: I just want you to know that's where it came from. They
do not own the founding of it. The founding of it came from just a couple of us organizing.

RK: I'm trying to piece things together until you start working here in Meyersville again to get this city incorporated because that's another piece of the story. Maybe we could spend a little bit more time on the sixties and how you felt. You had four or five years of very intense activity. I can imagine what your life must have been like running around day after day after day. You talked about these different organizations you actively participated in. As some of the energy of the civil rights movement began to move north and be taken away by the anti-war movement or the concerns about that, what kinds of things did you do and did other people in Mississippi do to keep pushing on the kinds of issues that you had been raising? Was there a change there?

UB: You have that period but it is not dramatic. I moved into housing because I had taken that step of pushing from voter registration over to development of CDGM so now what the people need is housing. My whole thing was, if you get them registered, they don't have a house to stay in and they don't have these basic kinds of things, their children don't have dental care and a whole lot of other things. That was the thinking process in my mind and some of the rest of the people I'm sure. I got involved in housing. I didn't start out that way. You know how you fall into a situation. I was invited to go to a workshop by Dorothy Irene
Hight with the National Council of Negro Women. I went there and they were asking us what do we think, because I was an organizer, needs to happen and how can we do things to help you do whatever it is that you want to do in your community? We discussed that and that is when I told them that - they were trying to hook up with Mississippi State which was talking about the extension services and all these family things - I told them the story about me going over to my extension services. I went over there before 1964 to get involved. I wanted to do something in my community. The women said lets go over here where you learn to cook and sew and all that stuff and help develop and they told us we were going to create and they told me to bring a cigar box and a piece of shiny cloth, silk or satin or something like that and some macaroni. We were going to make jewelry boxes. Well I got all my little stuff together and got my fifty cents and for us it was alot of money at that time. I bought my cloth and had my macaroni and I went over there and we were all sitting around and it dawned on me and I asked the other ladies, do you have any jewelry? They said no. I knew I didn't have any. My question is, what am I doing sitting here making jewelry boxes and no jewelry? Then I got up, got my macaroni and my box and come home and cooked my macaroni and I ain't been back. I told them this story and the extension service people were there working. Miss Hight was setting there, now what we are trying to let you understand is relevant to us. They drew a picture on the wall and this woman
got up and she explained it was a girl and a boy and a husband and a wife. We looked at it and I said but that don't fit us. Then she comes up with some kind of figures of one point something child. Do you understand what I'm talking about? As we said, you don't go to the community and talk this. People think we are crazy. You don't have one point something child. So that was how I started with this process of getting involved, this is not that Miss Hight was egging us on because she wanted to know what we talked about in terms of organizing people. I said you know we are going to have to have another way of getting to people instead of this. The issue of housing came up. I told them to ask people what is it that they think they need. One thing was houses. So I started off saying, we did that. Miss Hight got back to me and asked me if I would do something and I asked her what.

(break in tape)

UB: ...for the 4H clubs of America or whatever but I didn't get there. They said please tell that story. I spoke for the Children's Defense Fund. Rockefeller and the mayor of New Orleans and myself were the three speakers. I told me to make me the last of the three because these were very distinguished men. They all laughed. I was telling them, we've got to get relevant to what is really needed at a place and at a time.

RK: I think we're going to take about another half hour that will give you some time and we have to get back too.

UB: I'm sorry that it all came up at this date. When I was
talking to the young lady I said, oh my Lord, I know I've got to stand before these folks and talk about the African American women and women of color in politics and what do we do to have to see about the children, the family, the husband, and so on. And how does all that fit in?

RK: I think in saying that we also probably need to do some more interviewing at some time too. We won't look at this as trying to cover everything. Neil, I think you wanted to start with coming back to this town.

NB: I was curious, if I understand it, that this is the first town in the county that was incorporated? Why did you see that as a need and how did you go about doing it? This goes back to your thoughts and objectives and hopes and goals.

UB: Well, I was working with the housing program of the National Council of Negro Women. Earlier leaving from all these different areas of the sixties and seventies I got involved in trying to do the first home ownership program in this nation outside of an Indian reservation which there was one in New Mexico. I went down to look at that. The first homeownership program was done in Gulf Port, Mississippi. It was a pilot type thing and that's some of the stuff that we put together of how could we have government and foundation organizations such as the National Council of Negro Women involved. I had been doing that housing, coming up with the subsidy. The idea was to take the subsidy from public housing which is the highest subsidy and put
it into an opportunity for people to own their own homes. Then if we were going to build new kinds of housing, they would be single family units in some places. We put in housing in St. Louis which was townhouses because of the land question. It was that kind of thing that after President Johnson signed the housing act in 1968 a whole lot of things that I got involved with around that. I knew we needed some housing, that was for sure. We put two hundred units in Gulf Port, Mississippi. After that, we wanted to do something in the Mississippi Delta and that's when we had to get a referendum passed and it was not going to be passed because the same people who did not want the houses were the voters. They were still in charge of the vote. That's another piece of organizing technique. We got the Attorney General to do a waiver. The waiver was because we were just going to do one project and we were going to do it in Indianola, Mississippi. I put two hundred and sixty four units of housing, three and four and five bedroom homes, in Indianola, Mississippi with an opportunity to come off of the situation where the government continued to pay so people could become homeowners and they could be taxpayers. We sold that both to the Democrats and the Republicans. It was something that flew. Republicans came in and that's sort of what I did. I was around from place to place putting housing in the ground and I don't know how many millions and millions of dollars worth of houses that we got into the ground. That's a long piece by itself of talking about how those organizing techniques had to
come and what had to happen with that. Joe Berstein, it's what I call his brainchild because he was the legal person that everything that I came up with he'd put it into some kind of legal terms. Some things weren't legal and you had to have an opinion and then I got Weaver at that time and from Weaver to Romley. So I testified before folks and done some other kind of stuff so people kept saying well, you're doing all this stuff for everybody else, why can't you do it in Meyersville, we need some housing. I said you can't get these things. You don't have water and sewage and basic kinds of infrastructure. They said, well how do we get that? I said well, you have to incorporate. Well let's do that.

We went after guys again. We asked the men would you please come and incorporate? Two or three of the men around here, they were asking them if they would help with that work. So I got MACE to be the entity. I called Larry and talked to him and said look, we need to start incorporating some towns because people need to be mayors and on boards of aldermen and so forth. I had already found that out going around doing housing, how powerful that was to get some kinds of things in the ground. So he said alright, we'll get Bailey, which is Attorney Bailey, he had never incorporated anything in his life. So they put this black lawyer doing something and searching that he had never had to do. I said well, we'll apply for a grant. We applied for a grant to start off a program for incorporating towns. So we start that under MACE. So we got the first little money to start off to say we had
to have an engineer and you had to have a lawyer and you had to have basic things to incorporate a town. I had to find out how much land it took to incorporate. It takes one square acre to incorporate. That was Bailey's job to go down there to get that reading and bring it back. My job was to find out if we could get it done. I went to the church and told people, you all stay on me all the time asking me why can't we build houses, why can't we get these other kinds of things. One of the ways that we can do that is to incorporate the town. So I asked the young lady in County to fill out some papers, put down the people's names, just make something like a survey list and she did that. Then I passed them out to eight women. They decided they would walk from door to door and put the people's names down that didn't want to be incorporated. I've learned in life, if folks don't want it, there's no use in doing it. When you get ready to organize something, you've got to get a segment of people that wants it or that would want it. They don't have to say they want it but they would want it. You have to know the difference between that. I just wanted to get the feel and that's what we did. Everybody signed up that they wanted to be incorporated except two. One of them was a white preacher over there and another was a white man on the other corner. He said the reason he didn't sign, he didn't understand it. But they found out it was okay. The lady's dead now, Mrs. Vandavener, she even signed. She was the clerk. We had a segment of people, that even though we disagreed, that's the
same woman that I had sued so I could register to vote, we came to
the understanding that something needed to be done in the
community. One of the pieces that we did is start that process of
their putting their name down and doing this and we had lawyers in
and my job was to make sure that the whites show up because they
owned some of the land. I went and talked to one of the big
farmers which was Mr. L.M. Higgle and a couple of the black
farmers that had a little land attached to them and he came to the
meeting. I called the meeting at the courthouse and the whites
came and they listened and they asked questions. They said we
want to know if you are going to tax the house. What is the tax
on the land? I told them I would find out and get back to them.
I called a man and he came in from Pennsylvania and that's one of
the things of knowing people that is a help. He came and assessed
the land of that corporate area that we were talking about. He
set up what the assessment would be and we wouldn't tax the land.
We would just tax the houses. That flew with the farmers. Then
they put it on the assessment right, what it needed to be assessed
for. We'll come to that, but he had to come and do that. We came
back and had another meeting and I explained that to them and it
was okay. They said who is going to be the mayor? Because when
you incorporate the town you've got to have a mayor and a board of
alderman. A white fellow stood up in the back of the room and
said I nominate Unita to be the mayor because she knows what's
going on and how to do this and we have seen all the other work
she's done on houses and different stuff. We think that she would be the person to do that. Some other fellow stood up and said second the motion and that was the beginning. Then they said, who's going to be on the board? The courthouse was packed. Some of them said, well let Unita pick them. The black folks said okay and that's what happened. I chose two white people and three blacks, two of the most powerful in out county. I won't say they were the most powerful but they were the most knowledgeable in terms of what they do. Our postmaster, he was white and Mrs. Vandavener which is the same woman who was the clerk when I went over to try to register to vote and three blacks. We started the town off in this room. We incorporated, got all the papers put together and sent it down. The jury signed it and we became a town December, 1976. I became the mayor in that August because the people had decide that's what they were going to do but you had to put it in the paper. I have been the mayor ever since. But it came about, it wasn't anything here, nothing. We didn't have any streets, any toilets. We had outside shanty houses. The whites had decent houses but they were tired of smelling the outhouses in the summer. I didn't know that the water backed up on them. When we had seepage water from the river it would back up in their toilets. But the first project that I started, I started even before we became incorporated, they made me president of the Meyersville utility district. We had blacks and whites on that and I became president so that we could get some water. I
raised two hundred and some odd thousand dollars so that we could get a water system. By the time we finished with it the utility district, all was this was unfolding that I began organizing to incorporate the town, then we just put the water district over into the town. We sold water in December and we also became a town in December. My next project was to make sure that we got sewage. That's what I started and they said you couldn't do it because we were too small a population and we didn't have enough clout in voters and that whole thing. I started to piecemeal money from groups, national waters associations and people I knew to get us a little seed money so I could go after the grant. The town had to have so much of the first money. The first money that we had to have was two thousand five hundred dollars so that we could say that we had seed money so I got that to kick off. Then we got money from the national environmental protection. Then I found out that there was money at the state level and I got three hundred and some odd thousand from the national. I went to the state and found out that I could borrow fifty thousand. Then I ended up borrowing another fifty thousand from the state. Then I got grants from Farmer's Home Administration. So I pieced together six hundred and some odd thousand dollars to put in a sewage system. People were running here and writing it up and were busy. They'd never seen nothing like it. I was getting five dollars over here, thousand or two thousand or anything that was necessary to pull it all together. Then we got the engineers and
started the process of a sewage system. We had water and sewage which was part of the infrastructure. I got two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to start trying to have fire prevention in case we could have some houses. I was supposed to have been building houses. I was going to do the same kind of houses that I went after from HUD. Of course I knew the secretary of HUD in Washington, D.C. as well as a local person which helped me. Since I knew him I knew what he liked so I told him to come up and sit by the river and let us talk. His father was from up this way. He's a white fellow and a Republican and they were trying to figure out when I was supposed to have been a Democrat how we were doing so well. But we talked about housing and he gave me two hundred and fifty thousand to try to see could we get it. Could we get the land. The white folks that I tried to get some from went up on the price so that cut that down. Then the county went and bought this piece out from under me that the man was going to let me have. They said she's trying to get it for herself. You know rumors go and you have to fight all these rumors and all that. There were people who had never been involved in anything like this before and there were jealousies and convincing and who is this, this is a woman, who is she in the first place? They bought the land out from under me then fixed it they said so that it was going to be just for recreation. So I'll show you that. Then I had to figure out how to get a fire truck. So I just went on and bought a fire truck. But it was supposed to have went with
the whole other thing. The man said oh that's wrong, there are regulations. I just wrote a real nice letter and said I apologize for that but I didn't know it but you can come up here and get it. But if you tell these people in Meyersville that you are coming after their truck - so they figured out another way to rearrange that where that the truck would stay here but one of these days we'd get some houses. And I sent the rest of it back. The folks went up in arms. We hadn't got no money in this town and sending money back. I thanked the federal government. But somebody else could be using it while we could see if we could find some more land. We weren't going to sit there and try to hold it and go through no whole lot of changes. It paid off because when I did go back around and ask for some houses I was down as a person who would send the money back if it don't work and that's when we got the first housing in here that had ever been in the county. There had never been any housing for the public before. I had got it with an organization named the National Caucusing Center on Black Age. I utilized that group. Sam Simmons is in Washington, D.C. is the president of it and I knew Sam. He used to be the secretary of Housing and Urban Development. Now he is heading up this organization. So I asked him. He was interested in putting ( ) down here because that's a housing for the elderly and the handicapped. So I wanted to start off trying to house the elderly because that's the majority of the people in our community and get them out of the house because so many people were overcrowded. So
they gave me twenty units. When the papers hit and came to Jackson, Mississippi it was named Unita Blackwell Estates. I wasn't particularly happy about that because I know that adds more jealousies and hang-ups sometimes when you are trying to organize stuff. But they said I had been around housing and had brought housing to Mississippi and a lot of places in the United States of this calibre and they honored me by naming it. So that was the first one. I got sewage, water, a fire truck and housing then I thought about that we needed to have something for families but I wanted to use that land to put in forty units and I had done got the go-ahead that said if we can get the land we can get the forty units. I asked for forty. I may end up with twenty-five individual houses with the opportunities for three or four or five bedrooms like I had gone after. I had this fight from the county that didn't let it fly. So finally they come up when it got for them with public housing. As you enter you see Deer River and that's public housing which I wasn't too cool on but I'm glad it's somewhere for people to live. But we could have had a better situation. The next thing I got is some more housing for the elderly and that's called the Meyersville Apartments. From a place that had absolutely nothing, no streets - that's a long story how I got the streets. I went after trying to find money for the streets and they'd tell us we didn't have no population and rural and so on and whatever and I convinced them that it's better to keep people where they are and they said that's not what
they say. Guidelines say you've got to have this and that. So we finally kept going and they just got tired of looking at me I think. They give you a cup of coffee and sit you down and be nice to you and send you on home. I'd take that drink of coffee and come on home and come back tomorrow. Finally we got the streets and then I got the South Central Bell to come in. I told them it would be to their advantage to come in and find out where the telephones are. They drew me a map and put the streets on it and numbered the houses so they would know where their telephones were. They said we can't do this for every little town and community. I said I know that but this is a developing town and community and you cannot say that you can't help. He said okay, I'll try to do that. And that's what they did. They did a wonderful job. They set it up. Now they've got a charity because we didn't have money to buy street signs - so we've got a charity group and with their help we found a group that gave us the street signs. Now we have street signs and numbers. So we came from, I wish you could see the dirt roads......

Tape 3 - Side A

UB: I feel that everything that I've done is on the same cord. I think that if local people here, the black and the white local people, with the understanding that they could take mayors and the board and use them for something that would benefit the community instead of people just sitting somewhere with their legs crossed and saying I'm the mayor and I'm on the board or whatever,
but actually getting the needs of the people met. That's what I am concerned about. What kinds of things can we do to meet the basis needs and that our children can grow up in a community. They may start tomorrow but it is a peaceful coexistence here with the people. They sort of talk to one another, wave at one another, whether you are black or white or whatever. As far as the people who were disfranchised such as my self, people who were not allowed to register to vote and be a part of the political process, that now I am the mayor and I'm fair. They used to use that word alot but I am fair. I don't try to do just for this set of people versus another set of people. As I said to some of the white farmers, they said you've been in all this stuff and doing this, how is this going to benefit me? I said well, you work these people and you do all these things and you'll see, it will benefit you. I'm not really concerned too much about you because you've got this element. And I'm honest with you. But the streets, you can drive on them. You like them. Is anything backing up in your house? They said no. I said, okay, you get that piece that you need and they needed more. That's the only difference. And you are going to pay for it one way or the other anyway. That's what's happening in our cities and towns right now across this country with all of the uprisings and the shootings and the killings. It's because we didn't stop and do it where it was supposed to have been done.

NB: That was the other thing that was rather striking about
your conversation on incorporation. Back in 1975 or 1976 you were nominated for mayor as I understand by a white person and then seconded by a woman who at one point had tried to prevent you from registering.

UB: No, it wasn't seconded by her. I said that she was there and what she was saying was, you didn't get that opposition of saying that we didn't need to be incorporated when I was sending people around to ask about the incorporation.

NB: That seems like a fairly major shift in attitude.

UB: I feel that the shift in the attitude is human nature. I freed more white people in my community I think than in places that I've worked, as much as I did blacks. Because white people felt that they couldn't say anything. If they said something that would cut them off from their people and it was a whole freeze out of their children going to school and being called a nigger lover and called all these things. But when it got to the place it was the law because we sued so many people, I sued everybody in the state of Mississippi because you couldn't walk out the door here. I had to sue the highway patrol and everybody. We had all these lawsuits pending. In this county right now the lawsuit still stands because they denied us this right to register to vote. It's still there. So those are the kinds of things, the schools, everything. It's not that they are so great and arms open to us or anything but that attitude change came from what the law says versus what is economically feasible at the time. When it comes
the money of the Head Start programs and all these other things that we could go into sunflower stores and all these other stores.

The food stamps - they started off to fighting us about the food stamps and then they finally gave up on them when they found out they were going to be the recipients of the food stamps. When we talk about economics, that the shift. The economic power and the law are the two that I feel that changes any country.

RK: This maybe is going to be a last set of questions. I know that the next or one thing that you have been working on is how do you get industry or how do you get jobs for people. I think somewhere I read that you said if there was work here for people there are alot of people that would be moving back out of the cities, back down to Meyersville to live. They like the people, their family and stuff. Maybe you could just talk a little bit about the strategies for economic growth. You've been involved in that since MACE, economic development and getting businesses and new ways. Maybe you can talk a little bit about the history of things you have tried to do and then speculate a little bit about what needs to be done in that area.

UB: I think that when we found out through voter registration that we had to deal with an economic base and then how were people going to have jobs if mechanization has taken over, what would that mean? People were put off the plantation and found out and so on. We had to come up with some other means.

For instance when we created MACE that was a tool of leadership
so that people could start understanding what does all this mean and how does that affect your daily living and how do you live. Out of that we did Delta Foundation. That was another piece that we went after Ford money and asked for Ford money so that we could set up an entity. At first Ford just used to send the money there. Then we came up with a foundation. I am one of the founders of that too. The Delta Foundation was set up here in the Mississippi Delta so that we could then take money and find ways of how we could develop an economic base. Then we set up a stamp factory and a blue jeans factory. People are still working at the blue jeans factory and the stamp factories and telephones and so forth and doing all kinds of things. I'm saying that, out of this, we went as far as we could go in terms of that limitation. When we talk about setting up towns like Mayorsville is one way we say it, Meyersville is another way we say it, either way is correct. So the town people may say Meyersville or Mayorsville or whatever. When you come to a place like this that all of the cotton and everything else is still going on, people are doing some, but what kind of economic base do we have? So we started trying to develop a saying in our community we needed something besides just a cotton field or whatever. The elastic plant that is in Rollingport, Mississippi should have been here. We are talking about things that happen before now. It didn't come because the farmers at that time did not want something to come in and make more money than what they were paying on the farm. The
other piece was that they said they were going to have to hire blacks. For a long time the state of Mississippi wouldn't even receive federal money on account of, wouldn't even receive it to work on the highways. That's the reason we were so far behind in highways. We broke open the first money that came in through Head Start programs and all these kinds of things, federal money that Mississippi started taking money. Now Mississippi take more federal money than most other states. I'm saying that that kind of a trend is not only that we helped just our own people as black people but we helped Mississippi by being able to say we can take federal money to generate jobs and start this whole process moving. Where I am at this particular point in Meyersville, Mississippi is that I don't know exactly where it is going to come from. I'm just here searching and trying to fit and put this piece together and that piece together saying how many jobs can we generate and that type thing. Alot of things have come up. They were first going to put in a nuclear plant or some kind of plant up in the other part of the county. The people had a big fight over it saying they were not going to have it. The vote came and they won out and they are not going to have it. Then in comes the gambling issue. So the state of Mississippi wasn't going to have gambling and now they've decided to let the counties vote whether they are going to have it or not. When the vote came down the one on the coast and us were the only two in the state that voted. ( ) County voted to have gambling. Now everybody else found out
that we might get rich I guess or something and everybody now voted straight down this river. They've got more resources than we have like Vicksburg and Greenville have now done voted and Tunica opened up a casino. All these things have happened, you see what I'm saying? But, people are saying I'll take anything to try to generate jobs. We tried one time to get an aspirin factory because at that time you could do the same skills as picking cotton because you had to count the aspirins. It wasn't automated or anything. So we have tried several kinds of things. If anybody anywhere realizes what's happened in these cities or they don't - I can say that if people that come from these little small towns that went to the Los Angeles' and all these other places that they are having these uprisings and packed into these areas with low skills because we were not trained and put in those predicaments and then turn around with no leadership or explanation of why because they just said well, you're in Los Angeles. The big folks in Los Angeles are big but here's another group out there that don't have anything. And they sit there and get angrier and angrier because you're there where Hollywood is, where all the glamour is and all everything is. And you're sitting over here and don't hardly have bread to eat or if you do have if you've got to lean on the side or do it unjust. I think that people should stay in these little small towns if they want to. That we should develop these small towns. Come up with enough plants or satellite industries or whatever we can do to
keep people where they know their neighbors and their friends and their children can grow up. They should have an education system that educates people if they want to be educated. Up to a point, if they want to go to college, somebody pay for it, sure. They need to pay for it. But I'm saying that we should feel in our country as great as the United States is that we could do these things and it's time for us to reorder our priorities in terms of let's build our smaller communities. Let people know who their neighbors are. Our morals would be different that we would care about one another. The people say, well one thing about little small towns, everybody tends to everybody else's business. But also, everybody keep everybody straight a little bit better. It is bad in one way and good in another one. Out of that, I think that would help a great deal. So the Meyersvilles of this nation and people who want to live here left because they had to go to Los Angeles or they had to go to Chicago or they had to go somewhere looking for the job. There are more migrants in terms of black folks, of course you already know that part, than any history of people. We have done more migrating than anybody that they can think of, coming from all these other countries or anything. Just moving from the south going to the west, going to the north looking for a better place. That's what I feel as I have talked to Fortune Magazine and different ones talking about what to do about jobs. People have asked me what I think we should do about jobs. I think we should come up with satellites
and finding jobs that actually fit the people in the local community. We're always training for something that's not there.

I think that if you got, say in a town like this one which is five hundred and twenty-six people out there because a baby was born last week, then you know everybody. I know everybody. I know who will work and who won't work, what will happen. If we say that we go into towns that have got fifty thousand people, there are a lot of people that know these people and we cut them up into precincts and so on. Who is it that needs to work? What is this all about? I feel that we just got to reorganize America. That's just the fact. And the south is one of the areas that I think has more hope in terms of that because we didn't get to feeling that we had so much. Yet we felt we had our culture. The black had their culture and the white had their ways. It sounds strange but we seem to be the only stabilizing group. If white people didn't like you in the south, you knew it. They didn't grin in your face and cut your throat. That's the reason we are having the so-called riots in some of these other places. Now back to my opinion, it was an illusion. I've never been under an illusion. I knew if I stepped out the door I could be shot at so I took care of myself. I never felt that folks was with me and got so upset when they weren't because I never thought they were.

That's what some of this is all about. It is setting up an elusion and a hypocritical way of saying. One thing, and I don't know if we are turning into that in the south, but I feel that the
southern way, people used to ask me, why didn't you ever go north, I said I just didn't feel like living under a whole lot of lies. I just know where I am and this is it and I love Mississippi. I love home and I built it. We put our blood, sweat and tears and I just go on telling them about it. I say I haven't taken over my deeds yet but I built the place. So it's that kind of feeling because I love the land and there are alot of people in the cities in those tall buildings that love the land. They feel different and free when they are out where the wind can blow and they actually can see the stars at night and the moon. I had a friend of mine that came down and she said Oh, my God, there's the moon. She's from New York. There's real stars. She don't get a chance to see those things that much. So I really feel that for me to be the mayor of Meyersville has been an interesting time. I have enjoyed it. It hasn't been easy and sometimes I attribute that I am now having attacks with high blood pressure the man told me the other day, I said that comes from being the mayor. Some of it is eating too much. But anyway, I find my peace is by the river. I love this river. I've always been on this river. So I'll be out there looking for some kind of plant or something, any little something that don't take away from the town. We've got to have things that leaves the good things in town. If it's something that takes away from it it's not worth it.