



**Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey -
Black Oral Histories
1983/146**

Oral interview of
Robert Canson

February 3, 1984

Conducted by Clarence Caesar

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The following interview was taped on February 3, 1984, at the home of Mr. Robert Canson of 2178 Morely Way in Sacramento, California. Mr. Canson, a native of Houston, Texas, moved to Sacramento in 1930 with his family and went to local schools including Sacramento High School where he graduated. Mr. Canson later went into the Army and served in Europe during World War Two. He returned to Sacramento in 1947 and in 1948 was named Sacramento's first Black police officer, in the Sacramento Police Department. In that same year, his wife, Fannie Canson, was named the first Black school teacher for the City Schools since the retirement of Sarah Mildred Jones in 1925. The experiences Mr. Canson is about to relate as Sacramento's first Black Police Officer form the crux of the subject matter contained within this interview.

Clarence: Can you give us a little background on yourself? How you came to live in Sacramento?

Mr. R. Canson: Well, I came to Sacramento in 1930. My Uncle Charlie was here and he was in the tailoring business. He had a tailor shop at 5th and L Street. And my father came to work with him and so we came from Los Angeles to Sacramento. Originally the family is from Louisiana, and then they came through Houston, Texas, to Sacramento. I lived in Houston and Sacramento.

Clarence: What do you recall as a child when you first moved here as far as what your first impressions of Sacramento were?

Mr. R. Canson: Well, like I said, I came from Houston, and Houston was a large city and there were far more and there were a large population of Blacks, and when you came to Sacramento there was, to me this was a small town, and very few Blacks, and then they're weren't many Black businesses or any other activities really that the Blacks had or controlled. I noticed that as a kid and the whole family remarked about it when we first came. And then when we went to school, there wasn't many Black kids, very few. Coming from a community where there was an all Black school that made quite a difference and all Black teachers it was quite a difference. It was something hard to get used to. As a kid, that's about most that I recall, some of the things that were of interest to me.

Clarence: Did you recall having any Black teachers at all at that time? Or where there any?

Mr. R. Canson: No, there were no Black teachers in the city at all. In no school that I know.

Clarence: What year is this that we are talking about?

Mr. R. Canson: 1930.

Clarence: Has anybody ever mentioned a Sarah M. Jones as a teacher?

Mr. R. Canson: I've never heard of her before, until recently.

Clarence: What about Amonia Delow Gumia [spelling ?, counter 32], her name has popped up a couple of times as far as teaching?

Mr. R. Canson: No. In fact I wasn't aware that there was a Black teacher before my wife, until I was told by you.

Clarence: Okay. And what about high school? Where did you go to high school?

Mr. R. Canson: I went to Sac High, Sacramento High, and there were no Black teachers there, in fact there wasn't too many Black students, I guess we all knew each other and I think. I went to Sutter Junior High School, and I think about as many came from, there were two junior high schools where most of the Black kids went was Stanford in Oak Park, and Sutter was at that time 18th and K, and I guess it was split by 50-50, with Blacks living in the downtown area and those living in the Oak Park area.

Clarence: So both of these junior high schools fed into Sacramento High School?

Mr. R. Canson: Yes, at that time, when I went to high school, there was only one high school in Sacramento and that was Sacramento High, there was another one out in Del Paso Heights, Grant Union High; and then Elk Grove. And then one in the county, out in Citrus Heights –

Clarence: Would that be San Juan?

Mr. R. Canson: Oh San Juan, yeah. Those were the only high schools around.

Clarence: So there were basically only four high schools in the whole area?

Mr. R. Canson: Yeah.

Clarence: What types of activities did you participate in while you were in high school?

Mr. R. Canson: Well, mostly athletic, extra activities, was I was, I played basketball, and on track.

Clarence: Were Black students part of the say the student government or were any elected president of the student body or part of the student council at that time?

[Counter 50]

Mr. R. Canson: No, no, in fact they didn't even care too much for them to be on the teams. The Blacks that were there, they were there simply because they were outstanding athletes. If there was a choice, it was always a White person. The only, it was obvious, that the only reason that they accept Black athletes was that they wanted to win Championships or something like that.

Clarence: Was there much interaction between Blacks and Whites on campus or off campus?

Mr. R. Canson: Not too much, it was, although you had White friends and you spoke and everything, but usually after school, the Blacks went their way and the Whites went their way. Unless of course you lived in the same community. That's about the extent of your friendship. Then, like I was raised up around the South Side Park, I lived around down there a lot quite a, during my pre-high school days and playing in the park through inter-mural athletics, again that was through athletics, that you would have friends in the park and what not. That was the same thing in Oak Park, McClatchy Park, the Black athletes around the park would have friends there.

Clarence: Were there any social organizations for you to join, like the YMCA, or a Boys' Clubs or?

Mr. R. Canson: The YMCA was restricted to Whites only. In fact I didn't know of any Mexicans belonging or Orientals belonging to the YMCA. In those days, only Whites. That YMCA was located at 21st and W at that time. In fact it's there now, but in a different building.

Clarence: What about Black oriented community activities or clubs, were there any organizations that were strictly for Black youth?

Mr. R. Canson: We had a Black, had a club Black baseball team and a Black basketball team through city sports. We competed and we did quite well in baseball and basketball. That was about the extent of the athletic competition and then other than that was church.

Clarence: What church did you attend?

Mr. R. Canson: St. Andrews and, well no, no, my family were Baptist, and they went to New Hope, and that's where we went mostly to New Hope. The reason I mentioned St. Andrews was that I later went there after I married.

Clarence: Oh, I see. [they laugh] It was kind of a conversion of sorts?

Mr. R. Canson: Yeah.

Clarence: So after high school, you later went to college at Tuskegee.

Mr. R. Canson: Yes, I went to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

Clarence: Were you encouraged by high school counselors at all to go to Tuskegee?

Mr. R. Canson: No, in fact high school counselors didn't encourage you to go to college at all. In those days they were, they would tell you to get to take classes to get some type of job, a menial job at that. Because at that time, most of the Blacks were working for the city and or the state, mostly city though, and as garbage collectors.

Clarence: So the garbage collection business and the garbage collection occupation was the, probably the best paying occupation for Blacks at that time?

Mr. R. Canson: Post Office and garbage collectors, red caps for the railroad, jobs like that. I think if you are going to say who made the most money, I'd say the red caps.

Clarence: The red caps?

Mr. R. Canson: Yeah.

Clarence: And what did you major in when you went to college?

Mr. R. Canson: Commercial Industries. It is now referred to more like a business type of course.

Clarence: And you came back to Sacramento after your college?

Mr. R. Canson: I went to service,

Clarence: Oh, I see.

Mr. R. Canson: I was in the Army for four years and then I came back to, I went to the Army and I was a cadre, an infantry replacement cadre member of the Infantry Replacement Training Center down in Texas, and from there I went overseas to the European Theatre, and I was over there for two years and then I came back and was discharged and came back to Sacramento.

Clarence: Did you expect to find things any different in Sacramento when you came back or as far as opportunity? Any new opportunities available?

Mr. R. Canson: Well, I was hoping, but when I came back I was more or less looking, because I was exposed more to the South as an adult and what I saw down there I kind of liked. I wasn't too sure that I was going to stay in Sacramento and then, so I was hoping that things would be different and when I came back and my wife came to Sacramento, and we started, the both of us started looking around to decide where we would live.

Clarence: What sealed it for you as far as staying in Sacramento finally?

Mr. R. Canson: Well it's, I took the examination and became a policeman. My wife received a job as a, in the education field, teaching, as a teacher.

[Counter 100]

Clarence: Now you both are recorded as being the first of your field in modern Sacramento, you being the first Black police man and your wife being the first modern Black teacher in the 1940s. Can you give us a little background on your experiences being the first Black policeman and what your recollections are of that?

Mr. R. Canson: Well, when I first went on the Police Department I had an interview with the Chief of Police who was, his name was Hicks at the time, and he was a Colonel in the Army and when he was discharged he came back and he was a patrol man and there was sort of a shake up in administration and I think I just, my feeling I think because of his military experience and what not they just made him from patrol man to Chief of Police and his background as an officer in the military as I learned later was that he had been with Black troops and that's when, in World War Two they had a segregated Army. And then, naturally, in those days and from my experience any White officer over Black troops went up right away, they were the first to be promoted. In fact, most of your senior officers above a Captain were White and then the Blacks usually they were first and second lieutenants and very few captains. And even in the segregated Army. So then the first thing he told me was when I, when he called me into his office was that he didn't want any Black officers because he had had Black officers under his command and he couldn't get along with those in the military. And uh, so and I was in the military and then right away I understood what he was saying, because there was a lot of confusion and especially a Black officer under him that was more qualified than he it would just, it was a problem. That was a problem generally throughout the Army.

Clarence: So your entry into the police force wasn't necessarily because of a progressive attitude in the Police Department at that time?

Mr. R. Canson: No. It was quite frustrating at times. It, I think without my military experience that I probably wouldn't have survived it, but I had been in the Army and I had been under the command of White officers and then I was in the military when they integrated the military and I

survived those problems. So then I felt that this was, this wasn't any worse you see, and it was a similar experience, so that helped.

Clarence: In an earlier interview you stated that "you were instantly put on a beat in the West End." Can you give an idea of what the West End was like as you saw it from a policeman's perspective?

Mr. R. Canson: Well, the West End was supposed to be the crime area of Sacramento. It was, it was mostly your minority people, and like Orientals, Blacks, and in those days they were referred to as Negroes, and Mexicans, and Southern Europeans, mostly were down there. Then it was your houses of prostitution and gambling and just about everything that, it was just the area that you expect to go, where they, as referred to as where the action was. When I first went on the Police Department, they without any training or anything, they gave me, they sent me down there and I didn't even have a gun at the time. I borrowed a gun because I was supposedly, they took, they had told me that I would be on an information counter until I had some training. And uh, so one day I went to work, and they says, in roll call, he called my name and told me "Beat Eight". And I didn't even know where beat eight was. I asked, and they told me, and gave me the boundaries and told me to go and get on the street.

[Counter 150]

Mr. R. Canson: And I went down there and I later found out that they replaced, I replaced two police men. A beat that two White police men had been walking and they sent me down there by

myself. So I was, I went to work and I walked the beat that night and there was no incident, other than a few drunks or something like that. So, when I came in everybody was sort of surprised to see me looking as happy and whistling like they were! [they both laugh] I later, from a friend of mine, I found that they had expected the people to run me off the street.

Clarence: What kind of reaction did you get from the people the first year you were on the force?

Mr. R. Canson: Well, it was, it would, I thought it was nice. I expected, I expected a better feeling toward Blacks than I got. I think at first, when I first went on the street the Blacks resented it most, most of all, and only law enforcement they, the only Black law enforcement they'd ever had in Sacramento was from the military, from the MPs from the Mather Field or McClellan Fields. They had nothing to do with civilians, it was mostly when they would, unless of course they were fighting with soldiers or some kind of disturbance between the military. So when I first went on the street, it was I think I, naturally being a policeman in the military being down there, we would stop and talk, you know, and just discuss the police work, and I learned more about what went on down on the beat from the Black military than I did from the Police Department. [Clarence laughs]

Clarence: So after a while, you became a fixture in the West End?

Mr. R. Canson: Yeah, and after a while they, after I became known and I knew the people, and then I got very good cooperation from Blacks and I knew where to go for the, who to expect the

cooperation from and it worked out very well. Even the Oriental people were very nice, and Mexicans, and Blacks. Especially the business people in the area. Mostly the business people in that area was restaurants, barber shops, pool halls, and that's about the extent of it really. Night clubs, they had two or, a couple of clubs around there.

Clarence: Did they ever relate to you, the business interests, their particular experiences with the police force when it was all White, as far as response time or how they treated the people in the West End?

Mr. R. Canson: Well they, the White policeman was quite brutal I understand, and this was one of the main things and they had no respect for, there were a few Black churches on the West End and when the women were walk, the Black women, were walking the streets in the area, they assumed that all Black women were prostitutes. They made no distinction or they talked to them as such. Just being Black was a sort of a handicap in that respect. That is, I'm saying this was what the attitude they got from the Police Department, from the policeman in the district and what not. And if

[A lady speaks in the background stating "there's some catfish over here if you guys want some"?]

Clarence: So basically you were kind of a safety valve, a release or relief from old, the old way of doing things. How long did you stay on the West End?

Mr. R. Canson: I was down there about between 10 and 12 years.

Clarence: And then where did you move?

Mr. R. Canson: And then I moved, when I moved from the West End, I moved to a park. And when I went to a park, the park was predominately a White community. It was a, brief history, all that was White businesses and what not around there and they were having a problem in Oak Park.

[Counter 200]

Mr. R. Canson: I guess by that time, they I was a problem shooter, and they sent me and a couple of other officers from the West End to Oak Park. The younger ones, the ones that were my age and thereabouts, and we went out to Oak Park. Mostly what they had, the problem they had out there was molesting the White youth molesting the women on 35th Street as they went, as they were shopping. And narcotics from the pool hall, they were peddling marijuana and from the pool halls there in Oak Park, strong arm robberies it was almost the same. Just about the same thing that the people were doing West End, but it was out there.

Clarence: So the criminal element in Oak Park, even though it has always been associated with Blacks moving into the area was actually prevalent already, before Blacks moved in.

Mr. R. Canson: Oh yeah, in fact I thought the narcotics was worse when I first went there than when I left really. Of course, they had gotten a little more sophisticated, you know, by those fellows out there, I mean the Whites they would, they were operating on bicycles and then when the Blacks got it they were operating out of Cadillac's. [they both laugh]

Clarence: It cuts down on overhead anyway. So how many Blacks were on the force by the time you moved to Oak Park after ten years? Did the numbers increase substantially?

Mr. R. Canson: Well not too much. When I, I guess about, they'd had about four or five because two Black officers resigned and when I first went to Oak Park, I think they had about five Black officers.

Clarence: Five. And this was out of a total force of around 300 or so?

Mr. R. Canson: Something like that

Clarence: So it was a very infinitesimal number?

Mr. R. Canson: Yes.

Clarence: And were they given basically the same types of assignments as you were given at the time?

Mr. R. Canson: No, I think most of the Black officers were assigned squad cars, they were just about eliminating the foot patrol to mobile and most of them were in squad cars and then you had a few, a couple of Blacks on motorcycles assigned to traffic. I, now when I first went on, they would lend me to traffic. They used to refer to the motorcycle as a White man's job. And so it was like that, and when I say they lend me to traffic like the State Fair used to be out, the old fair grounds was in just above Oak Park there on Broadway and Stockton Boulevard there, and the main gate was about First Avenue and Stockton Boulevard, and in the heat of the summer they needed more officers and they would assign me to direct traffic in front of the main gate of the fair ground, and that was about the extent of my traffic duties.

Clarence: This was directing traffic on foot with hand signals?

Mr. R. Canson: On foot, yeah.

Clarence: On a very hot day of course. [laughs] So after your Oak Park assignment did you get, did you find yourself advancing through the ranks of the police force in any manner that suited you or that you expected?

Mr. R. Canson: No, no. What they would do, is they would, to me, they would try, they would do their best to discourage me or something like that. I'd take the exam, every exam, all the time I was on the police force, every exam that came, I took, and I would get no further than the oral interview. If they, they would come out, you would see in the paper or something like that.

[Counter 250]

Mr. R. Canson: that says the Police Department is going to hire 19 men or the police men is going to hire 19 [hard to hear counter 251] sergeant or something like that. So everybody knew how many people was going to be hired and when I, regardless, they wouldn't tell you were you were on the list, but you had a pretty good idea, but whenever my name came out, it was always much higher than what they were going to hire for that occasion. Then when, then they had training officers and they would send officers for me to be trained and then those officers always would make higher grades than me in the oral interview, and things like that, you know. It was discouraging and after you were there a while, you know who would make a sergeant, a good one, or who wouldn't make one, and so then you talk to, some of them would tell you, they would come back and tell you and give you some inside information about what's being said and so, and what was being said about me was my, that I was arrogant, "he's too arrogant, he's too that" you know, just because you wouldn't, and it was only because I wouldn't allow them to talk down to me or anything like that. It, and like I said, being a training officer, they didn't ever really classify me as a training officer, but they would send people down to work with me to be trained. And then I'd look around and they got good jobs or something.

Clarence: So in essence, you were kind of a walking academy?

Mr. R. Canson: Yes.

Clarence: On-the-job training?

Mr. R. Canson: Yes, this was on foot patrol only, because well, when I said I went to Oak Park I was the three of us that first went out there, we were the only ones really that patrolled it on foot. They had, when we went out there we replaced some old officers that were about ready to retire and at that time the retirement age was 70. And they were 75, they were supposed to be 70, but one of them I knew was 75, so I don't know. So they weren't really patrolling, all they were doing, was being seen on the street, and they had these patrol wagons where you called in from the street post and they would call in from there. But it was just them. I, then after I left the street, I went into warrant and fugitive detail. It was mostly investigation, plain clothes investigation and what not.

Clarence: Did you find that to be more rewarding as a position?

Mr. R. Canson: Well, I thought I had, I enjoyed it more. In fact, I enjoyed going to work when I was on foot patrol, that didn't bother me. It was just the attitude of the Police Department, the people I enjoyed seeing and talking too, and it was sort of a, it was nice just to go to work. But when I thought that I had been there long enough, because I had seen, and there was no more challenge to me as a foot patrol man, so then when I did go into that job, I thought it was nice. And the reason I think that they gave me that job, was I, when I was working down on the West End during the summer, uh I worked in the moral squad as a plain clothes officer and it worked out to, they were surprised, you know, that it would work out as well as it did. So I guess, I don't really know how I really got the job.

[Counter 300]

Mr. R. Canson: But I was, again, I was at roll call one night, and I was getting ready to go to work and they told me, uh to go home and come back the next morning, I was being reassigned, and I thought it was another deal like, like when they reassigned me to Oak Park, you know, so I went down, I came, see, my platoon was working midnight shift, and they were reassigning me to warrants and that was a day time job. And then when I went to work, that's what it was, and it worked out pretty good. I thought I did a heck of a job there, I used to, what I enjoyed about it mostly was it was a lot of travel throughout the state and throughout the United States, extradition and what not. And I think I served more warrants than any body up there when I was there. I'm quite sure of that.

Clarence: Were you supposed to fulfill some type of a quota or?

Mr. R. Canson: Not really, not really.

[Tape one, Side one ends, counter 315]

[Tape one, Side two begins at counter 558]

Mr. R. Canson: The warrants came from the court, and mostly, most of the warrants were traffic warrants and then you had other misdemeanor warrants and felony warrants. So they would come maybe two or three times a month from the court, so you would then, what we'd

refer to as hot warrants, ones that are first coming down, you'd try to hit them right away to see how many you could, and then before you filed them. So I, naturally, the court would expect, you know, the warrants to be served and we, especially the, not only did they come from higher court, they came from all over the state, and then so we would serve ours and try to push ours, the local warrants first, and then we would work on at the same time, if we had them we would work on other districts', other court districts. So the main thing is the reason I say, I served more warrants, is not really making an arrest, but I used to, I learned when I went up there that they were, maybe they'd had a felony warrant or something like that for a Black guy, or something like that and they would call down to Robbery Detail if it was a robbery warrant or something like that and they, four or five officers would have to go out there to arrest this one guy, you know, and when I, what I used to do was sit there at my office and I'd call down on the streets to somebody that I knew that knew him and they, and I'd get all of this information about them and I would tell them to tell me to call me or if he didn't call me, then I would go down and arrest him myself. But if a White policeman go there with four or five officers, then everybody is going, he's going to run and he's going to move out of town or you wouldn't see him anymore, is what I'm saying. I found that to be true, and that it was out of fear that I don't know, they just figured that all Blacks were homicidal or something, I don't know.

Clarence: So, looking at it from a psychological standpoint, you felt that you weren't really taking an added risk by going by yourself and dealing on this person's terms and arresting him, you felt that it was an advantage of sorts?

Mr. R. Canson: Yeah, I preferred to work by myself, that was my preference, unless a guy gave me a reason not to. And I did have some, some close calls. I found, that in police work, the element of surprise is more than the man himself. One on one, I think I had the advantage, that's the way I looked at it. But, if I'm, I tried not to be surprised, that was the big thing. A couple of times I was surprised. I walked in on a, I had a warrant on one guy, and I walked in a house and there were five guys in there and they, all of them were armed robbers, and all were there together, I guess conspiring to pull another job, or something like that. So I pretended I didn't recognize any of the rest of them, I just talked to the guy that I came there to talk to. So then, I guess it worked because they figured that, why should they make themselves known to me, you see? And then, the person that I went there, I figured he didn't give me any trouble, and the reason I think he didn't give me any trouble was because he didn't want to do anything to give his friends away, see? So I guess they must have told him that they'd bail him out or something you know, because he came with me very and I never did let on that I recognized them, so then later on we got them. To me, this was information, you know where they were then.

Clarence: Now, being a Black police officer in a growing city like Sacramento, did you notice any discernable changes in the attitudes of Whites towards your being a policeman and your having to deal with them. In other words, did the attitudes change for the better, the more years that you served on the force?

Mr. R. Canson: Yes it did. When I first went down there I had some racial incidents that happened, but I most of them were with the Police Department, with other policeman, but on the street you had a few name calling,

[counter 600]

Mr. R. Canson: And even when you went to court even some lawyers, some of the local lawyers would attack me as a Black policeman, and of course, the judge wouldn't allow it, he'd hit the gavel and all those. But, they just thought that they could say anything to Blacks at the time. I had a I think, before I told you about uh a White woman from Tennessee and she was causing a disturbance in a Black restaurant and when I, they called me and I went down there, and I told her to leave, and she looked at me like I was a boy scout or something and kept on cursing and cursed me worse than she was cursing anybody else before, so I was a foot patrol man and I called for the patrol wagon to come by and pick her up, and she cursed me all the way in, into the station and so the next morning in court, the judge asked her, he read the charge, and he asked her "how did she plea," she said that, well she didn't know at the time you can't, a court procedure that is, you can't talk until you make a plea, you're either guilty or not guilty and then the judge will allow you to make a statement. So she wouldn't plead guilty and so he says "guilty or not guilty?" So she, pretty soon, she says "well guilty, I guess" and so he said "well what do you mean?" and she says "well I'm from Tennessee, and that Nigger, come down there telling me what to do and where I came from don't no Nigger tell no White woman nothing about what to do, and that just made me mad." [hard to hear, counter 619] So they found her guilty, and Contempt of Court too, for using that language in court, and she couldn't understand that. But, now this is in court, this is not, the Police Department tried to protect her all the time, they couldn't see any reason why I wanted to arrest her at the time, when I said, not the Police Department, but the policeman working at the time, you see, on duty.

Clarence: So there was, when in acts of racism was it most likely that an officer would try to intervene between you and a racist subject to try to get you to understand?

Mr. R. Canson: Yes, they would try to, then they would say “well he’s too thin-skinned” and some of the expressions they used to use, you know, that “you’re touchy!” Any time they can call you “a Black Nigger” or something like that but you shouldn’t resent it, you know? “We’ve been calling you that ever since you’ve been in this country.” This was the attitude, you know?

Clarence: Was this something that they did to other ethnic officers? Non-white ethnic officers like Mexicans or Orientals?

Mr. R. Canson: Well at this time they didn’t have any Mexicans. I was the only minority. The only other minority that, if you were going to call them a minority, would be a Southern European, and that would be like, and they were to some extent, if they were dark they would like an Italian call them “Dago” or something like that. But, not too much, but even those were the most prejudice too, those Southern Europeans, some of them. But they didn’t have any Mexicans at that time. The Mexicans came after me.

Clarence: So did White homeowners ever give you any flack as far as when you came to investigate crimes, property crimes, or disturbance calls, or anything like that?

Mr. R. Canson: No, no, I never, uh sometimes, when like if you went to the disturbance call, it was, but generally it was the same thing, they would give a policeman, they didn’t want to be

annoyed by a policeman. It wasn't, it didn't appear to be racial. A lot of times especially, and I worked mostly nights, at night when I had on a cap and what not, they really couldn't tell really. A lot of them didn't know that I was Black, you see. This was true of some Black families, they didn't know until later on, and they would say "well I didn't know that you were Black." If some incident would arise or something like that. See, I don't know whether you would say that would be an advantage or not. I didn't feel that was an advantage, really.

Clarence: {laughing} Yeah, it doesn't seem like much of one. You are in a dangerous situation anyway, and they are really not going to stop and see, you know, whether you are Black or White in a lot of cases, just a blue uniform I would guess. Earlier we talked about your experiences in Oak Park as a White community, what types of experiences did you have in Oak Park when the community started to change from White to Black or predominantly Black as it has been called.

[Counter 650]

Mr. R. Canson: Well as it changed, then you had friction between the White and the Black. Then my position was law and order. I didn't take any sides from White or Black, it was either you do what I say or if it's a case where I say "do what I say" it's a case of preserving the peace. Either you leave the area or you live in a peaceful manner, or you go to jail, and that was White or Black, and so, I didn't usually have too much trouble from either side in that respect. I got respect from both of them.

Clarence: A lot of people blame the decline of Oak Park's business community as a result of racial animosity or racial violence. Did you notice that racial violence was a catalyst towards the deterioration of the community, or did you, or do you think other factors were involved? Say economics or social factors?

Mr. R. Canson: I think it was economics, I think that what really put, the transition from White to Black in Oak Park was a result from the tearing down the West End. When they did that, then realtors directed most of those Black people that could afford to buy a home to Oak Park or to Del Paso Heights. That was about the only place that they could purchase a home, or get a loan from the bank. The banks were in with the real estate. In fact, when I first tried to get a loan it was either Oak Park or Old Sacramento. So I had a friend that owned the lot, it was a Black fellow that owned a lot at 55th and Folsom, so I bought the lot from him, but real estate wouldn't, but it was pretty hard when I came back. Now this was in, when I first went on the Police Department, so I would say it was around 1950, or something like that. So then when they went out there, then there was no friction really between the Whites and the Blacks. They had a big market out there, Arrata Brothers, it was a supermarket at 34th and 3rd Avenue, and they would shop and it would be Blacks and Whites, I think those were the two largest of the customers there, were the Black and White, and there were no problems there. I knew Mr. Arrata, I used to go there and he was a, although he was a millionaire, it was Arrata Brothers, they had wholesale food distributors too, but he would work there in the back of the store in overalls, and you would think that he was just a laborer if you didn't know him. I used to go there and talk to him, when I was walking a beat over there I would talk to him all the time, and he never expressed any problem of the Blacks over there. That was the largest business in Oak Park. When the store

was there, and people would come from all over town to shop at Arratas'. I'm not saying just people from Oak Park shop there.

Clarence: As a child, I can remember 35th Street being a very vibrant economic community and I didn't, as a child I didn't, I was unable to see whatever underlying problems there were.

Mr. R. Canson: Actually, what I observed that when the Blacks came and started really to cause a problem, the Blacks were the first victims really. They were preying on other Blacks, more than the White. I guess what the White would say that the property was run down, or something like that, this is what you would usually hear about is that "they won't keep up their property, so I'm going to sell out and move someplace else." But what was really happening was that they were selling those old homes to Blacks and getting enough money to move into better neighborhoods. Almost moving into a better neighborhood for the same amount of money that they were receiving from their old homes. That was usually what was happening, so that encouraged them, and it was good for real estate, and it was good for the banks.

[Counter 700]

Mr. R. Canson: Not only that, the Black realtors took advantage of it too. Blacks were doing the same thing that the White realtors, but that was, then again, this was the only way the Black realtor could make any money. Because he couldn't open up any neighborhood until they allowed him, and then when they allowed him to what they call "Block bust" move a family in

there, then he took advantage of that too. So I guess, what I'm saying now is this is what happened and those were the times.

Clarence: Those were the times. Who were the major Black realtors at that time?

Mr. R. Canson: Oh, J. R. Smith was one. I guess a couple of, I hate to just call his name because these other two that I know that aren't in business any more and I can't think of his name. Charles, Phil Charles was another one. There's one controversial one that he lost his, both his uncle and cousin - nephew, both of them lost their licenses, I can't think of them, or their names now.

Clarence: Going back to the old days, do you remember any Black realtors at all? I ran across two names, Mills and Crawford.

Mr. R. Canson: Well Mr. Crawford and Mr. Mills had a license but they didn't practice, they worked for the state.

Clarence: Oh, I see.

Mr. R. Canson: They had other jobs, he didn't do any business.

Clarence: They weren't competitive in any ways?

Mr. R. Canson: No.

Clarence: So you are saying basically that from your prospective Oak Park was a case of “Block busting” and that social and economic factors played more of a part than say the actual violence of so-called rioting or whatever, in turning the community into what it is today?

Mr. R. Canson: State that over again.

Clarence: So you are saying basically that social and economic factors had more to do with the decline of Oak Park as we know it today, than actual violence, than actual street violence.

Mr. R. Canson: I feel that that was a conspiracy in, to get Redevelopment in Oak Park. I feel that the Blacks were a tool, they were used, I, the reason I feel so strongly is because I was working out there everyday and this, attitude just came up overnight, it is just something that happened. It was an explosion and some of the kids that were involved mostly, I didn't even know them at the time. Like Chong and Jennings. This is, he was around there, but he was inconspicuous until this explosion happened. When, and it only happened on one street, 35th Street, so I felt that if Oak Park was if it was a keg and it would explode yes, at one place, but it would spread throughout the community, but it was only on 35th Street, and the Black merchants were the first to feel the heat. You had Seborn, he was in real estate, before then, they broke his windows. Then James Young, had the beauty supply, they broke in and stole all of his wigs and the most expensive items that he had in his window. There was a barber shop, those windows were broken and nothing too much you can steal out of a barber shop, but they destroyed it

because of something that he might of said to one of them the day before, told them to go on, so they come back that night and destroy the Black merchant. But then getting back to Azevedo, California Apparel, I don't remember any window being broken over there and that was a big store. There was a Larwin and Darwin Hardware Store, there was glass all around there, but I think one window was broken that I remember from that store.

[Counter 750]

Clarence: That stayed around until what 1980, 1981?

Mr. R. Canson: Yes. And all these people that I'm calling, all these White merchants belong to the Oak Park Merchants Association, and they were organized.

Clarence: That's very interesting. Did you get a chance to, aside from moving to Oak Park into the Warrants Division, did you get a chance to serve in any other parts of town, Del Paso Heights, or Glen Elder?

Mr. R. Canson: I worked in squad car I worked out in Del Paso Heights a while. Mostly on the night shift I was out there. That's one of the things I mentioned about the, I had a reference to when the people didn't know I was Black or something like that, they knew that there was a Black policeman in Sacramento, but then when I went out there to work I worked with a White officer and the White officer that I was working with, I was his training officer, or more or less, he was and I took charge, you could put it like that. So then they would talk to me like I was a

White officer and then when they found out I was Black the attitude was sort of a flip flop, you know. It's a different type of respect or something. Then they, and some Blacks would get the idea, they couldn't understand why you were, it seemed like you were taking over from this White man or something like that. He must be trying to show off or something. This was the attitude. Here I had probably been there at least 15 years, this guy was only there two or three years or something like that, but still they figured the White guy should have took it.

Clarence: Should have been in charge?

Mr. R. Canson: Yeah.

Clarence: Those are probably real hard attitudes for them to change too.

Mr. R. Canson: Yeah, but I never remarked, but you sense these things and you notice these things, and you, this was not only with Black, this was with White too, would wonder why this White guy stand back and let this Black guy do this, and actually he's learning see.

Clarence: Did you participate fully in police activities like, I guess there is an annual policeman's ball or um.

Mr. R. Canson: I was on the policeman's golf team and I went to, there was no ball, but they had banquets like for retirement, or something like that. I always participated in those because, the reason more or less, I could care less about who probably was retiring, I was just glad to see

him go [Clarence laughs] but it was, you have a little circle, even like, when I say that the Police Department is very prejudice, I had friends in the Police Department that I had known as kids, when we went to high school, and I was on team with, and we knew each other and they would tell me things you know that, and this is what kept me on the inside tract on what was going on. So, and then when I went we would all sit together around there and even so, it was sort of like well, how would you put that, the young are taking over from the old, and I'm with the young, you see. And they would look over there and see them like them young, bucks or whatever, you know, and we'd sit there and make jokes and laugh at them, you know. [Clarence laughs] This was irritating them you know. But that's what that amounted to more than anything else.

Clarence: Now you are retired now, do you still keep up close contact with a lot of the old officers that you knew?

Mr. R. Canson: Yeah, yeah, I have a few friends that we visit and they come buy and we talk, but it's just talk, that's about all it is. [Clarence laughs] I try to keep up with the Black officers and what not. I did everything I could, you know, to make it easier for Black officers behind me, I think. I think they appreciated it.

Clarence: Were you instrumental in starting say, the Black Police Officer's Association that exists now?

Mr. R. Canson: Was I what?

Clarence: Were you instrumental in helping to start the Black Police Officer's Association?

[Counter 800]

Mr. R. Canson: No, I didn't start it, but I thought it was a good idea and I thought it was needed at the time.

Clarence: How many Blacks do you think are on the police force now?

Mr. R. Canson: Oh, I guess, I would estimate about 20.

Clarence: 20?

Mr. R. Canson: I would estimate that. I don't know.

Clarence: And they are serving in all capacities of the department now, or are they still?

Mr. R. Canson: Just about, they yeah they, yeah, I guess so, just about.

Clarence: Earlier we talked about Black women police officers. Can you give me an ideal of how you feel about that?

Mr. R. Canson: I think there's a need and I think they have some good Black policewomen now, at the Police Department. At first, I didn't see how it would work out, but it has, and I was, I guess I was a convert. I'm convinced that they are doing a good job. Black and White women really. Before I left the Police Department, in fact I had occasion to have a Black policewoman to accompany me to Las Vegas, and she was quite, she did a nice job.

Clarence: So there attitude is basically is as profession as the males and as dedicated to the position of the job as the males.

Mr. R. Canson: One of the things that you at first, there was a woman, a Black woman, and she when she first came, she felt like she had something to prove, and I talked to her and I, because a woman or any man really, if he thinks that, if he comes on the Police Department and he's going, if he has to go on the street to prove something, he's going to cause somebody else some trouble. If you go and walking around challenging everybody with a chip on your shoulder, somebody out on the street is going to knock it off, and it doesn't have to be no big man, it can be a small, you know, a small person or somebody else if you are looking for trouble. So I thought that she had the wrong attitude and then once she, you know, felt like that she was a policewoman, and let the people dictate her, how she would react, instead of acting, react to what they are doing. So then, she's all right. But a policeman is nothing without the cooperation of the public, you've got to have it. I know that it can be Mohammad Ali, but he's got to have the public to have him anywhere, in any kind of a situation, you need the public to be involved really. That was my success in the Police Department. Whenever I got into anything on the street on the West End or

in Oak Park, I always had friends, and they wouldn't say anything. In fact, I had to alert them, don't ever say anything, just stand by, and that's enough really.

Clarence: In closing, do you have any comments that you would like to make that would more or less summarize your experiences or how you feel about having been a policeman or the direction you think Blacks are going in the Police Department?

Mr. R. Canson: Well, when I look back I think it was a good experience and I think that Sacramento has progressed and its still progressing. Yes, and I would advise a youngster to become a policeman if he is interested in being a policeman, but he should learn more about what a policeman really is, than just jump up there because the pay might be better than what he can get someplace else. It's attractive, but it's not that attractive.

[Counter 850]

Mr. R. Canson: You get more going to school, you know, to a better job. I would advise him that, but on the other hand, you can go there and you can major in Police Science and they have some good jobs at the Police Department. But everybody can't be a policeman, just like you can't be, everybody can't be a doctor or a lawyer or anything else.

Clarence: Or a teacher.

Mr. R. Canson: It takes a certain kind of a person I guess to be a policeman. But you can't, like I said, you can't be one with a chip on your shoulder, and you can't be a scared one. That's the main thing, is fear. Fear, most of your, most of your brutality from in everything from Black or White policeman or any policeman it comes from fear more than anything else. I'm not, a lot of people think he's a sadist, or something like that, but that's not necessarily true, they react out of fear, I think.

Clarence: I'm scared.

Mr. R. Canson: Yeah.

Clarence: Mr. Canson, I'd like to thank you for your time and for the interview.

Mr. R. Canson: Well thank you, I hope it worked out this time.

Clarence: Thank you.

[Tape one, Side two ends, counter 864]