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SPECIAL COLLECTIONS FINDING AID

Title: MS 0769 1968 Riots Oral History Collection, 2002-2003

Processor: Rachel Donelson

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The 1968 Riots Oral History Collection, 2002-2004, includes oral history interviews and transcriptions from six individuals who offer different perspectives about their experiences during the Washington, DC, 1968 Riots, which occurred when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated on April 4, 1968. The interviews were conducted by the donor for an oral history graduate course at American University, in partnership with the Historical Society of Washington, D.C.

Virginia Ali, at the time of the interview in 2003, was a 69-year-old African American restaurateur who has lived in Washington, D.C., since the 1940s. She was raised by her mother's sister in a home on Meridian Hill in Columbia Heights, a middle class African-American neighborhood. In 1958, Virginia Ali and her husband, Ben Ali, opened Ben's Chili Bowl, a restaurant near the corner of 14th and U Streets, where the riots began. Ali recalls the Chili Bowl as a community center for the neighborhood and describes the restaurant's important role during the riots. Virginia Ali continued to run the restaurant in 2003.

Reuben Jackson, at the time of the interview in 2002, was a 46-year-old African American who moved to Washington, D.C., in 1959. The youngest in a middle-class family of two boys, Reuben was 12 years old at the time of the riots. The Jackson family lived at 5322 5th Streets, NW, several blocks from the riot areas. Reuben did not participate in the riots, but witnessed them with his father, from atop the roof of their home. At the time of the interview, Reuben attended Goddard College and lived in Alexandria, Virginia, working as an archivist at Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History.

“John Smith,” [pseudonym given to the interviewee, who required anonymity] at the time of the interview in 2002, was a 57-year-old African American and native Washingtonian. The middle child in a family of twelve, Smith grew up in an economically poor, but stable home. His family lived in a house at 8th and N Streets, NW, where Smith recalls a childhood of violence, drinking, and crime. Smith’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement began while working in the youth programs organization at 14th and U Streets, NW. There he became the leader of the black militant group, the Zulus. Smith was 23 years old at the time of the riots, and along with other members of the Zulus group, participated in the violence and looting following King’s assassination. Smith left the movement shortly after the riots to start a family of his own. He attended American University and currently lives in Washington, D.C., working for the city government.

Bonnie Perry, at the time of the interview in 2002, was a 47-year-old African American and native of Washington, D.C. The eldest in a family of two girls, she spent her childhood moving several times within low-income neighborhoods in the city. As a 13-year-old at the time of the riots, Bonnie lived at 7th and S Streets, NW, a few blocks away from the riot areas. She did not participate in the riots, but witnessed them from a close vantage point. Bonnie is currently a Washington resident and works as a corporate account manager for WAMU radio station.

Fath Ruffins, at the time of the interview in 2004, was African American who first moved to Washington, D.C., in 1957. She was 3 years old at the time. Her father was in the Foreign Service and their family moved around the world. Fath moved back into the area so she could attend high school. She was in school at the time of the riots.

John K. Jackson a 69-year-old African American retired Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Officer. Jackson has lived in Washington, D.C., since the early 1950s. Living in a middle-class African-American neighborhood of Landover, Maryland, with his wife and several children, Jackson served on the DC police force during the riots. Jackson also served as a law enforcement officer during Martin Luther King’s March on Washington in 1963.

Scope and Content Note: This is a collection of 6 oral histories covering the 1968 riots. The oral history includes a discussion of the person’s personal history and experiences during the 1968 riots. Each oral history comprises a transcript and audio cassette.

Donor: Dana Schaffer, 2003.128

Size: .25 cubic ft, 6 audiotapes (2 containers).

Access Restrictions: Access to “John Smith” audiotape is restricted, per the oral history contractual agreement between the interviewer/donor and the interviewee.

Use Restrictions: The oral history contractual agreement signed by each interviewee transferred legal title, literary property rights, and rights, title and interest in copyright to the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. It is the patron's obligation to determine and satisfy any case restrictions when publishing or otherwise distributing materials found in the collections.

Container List

Container 1

Folder 1: Virginia Ali interview, 2003. Includes abstract of interview, table of contents of interview, transcript of the interview.

Folder 2: Reuben M. Jackson interview, 2002. Includes abstract of interview, table of contents of interview, transcript of the interview.

Folder 3: “John Smith” [alias] interview, 2002. Includes abstract of interview, table of contents of interview, transcript of the interview.

Folder 4: Bonnie Perry interview, 2002. Includes abstract of interview, table of contents of interview, transcript of the interview.

Folder 5: Fath Davis Ruffins interview, 2002. Includes abstract of interview, table of contents of interview, transcript of the interview.

Folder 6: John D. Jackson interview, 2003 Includes abstract of interview, table of contents of interview, transcript of the interview.

Container 2

6 audio cassettes [**note access restrictions**]