

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW #462-1

with

Ernest L. Golden (EG)

April 21, 1993

Honolulu, O`ahu

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: This is an interview with Mr. Ernest Golden on April 21, 1993 and we're at his office in the airport industrial area in Honolulu, O'ahu. The interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay, let's get started, Ernest. Why don't we start by having you tell me when and where you were born.

EG: I was born in Athens, Georgia, May 21, 1923.

WN: Tell me something about your dad.

EG: My father [*Belva Golden*]?

WN: Yes.

EG: Well, first of all, my father and mother divorced when I was nine years old—separated when I was nine. The divorce, I think, came sometime afterwards. My father was from Mississippi. I don't know how to. . . . My father was quite a man. My father was a big man first of all. My father was six [*feet*] four [*inches*] or six five, somewhere around there. My father, even after the separation, was always in the neighborhood. Now I grew up in a pretty bad neighborhood. My neighborhood was called Over-the-River. Over-the-River is like over the tracks.

WN: Now this is in Athens, Georgia which is a . . .

EG: This is in Athens, Georgia.

WN: . . . pretty diverse town because it's a university town [*i.e., University of Georgia*], right?

EG: Yes, it is. Athens, because it is a university town, was and is a cut, I suppose, above other Southern towns, at that time, of a similar size. I think we moved to town from the country when I was about five years old, five or six. And we moved on Second Street which was Over-the-River. I'm saying all of this because there's a point. Even after the separation of my mother and father, my father was always in the neighborhood. Now this is looking back. This is as an adult looking back on the influences that my father would have had on me as an individual now. First of all, my mother and father were friends even after the divorce. He was in the

neighborhood. We're talking about a neighborhood where weekends were fights. There were fights. There was drinking and there was fighting. And I suppose I did have a strong family thing going for me even with the separation of my father and mother. But my father was in the neighborhood and my father was very much of a man because of size.

Let me give you an example. There was one situation I recall where one of the drunks, bad (person) in the neighborhood, was terrorizing the neighborhood with a shotgun. And somebody said, "Go get Golden." And this was on Second Street. My father at that time lived on Third Street, about a block up. So they went and got my father. And my father approached this man with a brick and made him put the shotgun down. These things remain with you. He was good with children. Children loved him and he loved children, not only my family, not only my brother and I, but other children, my cousins and other children in the neighborhood. He was a gentle man but yet he was bad. But he did not start a fight, and we're talking about a neighborhood where they had fights. I don't know how I survived. I think my influence with my father (is) the reason I survived. The one driving force I had going for me was to get out of that neighborhood.

My father left, I think, when I was quite young. I dare say I was maybe less than twelve years old when my father left Athens and went to Atlanta. And we saw him then infrequently. To go back a bit, before he and my mother separated, I visited with him in Mississippi. He went back to Mississippi after having left and come to Athens and married, and I was four years old when we went back, and I spent some time with his parents—about a year. Got to know that side of the family. But over the years, after I'd come to Hawai`i, I'd go back and visit with him, and we had a very good relationship. Even when I was growing up, I was under his influence even after (the) separation because he still lived in the neighborhood. During the time he and my mother were together he would discipline me. There were times when he has spanked me. And I look at what they call child abuse now, and I can't understand it because I think that the (laughs) spanking my father gave me was deserved. And he used a razor strap to do it. But this was usually after having talked with me first. My father always talked with me first, and maybe twice before the spanking came about.

WN: What kind of work did he do?

EG: He was a truck driver. He drove a truck for a coal yard. He did that, and then he sold whiskey. That was an interesting story, by the way, because (laughs). . . .

WN: This is legal whiskey?

EG: No. This is bootleg. This was white lightning. He did that all of his life even though he worked. He always kept a legitimate job whenever possible, but it was a way of life, I guess.

WN: Did he make it, too?

EG: No, no. They would go to the distillers somewhere. This always kept him in trouble with the law. There were (many) times when he was trying to outrun the law or the police. He had a reputation with the police department. (Laughs) My father was Belva Golden. Belva Golden was quite a man, quite a man.

WN: Now you said he was six feet four. People said that when---you remember when there was a

fight and they would call him. Was it only because of his physical stature or did he have some kind of status in the community?

EG: Status in the community (he), I suppose, was someone who did not back down, who approached the situation. . . . I suppose, it must've been because he would do what was supposed to be done. The law seldom came over and did anything Over-the-River. You'd have to call them, I think. And he had no special status in the community other than one bad man meeting another bad man, I guess.

WN: What do you mean by "bad"?

EG: "Bad" in the sense that. . . . There should be another term for it.

WN: Well, "bad" today, you know, when kids say "bad," "bad" means "good."

EG: "Bad" means "good." "Bad" means "good." My father---I had to explain that to you, to explain "bad," I suppose. In the fight world, who was the last fighter who was so "bad"? The one that they sent to prison? I can't recall his name now. Recently.

WN: Sonny Liston?

EG: No, the one who's in prison now.

WN: Oh, Mike Tyson.

EG: Mike Tyson. See, Mike Tyson was "bad." Muhammad Ali was "bad." Okay? These are legitimate "bad," and I suppose my father stepped in, walked the line between that sort of thing. He didn't seem to fear. My father wasn't afraid of anyone. If you bothered him, you had to deal with him. That's the way he was. He did not go out of his way to create any problems. He would never under any circumstances create a confrontation. But if one came his way, he did not back away from (it). I suppose this is what I mean. If the police bothered him and he thought they were wrong, they had to deal with him. Because at that time, six feet four was real big. I'm talking seventy, sixty-five years ago. And people at that time---we have a lot of six-, seven-foot people now but the tallest basketball player in those days usually was about six feet. This was your center. To be six feet in those days---six feet four in those days---was big. And to have the muscle and the guts and everything that go along with that made you an imposing individual. And this is what he was. I didn't understand some of his gentleness, though, until years later.

WN: What are examples of that?

EG: I suppose his relationship with my wife, with my daughter, with me, and with other people. Just a gentle, caring person. I opened a club when I retired in 1974. Opened up a club in Athens---a supper club [*Hawaiian Hale Supper Club*]. And during the time I was there [1974-76] he was living in Atlanta, but he would come down every weekend. And clubs within themselves could be a source of trouble. And even though this club never had any trouble in it, he was just sort of quietly behind me, supportive. He was a very gentle man in a sense.

WN: Tell me something about the neighborhood, your neighborhood.

EG: Over-the-River?

WN: Over-the-River.

EG: Well, first of all, if you completed elementary school, you had made quite an accomplishment. No one expected you to go to high school. The neighborhood itself was. . . . I don't know what it was originally. I think originally we moved (into a) neighborhood (that) at one time must have been a red-light district. There was a river that separated this part of town from the commercial part of town, because right across the river from where we were was a slaughterhouse, and they had some lumberyards and the coal yards and things like that on the other side of the river. We were on the side of the river that was, if you want to call it, residential. The town was about a mile or so—the heart of town—about a mile or so from there. But the Oconee river divided . . .

WN: The what river?

EG: Oconee.

WN: Oconee?

EG: Oconee. O-C-O-N-E-E, I think. And Water Street paralleled Oconee River. And then First, Second, Third, Fourth Streets ran into Water Street. First Street was the beginning of, was set aside for the White mill workers because there were several mills there.

WN: What kind of mills?

EG: Cotton mills---fabric mills, I think. Fabric mills because you're in a cotton belt, right? So they were fabric mills. So First Street was mill workers, more or less, but all White.

WN: So these are working-class Whites.

EG: Yes, working-class Whites. And then Second Street was the beginning of the Black neighborhood. And we were on Second Street, (there was) Second Street, Third Street, Fourth Street. When you passed Fourth Street you reached Madison Avenue which was (the) beginning (of) another section. So between Second Street and Third Street is where I grew up until the time that I left Athens. As I said, it was a pretty rough neighborhood. Teenage pregnancies. Most of the people worked when they could get jobs. They were not skilled workers.

WN: Did Blacks work in that mill? Or those mills?

EG: I don't recall any Blacks working in (the) mills, if they did it was as a janitor. I don't recall any Blacks working in those mills, no. It was set aside for. . . . Those jobs were considered, I suppose, some of the better jobs, and I don't recall anyone working there except Whites.

We had Broad Street which led to town from River Street, okay? Madison Avenue led to town from River Street. First, Second, Third and Fourth Street were between Broad Street and Madison Avenue. So you had two ways to go into town from where I lived. You either went Madison Avenue or went Broad Street. Now, when you came to Broad Street, you had to cross

First Street. And this is one area where you had to fight your way to get home.

WN: Now these are with the Whites?

EG: These Whites, yeah. If they weren't working and they were out there in the front of, mingling around, the only thing they had to do was pick up a fight with some Black person who's trying to go home, or trying to get to town.

WN: How often would these fights occur?

EG: Whenever they (laughs) had the time to start one.

WN: These are the mill workers themselves? What about the children of the mill workers?

EG: These were adults or teenagers. If the teenagers saw us coming there was going to be a fight. I remember one time, I know I was lucky. There was a store right across the bridge. Now, there was Broad Street Bridge and Madison Avenue Bridge, so (you had to) cross the Oconee River when you wanted to go into town. As you cross Broad Street Bridge, going towards town, there's a little community store that sold a variety of things. And we (had gone there for) kerosene because we had no electricity. And two or three kids and I had gone to the store together to get kerosene. And we had to get the kerosene in a (glass) jug that had a handle on it, and it was a gallon jug. (There) was a handle, to carry it. And as we were approaching First Street, there was a confrontation (with) these kids. Heck, I must've been nine, ten years old. I don't think I was twelve. No, maybe I was ten or eleven years old. But the kids with me were younger than that. And the kids that was getting ready to start harassing us was teenagers. But one came close enough in taunting or whatever he was going to do. And I took the jug by the handle and swung it overhand at his head. And thank God for missing—really—because I don't (know) where I would've been. . . . I know I would've (had to leave) if I'd hit him. I would've been in jail right now or somewhere, if not dead.

This is not an isolated situation. This is just one that I recall because even before we moved there, I lived in my grandparents' house and that was further out. We had to pass several mills in order to get to school. This must have been when I first started school. We'd have to run because there was no fighting. We'd run to get by these places or try to go some other way. Sometimes try to sneak by on a trestle so they couldn't see us. And if they saw us and then they start stoning you on the trestle, you wouldn't have nowhere to run then (laughs) because you couldn't jump off. It's a railroad trestle. So in other words, instead of going up the street on the roadway where you knew you were going to pass these guys. . . . These were adults, and we were going to elementary school, and you knew you had to pass these guys, so you're trying to find another way, (laughs) and they'd catch you on the trestle. It was interesting. But I don't know what else to say about Over-the-River.

WN: How far physically were you away from the university, for example?

EG: Oh, not more than two miles. A little more than a mile, maybe, walking distance. We were close.

WN: Did anybody in your neighborhood work for the university?

EG: Yes, there was one man—I don't recall his name—he lived between Second and Third Street, (his) was considered a good job because he was employed by the university. I don't know what he was doing, but yes, (there) was one man that I recall.

WN: How big was Athens about that time?

EG: Athens had a population of about 27,000. Athens was the center. People from various [*outlying*] towns [*would*] come into Athens to do most of their shopping because I think it was the biggest town within a (group) of smaller towns. But Athens itself had about 27,000 people.

WN: And taking Athens as a whole, was it, would you consider it a very stratified town?

EG: Stratified in what sense?

WN: Well, were there poor Blacks, poor Whites, and then wealthy Whites . . .

EG: Yes.

WN: . . . in the same town?

EG: Yes.

WN: I would imagine so.

EG: Yes. Very definitely so. And. . . .

WN: Was there any type of intermingling?

EG: Now, at this time, my interest would not have been of such that I would have been able to make a good assessment of that sort of thing. First, you had the business district. I think at that time most of the businesses were owned by Jews. Milledge Avenue was the money street. This was where wealthy people lived, and I'm talking about beautiful homes. Those homes now have been converted into frat houses and things like that, big-type colonial homes. And what these people did, I suppose, these were bankers and other movers and shakers of Athens. The Jewish people had most of your businesses, I think, downtown, and I'm speaking of shoe stores and men's shops and women's shops and jewelry stores and things like that.

The university crowd, the university faculty, I don't know where they lived. Then you had the farmers. Athens wasn't too far removed from the farm area either because you have a lot of farmers. Being a small town there were farms all around—cotton farms. Then you had your mill workers. Then you had the Blacks, who were the bottom of the totem pole. Some Blacks worked as servants in the homes, domestic workers. This was one source of employment. I suppose most of the people who lived Over-the-River, where I lived, fell in this category—domestic workers and things like that. My father and mother were a little bit different because my mother worked also. She was a laundry worker. And as I had said before, my father was a truck driver for a coal company. My uncle who shared the house—he and my aunt—and this was my uncle by marriage—we shared the same house when we first moved to Second Street. My uncle worked as a truck driver and delivered for a lumberyard. My aunt looked after all of us—my mother's two children; there was my brother and I. And she had two children. And we

all lived in a four-room house on Second Street. That was when we first moved into town.

WN: Was the house that you lived in pretty typical of that area?

EG: Yes. Like I said before, I think it had been a red-light district, and it had been one of the houses. Interestingly enough during the time we lived there---we're talking White prostitution, the house right below us, less than twenty-five feet distance, was still practicing prostitution. I was nine years old [when] I used to run errands for the head lady there.

WN: Did you know what you were doing or what that was at that time?

EG: I guess I knew but didn't know, you know?

WN: (Laughs) Good answer (laughs).

EG: There (were) all these men coming and going. And this . . .

WN: Whites or Blacks?

EG: Whites. (They were) all Whites. She was White. If there were Black prostitutes, I don't know where they were. This was not an area for Black prostitutes. The [*prostitution*] houses started on River Street, and the first house, I think, that was still practicing prostitution during the time I was growing up there was about halfway between First and Second Street. There must have been at that time two or three houses between First and Second Street. And then on the corner of Second Street (and) Water Street (was the house) that I was mentioning and we were the first house on Second Street. And then on up the river going toward Third Street, there was two or three more houses all on Water Street. So prostitution was there during the time that I was growing up there. That might give you an indication of what it was like. I grew up in a red-light district. And finally---prostitution moved out for some reason, whether it was banned. They were not operating illegally. They were operating evidently within the sanctions of the law. And I think that the people who ran Athens, the politicians, possibly allowed it because of the university. And I'm assuming that this was an outlet for university students—male students—to have sexual outlet. I'm sure this is why it was permitted. Athens was quite a football town, and whenever there (were) games—University of Georgia had games with a lot of the other colleges—you would have the visitors in [town], so I'm sure that this was a source of income for prostitution. I'm just thinking about it now, because I never thought about it before . . .

WN: It was probably a transient town, right, because of the university there?

EG: It was. Nine months out of the year it was quite a brisk place, and then after that, I think about three months out of the year, it sort of died down. But during those nine months Athens would come alive, I mean, because university students seemed to have carte blanche to do pretty much what they wanted to—and they were not necessarily a quiet group (laughs). No, they weren't a subdued group by any stretch of the imagination. Those guys could get pretty wild. And they were not all students, because you have football games, you have alumni, and these are adults, and there was a lot of drinking. But this was a dry county now. Liquor was not legal, but there was plenty of it around. It was white lightning. And it was plentiful. And this is why I suppose the bootlegger survived, and I suppose this is one of the reasons why my father and others

(whom) I knew bootlegged whiskey—both Black and White. So it was pretty much a way of life—an acceptable way of life for many, and I grew up in that. I went to [*East Athens*] Elementary School, about a mile, I suppose, from where we lived. But no kid in that neighborhood was expected to finish elementary school. He was expected to go to work. I think it was unique because there weren't very many kids that I knew from that neighborhood went to high school when they finished.

WN: Now your elementary school was integrated?

EG: No.

WN: Where did the White mill-worker kids go?

EG: For elementary school, there was a school in east Athens in an all-White neighborhood. More or less those employed by the mill. Somewhere over there was the White elementary school, but I can't pinpoint it now. I do know that further over, well, there was a school. And whether all of the Whites went to that school. . . . But it was quite removed from where we attended school. It may have been two or three miles from where we attended school. So no, the school was not integrated. There was nothing integrated.

WN: Your teachers were White or Black?

EG: My teachers were all Black. From the time that I finished high school, my teachers were all Black. Elementary school, all Black. And then junior high, then high school—all Black.

WN: So in terms of your outlook, here you are growing up in a poor side of town where probably one of the main activities or industries would be the University [*of Georgia*]. Now, was there any kind of thought in your mind at that time that someday you may go to that university, or was it so far out of your . . .

EG: It was so far---it was such a farfetched possibility. None, whatsoever. There was an interesting situation during the time I was there. I was in high school, and I was working for a Jewish man. I must've been probably a junior in high school. The president, I think, of the University of Georgia, had proposed that a building be set aside on the campus for Black students who wanted to study. This was such an unheard of thing. They weren't going to integrate the building, they were just going to have a building on that campus. The University of Georgia has a vast campus. You see, Athens came about because of the university. So it was a vast campus, and I can't understand, looking back, I can't even see where it would have made any difference. But Governor [*Eugene*] Talmadge got word of it, and he fired the president and I don't know how many members of the faculty. And because of it [*i.e., the proposal*], the University of Georgia was taken off the accredited list for a period of time—some years. But that's just an aside as to anyone's expectations of ever going to the University of Georgia.

WN: So there were Black students on campus?

EG: No.

WN: There weren't Black students?

EG: There was none. This president had suggested something of this nature. He suggested it. And the governor said no, stop and desist and let's get rid of you.

WN: I see.

EG: We won't even entertain the thought nor the person who brought the thought about. No, there was no such thing. There was no thought of integration at that time. I think, though, this was a driving force for me to get away. The whole thing, everything that I grew up with. This may be the reason I'm in Hawai`i now. To get away from Athens.

WN: I didn't ask you about your mother. Tell me about her.

EG: My mother [*Viola Johnson Golden*] was, I suppose, like mothers are. She and I were very close. She was small. My mother may have been five [*feet*] one [*inch*] or five two. She was considered quite attractive. I think she and my father eloped. She was the older of a family consisting of three girls and five boys. She was the oldest of the group of my uncles and aunts. My mother was a Johnson—her maiden name. She was Viola Johnson. I got to know my grandparents [*Lum and Mamie Johnson*] quite well because we lived close to them up until the time that I was, oh, four or five years old.

WN: In Athens?

EG: This was out in the country, a few miles from town. You could drive four miles and be out in the country. So we were approximately four or five miles from downtown Athens. And you asked me a while ago about University of Georgia. University of Georgia is downtown Athens. Approximately two to three blocks from the university entrance gate is the city hall. So University of Georgia is right downtown also.

My grandfather [*Lum Johnson*] was a sharecropper. At that age I couldn't have known that much about it but, [*he was*] successful. He had quite a large farm he was sharecropping on. But my mother, from the time that I knew, always worked in town, and I think in the same laundry for quite a number of years. So she was never much at home. She was a working mother. She had two children during this time we're talking about.

WN: You're the oldest, right?

EG: I'm the oldest. I'm the oldest of four.

WN: There was you and your brother during this time that you're talking about.

EG: Yes.

WN: Then you had two sisters later.

EG: Yeah. These are the early years of my mother. She was the oldest of her sisters and brothers.

WN: So she was working a lot and then you were not too far from your grandparents. And didn't you say your uncle and aunt lived there too, in the house?

EG: Well, this is prior to that. When we left the farm, where I spent a lot of time with my grandparents and uncles and aunts, I was only about two years younger than my youngest uncle. So I grew up with them almost like a younger [*brother*]. Here I had several older “brothers,” and then two older “sisters,” and I was (a) part of that household. It's a very choice position to grow up in. (WN laughs.) (I am) a baby and (I have) all these big brothers and big sisters, right?

WN: Let me turn the tape over.

WN: Okay, we were talking about your mother, and you had your uncles—you had an uncle—so you had pretty much an extended family living there.

EG: Yes, this is during the time before we moved into town. I knew she was my mother, but since she was working, I spent a lot of time with my uncles and aunts—grew up in the household with my grandparents. My mother and father both were working in town. And then we were moved into town, my mother continued to work, and my aunt pretty much was responsible for raising me since my mother was working. The relationship between my mother and I have always been good. I suppose [*my*] being an older child she seemed to have given me more credit than I really think I deserved. She always said, “Ernest is a good boy,” even after I'd left—even after I'd been away. She was a hardworking woman. She had to be because from the time I was nine years old until, oh, she retired after I was over here in Hawai`i, she worked. She worked to raise two children and then three, and later four—pretty much alone—all by herself. And it wasn't easy. It was difficult, very difficult. When I was able to, I tried to help as much as I could.

WN: Did you help her at all with chores or any kind of employment?

EG: Up until the time I left Athens [*in 1942*] I was attending school. And whatever I earned on part-time jobs I pretty much kept to help defray the cost of my education. I guess in a sense this may have helped a little. Direct contributions toward any household expenses, though, I was not earning enough, I think, to do anything. But after I left—after I got out of high school—then wherever I was and was working, I would always send my mother money. I think this eased her plight somewhat, especially after I came to Hawai`i. When I came to Hawai`i my oldest sister was possibly about nine years old, and I was able to set aside an allotment for my mother (as) a direct payment to her. And she later says that this was quite helpful. And I think this was the period (when) she was able to have some sort of relief from the hard life that she had led. She raised two children during the [*Great*] Depression. And she walked to work two or three miles from Second Street to downtown Athens. Whether there was snow (or) there was ice, she worked six days a week. So my mother had a hard life.

WN: She was working in the laundry?

EG: Yes.

WN: What did she do there?

EG: Worked on a presser machine. Very demanding work, hot in the summer. And during the winter months walking to and from work. And starting early in the morning and coming back late in the afternoon and the evening—just barely, just barely making it—very difficult time.

Don't know what else to say about my mother. I think everyone has a special place for mothers as I have for mine (clears throat). Excuse me.

WN: How was your family affected by the depression? Or how was the town affected by the depression?

EG: I recall everything being very, very severe—very hard. Times were very tough.

WN: Were there layoffs and things?

EG: Now, remember we are looking at a youth's . . .

WN: Yeah. Right.

EG: I was a child. They were working for what? A dollar a day? My father was working for a dollar a day. My mother was probably working for a little less than that. The domestics may have had it. . . . You see, as I said before, a lot of the people in the neighborhood where I grew up were domestics, and part of the work agreement, if there was any, was a low salary but at least you ate food from the tables. If you were a cook, you had an opportunity. You were a housecleaner, a cook, and so very often the domestic did it all. You were able to eat. Don't know where most of the men were employed. The women, I know, were domestic. Some of the men in my neighborhood worked at the slaughterhouse. This was one area of employment. As I told you, the slaughterhouse was right across the river, quite close. It was rough. It was just a rough period of time for most of the people, I think—both groups, both races there. That's about all I can say about it.

WN: I guess as a child it's hard to. . . .

EG: It's hard to make an assessment of it.

WN: You were saying when you were going to East Athens Elementary School, you know, that the possibility of completing elementary and going on were pretty remote. Now, you did it.

EG: Remote. Yeah.

WN: Now, can you tell me why?

EG: My aunt may have encouraged me a bit, but I went to school I guess because I wanted to.

WN: Were you a good student?

EG: I was a good student. I was in the top five throughout my elementary school years and throughout my junior (high) school years—the top five. And usually these classes consisted of maybe forty to fifty students. We went to the fifth grade in elementary school, and I was always a reader—always liked to read. And I remember the fourth-grade teacher would sometimes call in me as a second grader to show the fourth graders how to read. They would give out pink slips or blue slips if you made A's or B's, and I got quite a bit of those.

I was hungry most of the time that I went to school. I remember being hungry and there was

soup or some sort of food for students who qualified, and I'd most certainly qualified for some sort of food in school. We never would consider it. My parents---I know my mother would not have considered it. My aunt would not have considered me even taking it so there was no . . .

WN: Because it was . . .

EG: Ego, pride, pride. You didn't do that. Welfare was considered (degrading). You didn't accept welfare. So I grew up during these years quite hungry. As I said, I think the motivation must have been self-motivation. I could've dropped out and went to work. I did drop out when I first entered high school. I dropped out for two years. And I could've stayed out, but I think friends, or something like that, encouraged me to go back. But in elementary school, I just went to school because I guess I liked going to school.

WN: So you went on to intermediate, and once you went on to intermediate [*i.e.*, *junior high*] you had a pretty good idea that you'd go on to high school?

EG: Yeah, I entered high school, (it was while I) was in high school (that) I dropped out. Funny thing about it. I (have) to be among the top wherever I am. I had been a good student all during elementary school. I entered junior high, and I think the first year I was in junior high I still was applying myself. And the second year I was in junior high, I didn't learn anything, I didn't apply. . . . And when I entered high school I was behind and I wasn't able to keep up with that top five that I'd been accustomed to. I became disenchanted so I quit and stayed out for two years and went to work in a butcher market for two years. And I think some friends of mine—high school friends—must have encouraged me to go back. It wasn't family members, it was some friends. So I went back to high school, and somehow or another I applied myself and then was able to move back into that position that I felt I always wanted to be. Maybe I was studying hard, or maybe I was with a different group. But from then on, (I) was again pretty much applying myself. There was some times when I goofed off in high school. But by and large I made some pretty good grades in high school.

WN: The name of your high school was Athens High and Industrial School.

EG: Athens High and Industrial School.

WN: Was it like a vocational-oriented school?

EG: They had a shop. I don't know why it started out that way. It must've started out that way for some certain amount of vocational training. Well, for the boys I know there was a carpenter shop. And even now, some of the things that I learned then has been beneficial to me now. The girls had—there's a term for it—but they were learning cooking and all that sort of stuff. There's a term for it.

WN: Home ec.

EG: Home economics. Those were the only things that would possibly have made it an industrial school. (The) teachers, though, from the time that I started school (until) the time that I finished, took an interest. They took an interest in (the) students—personal interest. They had to because a lot of things that they taught, the kids weren't getting at home. And these were simple things that we might take for granted now, but etiquette and stuff like that were being

taught in school. Certain manners were taught in school, and certain hygiene habits were being taught in school. I look at the problems that schools are having now and realize that this is one of the things that's missing. Maybe it's missing because the schools were definitely not as big. Athens High and Industrial School had a student body less than 400 and I think it was about 325, which is small. But those teachers had an opportunity to take a direct interest in the students. I think this is one of the faults that the schools have today—they're too big. They should be reduced in size. I got a lot out of the schools. I got a lot from the teachers. Maybe this is why I continued because there was something there that I wanted and I could get it in the schools.

WN: Were you involved in any kind of extracurricular stuff?

EG: Yes, I was quite active in glee club during high school, (an interest) I would carry over from my elementary school. I did Christmas plays and Christmas pageants when I was in elementary school and all during high school. I didn't participate too much in sports. And it surprises me because before I started going to high school I was [into] sandlot football, boxing and everything else. In my neighborhood we had the toughest team, football. Played softball until I got hit coming into home plate, so that ended softball career. Never was (laughs) very much into baseball. During the time I was in high school, I had to work, so any free time I had I was working for this dress shop. And it includes Saturdays also, so I didn't have too much time to play. Wanted to play football. Was a little too rough for basketball. So I . . .

WN: You were too rough for basketball?

EG: Yeah, I don't know. Football, I went out a couple of times and I was placed on end. And at that time ends played both [ways]. And I was fast. So the coach wanted me to come out as an end because defensively I was breaking up a lot of plays the first time I went out—I remember this. But they practiced in the afternoon after school was out, and when school was out I had to go to work so I couldn't keep up with it. Then I went out a couple of times to try to get on the basketball team and then I was fouling out (WN laughs).

WN: Taking after your father, eh?

EG: (Laughs) Anyway, I didn't make the cut for basketball.

WN: What was your curriculum like?

EG: Emphasis on math, English, history. Studied Negro history.

WN: Really?

EG: Mm hmm. I have a pretty good background in Negro history. I think the year that I entered high school, a French course but they discontinued that and, I think, replaced it with Negro history. So I studied Negro history for three years or so. Chemistry. I studied English, English literature, math. I didn't get to trigonometry. History—one of my favorite subjects.

WN: So Negro history and history were two separate?

EG: They were separate.

WN: I'm curious. What was covered in Negro history?

EG: More or less the background of some of the leaders of the slave revolution, stuff like that. Frederick Douglass and some of the major leaders—a lot of it I've forgotten, I'm sure. Booker T. Washington. The two classes were separated, but I think the principal taught them both, Negro history and American history. The Negro history class, the top five, as a reward of some kind, was taken to Tuskegee [*Institute*] for a trip. I saw Dr. Washington Carver in his lab. We visited his lab and met with him. I have a fairly basic grasp of Negro history from high school. Naturally over the years I've picked up quite a bit more. But primarily the basic came from high school study.

Oh, and also I studied shop—carpentry. It's benefitted me now. I didn't see any benefit in those days. I didn't think about being a carpenter or anything like that. But the fundamentals of carpentry were taught. The use of the tools, the reading of the tools. Not so much [*reading*] blueprints and stuff like that, but how to use the tools, how to use hand tools and some power tools. I don't think (it) was too interesting. I found that a lot of it benefitted me later on because I built a house and (used some of the knowledge) I must've picked up during those days.

WN: I would think that since a small portion, a small percentage of the kids going to elementary school went on to intermediate and to high school, would you say that it was more or less the intellectually, it was sort of like the upper echelon going on to high school, and you being among them?

EG: You mean scholastically speaking?

WN: Yeah.

EG: That's a possibility. There were two high schools in Athens—Black high schools. One was a public school, the other was private. I think all of your public schools throughout Athens sort of siphoned into that one high school. Other parts of the town weren't like Over-the-River. There were one or two other places that were depressed also, but in some other parts of the town of Athens, the people had a higher standard of living than we had, and I'm sure that these parents encouraged their children to go to school. This wasn't the case where I grew up. There may have been one or two families, the Turners may have been in the category, and also the Williams who lived on the same street. These are names that come to me. And I'm sure that those families may have said, “Look, you will finish high school.” But by and large most of us didn't fall in that category. And I'm talking about a lot of my friends. If they finished high school, it's pretty much on their own. And, I suppose, to answer your question, if you are not a good student, then chances are, unless someone sort of pushes you along or encourages you, you're not going to go because there's no reason to. You're not accomplishing anything.

WN: By the time you were in high school did you have any kind of goals or ideas of what you were going to do?

EG: I was going to be a professor. That was the one thing that looked like there was something. Schoolteachers and ministers were the ones that were the leaders in the Black community. They were the ones that had any sort of status in the community. And I suppose I was going to be a teacher of some kind. I remember talking to this woman. I used to work for her as a houseboy.

She must've asked me the same question. I told her I was going to be a professor, and she often mentioned it afterwards. And I think she took it half jokingly as a humorous thing for me to say. I think I was working for her when I was about twelve years old. She asked me and I said that's what I was going to be. I don't know what was open for me. Later on when I was sixteen or so, I was working for this Jewish man, and at that time I think I wanted to go into the art field. We were decorating, doing his windows and things like that, and I used to assist him. And he encouraged me to leave Athens. He said, "Leave Athens." Jewish people were funny. You had two or three different stratas there, ethnically speaking. White Anglo-Saxon on top, then you had another strata there consists of Jews who were discriminated against. Catholics that were discriminated against. And there was some Italians there, but the Italians were not considered Anglo-Saxon or White. And then you had Blacks. And our position was naturally on the bottom of the totem pole. These others in between. But the Jewish people that I came in contact with were good people to my way of thinking. This man encouraged me to leave Athens. He said, "Look, you should get out of Athens, and go somewhere else." At that time, New York would've been the place to go. For some reason I guess he just felt that if I was going to accomplish anything, I wasn't going to do it in Athens. Athens was dead. Athens was endsville. It's different now. It's a total different thing now.

WN: So, Jewish people owned most of the businesses. Did Black people work for the Jewish people?

EG: As domestics.

WN: What about in their businesses?

EG: No. I did. They hired a lot of us. A lot of those businesses did have Black kids like me working in their stores and things. And we did errands, we cleaned up the shop. We assisted in different ways inside of the shop. But they did hire. Some of us did have those jobs.

WN: What about the laundry that your mom worked at? Who owned it?

EG: Whites owned it, and the Blacks were more or less doing most of the work with the exception of the front desk, I think. Restaurants, Blacks did the cooking. The waiters in the restaurants—White restaurants. . . . That's a good question. Since I never went into one, I don't recall anymore. I think they were White.

WN: Were there Black-owned businesses?

EG: Very few. I know there was a preacher who lived on Third Street. He had a sort of neighborhood store. He was definitely one man in business—Black-owned. Downtown, yes, we had enough. Downtown Athens had a fountain. This was a fountain-drugstore sort of thing that was Black-owned. They had two or three restaurants. This is all on Hot Corner. Hot Corner was about a block long, and they had a theater—there was a theater there. There was one or two insurance firms. There was one or two funeral parlors, Black-owned. There may have been small stores, neighborhood stores, grocery stores, and things like this, Black-owned. There was some Black businesses there, come to think of it. I almost lied. If you went to a restaurant, it was Black-owned. We didn't do any dining out, you know, like people do now. The Morton Theater was Black-owned. There was one or two funeral parlors.

WN: What about institutional segregation? Was there, in terms of separate facilities and so forth in

Athens?

EG: What sort of institutions?

WN: Restrooms, drinking fountains . . .

EG: Everything was segregated. The fountains were segregated. Restroom was Black and White. Bus stations, Black and White. Train stations, Black and White. Theaters, Black and White. Stores as such, you could enter, but if you wanted to buy something you couldn't try it on. Anytime you wanted to buy a hat you couldn't try it on. Shoes, I suppose, you could try on. But they were segregated. If you walked in a shoe store, the entrance was here, one section for Whites and the back section for Blacks. Stores, like department stores, the same thing prevailed to a degree.

WN: So separate entrances for stores, and restaurants . . .

EG: Not separate entrances---restaurants you came in the back or you came to a side window for a take-out. The stores weren't necessarily two entrances. I don't recall a Colored and White entrance to a store, let's say a department store. I'm trying to look at shoes and stuff like that now. If there was dressing rooms I'm sure they were separate, they would be segregated. It would be a segregated dressing room. Segregated shoe areas. Churches—segregated; they're segregated. Cemeteries—segregated. Funeral parlors—segregated. I've already mentioned theaters.

WN: When you say “segregated,” you mean Blacks only go to certain theaters?

EG: They had a combination---they had both. They had some theaters that had both Black and White, but the Blacks always went to the balcony, and the Whites always stayed down in the mezzanine. Some theaters, Blacks did not enter at all. There were one or two theaters in town that Blacks didn't enter at all. Hotels—Blacks did not patronize under any circumstances. There were two or three major hotels there—Georgia Hotel, Holman Hotel. And I think Holman Hotel didn't even allow Black bellhops for a long time. There was one Chinese restaurant in town, and that was only patronized by Whites. There were hardly---very few Orientals at all, I think. The ones that I'm familiar with possibly owned that restaurant—it was downtown. Most of your Black businesses were not downtown. They were in segregated areas. This was unique because this was a Chinese man, but he's right downtown Athens. And there's one or two Italian places right downtown Athens. The Jewish stores were downtown. As I said, Jews had most of the businesses. Of course, Jewish holidays, Athens almost closed up.

WN: Really?

EG: Yeah. It almost closed. The Jews were not participating too much in politics. I recall this incident I was telling you about—the University of Georgia. And the man I worked for was named Boley, and he and I would have conversations every once in a while. He was saying that the business people in town did not endorse what was happening as far as the University of Georgia being taken off the accredited list. I said, “Well, why didn't you people vote?” He said, well, somehow in so many words that they didn't get involved in politics. I suppose they voted, but to actively engage in politics, I think this was a White thing. I think this was a WASP sort of thing.

WN: Did Blacks get involved in politics?

EG: Not to my knowledge. I don't ever remember a Black politician back in those days doing anything. If there was one at all anywhere, he was a preacher. (There) was a guy who used to sell real estate. But he was bootlegging real estate, (WN laughs) he didn't have a license. Bootlegging for somebody else, I think. It was an interesting life. It wasn't a good life but it was an interesting life.

WN: Well, you went on intermediate school, then you graduated from high school. What year did you graduate from high school?

EG: Nineteen forty-two.

WN: Nineteen forty-two. And that's when the war started [*December 7, 1941*]. So what I want to do is to stop right here and I want to come back another time and we just pick up from right there. And I think a good way to leave it was when you said someone told you that you should get out of Athens.

EG: I suppose that was the time.

WN: Okay, then why don't we stop here then.

EG: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW