

?

(INTERVIEW WITH AUSTIN CURTIS)  
(VERSION 1.0 REVISED OCTOBER 1991)

I think it becomes important to find out the problems that existed in terms of discrimination and the barriers that existed. What happened as far as Black people coming to Detroit, leaving the South, and of course coming here and making more money than they'd ever made. At the same time they were not prepared for the problems of urban living, which compounded the problems. A city can be very cold. When I came here in 1945, there were the pockets of where Blacks could live. On the west side, just west of West Grand Boulevard, south of Tireman. Further west out to American, that was a pocket. There was the area between John R and Hastings. The other area was Conant Gardens.

The things that you wouldn't think would prevail from a business standpoint. As one example, Avon would have separate sales meetings. The Blacks couldn't meet with the Whites. It was very interesting to me how they can talk about reverse discrimination and forget all about those things. All of these major discrimination now take the approach that there was no discrimination and now they are recognizing that there are dollars available from the Black community.

Black people tend to accept what Whites say without any  
QUC  
??? I guess that had been passed on through the generations. If you went south, most Blacks used just their initials, because the Southern Whites wanted to find out what your first name was so they could just call you by your first name. So you used your initials so that they couldn't find out what

(INTERVIEW WITH AUSTIN CURTIS)  
(VERSION 1.0 REVISED OCTOBER 1991)

your first name was. That was true when I went to Tuskegee. They didn't want to call you Mister. Those are all the things that were humiliating. Regardless of what your background or your preparations, that wasn't respected.

I went to Tuskegee in 1935 and during that time there were 300-400 lynchings a year. There was a department of lynch research and they kept a record of lynchings.

I came here to Detroit in 1945. Detroit had the reputation of being the leading city in the nation as far as Black businesses development and progress.

Now, with integration and the openings of opportunities to go elsewhere, a lot of those businesses don't exist any longer. This is a thing what is so very important that we as a people have had to cope with is controlling more of the dollars that we earn. Until we get to the point that we do that we are still in danger. We have made progress individually, but as far as I'm concerned, as a group we have retrogressed.

When I started in business, there was no competition from the major companies. The Black market was totally ignored. Now, our problem is with the majority companies.

The Housewives League was successful in promoting Black businesses. That was started by Reverend Peck. He was the minister of Bethel Church. His wife organized the Housewives League. That was an auxiliary of the Booker T. Washington Business Association. These women would go into the merchants

(INTERVIEW WITH AUSTIN CURTIS)  
(VERSION 1.0 REVISED OCTOBER 1991)

and ask for Black products that were produced by Blacks. If they wouldn't then they would see that people wouldn't buy there any longer. It was effective. As people feel that they are secure and they are satisfied with what they are, they gain insight of these other problems that exist. In the beginning there was recognition that something needed to be done. The movement of Dr. King focused attention on the problems that existed for Blacks. So many of the things that were happening to Blacks weren't recognizable because they were not publicized. I think television played an important role in making known the conditions that prevailed. Where people were secure in their own little circle, they don't have that added concern of the total problem. There are all those factors that come into play.

Much of that blame can be placed on us not recognizing what was necessary and essential.