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From Immigrant to Ethnic: Interview with Joseph LeCount by Joseph Conforti

Joseph LeCount

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Recommended Citation

LeCount, Joseph, "From Immigrant to Ethnic: Interview with Joseph LeCount by Joseph Conforti" (1976). *From Immigrant to Ethnic*. 14.

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Rhode Island College

ETHNIC STUDIES PROJECT

Oral History Interview # 15

with

Joseph LeCount

May 14, 1976

By Joseph Conforti

Tape 1 Side 1

- 7 Born in Washington, D.C. Came to East Providence in 1889 when he was 2 years old. Came to live with relatives. Then moved to West Elmwood section (between Elmwood and Cranston Street).
- 26 His neighborhood was mixed--many blacks, Irish, Italian.
- 36 Housing: black parents not employed in highly skilled trades. Were mostly working at menial jobs: furniture wagons, delivery wagons, porters. So they couldn't buy the best homes in the area. But some did buy homes. They were respectable--attended church, sent their children at least through grammar school. Then children usually went to work to help support family.
- 68 No trouble among ethnic groups there. Boys were able to participate freely in school sports.
- 81 Was discrimination in restaurants, theaters, auditoriums, skating rinks, etc.
- 86 He graduated from law school in 1913. Was active in NAACP. Was one of founders of Marathon Club when he was in high school in 1905. Founded to prove that black youth could be respectable, did have ambition, civic concerns. Talks about some of the members.
- 127 Activities of Marathon Club. At first they were involved with sponsoring athletics then became interested in more wide-ranging issues. Secured pardon for black convicted of rape, secured re-institution of an all-black militia company in the state, supported activities of NAACP. Had football, baseball, track teams. Now Club supports charitable causes, gives scholarships.

Joseph LeCount

226 West Elmwood was largest black neighborhood in Providence. Also fairly large group on East Side and South Providence.

260 Church was important in the community. Two churches there and some went to other sections of the city to attend services. His mother was Baptist but went to Methodist church here. He took part in Sunday school, was in choir. Became Episcopalian when his daughter was confirmed.

338 Jobs: worked in Boston Store as bundles boy, porter, elevator operator. Was ambitious and read a great deal. Applied to Howard University and studied there for law degree. Worked his way through school by working in restaurants, in boarding house, as delivery boy. Got no financial support from home. Had drive to succeed and felt education was a way to do so. Always felt he should be treated equally, should be given equal opportunities.

Tape 1 Side 2

1 He felt the blacks should not have suffered what they did-- should not have been barred from restaurants, they couldn't sit in lower section of theaters, couldn't go in barbershops. He got involved in NAACP, was president of Providence branch in 1935. They succeeded in eliminating discrimination in restaurants and theaters in the state.

53 In 1939, he was elected to term as regional president of NAACP. Held office for 8 years and then was on board of directors.

86 After law school, he came back to Providence, married in 1914 then lived on East Side in black neighborhood known as Sugar Hill--called this by other blacks who felt that only the "higher class" blacks lived there. Respectable element of black community lived in area of Lippitt Street, Howell Street. Area remained that way until World War II. Then the Jewish people living there began to sell their homes to blacks coming in from the South to work in trades in Providence. Conditions in housing began deteriorating.

156 West Elmwood was good neighborhood, generally good housing. He found no differences in people on Sugar Hill. People from both communities held same kinds of jobs--couldn't be teachers, couldn't get employment with city or state.

202 He served as an intern to a black lawyer in Providence.

Joseph LeCount

- 227 Lived on East Side until 1966 or so then bought house in East Providence.
- 252 Changes in East Side neighborhood--some sections became dilapidated. Neighborhood declined--cause was the nature of the people who came in. They were lower class blacks. Only concerned with gambling and drinking. University Heights was intended to replace houses that had been torn down but when completed rents were too high for original residents to return to area. Many of them had gone to South Providence. Neighborhood on East Side began to change around time of World War II, influx from South, overcrowding, people with no ambition.
- 340 Whites sold houses to blacks at high prices which they couldn't really afford so some turned to bootlegging, etc. to keep up with mortgage payments and neighborhood became worse.
- 370 Unfamiliar with changes in West Elmwood.
- 385 Involved in NAACP in 1913 when he returned from law school. The second president wasn't holding meetings, chapter was inactive so he and several others insisted that meeting be held and he was elected president. Membership over 1,000 at one time. They worked to eliminate police brutality against blacks, would file complaints and pursue them to improve conditions. Description of incident at Rhode Island auditorium.

Tape 2 Side 1

- 1 Description of incident at Rhode Island Auditorium.
- 40 Before 1935, NAACP not very active in Providence.
- 57 Marathon Club was filling void left by NAACP inactivity.
- 63 He's involved in several fraternal organizations: Elks, Odd Fellows, Masonic groups.
- 94 Member of Urban League since its founding but not very active. Felt other groups already established were doing the same work.
- 144 His comments on Governor Noel's "racial remark".
- 175 Found time for law practice even though heavily involved in furthering cause of equality. Had mostly black clients.

Joseph LeCount

- 187 Life in East Providence: enjoys life there, lives on Dunbar Street. Many blacks in his neighborhood. Only 3 white-owned homes on the street, rest are black-owned and all are well-kept. Most blacks have moved there from Providence.
- 265 Involved in promoting welfare of blacks in the area and he feels there has been much progress. For example, there are now blacks in banking, as bus drivers, as legal secretaries, involved in running businesses, restaurants.
- 296 Overall the educated black now can advance, he feels. Still have long way to go. Feels whites must still come to full realization that blacks are real human beings just like anyone else. He feels more progress is possible.
- 338 His reactions to black militant movements of 60's: not impressed, some of their tactics hurt the cause. Believes in getting equal rights by persuasion, negotiation, peaceful means.
- 350 He's hopeful for the future--if education is used properly, progress will be made, discrimination will lessen.