Sokiera: This is an interview for the Oral History and Cultural Heritage Center at The University of Southern Mississippi. It is eleven o’clock on November 8, 2012. My name is Jason Sokiera, and I am at the home of Mr. Richard Burger. Mr. Burger, thank you for agreeing to this interview. And first I just wanted to begin by asking you about your childhood, where you were born, where you grew up, things like that.

Burger: Well, I was born and raised here in Hattiesburg, and I did all my schooling, elementary through high school, was here in Hattiesburg in the Hattiesburg public school system. And I left when I went to college. I went to Tougaloo a couple of years, and I finished at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. And I majored in mathematics. And so from there, I—you know how you are when you’re a young kid; you don’t want to do what your parents did. And so that was one of my aims, is not to go into education, and I went through college and didn’t take any education, to make sure I didn’t teach. (laughter) But I was fortunate enough to get jobs in industry, and I did work in the industry most of my life. But the older I got, that urge to teach started coming back. I wanted to teach, and I did. I did some subbing, and I did some adjunct; I was an adjunct professor at Jackson State for several years, and I enjoyed it. I did enjoy it.

Sokiera: Was your BA in mathematics?

Burger: Yes, in mathematics from Lincoln University, yeah.

Sokiera: And then did you go on to get your—was there a master’s in—

Burger: No. No, I didn’t get a master’s. After I worked there, I did come back to Hattiesburg, and I did teach for two or three months. And from there I went to work for General Electric in the space program. And so I worked at, it’s Stennis Space Center now, but it, at that time, was Mississippi—it was called Mississippi Test Facility. And so I worked in the program where we test the first two stages of the Apollo mission that carried a man to the moon. And so I was a mathematician and computer programmer. This was back in [19]65. Yeah.

Sokiera: Did you have any troubles, I guess, when you applied for the NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] position? Was race any hindrance or help, or did they just basically go on your knowledge and your skills?
Burger: None that I would say that was noticeable. I did go there; I used to go about once a month for several months before I actually got an interview, and I don’t know. It could have been that there was no positions. You know, several times I went, and there were—and maybe, you know, I wasn’t able to apply, or maybe they didn’t have anything. But at one point, they had an opening for a mathematician, and when I was in school at Lincoln, data processing was just beginning, and I was able to take a couple of computer courses. And I have some computer courses back in the early [19]60s or mid-sixties that probably helped me as far as my background experience in data processing.

Sokiera: How long did your career with NASA last?

Burger: I stayed there seven years

Sokiera: OK. From?


Sokiera: So you were able to see a massive expansion in America’s space program.

Burger: Right, right, right. And I enjoyed it. I worked along with engineers, and I learned a lot, and I learned a lot of things that—it was a learning experience along with work and all, so, yeah.

Sokiera: You mean professional learning experience, personal learning experience?

Burger: Yeah. I’ll say right. That’s like my first assignment was to work with a guy; I never will forget him. He was a engineer named Charlie Parker(?). And at this time in the space program, when they got ready to fire a missile from the Cape, or anywhere, or test them, they put the fuel in a truck, and they backed it up and loaded the fuel. And it might take a hundred trucks to get the tank full, but midway, maybe after fifty trucks, they might see that, “Hey, we need to scrub this mission because there is a problem.” So we got to unload all the fuel. And so they had to—then you got to bring all these trucks (inaudible), get all this fuel back out, put it back in the tanks. So NASA came up with a plan to, “Let’s have a piping system that will run from the tanks directly into the engines, to load these tanks.” And so this was the first time they had that, and there were about, probably about twenty-five or thirty engineers and scientists and physicists that worked in Los Alamos that designed this system to load this fuel. And Mississippi Test Facility was the first one to use it. And so Charlie Parker and I, I worked along with him; I was under him. And it was designed to—because there was a lot of pressure and different things on these pipes and valves and everything because you don’t want an explosion. And so I worked along him, and he was a very unique guy. Just to give you a little background on him, he was a little weird. But he (laughter) had read three sets of encyclopedias and each one in a different language before he finished high school, and so you could tell how weird he was. We’d have lunch; we’d be sitting there, eating a sandwich, and he’d take a bite with one hand and take a puff off his pipe with the other hand. He was in his own world, but he was
smart, very intelligent. And there’s a lot of these things I learned from him, and I worked with other engineers, things they had to do before they can fire a missile, even little, simple things. Like from Bay St. Louis to New Orleans over to Mobile, different stations, they had microphones, and if it was overcast, they had a horn, and the sound would bounce off the clouds, and they could tell, according to how strong this is, whether they should test a missile or not. There was a lot of things to learn, like the heat from a engine, and they had stations where, in little houses and watch, but it had effect on the glass within there. So it was very interesting, very interesting.

Sokiera: So Stennis was one of the final stages before it actually went into, I guess, production, you could say.

Burger: Right, right. They did the assembly at Michoud, down in New Orleans, and they put it on a barge and send up to Stennis, and this was just the first two stages that they tested there. The one that lift off the ground, and then it was just a few minutes, very short period of time to get it up. Then it dropped off, and the next stage took over to get it on out there. Yeah. Right.

Sokiera: So did you get to work on the Saturn rockets?

Burger: Right. This was part of it, yeah.

Sokiera: So when you were watching all the early Apollo missions, you were saying, “Hey, I built that.”

Burger: Right, working along with these engineers, you get to know them personal, and sometimes you say, “Would I get on there?” (laughter) Or, “Hey!” You know? But it was very educational and enjoyable; I enjoyed it.

Sokiera: Did they have, I guess you could say viewing parties, or what have you, about all the Apollo missions and everything?

Burger: They had a—

Sokiera: Was that something on the base, I guess?

Burger: Yeah. There was a tower, where the dignitaries, they could go there and go up in this tower and watch it. And then sometimes, several times, I was at home when they actually wind up doing the firing. And I lived about ten or fifteen miles from there, and you can stand on the ground, and the change in your pocket’ll be rattling, the vibration. It was very interesting.

Sokiera: Were you ever part of, I guess, a contingent that actually went to Cape Canaveral or Houston or any of those places?
**Burger:** No. No, I didn’t. I was mainly there at the Mississippi Test Facility. That’s where I was.

**Sokiera:** So NASA was, I guess you could say, very compartmentalized where you have these engineers here and then these engineers at this spot.

**Burger:** Yeah. Right. Now some of the engineers might have gone to those places, but I didn’t.

**Sokiera:** But I’m sure you had a sense of pride when you have Walter Cronkite on TV, and he’s mentioning the Saturn V.

**Burger:** Yeah, right, right.

**Sokiera:** I guess since you were a part of NASA at that time, did you have a lot of family and friends over? Because I know they televised a lot of those.

**Burger:** Right. Not really. It was just family. It was just maybe my wife and I, who say we’ll watch it or something like that, but it wasn’t like a celebration or a party or anything like that.

**Sokiera:** It was more of just a sense of a job well done.

**Burger:** Right, right.

**Sokiera:** So after NASA, in [19]72, what did you move onto?

**Burger:** I went to work for Ingalls. It’s shipbuilding. I was doing data processing work for them.

**Sokiera:** What all did that entail?

**Burger:** At that point, I did a little—when I was with NASA I was doing more scientific-type programming, and then I began to sort of change over and go into more commercial-type programming, and I did very little of scientific with Ingalls and mostly commercial programming because there seemed to be more businesses that need it. The demand was beginning; data processing was getting there and so I figure that I needed to strengthen my background in the commercial area because there were more opportunities. And so I kind of moved on over to the commercial side. And there are two different languages of data, of computer languages that you would use, and each one—in scientific, and there’s one particular ones or some of the ones you’ll use in the commercial side.

**Sokiera:** Do you remember which one was at NASA and which one was at Ingalls?

**Burger:** NASA had both of them because you had a commercial side; you had to do payrolls or inventories, and you had these kind of things. And a lot of these things were
handled from the commercial side, but the scientific side, well, there was number crunching you used for scientific side. Engineers need to do equations or these type things. That’s the scientific side. And that’s where you need a math background, to be able to solve formulas and problems. You got to be able to take a formula, look at it, and write a program that will solve that, that you can execute that will solve that particular problem.

**Sokiera:** So very much the beginnings of, I guess, modern computer programming where you have all these different systems. Do you recall which specific languages they were called?

**Burger:** Right. The scientific was FORTRAN [formula translation], and the commercial side was called Cobol [common business oriented language]. And those were the two main languages. And there are a lot of smaller languages, the report-generator-type things that was used in them. But FORTRAN Cobol were the main languages.

**Sokiera:** Do you know if they’re still used today, or have they morphed into, I guess, bigger and better versions?

**Burger:** Every now and then you’ll see some company looking for maybe a FORTRAN or Cobol programmer, but it’s very little. They few and far between. I would say, my guess would be it’s probably might be down to about 5 percent or something like that. And somebody was telling me a few years ago, I think like here, Hancock Bank, I think they still uses Cobol as a commercial language. So a lot of these other languages, they have gotten simpler, easier to use. And I’ve seen, in my time I’ve seen the computer go from—we used to have a computer had 16 K, where a laptop now is probably 100 times powerful than what we had back in that day, where a PC, you got gigabytes of memory and disk space. When I first started, they didn’t even have disks on them. (laughter) And they began—it first came out they had disks, and they also had what they called drums. UNIVAC [universal automatic computer] came out with a drum, and the drum didn’t do as well. And the disks wound up being the one that’s used, and are still used today. And the computers we used—I was at Slidell computer center, and those computers today, the floor where they were would probably be about as big as a gym floor, and it was full of computers, you know, computers, mainframes, and disks, tape drives. And your laptop at home probably today is more powerful than that, and that was taking up a whole gym floor. That’s kind of the difference in back then in the [19]60s and today.

**Sokiera:** The miniaturization of—

**Burger:** Right. And they had tubes in them. A lot of computers still had tubes, and like today it’s a different day. You can put it under your arm or in your pocket. (laughter)

**Sokiera:** (Inaudible)

**Burger:** Right. It’s really been compact.
Sokiera: So when you were working at NASA, the computers were still—were they vacuum tubes, or were they transistors?

Burger: When I first started, a lot of them had vacuum tubes. Yeah, they had vacuum tubes.

Sokiera: Do you recall, was there an effort to, I guess, do the big switch, get rid of the tubes and go all transistors?

Burger: As—

Sokiera: It worked?

Burger: Yeah. As technology was developed, they would phase it in because it’s the government, and they could afford it, and they could get it, and they wanted the best, and they did get the best. And they changed with technology. You just have to stay abreast and change with it, or you get left behind.

Sokiera: Were you paying attention to the Mars landings, I believe, this past summer, where everything had to work perfectly to get that lander on the surface?

Burger: Right. I did, but I wasn’t watching it very close. I see it on the news and sort of kept up with it that way.

Sokiera: Has your experience at NASA, has it, I guess, peaked your interest in, I guess, space-related—

Burger: I still observe and listen. When they fixing to do something, I will pay attention, but I’m not really up on it or following it day to day. As things begin to happen, something new or a launch or something like that, I’ll pay attention, or a landing, these type things. But I’m not on top of it, say, daily, as to what they’re doing and changes they’re making.

Sokiera: Is there, I guess, any sort of reunions or anything for people [who worked at NASA]?

Burger: They had, I’m trying to think was it last summer or summer before last? There was a big reunion down at Stennis for people who had worked there. And I had planned to go, and something came up, and I didn’t go. But one or two people that I have stayed in contact with, and some people I’ve lost contact. The guy I worked [with], he and I worked side by side; he left and became director of computer services at Loyola in New Orleans. And later on, I’ll say about twenty years ago, I was director of computer services at Jackson State, and both of us, our departments were doing a lot of the same things, and a time or two, by knowing him, and we were still buddies, and I could call him and bounce things, ideas off of him, and see how they do them, things that I can use to help me. And eventually I was able to get the business office and the registrar’s office and the financial
aid office and alumni office, and each one of them took a couple of representatives, and we went down and looked at their systems to ask questions. They had questions; they was able—they spent the day in those departments, like, “We having problems with this. How are you handling that?” Just to get some new ideas, some outside ideas, to try to improve things at Jackson State. Even when I was director, I became friends with a gentleman here at USM [University of Southern Mississippi]; I believe his name was Bateman (?) or something like that, years ago. And I would come down and spend a day with him and talk and see some of the things they are doing, to just get some ideas. Some things you might not do it exactly, but it’ll light up a light for something else you can improve.

Sokiera: Was your friend working at Stennis at that time, when you were at Jackson State?

Burger: Well, the one at Loyola, yeah, we worked together at Stennis, together. And so he has since retired. I think he’s living there in Slidell, but I think I could find him. But we got to be very good friends, which that was almost like forty-something years ago; (laughter) talking about forty-five—

Sokiera: (Inaudible) friendship.

Burger: Yeah, right. I’ll say forty-five years ago.

Sokiera: Well, those are always the good ones to have.

Burger: Yeah. Right.

Sokiera: The long-lived friendships and everything.

Burger: Exactly, exactly.

Sokiera: How long were you at Ingalls?

Burger: I only worked there a couple years, two or three years maybe. I left there and went into retail business; I went into a clothing business for two or three years. And then I went back to data processing.

Sokiera: Where was the retail job at?

Burger: I had a clothing store here, and I had a clothing store in Jackson.

Sokiera: So you were the owner of it?

Burger: Yeah. Well, I had a partner. It was two of us.

Sokiera: So it was a joint business venture.
Burger: Yeah, right, right.

Sokiera: Was it just—

Burger: It was men clothing.

Sokiera: Oh, OK. Sort of like, I guess like a Joseph A. Bank or something like that?

Burger: Right. Yeah. We carried men’s suits, high fashion clothes, shoes, the whole thing. It was a good business we did. We did good in it and got real good support. And I would say a very nice, say, like the suits, a lot of them had fashion to them, but it just wasn’t your regular two- or three-button suits. A lot of them had some styling in it, but it was nice and clean. It wasn’t nothing very flashy or anything. We had some that was flashy, like, we even had some orange suits, some red, and satin, and all these kind of things.

Sokiera: The big, wide lapels and everything?

Burger: Yeah. But there was a lot of athletes that we sold to. We even dressed Walter Peyton up when he went to sign his contract with the Bears. People like Walter bought clothes from us. Another number-one draft choice, Donald Reese went to Miami, and there’s another boy; he played with Houston. There was a lot of players from Alcorn, Jackson [State], lot of players from Valley [Mississippi Valley State], or Ole Miss, that bought clothes from us.

Sokiera: And they all came to your store. What was the name of the store?

Burger: Rick and Vick(?). And a lot of professionals, a lot of professors and doctors, lawyers we sold clothes to. And we did a lot of shipping. We shipped clothes out of state to a lot of places. And a lot of people bought clothes. We would go to New York a couple times a year to (inaudible) and to Dallas and do our buying, try to stay current, stay on top of the latest, have the latest things. And one thing we tried to do was—I always say you got to have some little unique to get the person. We started; we had a girl, a seamstress. If you came in and buy a pair of slacks, and all you needed was the hemming, we hem the slacks before you leave. You don’t leave and come back or come back, next week, seven days from now to get your slacks. We can do that hem in ten minutes. And so when you buy your clothes, we measured it, gave it to the girl; we had the right equipment. We hemmed it, gave it to you, and you were gone; had your clothes and gone. That mean if you wanted to attend something Friday night or Saturday night, and the last minute you see, say, “Oh! I need an outfit,” you can come in Saturday, get your clothes, hem it; you wear it Saturday night.

Sokiera: What was, I guess, what was advertising like back then? I guess that’s the midseventies?
Burger: This was the early [19]70s. We did a lot of it ourself. We attend things, things that we felt that people was our clientele, we attend these things. And you meet people, and there was a dance show on WLBT in Jackson, and there was a guy, we furnished his clothes for the dance show, so we got advertisement there. And another thing we specialize in, back in that day, the large guy or the very tall guy had trouble finding clothes. And your department stores like Gayfers or Godchaux and these stores, and these stores, McRae’s, they didn’t carry nothing for the big man. And so we, when we go to New York, we try to find suits that the big man, casual clothes. The big man couldn’t find no casual clothes, you know, shirts or slacks, where he can dress up and look nice, also. And some guys come in, if you can fit them, they’ll buy everything you got. And you stayed out of clothes in the big- and tall-men’s area. And so that got to be a big part of our business. Big men like to look nice. They two-piece suit, like casual suit, say, if he went out to a sporting event or something, we had a two-piece suit. He can come in, get him a nice shirt, a nice two-piece suit, nice shoes, and he could go out and look nice like a small guy. (laughter)

Sokiera: Where were your stores located, I mean, in Jackson and in [Hattiesburg]?

Burger: In Jackson, we was across from the Jackson Mall, right there on Bailey(?) Avenue, and that was the mall then. Let me see. I think that was the first mall in Jackson, the Jackson Mall. Then later they moved to the Metro; Metro became the main mall, and then North Park became the next mall. But we was directly across the street. That was the best place for us because it was statistics showed that small businesses, majority of them didn’t make it in the mall, but we was in a little strip, sitting across from the mall. And the rent was better, and it was a very nice place, and we were like—the mall was an attraction for us. People go to the mall, and then they come across the street to us. We did a good business. And here we were down on Cade(?) Avenue, here in Hattiesburg.

Sokiera: How long did you operate those businesses?

Burger: About three years. After three years, I got out. And my wife was expecting, and so I said, “Let me get back where I can get some health insurance and a steady job.” And I went back into data processing. And when I went back, I stayed in it. I’ve been in another business or two. About ten or fifteen years later, I went into—a couple guys, we went into a manufacturing business, but basically I been, data processing been my main line.

Sokiera: Was it still called Rick and Vick when you left?

Burger: Yeah, it was still called Rick and Vick.

Sokiera: Where did you meet Vick?

Burger: He was from Hattiesburg also; both of us from Hattiesburg. And we grew up probably a couple blocks from each other. We been knowing each other all our life.

Sokiera: So you were friends from childhood?
Burger: Yes, right.

Sokiera: Well, is the business, is it still in operation?

Burger: No, no.

Sokiera: Do you know when it closed?

Burger: I would think it probably closed about [19]75, [19]76, somewhere in that time frame because I was out of it at the time, and I would say somewhere in the mid- to late [19]70s, somewhere.

Sokiera: Didn’t have your guiding hand at the—(laughter)

Burger: I’m not sure what happened.

Sokiera: Well, I guess the nature of business, things come; things go.

Burger: That’s true; that’s true.

Sokiera: So you went back into data processing?

Burger: Yeah. I went back into data processing, and that’s where I went; back there for a long period of time, and I went into manufacturing with a couple of buddies, and so stayed in that for a couple years, but I continued to do data processing work also.

Sokiera: When did you get the, I guess, the teaching bug?

Burger: It was probably, well, around the late [19]80s, mid- to late [19]80s. That’s when I started getting that urge. I felt I could, what I’ve learned through experience, maybe I could help somebody, the experience I have; I had learned, and I could try to help pass it on.

Sokiera: Is that when you went to JSU [Jackson State University] to teach?

Burger: Right, right. I did adjunct at JSU while I was there, and I was working full-time and then teaching a night class.

Sokiera: Oh, OK. What was your full-time job?

Burger: I worked for a couple insurance companies, like Standard(?) Life Insurance and Blue Cross, and I did work for them. Then eventually, I went on and worked full-time at Jackson State. I left those jobs and went full-time.

Sokiera: So the adjunct led into a full-time position.
Burger: Right, right.

Sokiera: Were you still living in Jackson at the time?

Burger: Right.

Sokiera: What classes did you teach?

Burger: I taught Cobol, FORTRAN, the languages that I had been using.

Sokiera: Both adjunct and full-time?

Burger: No. When I was teaching it was just adjunct. I was just adjunct professor, but when I went full-time, I started out as director of the academic research computer center. And then I went from there to assistant director of computer services, and later on I became director of computer services.

Sokiera: So I guess those are more administrative positions?

Burger: Right, purely administrative, yeah, right.

Sokiera: So what was your job descriptions for those various positions?

Burger: It was, academic computer center was mostly trying to provide or give services to more the academic side and also to the staff. When I say staff, at that time word-processing, spreadsheets, and these type things were beginning to develop, and so to try to do workshops to get like secretaries and different people, the staff, to use word-processing, to move to automate the systems. Then when I went to computer services it was to provide services to the whole campus. We provided the computers, made sure that the academic side had computers or whatever they needed to do what they needed to do, but the academic side, the one that did the teaching and ran that side, but we had to provide the hardware. The academic side, we provided services like the registrar, the business office, and alumni, financial aid, and then the departments, as far as getting them up, that’s when more people started trying to get online, using the modem. We (laughter) started out with the modem, and so to train people how to use it, how they can use the terminals or the PCs online, these type things. So it was to provide services to the academic side.

Sokiera: Now, would that be similar to, I guess, today’s IT [information technology] departments, like in major corporations?

Burger: Yeah, right.

Sokiera: OK. Like I know at USM they have the ITech people. So basically you were in charge of all of that.
Burger: Right, right.

Sokiera: And that’s all based on your many years of experience with data processing.

Burger: Right.

Sokiera: Did your adjunct position lead directly to the directorships, or was it sort of like a happy coincidence?

Burger: It was I guess probably like a kind of coincidence. A position became available, and I was able to be the one to fill it. And then the same thing on the director side, I was able to become the assistant director, and after several years, the gentleman that was director had a stroke, and I became the acting [director], and then later I became the director.

Sokiera: How long were you at JSU?

Burger: Probably all told, probably about ten or twelve years with the adjunct through my director’s position.

Sokiera: Was JSU, was that your last full-time job?

Burger: No. I left there and went to work for Central State in Wilberforce, Ohio. I worked there about two years, and I stayed there two years. And after two years, I came back home. My mother was getting older, and I came back to look after her. That’s why I’m back in Hattiesburg.

Sokiera: So she was living in Hattiesburg?

Burger: Yeah. So I figured she needed me. Yeah.

Sokiera: Are you retired at the moment?


Sokiera: Took that as a sign that, “OK. Take it easy.”

Burger: Yeah. Right, right.

Sokiera: And are you the treasurer for your church?


Sokiera: OK. Is that a purely volunteer [position]?

Sokiera: So it’s a service.

Burger: Right. Right.

Sokiera: What church do you belong to?

Burger: St. Paul United Methodist Church.

Sokiera: How long have you been a member of that church?

Burger: Well, all my life, well, pretty much. I was christened as a baby, and then when I moved to Jackson, I moved my membership, but I was still United Methodist, and so when I came back home, I joined my church back, the one where I started out as a baby.

Sokiera: So your parents were both Methodists, as well?

Burger: Right, right. They were members there. Right. They joined probably about 1940 when they moved to Hattiesburg. Right.

Sokiera: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Burger: I have two brothers. Yeah, it’s three boys in all. I got two brothers.

Sokiera: Are you the youngest?

Burger: I’m in the middle. I got a older brother and a younger brother.

Sokiera: What are their ages?

Burger: My older brother is seventy-five. My younger brother is sixty-five.

Sokiera: I think you mentioned that you said you were seventy-two?

Burger: Seventy-one.

Sokiera: Seventy-one, OK. Don’t want to add to it!

Burger: It doesn’t matter. They say the older you get, you start saying, “I’m only seventy-one a half,” or three-fourths, kind of like a kid. The kid’ll say, “I’m three and a half.” So you start going back to your younger days. Yeah.

Sokiera: Yeah. Once you reach those upper years, you’re, “Yeah, thirty-something or forty-something,” more like the low end of thirties and forties. But I noticed that you do have, “The grandchildren are a blessing.” How many do you have?
Burger: Four.

Sokiera: Oh.

Burger: Yeah, four. I spoil them rotten. (laughter)

Sokiera: That’s what grandparents are for.

Burger: Right. I put the spoil on them and send them home. (laughter)

Sokiera: Exactly. The great part about being a grandparent is, “Oh, OK”—

Burger: Right. It was one was here yesterday. He wear you out. He’s two and a half, and he’s full of energy. You enjoy them. And he gets here and get under the table and throw books and enjoy himself.

Sokiera: Yeah. I was just recently up in Jackson, visiting some friends, and they have a three-year-old-son, and he’s wild and crazy as a three-year-old is. (laughter)

Burger: Yeah. We love them all.

Sokiera: Um-hm. So how many children do you have?

Burger: A girl and a boy, yeah, son and a daughter.

Sokiera: Are your grandchildren evenly split between the two?

Burger: No. My son, he has three, and my daughter has one.

Sokiera: Well, that’s wonderful, of course. Did they all grow up in Hattiesburg or Jackson?

Burger: Jackson.

Sokiera: Or between the two?

Burger: Yeah. Well, I’ll say one grew up in Jackson, and the other one grew up on the Coast. Yeah. But they both live in Jackson. One live in Jackson; one live right out Jackson. Yeah. So they up there together now.

Sokiera: Um-hm. Now, you were in Wilberforce, Ohio for about two years?

Burger: Right.
Sokiera: Was it different in Ohio as opposed to, I guess, going to New York and doing [your] clothier buying and things like that?

Burger: The program I worked, I was manager of a program up there, and it wasn’t, not really data processing. I had a NASA contract, a contract with the National Aeronautic and Space Administration, and the contract was to take kids out of Watts, high school kids out of Watts and bring them over to Ohio for the summer and teach them earth science, mathematics, some English, computer science. And these kids, they were selected from two or three high schools there in Watts, Morningside. There was a couple of other high schools; I don’t recall those names right now. But it’s to try to get—we look more at the, say, maybe around the tenth grade, tenth, eleventh grade, and these kids applied. And the ones we accepted—we accepted about sixty or sixty-five students. The ones who had strong grades, very good grades up to around ninth or tenth grade; then for some reason, the grades start falling. So we wanted to—it’s like finding a diamond in the rough. We wanted to get those kids and try to motivate them and get them going again. And so all A students get scholarships. They the ones who get everything. So we were not looking for any A students. We didn’t want no A students. We wanted the students who we could probably, maybe we can bring them back. For some reason their grades started falling, but we felt the ability was still there. And so we wanted to help those kids. And the other thing we did, NASA wanted to—we’d work with these kids for six months there at Central State in Wilberforce, Ohio. Every other weekend, we had field trips. We went to like Lewis Research Center; that’s a NASA site up in Cleveland, Ohio. We’d rent a bus, two buses, and we’d go up there, and they would demonstrate the research that they are doing for NASA. And they did things like, they had a hole drilled in the ground, probably about a mile, and they could treat it like a vacuum. And then they could drop things in there, and other research they did. And they had planes, like a big, commercial plane, and small planes, and they’d take the astronauts up and go as high as that plane could go and take a dive. And the inside of it was padded, and the astronauts are like weightless. And so all these things were demonstrated, and they didn’t take the kids in the plane, but they showed them what their research was. And we went out, up in some hills and mountains where they had, say, one field trip might have been, people had been doing coal mining, and they had vacated the mines, and water running out of the mines, and you have that ore that’s running in the streams, and then we did little projects like we found out that you could take cattails and use that, and for some reason, we had some other scientists who really worked with this, and it sort of more like after it ran through a lot of these cattails, it sort of purified the water. The end result where it was coming out these caves, it had that iron ore to it. And we went to the Mammoth Caves in Kentucky, and they could walk for miles through these mountains, through these caves. And there were a lot of things that I learned (laughter) right along with the kids! A lot of the stuff I wasn’t aware of. And then after the end of six weeks, we take a two-week bus tour. We go to historically black colleges, everywhere they had a NASA contract, where NASA had a research programs going on in these black colleges, and it was to try to expose these kids to a black college. We’ll start out at Nashville. We go to Fisk University, Tennessee State University, and each one of these schools would do a demonstration on the research that they are doing. Like some of them was robotics; some was laser. And from there, the next day we’ll spend the day down in Huntsville, Alabama. They go to the space center there, and they get a chance to
go back in there where the astronauts are. They got a place for the visitors, but they actually, the kids could talk with and work with the astronauts and see the things, the training that these astronauts go through, and they get a chance to spend a whole day there. And from there down to Montgomery, we go there. To Tuskegee, Atlanta, a couple of days there, Morehouse College, Spelman College, Clark, Atlanta, and on down to Tallahassee, then by that time it’s the weekend. We come back. We usually spend the weekend on—I did this two years, and we spend the weekend down on the Gulf Coast, Bay St. Louis, somewhere. And then we’ll go out; Saturday we’ll go to aquarium there in New Orleans; go to Stennis Space Center that Saturday morning. And Sunday, they spend the day resting and washing clothes and getting ready for the next week. And then we go to Dillard and Xavier University, New Orleans, on over to Baton Rouge the next day. And from there, we go to Houston; spend time in the space center there in Houston. And from Houston, we’ll fly back to L.A.. And so it was very educational for me. I learned a lot of things, and the kids enjoyed it. We went to Tuskegee, and these kids out of L.A., they’d never seen a pig, or hog or cows, or sweet potato coming out of the ground. They really enjoyed it; they really enjoyed it.

Sokiera: It was a real, I guess, eye-opening experience because, like you said, these were basically city kids, and they’d never experienced any of that.

Burger: Right, and never seen it or never heard of it, but it was a lot of fun.

Sokiera: And this was all through NASA?

Burger: Right. NASA sponsored the whole—the flight in from L.A., they’ll usually fly into, most of the time into Columbus, Columbus, Ohio, and we were sixty miles out of Columbus, and we’d bus them back down to Wilberforce. And then stay there on the campus at Central State, and they stayed in the dorm, and they ate in the [cafeteria] there on campus.

Sokiera: This was like about what? A three month program?

Burger: It was, on campus it was six weeks, and then other, two more weeks on the road.

Sokiera: So basically, like a two-month, summer camp?

Burger: Yeah, right, right.

Sokiera: I mean, that sounds like a great opportunity.

Burger: Yeah. It is; it is.

Sokiera: Do you know if NASA is still doing that program?

Burger: I don’t think so. I don’t think so.
Sokiera: Did NASA come and ask you to do this program, or did you found out about it through I guess—

Burger: I found out about it through someone else. They wrote a grant to get, and I knew the person, and they offered me the job, to manage it.

Sokiera: They saw the NASA line on your resume, and they said, “Hey, look at this guy.”

Burger: Yeah. It was a lot of kids. It wasn’t all academic for the kids. We had instructors where, in the evening, we made sure that we broke them up into little teams, and they had volleyball games. And it was like a tournament, a league, and they competed against each other in volleyball, basketball. There were different sporting events. And they spent two or three hours every day doing this. It wasn’t just your head down, and your elbows up, and working all the time, teaching. We tried to keep it structured, and keep some fun in it.

Sokiera: Do you recall what years this was?

Burger: It was about [19]95, ’96, somewhere. It was the midnineties. Now, it may have been [19]96, ’97, somewhere in there.

Sokiera: I think NASA was doing pretty well as far as budgetary things during those years. I know the past couple years have been pretty lean as far as NASA funding and stuff.

Burger: Right, yeah, because even during that time I went to a workshop, the kids wasn’t involved. I was able to go down to the Space Center, and go to the Cape, and they had a firing. That’s when this lady, Jemerson(?), she went up. But I was able to see a launch, which I enjoyed that. By being part of this workshop, I was able to—I wasn’t a dignitary, but they let me go there with the dignitaries. And you’re pretty close to the stand where the liftoff is, even the vice president of the country was there, Dan Quayle. At that time he was there, but it was very nice, very nice.

Sokiera: Do you recall the name of the program?

Burger: Well, we gave it a name of Earth to L.A. (laughter), since the kids were from L.A., dealing with earth science. And we called it Earth to L.A., but now, I’m not sure what NASA called it.

Sokiera: Right. The official NASA grant name for it. But Earth to L.A., that sounds like a pretty good name. Maybe it stuck; maybe it is called Earth to L.A. One never knows. But you were telling me earlier about what originally brought you to the listening session was Mr. Martin.
Burger: Right. Yeah. I mentioned when Kennedy was elected president, in I believe about 1960, he called in the attorney general, which was his brother Robert, and told him that we need to do something to help blacks vote. And he said, “We got to do something.” And from there Robert formed the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, and he had John Doar as the head of the Civil Rights Division at that time, and the first attorney hired was Gordon Martin. And Gordon’s assignment was to, like I mentioned earlier, the assignment was to come straight to, they came straight to Hattiesburg. Can you cut it off for a minute? (brief interruption) Gordon Martin was hired by the Justice Department as the first attorney, and they came to Hattiesburg. And they took up the case of, the case wound up being *The United States versus Theron Lynd*, the registrar of Forrest County. So they came here to develop a case because in the [19]40s, in Forrest County, there were blacks who voted. And they were about—I got a copy. Let me see can I find it. Some of the blacks who voted in—let me see. You can have that one. These are blacks who voted in Forrest County in the [19]40s, but the Mississippi legislature passed a law in the late forties, around [19]47, ’48, somewhere in there, that they purged all the rolls. And everyone had to register again to vote. And so the registrar in Forrest County at that time was a gentleman named Luther Cox. Luther Cox passed; he died in office, and Theron Lynd ran for that position. And Theron Lynd became registrar, and also the Mississippi legislature said that people needed to fill out a sworn, written application for registration and had to interpret a section of the Constitution. And this is a copy of it. I can make you a copy. That’s a copy of one, the application my mother made, Ms. Burger. But in this process, people, blacks were not able, as far as the registrar concerned, wasn’t able to interpret sections of the Constitution, so they were denied the right to vote based on that information. And so but these people, there were about—I’m not sure the exact number—twelve to fifteen people who wound up being in the first case as the people who testified in the case. And these people, there were maybe six or seven people from Royal Street at the time; it’s Rowan now. But at the time it was Royal Street High School. These people had master’s degrees. Like the English teacher, Miss Eloise Hopson(?), she had a BS degree from Spelman College and Columbia University, New York. There was a gentleman named Chester Stagar(?). He had a B.S. from Jackson State and a master’s from Wisconsin, the University of Wisconsin. Another guy named Robert Lewis(?) finished Alcorn State University; he had a master’s from the University of Oregon. He was in science and chemistry. Another man named David Robinson(?), he finished Alcorn and a master’s from Cornell University. He was in biology. You had Miss Samoford(?) who had a degree from Tuskegee University and graduated from New York University. Miss Burger had a BS from Alcorn and finished, had a master’s from New York University. And these people, these were some of the people who took the test, made application, took the test, and they took this test several times and was unable to pass, pass the test. And they had master’s degrees. And there were other citizens also, like Richard Boyd(?), worked at Hercules, and Willis Simpson Sr. (?), he worked at Hercules. And these people also, they took the test, and they were unable to pass, and they were a little afraid on their job. And everybody, even the teachers were, at this time, because a lot of places, you just—the school system would let you go. And by letting you go, your family is depending on you, on that income. And you have kids; you have bills, and obligations, so you needed to work. And like at Hercules, Mr. Simpson and Mr. Boyd—
Sokiera: I’m sorry. What was Hercules?

Burger: Willis Simpson Sr. and Richard Boyd both of them worked at Hercules but their supervisor, they were—.

Sokiera: I’m sorry. Hercules was?

Burger: Hercules was probably one of the main industries in Hattiesburg at that time that hired people and paid real good salaries. So if you worked for Hercules, you could make a average salary or above-average salary of people in Hattiesburg.

Sokiera: What did they focus on?

Burger: It was more like a chemical company. I think made things like rosin, a lot of things they extracted from pine, pine stumps, and different stuff like that. And the two gentlemen at Hercules, they were a little reluctant, and their supervisor, which was a white man—I’m going to have to look his name up, but I think it was Duncan or Duggan or something like that. But he told them; he say, “Go ahead and pursue this, and I guarantee you your job. Nobody will fire you from here.” And so they did go ahead, take the test, several times, just like everybody else. And you had ministers, like St. Paul’s United Methodist Church pastor had a degree, had a master’s degree from Columbia University in New York. He failed the test. He took the test several times and failed it. Then you had another reverend, a Reverend Pittman(?). Reverend Pittman had a saying: a voteless person is a worthless person. And he took the test, and he was one of the—several times. And he was one of the ones that failed. And there were several other people, maybe another three or four people, who was part of this suit. And this suit was tried in Jackson in the court of Harold Cox. Harold Cox was the federal judge there, and they tried this case. And at the end of this case, Harold Cox never ruled on it. And far as I know, to this day there hadn’t been a ruling on this case. And they say he was a very smart judge, and if you go look at Harold Cox’s civil rights cases that he heard, most of them was overturned at the Fifth Circuit. They appealed, and at the Fifth Circuit they was overturned. But in this case, Harold Cox wouldn’t rule, so they couldn’t appeal. (laughter) And this sort of caught in a catch-22, and so finally they were able to help prove this case, although these people was failing, Gordon Martin and John Doar, they got a Hattiesburg High School annual. And they looked in there, and it was a old annual. They say, “These people should be voting age.” So they got the FBI out of New Orleans to come up and find some of these people and interview them. “Are you registered to vote in Forrest County?” And they found people who was registered to vote in Forrest County, and when they interviewed these people, they found some said yes. And the ones that they found, they also asked them about the test. Some of them didn’t even take the test, but they was registered. And some took the test and was there maybe five minutes and passed the test, where when the blacks who took the test, they had to come back a day or two later, and he’ll say, “Well, you didn’t qualify. You got to take it over.” And this was the process for blacks, but they even found some whites, one or two whites, who could not even read or write, and they had passed the test. And so these people were subpoenaed to testify also. So this was the thing that helped complete the case, how the office was run, the registrar’s
office was run. And so finally, the Civil Rights Division, John Doar and Gordon Martin, they were able to get the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals to come to Hattiesburg and hold a trial. But the trial they held, there were different people who testified. And from there they made a ruling. I think there were five judges, had to come in, some from New Orleans, some from Houston, and different places, who came in and held this trial. And then they made a ruling. Once that was done, this legislation was given to Congress, the U.S. Congress, and the Voting Right Act of 1962 was developed. Lyndon Johnson signed the bill. After that legislation was passed by Congress, South Carolina and other states in the South contested that ruling. They went to the Supreme Court to say, “This is unconstitutional.” And so when they went to the Supreme Court, the Supreme Court heard the case, and in that case, this was the ruling that the Supreme Court ruled. I’ll let you read it.

Sokiera: [Reading from Martin’s book] “An insidious and pervasive evil through unremitting and ingenious defiance of the Constitution had been ended.” Exactly, um-hm.

Burger: Let me see. That case, yeah, that paragraph.

Sokiera: “When it was challenged by South Carolina and other affected Southern states, Chief Justice Warren recalled on behalf of the Supreme Court our Forrest County witnesses who were rejected despite their baccalaureate and MA degrees. The Hattiesburg teachers barred from taking part in the democracy they were acquainting their students with and the way the order of the Fifth Circuit had been defied in Forrest County, which then leads to the insidious evil was ended.” Which is true. You can’t just arbitrarily disenfranchise people.

Burger: Right. And so their testimony led to the Voting Rights Act of 1962.

Sokiera: Was this all under the U.S. versus Lynd?

Burger: Yeah. Right, all of that was under U.S. versus Lynd. And so it came out of Hattiesburg.

Sokiera: It took a long time to get everything all passed.

Burger: Right. A couple weeks ago, I went and talked to a group who’s responsible for putting historical markers around Forrest County, and I asked them would they recognize these people. And they are working on it, and I also asked could the marker could be put over, across the street, see, at Rowan School where these people worked.

Sokiera: And your dad was pretty integral in this, as well?

Burger: Yeah. He could vote. That’s why he wasn’t part of it. But these people couldn’t. Now John Doar spent a lot of time here in Hattiesburg, probably a year or so. And he and John Doar worked hand-in-hand, handpicking a lot of these people. It might not be in the book, but he was, I guess, kind of like an advisor and might have talked to
some people to encourage them to do it. Yeah. I’m going to make you a copy of this before you leave.

**Sokiera: All right. Thank you.** Was your father, I guess, one of the leading civil rights activists in this era?

**Burger:** I wouldn’t say that. I think I would say where he could give input, I think he was respected. His decisions was respected, but he didn’t get out, say, like when they had maybe civil rights rallies at a church; he didn’t participate in that. Just like during that time, he could lose his job. He could lose his job, so where he could help, he did. I’ll say it more like that.

**Sokiera:** Because when I was going over his interview that he gave years ago, that was the impression that I received was that he did as much as he could, when he could, because he knew that he could risk his job, and then of course he had a family to provide for and everything. Did he encourage you to get involved in civil rights activities? Because I mean it didn’t stop with the midsixties. It continued on and on and on.

**Burger:** No. He didn’t. You had to know him. He was the kind of person who was—I guess he wouldn’t outright encourage or push you on a lot of things. He kind of let you make your mind up, or maybe along the way he would give some advice, like that. He wasn’t a drum major to say, “Come on and do this,” or, “Follow me,” this kind of thing. Just recently, Dr. Noonkester passed, a couple months ago. He was president of Carey College, and he and Dr. Noonkester sat down and planned the integration of Carey College. And Dr. Noonkester would tell you that—his statement was that this is the first known, Carey College is the first known white, Baptist college to voluntarily integrate in the South. And I think that’s the way Dr. Noonkester put it. And they had a—I don’t know if I have it here. I should. Several years ago, maybe about five or six years ago, I attended a—this may be it, here. They put a marker out on campus over at Carey. And I did attend that, and that’s it there. That’s a picture of the people who attended, and Dr. Noonkester is on there.

**Sokiera:** And this was at the dedication for the marker?

**Burger:** Right. This is the girl here; she was the black that integrated Carey. And she’s still living here in Hattiesburg, Vanessa. She was Vanessa Jackson at the time. Her name is Vanessa Bester now. And then it was another young lady also, but she didn’t attend. She lives in Minnesota, I believe. But her name was Williams, last name was Williams. What’s her first name? First name don’t come to me right now, but her last name was—it’ll come to me probably in a minute. And that’s Dr. Noonkester; that’s his wife. That’s Mrs. Dahmer, Vernon Dahmer’s wife, and that’s Vernon Dahmer Jr. Those are two of two sons. This lady name Miss Carey Macgee(?). And that’s me. (laughter)

**Sokiera:** I’d love to get a copy of that picture. But yeah, we can do all the copies and stuff.
**Burger:** OK. I’m going to look back there. I might have another copy. I think I might have another copy. I’ll look back there. And if not, I’ll get you one made. But he and Dr. Noonkester, they worked it out real good, and I think it was very smooth. There was no problems, nowhere. You had to know Dr. Noonkester. You’d probably saw a small-framed built but plenty energy. He was a great man. Yeah. He was a great man. But also, you was talking about Mr. Burger and civil rights. He was, years ago—I will tell you about the—you know about the first civil rights case filed in Mississippi?

**Sokiera:** No. I’m not familiar with that. No.

**Burger:** Not familiar. You’re probably familiar. When I start talking about some of it, you’ll probably be familiar with it. But Mr. Burger played a role in it. He wasn’t the leader, but it was the Gladys Noel Bates case. Are you familiar with—you all do have a—what you call the book? Oral history on Gladys Noel Bates. OK? I’m pretty sure it’s one at USM [University of Southern Mississippi]. Seem like I’ve looked at it online. But Gladys Noel Bates, this is considered the first civil rights case in Mississippi where Gladys Noel Bates—it was probably about 1948. It was late [19]40s. She was working at Lanier High School in Jackson, Mississippi, and the equal pay for black teachers and white teachers were not the same. And she made up her mind. She say that, “We need to do something about this.” And so she filed suit against the Jackson Public Schools. And so she eventually was dismissed. She lost her job. She picked up some work and different things around Jackson, to kind of help keep her going, she and her family going. And eventually she had to leave the state of Mississippi. But in this case, when she filed the case, it was hard to find an attorney. And finally she found an attorney in Meridian. And his name, I want to think his last name was Verns. I’m not sure. Are you familiar with it?

**Sokiera:** No.

**Burger:** It was a gentleman in Meridian. I think he was an elderly guy because he would catch the bus and come to Jackson to do some of the legal work. But there was no monies. Nobody had monies to really file the case, and so the case set out there several years. And they was able to raise enough money and get a little money here and there to do some things, and I think the attorney pretty much did it for only expense. They’d give him a little money when they had some money. And so in the [19]50s Mr. Burger became president of the Mississippi Teachers Association. That’s the black; they had a black teachers association, and a white teachers association. So he was president of Mississippi Teacher's Association. So at one of the meetings, when he was president, he asked that everybody—they always had a meeting in what they called College Park Auditorium there in Jackson. It was on Jackson State campus. And College Park is still there. And so he would ask. At one of the meetings there in College Park he asked that everybody—he didn’t directly tell them what the money was for, but I think they knew, the people, the participants. And he asked every—they called it a Brown Bag Association. You know these big, old, brown grocery bags? They had them at the door. And they say, “When you leave, what you can afford, ball it up in your fist, and just stick your hand in that bag, and put it in that bag.” If you didn’t have no money, still stick your hand in the bag; don’t nobody know whether you put money in there or not. And so they did that, and they raised
money for this particular case. Then they had another little fundraiser where, in each school district, they were asking the black teachers to pay a dollar a month, a dollar out they paycheck to help get some of the funds. But the superintendents in these districts were white, and they were telling them that, “This is for to help some the teachers when they get sick.” These kind of things, but it was to fund this case. That’s what the money was for. So finally, they eventually raised $50,000. They put it in Liberty Bank in Memphis, Tennessee, and that bank is still there. And I just found that out a few months ago. I was talking to a gentleman that worked in Memphis, and he was telling me. We was talking about it, and I was telling about Liberty Bank, and he say, “Liberty’s still there in Memphis.” And so they was able to raise the money for that case. Then they’re fixing to take it to court. And in the back of my mind, I can’t remember which one, but the governor of Mississippi at that time was Governor Wright(?) or Governor White(?) I can’t remember who.

Sokiera: I think it was Governor White.

Burger: OK, Governor White. At that time, they just had a similar case in another southern state, and it did go to court, and they won it. And the state had to up a lot of money. So Governor White said, “Wait. Let’s settle this thing.” So he asked the legislature; I think it was for about $3 million. And so they gave everybody equal salaries. And it never did go to court, but this case was settled. And Gladys Noel Bates had to make it where to—she took and moved her family to Denver, Colorado. She had to leave the state because at that time she couldn’t get a job. And Jackson Public Schools built a school about three years ago and named after her, a brand-new school, an elementary school. And she passed October 15, probably about two years ago. And see, as a little kid, well, I knew her as a kid because [my] mother and Ms. Bates and some more people, they were in the same sorority. And I was a boy, and my mother used to take me up there when she’d go to the sorority meeting, and all the kids played together while they was in the meeting. And so I knew her back then, and periodic, she would come back to Jackson.

Sokiera: What sorority was this?

Burger: Delta Sigma Theta, uh-huh. And Gladys Noel Bates, at certain times she would come back to visit family and friends in Jackson. And like when I was in high school, Daddy always went by to see her and Mother. And so I got to know her and her daughter and son. And so he played a role in it, but she was the main person. Yeah.

Sokiera: So when you were growing up there was a lot of big civil rights cases that you were, at least, around.

Burger: Yeah. Right.

Sokiera: Did you ever become really active in the civil rights movement, as you grew older?
Burger: No. I didn’t. One of those times I was home from school, I did go down, and I took the test a couple times, flunked the test a time or two. (laughter) But eventually I passed it. I passed the test before these judges from the Fifth Circuit came because John Doar was trying to encourage; he was telling Daddy he was going to subpoena me to be the part of the second case. And Daddy told him, “No.” Say, “He’s voting, so he don’t need to be part of that.” And so I wasn’t part of it. And John Doar spent a lot of time at the house, and I guess they planned things. And we stayed down on Manning(?) Avenue at the time. And I remember one time John Doar, when he was telling him, he said, “Well, I’m going to subpoena him.” And so Daddy told him, said, “We’ll, that morning he’s going to be sick. He can’t go.” (laughter) But I did take the test a few times, and I did eventually pass it and was able to vote. But back during this Gladys Noel Bates case, the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] took that case up, and Medgar Evers was one of the main people who did the legwork. And they even had, at the time, Thurgood Marshall, who later became a Supreme Court justice, the first black Supreme Court justice; Thurgood Marshall came down several times. He was their advisor, but he was just a young lawyer for the NAACP. He would come down, and he was an advisor in this particular case. And Medgar and Daddy, they communicated, but they wouldn’t be seen together because you had your Sovereignty Commission during that time, too. And so the way they communicated was Daddy, when he wanted to write Medgar, he wrote letters and sent it to the director of the YMCA in Jackson. And when that director got that letter, he gave it to Medgar. So when Medgar answered, he’d send the letter back like it was from the Y. And so they communicated all that time because they didn’t talk on the phone. They figured the phones were going to be tapped. Even if he’d wrote a letter to Medgar, that could be noticed. And it probably be illegal (laughter) for somebody to do it that way. You in the postal service, but that could happen. But they did it through the YMCA. They communicated back and forth. And Medgar name was never on the letter going up, and his name wasn’t on it coming back. But they were able to manage that case, manage their strategies on that case, back during that time. Yeah.

Sokiera: Did you ever experience any racial divide or anything during all your years of working? Because you had a very diverse working experience, and different places, too.

Burger: Yeah. Some things you know, but they handled it in a way, but you can tell. I know, like one job I worked on. I won’t say where, but I felt within the group I was or should have been one of the senior people, but I was like a little box, a line drawn out from the managers, a special assistant to the manager. But that probably should have been some of the people there, reporting to me, and these kind of things. But you can’t say, “Well, they discriminating,” or something like that, but you know those things are there.

Sokiera: You can’t put your finger on it, but you know.

Burger: And then if you made the accusation, it wasn’t firm enough that you could prove it. You couldn’t prove it. There were situations like that. And I got to the point; I recognized a lot of stuff, but I’d just ignore it and go on. I wasn’t going to let it bother me.
**Sokiera:** You just weren’t going to let it bother you, just got on with your work. Let your work, I guess, speak for itself.

**Burger:** Right. Then at the end of the day, I go home. I was happy at home. I didn’t have to go places, or even go places with other people. I was satisfied.

**Sokiera:** How do you think race relations are today?

**Burger:** There are a lot of things we need to work on, but, too, I feel that there are a lot of things better. You do have a lot of opportunities, but there are still problems. I guess there’s work in progress. There are things we—I guess you can always improve on something.

**Sokiera:** Has things improved, in your opinion?

**Burger:** I’ll say yeah. I’ll say yes. They have improved, and we just—you have to say, “Just keep working; work in progress. Keep trying to improve on things.” You got to.

**Sokiera:** Yeah, very true. And there’s always room for improvements. Is there anything else that you wanted to discuss, anything in particular? Something that crossed your mind?

**Burger:** Not really. I can’t think of nothing else because a lot of these things, I wasn’t directly involved in. Like I said, I did go down, a couple, several times and took the test, and eventually passed it. And even I think in this book they talk about back in those days when Mother and them was going, I think it was mentioned that sometimes the question might be, “How many bubbles in a bar of soap?” And so you never know (laughter) how many bubbles in a bar of soap. But yeah, those kind of things. It’s not really like that now.

**Sokiera:** Did you ever have any troubles in school or just growing up around Hattiesburg or anything?

**Burger:** No. See, schools was segregated when I went to school. When I finished high school, there was nothing. I don’t know. Maybe it might’ve been seven or eight years after I finished when they began integration. I’m not sure what year it was, but everything was segregated in my days. Even in high school, it was that way.

**Sokiera:** You said you went to Hattiesburg High. Is that correct?

**Burger:** Mm-mm, no, no. I finished across the street here. It was a high school. That was the high school when I finished, the school across the street. That’s where I finished. That big end, up on that end, that part wasn’t there. It was just this end down here, but I—

**Sokiera:** Oh, so Rowan Elementary was actually the high school back then.
Burger: Yeah, right. Elementary was the high school. One time it was seventh through the twelfth grade. And I went to elementary school a block up here. It’s Mary Bethune School now, but that’s where I went to. I started school there, elementary school in the fourth grade, but the first grade I went to Eureka. I went first through the third at Eureka, across town. And at that time, that school was first through the twelfth grade. But I started in first grade at Eureka.

Sokiera: Was it called Rowan when you went there?

Burger: It was called Aurora Street(?). Now, when I finished high school, I don’t know if they had changed the name to Rowan or not. I’m not sure. I was trying to look up there and see was my high school diploma up there. I was going to see what was on it. (laughter) But I don’t remember. I don’t remember.

Sokiera: Would you say that as far as race relations go it was, I guess, a typical experience for you? Atypical?

Burger: There were problems. I know I remember times when my older brother and I, one time, we used to, over here where the police department, that was the Methodist Hospital. And right there where you turn to go on Bay, Bay Avenue, there’s kind, there’s a little island there. And me and my brother, me and my older brothers, we used to stand there in the evening and sell papers. And several times a car’ll would pull up, and stop there. He say, “I want a paper.” You walk over there; they spit in your face. You had incidents like that, and a lot of little things like that happened. So you—

Sokiera: Like you said earlier, try to deal and move on. Go home and get on with your life, and concentrate on your family.

Burger: Right, right.

Sokiera: Well, thank you for your interview, and I will be in touch if we have any further, any questions or any comments or anything about it. I thank you very much.

Burger: Thank you.

Sokiera: Thank you.

Burger: OK.

(end of interview)