

Willard McRae - 3/12/76 - Interviewer Eileen Hammond

This is an interview for the Russell Library Oral History Project. My name is Eileen Hammond. I am interviewing Mr. Willard McRae at 80 South Main Street which is his office at the Community Mental Health Clinic. It's March 12th and it's 9 o'clock in the morning of 1976.

Q: Mr. McRae, can you tell me how you became involved in politics in Middletown?

A: I think that the beginning of my involvement in politics was when I was about seventeen years old. At that time there was a critical housing problem for the black community. Redevelopment was taking place and everyone else in the redevelopment area had been relocated excepting the black families. I don't recall the number of them, but there were a number of them. The redevelopment area at that point was in the lower part of the city near the river. The streets were, oh, Water Street. Some of these streets no longer exist: Lower William Street, Lower College Street, an area which was known as Duck Hollow. All of this was fairly near the river and--

Q: Was that where the Riverview Center is now?

A: No, it was even below that. Much of the housing was below the tracks. It's where the present Acheson Drive is, where it runs along the river. And at that time the city's solution for the black families that remained was to erect what we called "Tent City" which was literally some tents placed on a wooden foundation in what's now known as Hubbard Park and what was known as Hubbard Park then also, which in the spring of the year, which then was occurring, is little more than a swamp, or was at that time. Maybe the drainage is better since they have some ballfields there now, but at that time it was literally a swamp. It's adjacent to Sumner Creek and it runs, Sumner Creek runs along the base of, it separates Sumner Street from East Main Street in the southern section of town. And Reverend Davage who had come to town, oh, I don't know, a year or two before this, had been active in politics in New York and saw the solution to this housing problem, saw political involvement as a solution to this housing problem. He organized the black community to register Republican, to register as Republicans, because the Democratic administration was in and obviously and they had proposed this solution. So he made a political deal or plan with the Republican candidate, who was Salvatore Cubeta, that if Salvatore Cubeta became mayor he would open up some housing which had been closed, housing which was used for the veterans on their return in the later '40's. Well, in order to deliver on his promise, I was on the committee to do this, many of the black people in the community had to be registered and we had to make certain that they got out the vote. And I worked very closely and very hard with him in registering blacks and getting them to the poles and getting them to vote for Mayor Cubeta. And that was my beginning in politics.

Q: At the age of seventeen? What did you do between the age of seventeen and now?

A: O.K. Following that I, well, I went on to college and then to the Service and when I got out of the Service I went to work for the State, and so I had to leave politics. I was covered under the (Hatch) Act so I couldn't be very active in politics. I worked for the

State until 1970, about twelve years, and then I got out of the Civil Service employment and decided to run for Council. I was asked by the then Mayor Sbona to run with him. He was running for re-election in 1971. He had won in '69 and there was an opening on the ticket and he asked me to run with him on that, and I did, and that's how I got elected to the Council.

Q: Did you have any definite ideas about what you wanted to do once you were on the Council, about the kinds of things you wanted to see done by City Hall?

A: Yes, well, generally I felt that the government ought to be open, ought to be responsive, and politics doesn't really lend itself to long-range planning. I think that what happens is as much a matter of the times as it is the people. Hopefully, you know, a person will be ready when the times dictate, like with Martin Luther King--not that I compare myself to him but, you know, that's an example that everybody knows about. And in local politics much of what happens is determined by the economic condition of the State and the economic condition of the Nation because many of your large projects locally are funded by State grant or Federal grant so that, to a large extent, what happens locally is influenced by what happens in the State and the Nation and the availability of resources and, also, in terms of programs for people. The Federal philosophy that, for example, the war on poverty, you know, was declared by the Federal Government and so local programs were developed with the cooperation of the government and private citizenry. But if the Federal Government hadn't declared a war on poverty, the local government could not have. It would be impossible for us to fund the Community Action Agency to the extent that it is funded, so--

Q: Was that, are you talking about CAGM ?

A: Yes, CAGM, right, right.

A: So, I think that my goals were limited in terms of what I hoped to do on the Council. Also, I think that my political philosophy differs from most of us and probably grows out of my social work background in that I think it's important that people learn how to exercise the avenues which are open to them and I don't think that the political practice of tying people to you through some kind of an allegiance based on the number of favors which you may have got for them, you know, it enhances the maturity of the individual. So that I've always felt that my role in helping Government to be more responsive and, you know, explaining to people how the process worked, and perhaps making a contact for them, setting up an appointment for them with the appropriate person, if they are unable to do this. But my preference would be that they set up their own appointment and then talk, and if they felt, you know, that the particular person in Government with whom they spoke hadn't provided all the answers that they sought, then I would intervene. So that, you know the theory, my feeling about this is that once a person has done this he is more able to do it on his own. I think that's the way people ought to do it, on their own. It's education and it's a matter of developing confidence to walk into City Hall. City Hall can be a very strange and confusing place if you aren't familiar with how the bureaucracy works.

Q: O.K. You said that Reverend Davage had managed to, I guess, swing the vote through the block of black registrars voting Republican. Like in the last couple of

years, has this happened again, or are you--

A: Well, the majority of black people in Middletown, by far, are registered Democrats. The town itself is 3-to-1 Democrat. That is, there are three thousand some-odd Republicans and 9,000 some-odd Democrats so that this is clearly a Democratic town and it votes Democratic most of the time. The only time that it goes Republican is when you have a mayor like Anthony Sbona who was able to, you know, present a wide appeal to Democrats, Independents and Republicans. There is a sizeable Independent block of voters, a sizeable number of people who have registered Independent. So, you know, the black population in that sense follows the pattern of the wider community in registering Democrat.

Q: I guess in essence the black people just will vote for whomever seems to offer the best deal for them.

A: I would hope so.

Q: Has there been a definite increase in black interest in politics in Middletown?

A: Yes. I think my candidacy, you know, perhaps ignited some sparks of interest in the black community in politics. Also, you know, one of the things that I wanted to do as an elected official was to try to bring more blacks into the political, I wouldn't say political, but government machinery. So that I try to make blacks aware that they need to be involved on boards and commissions that the city has, you know. The city government uses a great number of volunteers. It would be impossible to operate a government without a lot of volunteers and I think typically people think of these as businessmen, community leaders; but boards and commissions need a lot of just regular people. They need the input from lay people as well as community people with special talents. And so I try to make the black community aware of that and encourage people to, you know, submit their names for consideration for appointment to many of the boards. I think that in my original speech, the one speech that I made when I first ran, I pointed this out that there had been, to my knowledge, only one or two black commissioners. Commissioners are people who serve on city commissions and I think that at the end of my first term there were probably nine or ten blacks on various commissions, so I felt that that was achieved.

Q: What do you see as the future for blacks in politics or, not in politics, I would see the future changing for blacks in general.

A: I don't know how to answer that. Politically I would hope that blacks continue to be involved and I'm sure they will. I mean, I think there is a nucleus of people who see the resolution of many of the problems which affect blacks, you know, as being a political arena. So, and I think that there's probably a national trend also to become a part of the political process, work from within, so to speak, as opposed to demonstrating or working from without. Many of the people who were active in the Civil Rights Movement are now a part of the political process so that I think that, I think that trend will continue.

Q: O.K. Thank you.