

Black Archives of Mid-America / Kansas City Public Library Oral History Collection (AC12)

Interview #15: Curls, Fred

Interviewer: Ella Pruitt

Date: 03/11/1976

Length: Part 1, 51:17; Part 2, 25:32

Summary:

00:00 – 02:29: Discussion of Mr. Curls' family background. Mr. Curls was born March 31, 1919 in Kansas City, Kansas. His parents were from Oklahoma. His mother came to Kansas City to attend Western University.

02:30 – 05:21: Discussion of Mr. Curls' education. He attended Attucks School and Yates School in Kansas City, Missouri. He graduated from Lincoln High School in 1937. Mr. Curls' also discusses his father's military service in World War I and additional tours of duty.

05:22 – 11:53: Discussion of Mr. Curls' early work experience. Mr. Curls started work in 1939 at Myron Green's restaurant on the Country Club Plaza. Green had a line of promotion from dishwasher on up. Mr. Curls was passed up for promotion due to his race. Green moved Mr. Curls to the downtown location and gave him a job operating the elevator, according to Mr. Curls one of the best jobs available to a black person. His new boss at the downtown location moved him to the bakery department.

11:54 – 15:48: Mr. Curls discusses his work experience at Indian Handcrafts. He learned to cut stone and silversmithing. Mr. Curls worked at Indian Handcrafts around 1940 or 1941. At that time he had married and had two children. The pay and work schedule were not good; he made about twenty-six cents an hour and worked five and a half days a week.

15:49 – 21:52: Discussion of Mr. Curls' experience working construction. Friends convinced Mr. Curls to move to Oklahoma to take a job as a construction worker near his grandparents' home. His wife and children remained in Kansas City, Missouri, with Mr. Curls' mother. He worked as a common laborer in Parsons, Kansas, but later became a foreman. The crew was a mix of black and white workers. Mr. Curls also discusses a racial incident that occurred on the job.

21:53 – 24:04: Mr. Curls discusses learning to weld as part of the National Youth Administration in Parsons, Kansas. He was paid to learn the trade. Mr. Curls was the only black man in the school.

- 24:05 – 27:25: Discussion of Mr. Curls' return to Kansas City, Missouri. Mr. Curls received a medical deferment from the army. He came back to Kansas City and returned to his job at the Indian jewelry store. The business failed in 1945. Mr. Curls took positions elsewhere in machine and welding shops around the city.
- 27:26 – 31:05: Mr. Curls describes an experience of discrimination in the workplace. In 1950, Mr. Curls was sent by an employment office to Lake City to work as a maintenance welder, but the business placed him in the position of janitor. Mr. Curls told the building superintendent that he was well-qualified to work on machines, but the superintendent told him to make do with the work he was given. Mr. Curls had to perform worse jobs after speaking out, such as picking up cigarette butts out of sand boxes.
- 31:06 – 34:49: Mr. Curls discusses gambling at the workplace to make extra money. Mr. Curls used some of the money he made gambling to pay off his foreman to keep from getting bad work assignments. Mr. Curls was fired for spending less time working and more time selling punch boards.
- 34:50 – 39:26: Discussion of how Mr. Curls got into the real estate business. In 1952, Mr. Curls took a job at a friend's real estate agency. It was a seller's market because African Americans were just starting to move past 27th Street. Mr. Curls also discusses challenges to residential segregation.
- 39:27 – 46:25: Mr. Curls discusses the housing market. White real estate agents would contact black real estate agents to team up to sell houses to African Americans. Both white and black real estate agents used "scare" tactics to sell houses. Mr. Curls knew that if one black person moved into a neighborhood, his or her white neighbors would soon want to move out. Mr. Curls would leave his name and number with the buyer after selling the initial house in the neighborhood. He notes, however, that moving up and out was not just a white phenomenon; blacks were also looking for ways out of the city.
- 46:26 – 50:10: Discussion of how school desegregation affected the housing market. Prior to 1954, African American families were locked into particular neighborhoods because segregated schools were the only options available to black children. Mr. Curls also discusses how mass displacement from the city to the suburbs began to destroy the inner city.
- 50:11 – 51:16: Mr. Curls discusses moving into his current real estate office on 31st Street.
- 51:17: End of tape one.
- 00:00 – 05:59: Continued discussion of how Mr. Curls moved into his current real estate office. Mr. Curls could not get a bank loan, so he relied on private investors.
- 06:00 – 09:31: Discussion of how Mr. Curls moved into real estate appraising. The housing market was rising through the 1950s but started to slow down in the 1960s. Demand for homes was down across the country. Properties were

available to African Americans throughout the city as opposed to being locked in certain areas. Mr. Curls moved into real estate appraising to make more money. He needed additional schooling to become a licensed appraiser.

09:32 – 16:21: Discussion of Mr. Curls' college experience. Mr. Curls initially took courses in Columbia, Missouri. Mr. Curls notes that he did not realize how much he really did not know. He took it as a challenge. He went back to school, got better at math, and did a lot of studying on his own in order to do better. Mr. Curls failed the first time. On his third attempt, he passed his courses.

16:22 – 21:37: Mr. Curls discusses his work as a real estate appraiser. In 1967, as part of Kansas City's Land Redevelopment Authority's contract with a white developer, the white developer had to provide field training to Mr. Curls in mass appraising. Mr. Curls started to get contracts on his own. He asked to be assigned to the Highway Department since a new freeway was being put in. The Highway Department accepted him without argument, but he once again worked with a white appraiser. Mr. Curls eventually worked as an appraiser for a number of public and private entities, including the Veterans Administration and the cities of Kansas City, Missouri, and Independence, Missouri.

21:38 – 23:58: Discussion of Mr. Curls' family. He and his wife Thelma had six children. His oldest daughter is no longer living. His son Phillip worked with him as an appraiser and is a Missouri state legislator.

23:59 – 25:30: Mr. Curls' message to black youth. Mr. Curls believes youth should acquire all of the academic knowledge they can and use common sense. Life is a struggle, and you have to work hard to get all you can out of it.

25:32: End of tape two.

Index Terms:

Appraisers
 Business
 Curls, Fred A.
 Discrimination
 Green, Myron
 Housing
 Kansas City, Kansas
 Kansas City, Missouri
 Lincoln High School [Kansas City, Missouri]
 National Youth Administration
 Parsons, Kansas
 Real Estate
 Segregation

Summary compiled by Brian Garrison, June 2014. Edited by Michael Sweeney, Collection Librarian, August 2014.