

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Theodore Judson Jemison

COLLECTION: 4700.1040

IDENTIFICATION: Baton Rouge reverend and civil rights leader

INTERVIEWER: Erin Porche

SERIES: McKinley High School Oral History Project - Baton Rouge Bus Boycott

INTERVIEW DATE: June 16, 1998

FOCUS DATES: 1950s

ABSTRACT:

Tape 1536, Side A

Introduction by Fred Matthews about Jemison's service in Baptist Church and his civil rights work; seems to be a group of people, Jemison asks what churches they attend, they're Baptists; Theodore means "gift of God"; named Judson after Adoniram Judson, first American missionary to China; Jemison comes from the family who owned his paternal grandfather in Alabama; born in Selma, Alabama, August 1, 1919; went to elementary school in Mobile; attended Selma University for high school, then Alabama State College; earned master's in theology from Virginia Union University; got psychology degree from New York University; is sixth pastor of 148 year-old Mount Zion First Baptist Church, where he has been for forty-nine years; had been called Mount Zion First African Baptist Church -- when he came to pastor the church, he got them to drop African from the name; father was a Baptist preacher who headed the Alabama Baptist State Convention for forty-six years; mother taught at private school; predeceased by his three sisters and two brothers; all the riders on the buses into South Baton Rouge were black, but they still couldn't sit in empty seats reserved for whites; Jemison went to city council to see if they would change this discriminatory seating rule; city council devised Ordinance 222, stating that blacks could sit in all the seats from back to front, while whites sat front to back, first come, first served; Jemison was focused on church leadership, not civil rights leadership, but believed in standing up for what was right; civil rights leaders in Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Birmingham, and Montgomery got interested in Baton Rouge bus boycott; gave boycott blueprint to Martin Luther King when he visited Baton Rouge; successful bus boycott in Montgomery, which influenced Supreme Court decision to end segregation in public schools; one day Jemison saw that a white driver was disregarding the new ordinance by not letting black people sit down; Jemison intervened, quoted the ordinance; policeman came, sided with the driver; police threatened to arrest Jemison but police sergeant said not to; the manager of the bus company, told the driver to drive, but still he refused; bus driver suspended; drivers went on strike for four days; when they came back, black community boycotted buses for eight days; city attorney

Gordon Kean supported Ordinance 222; story of Jemison sitting down on bus and getting in altercation with policeman; United Defense League united about ten different organizations with a common cause; after bus boycott, integrated lunch counters; demanded department store Goudchaux's hire black clerks; lobbied sheriff's office and police department to hire black law enforcement officers; Judge Holcombe upheld segregation as the law of the land, saying that blacks couldn't sit in the very first seat of the bus and whites couldn't occupy the very last; United Defense League sued over that front seat; this was simultaneous with the Montgomery bus boycott; after Montgomery boycott ended, black Baton Rouge bus riders could sit in the front seat, too; Raymond P. Scott, secretary of the United Defense League, very involved in Baton Rouge boycott; police were afraid to arrest Jemison because he always traveled with five armed bodyguards; Jemison's attorney told him not to use the word boycott because it was illegal; Jemison closed all the bars in black community so drinkers couldn't cause trouble during boycott; no police came into black neighborhood for eight days of boycott; Jemison and his bodyguards kept peace; anybody who caused trouble, Jemison had bodyguards "take them behind the building and pound them"; first unanimous boycott in America; all black people in Baton Rouge had had ugly experiences while riding bus; free car rides during bus boycott; couldn't legally charge, because drivers could be arrested for charging passengers without a license; at night, took up collections in mass meetings to pay drivers for gas and other car-related expenses; Mayor John Christian started a biracial committee to handle racial matters; called off boycott when they got all but the last seat; segregation was the law of the land until May 17, 1954; one of Jemison's children was the first of seven black students to attend Baton Rouge High; black students took cab to school half hour before it started so white students wouldn't be there yet; people called and threatened him over the telephone, but never to his face; crosses burned on his lawn; fear during the boycott; Johnnie Jones and Murphy Bell were their two attorneys; all desegregation efforts in Baton Rouge grew out of bus boycott; wouldn't have done anything differently; his bodyguards weren't well-versed in the Bible; Jemison tells interviewer to go to church and stay out of trouble; conclusion.

TAPE: 1 (T1536)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 46 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 23 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Interviewer comments form; Oral interview checklist

RESTRICTIONS: None