

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

Interview #42: McKamey, Leo

Interviewer: Ophelia Webber

Date: 02/01/1976

Length: 62:32

Summary:

00:00 – 03:07: Discussion of Mr. McKamey's family background and early history. Mr. McKamey was born in St. Louis, Missouri. He attended school in St. Louis County and later attended Lincoln University and the University of Chicago. Mr. McKamey returned to St. Louis after college and met United States Senator Thomas C. Hennings, Jr. Senator Hennings helped Mr. McKamey get a job conducting a survey for the local Urban League under the auspices of the Interior Department.

03:07 – 06:21: Discussion of Senator Hennings and his influence on Mr. McKamey. The survey position lasted six months. Mr. McKamey worked for the City of St. Louis for another year; this was followed by the position at St. Nicholas Catholic School teaching the drum and bugle core. He later took a job with the St. Louis County Schools teaching band.

06:21 – 09:52: Discussion of Mr. McKamey's employment during early World War II. Mr. McKamey worked for the Atlas Powder Company in Weldon Springs, Missouri. He left this position due to the hostile environment towards blacks. Mr. McKamey came to Kansas City, Missouri, to find work; his brother was living and working in Kansas City.

09:40 – 10:27: Discussion of Mr. McKamey's war experience. Mr. McKamey was called to appear for a physical exam at Jefferson Barracks. He was drafted into the United States Army as a warrant officer.

10:27 – 12:50: Discussion of Mr. McKamey's post-war employment. Mr. McKamey returned to Kansas City. His first job after the war was with Thomas McGee Insurance Company followed by another position as the Automated Canteen Company, where he stayed for two years. Mr. McKamey's next position was with Local 555.

12:50 – 17:12: Discussion of Mr. McKamey's entry into Local 555 in 1955. Mr. McKamey achieved some financial security by partnering with a friend in a bonding business; the business was located at 12th and Euclid. He was approached by Local 555 to take over the position of Financial Secretary at the union. Local 555 had historically been an all-black union; there was fear that, due

to its financial difficulties, the union would be amalgamated with a white union. Mr. McKamey worked for six to eight months without pay.

- 15:51 – 17:12: Discussion of Mr. McKamey’s experience with Local 555. He describes his experience with discrimination, but he stayed with the union because it was the oldest union in the area that had a black business manager, a black financial secretary, and black officers.
- 17:12 – 20:50: Discussion of Mr. McKamey’s decision to turn down an offer to serve as an organizer for the international union. A contract with a local union was more stable. After Thomas Callaway’s departure from the local union, Mr. McKamey assumed the position of business manager. Mr. McKamey discusses union wages.
- 20:50 – 25:06: Discussion of union membership. There were roughly 600 to 700 members when Mr. McKamey started with Local 555. The local union has never owned its own building; the members created a corporation which purchased and owns the building and rents to the local union itself. Mr. McKamey discusses the history of Local 555.
- 25:06 – 29:55: Discussion of the international union’s need for black officers. Mr. McKamey helped create the constitution for the international union. According to Mr. McKamey, the international union recognized the need for black officers to be appointed. The union convention in Chicago nominated Robert Pyles, a member of Local No. 1290 in Kansas City, Kansas, to serve as vice-president for the international union.
- 29:55 – 30:07: Discussion of problems at the Springfield regional office.
- 30:07: End of side one.
- 30:07 – 33:17: Discussion of the emergence of Freedom, Inc. Mr. McKamey describes the organization’s success at upgrading the jobs available to African Americans at City Hall. Based on this success, Mr. McKamey agreed to run for office in the new 36th Congressional District.
- 33:17 – 40:58: Discussion of Mr. McKamey’s first year in office. Mr. McKamey won his seat in 1973. Serving in the Missouri House of Representatives from the Kansas City, Missouri, area were Harold Holliday, Sr., Fred Curls, Leon Jordan, and Mr. McKamey. Mr. McKamey describes a bill he offered concerning consumer protections against unfair practices by utility companies.
- 40:58 – 45:18: Discussion of Mr. McKamey’s priorities in the Missouri House of Representatives. He notes the defeat of “right-to-work” legislation. Mr. McKamey discusses the importance of unions to black people throughout the United States.
- 45:18 – 49:07: Discussion of how Mr. McKamey learned the rules of the Missouri House of Representatives. He notes the vital importance of learning the rules of the

House for succeeding in getting bills passed. He was well respected for his knowledge of the rules by other members.

49:07 – 54:14: Discussion of the health and welfare program established by the union. Mr. McKamey also discusses the union's dental clinic, eye care program, and savings program.

54:14 – 58:00: Discussion of Mr. McKamey's future plans. He mentions his plan to run for office again. Mr. McKamey wants to continue working in the labor field, possibly with younger unions starting out on general assignments.

58:00 – 61:02: Discussion of today's youth. Mr. McKamey expresses the importance of getting a good education and getting experience in technological fields, e.g. electronics, automation.

62:32: End of side two.

Index Terms:

Freedom, Inc.
 Hennings, Thomas C., Jr.
 Kansas City, Missouri
 Labor Unions
 Local 1290
 Local 555
 Mason and Plaster Tenders Union
 McKamey, Leo
 Missouri State Legislature
 Politicians
 St. Louis, Missouri
 St. Louis County, Missouri
 State Representatives
 Thirty-Sixth District [Missouri Congressional Districts]

Summary compiled by Michael Sweeney, Collection Librarian, January 2014.