

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

***HISTORY OF THE COBB COUNTY BRANCH OF THE NAACP AND CIVIL RIGHTS
ACTIVITIES IN COBB COUNTY, GEORGIA***

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INTERVIEW WITH REGINALD HOBERT KEMP

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CONDUCTED BY JOHN McKAY and STEPHEN BRIGGS

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Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
Cobb NAACP/Civil Rights Series, No. 15
Interview with Reginald Hobert Kemp
Conducted by John McKay and Stephen Briggs
Saturday, 31 October 2009
Location: Mr. Kemp's residence, Marietta, Georgia

SB: To start off, I'm going to ask Mr. Kemp some questions about his background. Could you please just tell us about you background, were you born in Cobb County?

RK: I was born in Acworth, Georgia, May 14, 1931. If you want to be precise I was born at 11:59, so as the midwife says, but my mother says I was born at 12:01, and being a black person, we have been accused of being suspicious of the 13th and the 14th so my mother won because I was born under a midwife. The midwife says I was born at 11:59 p.m. but my mother says I was born at 12:01 am so there is a little conflict between the two dates with only two minutes separating it.

SB: Where did you go to school and who were your teachers?

RK: That has been some seventy-four years ago and I can't remember the teachers' names. We attended school at an old church; where Cobb County would go out and choose teachers that had majored in teaching with probably only a high school education, not a college education. So we went to school at an old church there in Red Rock community out on the intersection of Acworth and Mars Hill Road. That has been some seventy-three years ago because I'm going on seventy-nine now.

SB: If you don't remember a lot of these teachers' names that's okay.

RK: I don't remember the names, I sure don't. I'm sorry.

SB: That's quite all right.

RK: That's the beginning now.

SB: That's the beginning.

RK: Let me add to, this: in those days we had to walk roughly three and a half to four miles to school, in the mud to start to school and when we got to school we had not much to learn from. "See Spot Run" and so forth on.

SB: But you do remember who had a strong influence on you, other than teachers?

RK: It was my mother because my mother also was a schoolteacher in those days but my father was uneducated. He only had finished roughly the third or fourth grade the few days he got to go to school. But my mother was a teacher in what we called the grammar school in those days.

SB: Talking about the schools, of course, they were segregated at the time. What was it like?

RK: Correct. Well, in those days the blacks did have to walk to school and lots of the whites had to walk to school but a few of the whites got to ride on an old, obsolete bus and sometimes they would pick at us and we had to jump over into the ditch. They would holler "Hey, n-word!" We can't help it, but I've come up on the rough side of the mountain too, but we payed no interest, we continued. Where there's a will, there's a way.

SB: Any examples, little stories you remember at the schools? You just mentioned kind of an example, of when you were called names. But do you remember more specific examples?

RK: It didn't hurt all that much because when you are in an environment and it's the custom and it's all you know, you can accept those conditions much better. But if you have had experiences at a much higher level then it hurts to go back down. So it didn't hurt all that much.

SB: So you put your blinders on and just went on?

RK: Continued on. Correct.

SB: So did you see the differences then in the white schools and black schools as far as funding? You obviously gave as an example of the discrimination in Acworth.

RK: Okay, I'd like to answer that question if I can. We would receive books sometimes that were obsolete that the whites had used, they would give them to the blacks. Everybody was way below, I call, a standard. Whites suffered too, not just black, blacks and whites, but whites had a little better opportunity than the blacks.

SB: We've run into quite a bit of that as far as, between the quality of the books and materials.

JM: For clarification, these schools you're describing are in Acworth?

RK: About four miles out of Acworth on Mars Hill Road which was called the Red Rock school church, so to speak.

SB: So when did you move to Polk Street?

RK: Okay, I'm glad you asked me, I lived in Acworth up until I was eight years of age. Then we moved to Marietta out on Sandy Plains Road, Ebenezer at this point. We started going to school at the Liberty Hill Baptist Church at Marietta [Liberty Hill Road off Canton Highway]. We went to school there approximately a year and something

happened that the board of education did not supply a teacher, and there wasn't a black school in the area so we had to stay out of school two years without even going to school.

SB: Wow, and you were so close to the Lemon Street School when you actually did move into this area.

RK: Yes. Sandy Plains Road was approximately six miles from Lemon Street and we couldn't walk that far. We did walk two and three miles so that was too long so we had to stay out of school. There wasn't any school for blacks to go to in our area.

SB: Can you describe race relations growing up, when you moved here, what did you notice was different for African-Americans in the area, you gave us some examples of Acworth, what did you notice when you moved down to the Sandy Plains area?

RK: When we moved to the Sandy Plains area, let me see if I can find words to use. When that's your environment, when that is the system and the custom, it did not work; it did not hurt near as bad. I played with white boys all the time. We were very good, close friends and their name was the Hamby's and we loved one another, we played together, we fought together, we played, we raised chickens together and we were tight, just that simple.

SB: So, on a personal level it was great.

RK: It was great, it was great. That's all you knew, just like, if I can explain this, something that we have right now, this is our custom at this age, 2009, suppose you would appear here fifty years from today back and you were telling about what you are going through now, the younger generation wouldn't believe you because they're going to be so advanced over what we are accustomed to now. It's just that simple. Did I make it clear?

SB: Yes sir. So as far as the high school education, it was in this area?

RK: We left for Liberty Hill on the north side of Marietta, we moved on the southwest side of Marietta. At that time we started going to school at Powder Springs and you know what we had? A bus to get on, it was still a segregated school but we got to ride the bus from Macland Road here in Marietta, to Powder Springs.

SB: To the city of Powder Springs?

RK: Correct. I was in the seventh grade at that time so I went through the seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth grade at Powder Springs. But I never received my diploma and then we had to stop school and I got a job as a janitor with the Kelly Motor Company. I worked there one year then they promoted me at the Kelly Motor Company at an age of eighteen years old, so I stayed there about a year and then Lockheed Aircraft opened up and I kind of gave a bold statement to my employer. I said I had to stay out because I was sick, but I went to Lockheed and did approve my performance test.

SB: Evaluation?

RK: Correct. So he came out to the lot and he picked out about ten or twelve people, hiring them as janitors. He went to the larger person first and then he came back to me as a young man and he said, "How about you, boy?" Then he says, "Come here. Career is going to call you, the career ward is going to call me? I said, "But I'll be twenty Monday." He says, "Well, I'll try you for awhile." So I got hired at Lockheed the day I was twenty years of age and I stayed there roughly a year and two or three months and then I got inducted into the military. When I went into military I went to Ft. Jackson, South Carolina and we took our training. The army was paying at that time \$70.00 a month for your military training, which when I did leave Lockheed, I was making \$1.10 an hour which is \$42.00 a week; \$42.00 a week is much better than \$70.00 a month for four weeks; but the army did supply you facilities and all that.

SB: Food and shelter.

RK: Correct.

SB: Did you notice in the military at the time that opportunities were different for African-Americans over whites?

RK: Oh yes. When you went into the military there was a transition of change. About 50 percent from World War II to the Korean War, we had begun to sleep and dine and live together with the whites and it went on for about I guess until I got to the front line in Korea, a little transition of change. Most of the brethren, white and black, they were close together. We understood the value of being together.

SB: Did it have a lot to being together in World War II and the effort the African-Americans contributed?

RK: I had heard, this is the only thing here, I had heard that they would always be segregated in the outfits in World War II before I went in and they learned the value of togetherness in service so someone says we need to be together and they started a transition of change from 1944 or '45 to 1951.

JM: We'd like to go back and ask you a few more questions about Lockheed if that's okay with you.

SB: Okay, working at Lockheed for forty-five years, that's quite a contribution, what positions did you hold there?

RK: When the man came and picked me out I was a young bud, so to speak, and he says, "You're strong," and he hired me as a janitor. I stayed a janitor roughly two or three months. Then we were elevated to a utility helper. What is a utility helper? That is a person that assists air conditioning and heating facilities in the top of the building so I got

promoted in about two or three or four weeks to a utility worker. Then I left the utility worker then I became a drill operator, getting in the shop now and I continued as a drill operator for approximately six or seven months. After that it came true that Uncle Sam says, "Come, I want you." So I had to leave Lockheed as a drill operator, stayed in there a little better than two years, I came back and retained my position as a wash rack. When I was hired at Lockheed I went in at the rate of \$1.10 an hour. After two years of being in the service I think I was making about \$1.74 when I came back, with the unions and all that. I continued about eight or nine different classifications and those classifications were things such as going in as a janitor, a utility worker, a drill operator, a router operator, I mentioned a wash rack, did I? Wash rack and then went into a foreman material operator, I went into an experimental—there was about five or six different classifications in the experimental—but to kind of cut it short here, after about seventeen years I became an experimental technician with engineers. That's me right there. There's the crew.

SB: In '51. Wow, you moved up fast.

RK: Oh yes. I had at least twelve or thirteen different classifications while I was there but I stayed, now it so happened, I didn't mention hand foreman and all that, lots of different ones, I can't remember right off hand but I went up. Where there's a will there's a way and I must admit this now, when I started getting up like at least eight or nine different classifications they put us under a test, strong, you being a black man, and just because you drinking out of that white water fountain, don't you think you're going to be above us. So three or four of the white gentlemen, they had worked as a checking and straightening—see this table here, let's consider this as a piece of metal that's that thick, it's precisely straight and you put a piece of material on it and if it's round you roll it and then you take a filler gauge, if the filler gauge goes up under it right here you know the object is not straight. So when you let materials stay out too long it becomes edge hardened and you cannot work it very well. So once it comes out of the heat treat area you've got to work it in at least I guess ten or fifteen minutes because it becomes edge hardened. So they had let some stay out three or four days. Those black boys that say they want this job, so let's put them on it, after they done messed it up three or four days. I think about the expression, John Henry as a steel driving man, I knew me being a black man, I knew that we had to perform—and you're probably going to say amen on this like you're a president now, Obama, somebody's man, educated—and when he had to go through what he had to go through to perform and out perform, he had to be right.

SB: Yes, you can easily get discouraged.

RK: And I don't want to get on the subject too much but even at this point I guess I say sometimes I bet you when he goes into his secret chamber, "I wish to so-and-so I never got to be President, "because the pressure is too much.

SB: Yes, you have to agree, deal with the situation and move on, even if you disagree at times.

RK: So I got elevated in that sense, so to speak, to perform a job that has been turned down by some of our white brethren. You had to get it and four or five blacks throw their hands up and two or three of us stuck with it. And we straightened those parts out so they had to give it to us.

SB: Was the opposition you faced more from management or was it from your co-workers?

RK: Mostly co-workers, not management because management knew that they had to build quality parts for the Air Force and so forth on so they can't cover up for you and let themselves down. If they could get quality work, regardless where it came from, they wanted it. Thank God.

SB: And you saw, of course, Lockheed had to follow certain guidelines and they seemed to be ahead of the game as far as what was going on outside.

RK: Correct.

SB: Was the pay rate equal?

RK: Yes, we had a union. The first pay raise we had a black union and a white union, it was unequal then. Then it got integrated and it had to be the same.

SB: So you still have memories of when it was called the Bell Aircraft Company. I realize after World War II the name was changed when they were still building the B-29s for the war effort and can you tell us about that and the effort?

RK: About the Bell?

SB: Yes.

RK: The only thing I can tell you at the Bell, I wish you could turn this thing right there, this was before Lockheed had taken over and the reason I put this there for your reason so if you'll just read it.

JM: Just for the record, Mr. Kemp is showing us a book called the *Pictorial History of the Bell Bomber Plant*, Marietta, Georgia, 1942 to 1945 by Ernest J. Englebert.

SB: He was the production manager of the Georgia Division.

RK: And this book, I have it borrowed, and I'm expecting to receive it, the fellow that owned it, a black fellow, I think his wife is going to let me inherit it but at this point it's still hers but in the future I think it'll be mine.

SB: This is an original hard back copy.

RK: Correct. And y'all may call for this book later on in something. I wish you would glance through it before you leave.

SB: Oh yes, definitely.

RK: Now, going to Bell, my late father helped work on that building, he helped work on the building in 1942-43. He helped build it. There's a black man, you need to look at it; do I need to continue to talk?

JM: If you don't mind we're going to move on but we would love to look at this.

SB: Absolutely. Let me just ask one more question about this book. Can you get a revised edition?

RK: I think that we can work together on it, there's a great possibility. I'm in favor of that.

SB: That's amazing.

RK: But before y'all leave I want you to glance at it.

SB: Thank you.

RK: That's Bell that became Lockheed, then Lockheed Martin, you know, it's changed and so forth.

SB: When the plant became Lockheed Aircraft Company and there were about 30,000 jobs lost [when Bell closed], how did this transition affect you and where were you at this time?

RK: Ask the question again?

SB: When it became Lockheed Aircraft Company, you obviously came in at this time.

RK: Correct, ten years later.

SB: Yes. 30,000 jobs were lost at that time and you came in after that.

RK: That was Bell first and then it stayed empty for two or three years and then Lockheed came in when I went. Did I answer the question?

SB: Do you remember anybody's stories or anybody you spoke with being affected by that transition because it was noted that 30,000 jobs were lost in the area?

RK: I see exactly what you're asking but in that 30,000 that were lost there was a gap, see, Bell, the plant went down, closed up in 1946 or '47, then it opened back up in 1951.

SB: For the Korean War.

RK: Yes. Did I answer the question?

SB: Yes. Some of the buildings that were in that area, you know, I've seen in various books, I think, *Under One Roof, the Story of Air Force Plant Six*, it's a small publication, Jeffrey L. Holland. It's a fairly recent release.

RK: I have something almost like this in some of my literature in here. This is yours here.

SB: It says that some of the buildings in that area were around when it was the Bell Bomber Plant . . .

RK: They were cotton fields before the buildings.

SB: Some of the buildings at Lockheed are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and I wondered if they will be open for interpretation, this is kind of a question that I'd like to know, been a History student.

RK: Can you stop this? I need to go back to that book and I can show you something.

SB: Great for the history student.

RK: Just a second here. If you would just start looking, just turn the pages and look, you can turn, see, under construction there's one place where it's cotton fields.

SB: So this is actually . . .

RK: This is the groundbreaking right here.

SB: So this is where the buildings were.

RK: Yes, before that building was even constructed.

JM: We're looking at photographs taken in March of 1942; the groundbreaking of the Bell Bomber Plant on what was formerly cotton fields.

RK: Correct. Turn some more pages. You see? I think that's answering y'all's questions better than I can do it.

SB: Little and Big Kennesaw Mountain in the background, you can see it; it's really visible because the ground's so clear. Some of these buildings that still remain today . . .

RK: Well, there are none of the buildings today because they've been reconstructed from just a regular structure to military stuff and air force buildings.

SB: Some of these buildings are still used?

RK: Oh yes. But most of the buildings have been torn down. They erected new structures. Just turn two or three more pages and I think it will answer your questions pretty good. You see the building is being erected there.

SB: Wow, look at that. April 15, 1943, structure is complete.

JM: Those are cool.

SB: Yes, its' amazing.

JM: We're now looking at pictures of it looks like is this everybody that works . . .

RK: That's the class of '51, that's at Lockheed, that's way after Bell and I'll show you, where is it? I don't see it there but I can show you right here.

SB: There's a C-130 in the background.

RK: Do you associate that person right there? That's me. Here's a bunch more. Here's what you see in that book and so forth on. See, I have all this old literature. This is ten years later, that's me right there in the shop. This is a question y'all haven't asked about, when I left Lockheed that's me right there in the background and I've got some more books showing, defining that.

JM: This is with your company?

RK: No, this is with the military, when I took my military training when I left Lockheed and went to Ft. Belvoir, Virginia.

JM: This is the fort?

RK: At Ft. Belvoir, Virginia, after I had worked at Lockheed.

JM: But before you were sent to Korea?

RK: That is correct, I had my training. This was after I came back from Korea, that's the ship. I tried to get—I didn't know what y'all wanted so I just put it all out here.

SB: This is more than we expected.

RK: See, here are some things on the Bell Bomber plant now. But go ahead.

SB: You kept track of everything. That's very impressive.

RK: So you know where you can get more information when it comes time. I'll be glad to work with y'all.

SB: Thank you. It's noted that Hugh Gordon and Charles Ferguson had a large impact on the integration at Lockheed.

RK: You know Charles Ferguson?

JM: We hope to interview him in the near future.

RK: Well, I've got his picture somewhere right there, Charles Ferguson in the Masons here.

SB: He was known, Hugh Gordon, for implementing the C-141 StarLifter program in 1961 and he had a lot to do with ending segregation of Lockheed and he was largely responsible for the oversight of the Plan for Progress program at Lockheed. Can you tell us something about these men or the C-141 StarLifter, and the Plan for Progress program that employed so many African-Americans?

RK: I know more about Ferguson than I do Gordon. Ferguson worked there at Lockheed as an electrician, E&E, he worked as an E&E hourly and then he got promoted to the supervisor and he was over the structural part. He had quite a few fellows working under him and he was a part of the integration at Lockheed. Ferguson and I attend the same lodge right now. He's past master and I'm past master.

SB: Do you still attend this lodge?

RK: Masons. Oh yes. And he's originally from Florida and I used to go to Daytona Beach but he lived on down in the Homestead, Florida, that is the last town in the mainland of Florida before you hit the bridges going to Key West.

JM: Way down there.

SB: Nice.

RK: And he has been a great asset to the community, not only Lockheed but to the community since he's been here. That's Charles Ferguson. I want to show you a picture somewhere. Oh yes.

SB: Do you know anything about the Plan for Progress program at Lockheed and what kind of affect that had on you?

RK: I'm not too well acquainted with that. I can't give you firm, concrete explanations or definitions for what you're asking there.

SB: This is kind of a broad question, going away from the Lockheed experience. What do you think had the largest affect on integration in this area?

RK: Well, we have to go to the NAACP, Martin Luther King, I guess, because they came in to assist in so many different ways, the NAACP, even to Lockheed. That was a factor.

SB: And on a larger scale, you know, various acts and the 1964 Civil Rights Act and then the Voting Rights of '65, you know, what do you think was the strongest influence on integration, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, you don't have to give in-depth insight on these.

RK: Being together and attending the civic advancement works and supporting through the NAACP. One individual couldn't have done it by themselves.

SB: This is one thing that seems to be a theme we've noticed throughout the interviews and through our education to do with the NAACP and people in the community actually asked, someone we spoke to in Acworth, an individual, do you feel that integration damaged your sense of community of the African-American community in Cobb County?

RK: I guess the best way. I think I understand what you're saying. Illiteracy played, and selfishness played a great part, especially on the illiterate white side and also even on the black. Being informed, knowing the success of togetherness, where there's unity, there's strength. We can get more done by you and me working together, you happen to be a white man, I happen to be a Blackman; we can get this job done. But when we are tied up in selfishness and ignorance there's no success. That's the best way I can put it.

SB: That's a great view. We've had various views of African-Americans that we've spoken to felt like the lost a sense of community but in your sense you think it created opportunities in working together.

RK: And to make it clear, who's your president of the United States? Did he fall back and say I'm not going to learn, I'm not going to study? But he continued to fight and what happen? He made it and we're together. Even the white and black, especially the younger whites are more informed on righteous, the younger black is more informed. When you put stupidity and selfishness together, well, you know the story.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

SB: What we've noticed throughout our studies as well is that there's been an increase in the influx of African-Americans in the community, Cobb County. Why do you think African-Americans want to work and live in Cobb County?

RK: I've noticed a fluctuation even from Africa, from the North and from the West; the economy has shifted from other places to the southeast. Did I answer what you're

asking? There's more progress, necessities, support here, jobs and the economy than other places.

JM: Why specifically Cobb County?

RK: Oh yes, you said Cobb County, I said the southeast. Cobb County, in my understanding is one of the prosperous counties in the state of Georgia. Is that correct?

JM: Yes sir.

RK: The opportunities are here. Opportunity is I guess the answer that I'm trying to give you.

SB: The building of the suburbs.

RK: Correct, opportunity.

SB: This is kind of a question I was thinking about because what we've learned, even downtown Marietta, there were a lot of sit ins in various cafeterias and being so close, did you ever take part in any of this kind of activity?

RK: I'm sorry to say I've never taken part to that. I was always real busy, tied up and trying to accomplish things.

SB: One final question. What are your feelings now about the current general manager of Lockheed, Lee Rhyant, who is an African-American? In your opinion we've come to a point where race in the work place is unnoticed and that discrimination is a thing of the past. Do you believe this? It doesn't seem like you have really questioned much of that because you just went ahead with your qualifications, but it's just a question, an overall question. Do you think it's a thing of the past and you don't even notice that Lee Rhyant is an African-American because a white person heads this organization; a black person heads this organization so we don't really notice any more. It's just based on people's qualifications.

RK: I think you are pretty well answering that question for me your own self.

SB: Yes. What do you think of that? I know I went on.

RK: I must admit that I haven't participated. This right here is this house right there, this is this house. I've got the blue prints; I do architect work and so forth. This is the first house I built, this over yonder, over on Chestnut Hill Road and I did buy some apartments and another house in Atlanta. I would really, I guess I'm a little greedy over the monies and the prosperity and I spent lots of time in this and at Lockheed and in the service, so I didn't really participate like I should have in the civil rights thing because I was trying to get, to prosper. I just thought I'd point that out. I'm trying to answer your question I guess.

JM: In you opinion has race in the work place become a moot point?

RK: Break that down a little.

JM: Has race gotten to the point where it's not a factor in the work place?

RK: I think race, the standard of people will always, it's in the black area, it's in the white and it's between the black and the white, I'm just laying it on the line. Whenever we get elevated, even our Congressmen, Senators, when they get above you, both of y'all are white, there's a little, they feel like I'm a little advanced over you. That's the same thing that happens with blacks, whenever we get in a position to accomplish and, should I use the word race there or selfishness?

JM: Is discrimination a thing of the past?

RK: No. No. It won't be even two whites together. If one white ran and sees he can advance on the other one, which is related to discrimination, right, we're going to give him an opportunity, he's going to get, self preservation.

SB: So you don't see it as a skin color issue you just see it as just men in general.

RK: That's the reality, that's correct. I guess you have experienced that.

SB: You know actually this is kind of off topic, but I don't want to go on one of my little tirades . . . but my little nephew called me yesterday and he was explaining that he went to school and he made a homemade little clone trooper costume from Star Wars, they made fun of him and I said, "You know, you're going to get made fun of." Because it looked really put together and that's what kids do, no matter what. I tried to tell him you'll get over that. In a year, they'll forget all about that, hopefully. But growing up, when I moved to Canada I had an English accent, you know, British tea etc, this and that, you know, you get made fun of because you are different, that's what kids do, so yeah, it depends on what kind of circumstances you're in.

RK: Okay, I think we're together. I'm trying to answer the question, not trying to satisfy you or even myself as I see it.

JM: That is what we're after.

RK: Correct.

SB: That's great. All right. Well, we'll just say thank you Mr. Kemp.

RK: Okay.

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