

Willie May

Interviewer: Tell me when and where you were born.

Willie: It doesn't matter when but where. I was born in Finland, Mississippi, which is Holms County.

Interviewer: Tell me, from Mississippi, so you're from Mississippi.

Willie: Yes. Definitely.

Interviewer: Ok. Tell me when and why you came to Waterloo.

Willie: After I got married. I got married in Mississippi and my husband was here. So I followed my husband after I got married and came to Waterloo.

Interviewer: When was that, when did you get married.

Willie: 1952.

Interviewer: 1952 so that when you came to Waterloo.

Willie: No I got married in '52 but I came to Waterloo December 21, 1954.

Interviewer: 1954. Alright. That was a good time to come.

Willie: No it wasn't a good time. I thought it was. It was December 21, I never experienced anything that cold before in my life.

Interviewer: Ok. Yeah the cold is fierce especially coming from Mississippi, in the south.

Willie: Yes.

Interviewer: Tell me what would you do when you come to Waterloo? Let's talk about your employment in John Deer. I know you worked there.

Willie: Oh yeah, I didn't start working at John Deer until 1965.

Interviewer: 1965 you worked at John Deer. What did you do there?

Willie: I was a clerk typist.

Interviewer: How long would you work there?

Willie: 23 years.

Interviewer: What was it like working there?

Willie: At first, it was horrible. Because I had tried to get on at John Deer five years earlier. But of course, they weren't accepting any Negroes, as they called, it at that time. And after completing Gates College and I was recommended to Deer's and the personnel manager saw who I was and what I was. They didn't need anybody. So five years later after I'd worked at vocational rehabilitation I went on my own and applied. And I had to take a test, and see the Civil Rights Bill had been passed then. That made a difference.

Interviewer: So you are talking mid-'60s?

Willie: Yes. So I had to take the test, and I did, I passed the test without any errors. And I was hired immediately. Within hours after I'd taken the test they called me and I was to start work.

Interviewer: And again, we know that this was a time that the Waterloo community was racially charged. We talk about discrimination particularly in the job scene.

Willie: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: You had to have experienced it.

Willie: Of course I did when I first got there. And it wasn't too bad at first in that area. But because I was there and because of who I was there were some people that didn't want to work with me. And they had hired me, so here I am what do I do? I was on five jobs in one day. Trying to get a place where I could fit, where people could work with me. And finally, they settle me down in one place. And of course, it was running keyboard. IBM machines.

Interviewer: You would go through five different positions within John Deer until you would find a home there.

Willie: Yes.

Interviewer: This is because...

Willie: Because of who I was. I don't know if I got complaints from other employees or just what. But they would come and get me and say, "You're not suppose to be here, you are supposed to be over here." And I would get there, "You're not suppose to be here, you are supposed to be over here. But wherever they came and took me that's where I went. Not knowing how to do any of it. Of course, it wasn't always just typing. It was other things that go along with knowing what to type and who to type for. And one incident I was with one lady that was supposed to train me. And it wasn't a matter of training because she wouldn't speak to me, she wouldn't say anything so how could you train me if you're not gonna say anything. Finally, I spoke up and said, "I'm here. You don't have to speak, I'm not gonna quit and I'm not going to give anybody a reason to

fire me. So it looks like we're gonna have to work together." And surely enough, she didn't and I had to go to the supervisor. And the supervisor talked to her to let her know that she had to train me to let me know what to do.

Interviewer: So you would encounter similar situations like this until you would get to your fifth spot.

Willie: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: And I know there was a lady there that you worked with that was corporative she likes you. She did what everyone else was supposed to do. Who was this lady, I think we have a photograph of you and her together.

Willie: Yes. And you know what, for the life of me I cannot think of her name right now. But we worked together, we were very close, we were like families. Finally when we got together and started working. And uh, Connie Leman that's her name. And we were, we were real close, like friends, we were like family. And she would, she would show me and tell me and work with her and we did work real good.

Interviewer: So then you would, things would start to smooth out for you at John Deer at that point. And you would, in fact, retire from there. How many years did you?

Willie: 23

Interviewer: Ok. But while you were working there I know that you were doing so much, you were very active in the community in number of different ways.

Willie: Oh yes. Well, and I was a member of different organizations even before I went to John Deer. And being a member, I had just joined the Legal Women Voters that year before I joined. Then they got me working second shift. That is when I would attend the, the league had a day session and the night session. I would attend the day session of the Legal Women Voters and we would study on the issues.

Interviewer: So, Legal Women Voters, tell me one thing about that you enjoyed.

Willie: Because you was studying the laws, the issues. You were studying issues and you help to put laws on the books. I was very interested in government, I liked that.

Interviewer: Also, I know you were also involved at the Waterloo Women's Civic club.

Willie: Yes I was member of that, and of course president several times. And a matter of fact, I am president of Waterloo Women's Civic club right now. That was started in 1955 and that's a Black organization. A black lady started it in her kitchen. Just like Mr. Norman was talking about, people used to get burn out and they were poor and didn't have anything. She started this by helping people that were burned out and didn't have anything. It wasn't like you were see people were getting aid and federal funding at that

type of thing during those times. It was just whatever people would help to give you. So she started this to help the burn victims, people that got burned out. And from that it went to helping people to go to school. They weren't able to afford tuition and that. So for fifty-five years we've been sending young student, high school graduates to college. So we give stipends and we give scholarships.

Interviewer: This is great. We have a clip from the Waterloo Courier shows you in a cotton club. You are in a dress, dressed very nice. You did this for a fundraiser is this correct?

Willie: Yes that was for our benefit. The band collectors were a benefit for our scholarship.

Interviewer: So you were involved in the Waterloo Women's Civic Club. Also, I know that you were involved in the Boy Scouts as well.

Willie: Oh yeah, that started when my kids were little. I only had one son. And of course at Longfellow school they had cub scouts. And my son wanted to be a scout so badly, he came home and said, "Mom you got to be a den mother". I says, " I don't have to be a den mother." But that's what they told him if he had a den mother he could go, he could be a scout, because they didn't have a den mother for the black boys. And when he told me he wanted to be a scout, sure I volunteered to be a den mother. And would have the little boys his age that was in Longfellow school they would come to my house for den. Because I was the den mother. They were called dens then. And would train them how to cook and do baking and go camping outings and spend weekends with them in the woods cooking and horseback riding hours and hours. I was the den mother that was with the cubs scouts and boy scouts. They didn't have women in boy scouts but they made me an auxiliary member of boy scouts because they didn't have women involved in that.

Interviewer: Ok. So now, you are an auxiliary member.

Willie: Of the boy scouts. I was a den mother. See once they get older they go from cub scouts to boy scouts. And then women are not involved when they become boy scouts only when they are cub scouts.

Interviewer: Ok. Alright. Now I know there is a picture with you and a black gentlemen, he's a boy scout. Tell me the history of you and the gentleman.

Willie: He was the first black boy scout leader in the United States and he was recognized. That was Mr. Paige. Mr. J.L. Paige. And he's from Waterloo. And when he was 90 years old they had him a birthday and because he was recognized and the mayor, council people and all of us attended his birthday. Because he had been recognized by the President of the United States for being a boy scout leader, starting boy scouts in Iowa.

Interviewer: He was the first black boy scout and here you are the first den mother.

Willie: Yes. Yes.

Interviewer: Also, I know that you were busy doing those thing, you have another very interesting photograph of you and Governor Ray. I believe it was you and the governor and group of other people standing behind the governor and he is signing a document.

Willie: That was the document for the Jessie Cosby Neighborhood Senior Citizen Center. At first it was just the Jessie Cosby Center, named after a black person that was very active in the community. Because there were Senior Citizens we gathered and Governor Ray mandated and authorized funds for senior citizens of northeast Iowa. So when signed this document awarding these funds to northeast Iowa part of it was to go to Jessie Cosby for the senior citizen center. He invited us there for the signing. We were in his office when he signed this for money to go the center for the seniors in Waterloo.

Interviewer: I know that you were active in that center.

Willie: Yes, I was president of the board.

Interviewer: Ok. So you are not only active in the Jessie Cosby Center you were active in a number of other organizations that kept you very, very busy, in fact made you well known in the Waterloo community. I know that this would lead to you becoming politically active. Let's talk a little bit about how you got involved in politics. Who inspired you and why did you seek the role in politics that you took?

Willie: That came from church. And of course, having a minister that was new in the AME we have a bishop and ministers there that are from different places in the United States. We had a minister to come in and he was new and every time something would go on people would come in from out of town or in town, locally, they would ask if you know Willie May Wright. By him being new, he didn't know. He says, "Willie May so many people know you why don't you run for city council, said they need somebody for city council." And I says, "Oh no, I don't want that." So surely enough he got with other members and they said, "Yes come on lets do it." So they got behind me and I ran and surely enough served on the city council for ten years.

Interviewer: Ten years, oh my goodness.

Willie: Yes, five, two-year terms.

Interviewer: I know that you ran for the third for the first time.

Willie: For the very first time and I lost that election. Because it was with a three incumbent but it was so close that it kind of turned peoples eye to look at me. So, that council the next two years, there was a new mayor that was going to take office. He says, "You know that Willie May Wright that ran for third ward." He was gonna run for mayor, he says, "Why don't we get her to run in my place" he was a council person. So with him running for mayor he wanted me to run for his position as being the ward.

Because it had shaken and turned so many eyes. I gotten so many votes, so close to beaten an incumbent. It kind of interesting, maybe we should have somebody. And that's how I really got it, because I was on the ticket and a ticket is made up of a mayor and five council people.

Interviewer: Ok so in the fourth ward when you would run.

Willie: Yes the wards had shifted.

Interviewer: Tell me who you running, who was the mayor again.

Willie: Deblin Bowers.

Interviewer: Ok so you are on the Bowers tickets.

Willie: Yes.

Interviewer: And what year was this you guys would be victorious?

Willie: 1983

Interviewer: This would be the start of a long...

Willie: Yes. '83 to '93

Interviewer: Ok. Alright. Ok. I know while you were on city council doing a number of things in the community there would be a lot of things you would get accomplished during your term. Specifically, I want to talk about an article in the *Courier* entitled, *Kings Birthday Declared City Holiday*. Tell me your role in getting this holiday, Martin Luther King's birthday passed.

Willie: Because when the national holiday was determined the city did not recognize that it was a national holiday. And when that council meeting in January came I refused to attend council meeting. As matter of fact, I boycott the council meeting because I told them it was a national holiday. Just like Memorial Day, Labor Day, they recognize that. We don't meet on Monday night we meet on Tuesday night. Martin Luther King's birthday was on a Monday, then we can change and meet on a Tuesday because it was a national holiday and we observe it like we do all other holidays. This of course aroused an interest in the next year then an ordinance was passed that Martin Luther King's birthday would be recognized and we would honor that and we'd meet on Tuesday nights.

Interviewer: Congratulations on that great victory. A great victory. Also, I know that while you were on city council you were working in the community in a number of different capacities. In fact, you were on the board of My Waterloo Days. There is a

picture of you and Terry Branstead. You were also still on city council there. Tell me the story behind the picture of you and Governor, former Governor Terry Branstead.

Willie: Because I was on the committee to get My Waterloo Days going. And it was during My Waterloo Days Parade that he came to Waterloo and he was the lead Parader. And when the parade was over, because I was on the committee of My Waterloo days, he was making pictures the committee members and that's how I got the picture with. And with our city attorney being very close to the governor and he new him and he new Willie May and he said, take a picture with Willie May because she is a member of the My Waterloo Days Committee.

Interviewer: Ok. This is good, he is taking his picture with a powerful black who is doing a lot for the community.

Willie: Well I didn't think of it as being powerful. It was just something, its just things that you do.

Interviewer: Ok. Alright. Also, while you're on city council let's talk about what would be your greatest accomplishments as a member on that council.

Willie: There's several great accomplishments that I considered. Because one is what I consider equality. There were times, East and West side are still exist because you don't get the equalization of representation. But of course with the street reconstruction and the street improvement there weren't any streets and they were all gravel. And when the street reconstruction about and they had to pass the local option sales tax for the streets. I made sure that the fourth ward got as many streets as the others. See they were doing certain streets in certain parts of the city. But when I got on city council I knew every street name in fourth ward. That's how I was able to determine if they were getting some streets in fourth wards as well as other wards. So I made a motion that the local option sales tax would go and each ward would receive equal representation of each street reconstruction. So that happened to pass that each year so many streets in each ward would get done and not just certain streets.

Interviewer: And you made sure that fourth ward was a part of that.

Willie: Yes. Yes. Of course.

Interviewer: Lets just talk a little about your affirmative action plan. I know that was another big victory for everyone in the city.

Willie: Yes it was and something that I authored because there were so many employees. And I talked with the mayor and told him and I had black people that were tax payers as well as white. And all that I could see in city employment were whites. And all they were employing were whites. And I told him I want some of my tax payers to receive the benefits of tax paying as well as the whites. So, that's where the affirmative action program came about and I had the personnel to draft an affirmative action program and

with the attorney and the personnel they drafted this and of course it was passed and unanimously. It wasn't one that said no, it was a unanimous vote that we adopt affirmative action. That also included the minority contractors, if there weren't any minority contractors in these federal funds then the contract wasn't let, we didn't pass it, it wasn't let, because you had to have representation of the minority contractors. Or if the department had so many white you had to have a black, a minority. So that was the affirmative action program that was established while I was there.

Interviewer: This is good. Because without that plan, without you speaking out and pushing that you would have a lot of contractors that would be frustrated.

Willie May: They're still frustrated. They don't utilize it since I'm not there. And whether they do, but I told them that the plan is there. Whether they use it or not.

Interviewer: This would happen in the eighties actually.

Willie May: Yes.

Interviewer: It is long over due. Thank you, thank you very much, it is very important. Now, among your volunteer work and your work with the city council being very active and making waves and making a lot of accomplishment and making things happen. You would be recognized for a number of different awards.

Willie May: You know they just did last Sunday and I wasn't able to attend it. This voting rights celebration, this forty-year voting rights celebration. They honored me for being so active in doing registration, doing voter registration for so many years.

Interviewer: Let's talk about the Leonard Katosky Service award. Because I know that you were honored for by KBDG also because they had an award you were honored for and there were some other people that you were recognized by for your contributions.

Willie May: That was during John Roofs term as mayor and because of my volunteering with so many organizations for so many years my name was turned in. He was given my name and he bestowed upon me the Leonard Katosky because Leonard Katosky was an outstanding man that did so many parks and so much recreation and did so much in the community. That was quite an honor, that was quite an honor. And it was a surprise because they wouldn't even let me know that I was getting the award until I was sitting in the banquet. They were reading all of these things about this person who was about to receive the award. And I when they were reading I was thinking that my son was going to get the award, but they were reading about me. They told me it was going to be my son so I would be there.

Interviewer: Ok so actually you were coming to support your son.



Willie May: Yes. And I didn't know I was getting the award until they started reading and I said, "That's not my son, that's me." And surely enough they called my name and I got the award, the Leonard Katosky award.

Interviewer: So what emotions?

Willie May: Oh that was quite an emotion, because I had no idea. I would have never even thought, never would have dreamed that I was getting an award and to know that I was getting something for a man of such outstanding value.

Interviewer: Well thank you. It has been an honor and a privilege to be here.

Willie May: And I'm so sorry.

Interviewer: Thank you for given me your time.

Willie May: I appreciate you for doing this.