

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
Chattanooga - Hamilton County Public Library
Chattanooga, Tennessee

An Interview With
WILKES T. THRASHER, JR.

By

Norman Bradley

July 12, 1984

CHATTANOOGA - HAMILTON COUNTY BICENTENNIAL LIBRARY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

PERSONAL DATA SHEET

Date July 12, 1984

1. Full name (include maiden name and married name, where applies):

Wilkes T. Thrasher, Jr.

2. Current address and phone number:

311 Hamilton County Courthouse 757-2457
Chattanooga, Tennessee

3. Date and Place of Birth:

July 23, 1921 Chattanooga, Tennessee

4. Mother's maiden name:

Mary Louise McCahill

Place of Birth:

Chattanooga, Tennessee

5. Father's name:

Wilkes T. Thrasher, Sr.

Place of Birth:

Chattanooga, Tennessee

6. Spouse's name:

Madge Ramsey Thrasher

7. Children's names and addresses (if possible). Indicate daughters married names:

Wilkes T. Thrasher III

James P. Thrasher

PREFACE

This manuscript is a transcript of an interview conducted for the Oral History Project of the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Public Library. The purpose of the project is to capture the first-hand accounts of the social history of the Chattanooga area in the twentieth century.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that the transcript reflects the patterns of the spoken, rather than the written, word. The information is presented as it was recalled by the interviewee at the occasion of the interview and has been edited only for clarity.

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Two indexes have been prepared for locating specific information from either the transcript or the tape. The page index to the transcript is located at the end of this volume. A meter count number has been given in the left margin of the text for locating a section on the tape. It should be noted that this number will vary depending on the equipment used.

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INTRODUCTION

Wilkes T. Thrasher, Jr., Chattanooga attorney and judge, dates his memories of the local political scene from his third birthday or thereabouts. It was then that his father, whose career as a public office holder ranged from justice of the peace to county judge, first ran for a place on the county court. Rarely had there been a year since, in which the younger Thrasher was not engaged in a political campaign, either as a worker or as a candidate, until his election in 1974 as a judge of the chancery court, the position he has held for the past decade. He is a veteran of a score or more election battles encompassing the years of the controlled wards and the so-called chain ballot method of delivering an assured vote.

The interview with him was recorded July 12, 1984, at the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Bicentennial Library by Norman Bradley for the Oral History Project.

Bradley: Judge Thrasher, from your personal history, it's quite evident that politics, in the best sense of the word and in the practitioner sense too, politics has been at the very heart of your life. Can you remember a time when you were not interested in politics and political affairs in this community?
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Thrasher: No, Norman, I really can't. I was born in 1921, July as a matter of fact, so I'll be about sixty-three here this month. My father entered the political arena in 1924, so I was a lad of three when we had our first political campaign; that's the first thing I remember. They laugh and say I cut my teeth on an instruction ballot and played in the sandpile with a ballot box, and I guess that's about true.

Bradley: Your father ran for member of the county court?

Thrasher: Yes, sir, he ran for justice of the peace of the Third Civil District of Hamilton County; that's north of the river, shall we say.

Bradley: Was he an attorney, too?

Thrasher: Yes, sir, he was an attorney and if I might digress for a minute, I thought it was rather interesting. He had two older attorneys, Mr. Horace Hamby and Mr. Alvin Ziegler. They asked him one day, said, "Wilkes, you've just gotten your law license and started practicing. Why don't you run for justice of the peace?" And he said, "Oh, I can't do that, it'd cost too much money." And they said, "Well, how much will it cost to be properly financed to run a race in Hamilton County?" "Oh," he said, "my goodness, it'll cost easily \$500." And they said, "Well, I tell you what we'll do; we'll go down to the Hamilton National Bank and we'll sign your note for \$500, with one condition precedent, or rather two conditions precedent. If you lose, forget about it; we will pay the note ourselves. If you win, then you will be justice of the peace; you will operate in a court and you'll have an income, then you pay it back." He accepted that proposal, and he did run and the campaign was financed with \$500, and he did win. The reason I mention that, nowadays with the county-wide campaigns costing anywhere from \$25,000 to \$100,000, the \$500 seems insignificant.

Bradley: It doesn't sound like so much, does it?

Thrasher: No, sir, it doesn't.

Bradley: For the benefit of those who might not remember, will you go over very briefly the form of county government we had at that time, the county court as the legislative body and the county judge as the executive. It's changed since then, so let's catch up on that form of government.
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Thrasher: Yes, in those days we had the quarterly county court system, which was, as you stated, the legislative branch. The county judge was the head of the executive branch. There were eleven justices of the peace in Hamilton County, and the county judge did not have a vote except in the event of a tie. That is, if somehow they got tied, maybe one member was not there and it ended up five-five, why, the county judge would have a vote. Otherwise, he presided over the quarterly county court, but did not have a vote.

Bradley: What powers did the squires have?

Thrasher: The squires had the same power that the present county commission has; they were the legislative branch. They were in charge of the roads, the workhouses, the schools, the budget, Every bit of the county legislative affairs was vested in their hands: the election of the superintendent, the election of the county coroner, the election of the county physician, the health department, the workhouses, the roads, all those matters were under their complete control and jurisdiction.

Bradley: And they, as individuals, had certain judicial powers, did they not?
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Thrasher: Yes, sir, they also had the right to operate courts, which would be similar to and are similar to, I should say, our sessions courts of today.

Bradley: That was why they were called "justices of the peace" as well as being squires or members of the court.

Thrasher: That's correct, sir. With your permission, it was about 1934 that they formed the "Rebel Squires." Six of them* joined together to resist the other five and the county judge, the county judge then being Judge Will Cummings, and he was aligned with the other five. The Rebel Squires decided they were going to put their friends and people in office and they did, and that lasted down to the 1940-41 period when they changed the form of government, abolished, or really didn't abolish, divested them of their power and vested it in a county council, which is, of course, the forerunner to the present county commission.

Bradley: And your father was a member of the court during the Rebel Squires -- as a matter of fact, was a leader of the Rebel Squires, is that not correct?
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* The six Rebel Squires were Wilkes Thrasher, Sr., G. Russell Brown, Mack Fryar, W. F. Langley, Luther Hamby, and J. W. Johnston.

Thrasher: That's correct.

Bradley: What were the issues, primarily, that brought that on, Wilkes?

Thrasher: The actual basis I don't know, except six of them fell out with
080 Judge Cummings over the appointment of the county physician and the county superintendent one year.

Bradley: Superintendent of education.

Thrasher: Yes sir, and they decided that they would just get together and band themselves together and get a superintendent of their own because they felt that Judge Cummings' superintendent was not the appropriate one. So that started it all, and then it just kept -- the gap got wider and wider.

Bradley: At that point could they dismiss the superintendent by an adverse vote?

Thrasher: They most assuredly could.

Bradley: In other words, he served at the pleasure of the court.

Thrasher: He did. He did, and they removed A. L. Rankin and put in -- I believe Marshall Clark was their choice.

Bradley: And this would have been in '30 --

Thrasher: Thirty-three, thirty-four period, yes sir. *

Bradley: The squires were elected from districts, right?

Thrasher: Districts, rather than county-wide, that's correct.

Bradley: And do those district lines exist anymore?

Thrasher: No sir, they do not exist; the commissioners [ed: councilmen] ran county-wide.

Bradley: And he had been from his first election in the twenties up un-
095 til and through this period, a member of the county court.

Thrasher: Yes sir.

* In 1939, six quarterly court members rebelled against the leadership of Will Cummings and elected Marshall Clark as superintendent of schools, defeating incumbent Arthur L. Rankin.

Bradley: Let's go ahead. Did he then become an active opponent of Judge Cummings?

Thrasher: Yes, they became political enemies; that's true. In fact, 100
Judge Cummings fell out with all of the six Rebel Squires and was determined that he was going to do them in politically. In fact, he accomplished that purpose; he got together with the, then, trustee, Wiley Couch, and prevailed upon Wiley Couch to help him and to elect a legislative ticket who would be committed to the abolition of the justice of the peace system, or at least to divesting the justices of the peace of their legislative power. And that commission was so elected. Judge Wiley Couch did decide that he would join with him [Cummings] because Judge Couch at that time was coming to the front fast as an official in this community, and so he joined forces with him. I'm just trying to think who the members of that legislative delegation were. Judge, I mean, Senator [Benjamin L.] Bennie Cash was one, I remember that for sure.

Bradley: He must have had one senator and three house members.

Thrasher: He sure did. I think it was [Daniel] D. M. Coleman and [Jesse] 115
J. B. Ragon and [William] W. J. Everhart, I believe.* And so with Couch's help, aid, and assistance the legislative ticket was elected. And they did pass in [February] 1941 the County Manager-County Council Act, which elected four men, or four people I should say, to work with the county judge. So, therefore, Judge Cummings, at long last, had become victorious and the Rebel Squires were at long last defeated and at his mercy, so he thought. But within a few months Judge Couch ran against Judge Cummings for county judge [March 1942]. The Rebel Squires backed Judge Couch and Judge Cummings was defeated, so the victory was short-lived.

Bradley: Not long thereafter Judge Couch died.

Thrasher: Yes sir, in [April] 1947.

Bradley: And also Judge Cummings; did he live much longer?

Thrasher: Oh, yes, he lived quite a time longer, yes. [died 1969]

Bradley: In retirement.

* Elected in August 1940, John T. Mahoney, D. M. Coleman, J. B. Ragon, and W. French Grubb represented the county to the Tennessee General Assembly and introduced legislation which changed the county's form of government.

Thrasher: Yes, in retirement.

Bradley: You said a moment ago that Mr. Couch, then trustee, joined
125 with him and helped him. In what manner, just by his influence?

Thrasher: Yes, he had quite a bit of --

Bradley: How long had he been trustee, do you recall?

Thrasher: Yes, I can check right quick and tell you because I have them when they came in [looks at reference papers]. I thought maybe that question might come up, so I had checked it out. Judge Couch became county trustee in 1934 and served until 1942, so he came into public life in the year of 1934.*

Bradley: He had not been in public office prior to that?

Thrasher: Prior to that time he had not, but he had an ocean of friends and he had made a lot of alliances, and he'd helped many people down through the years. He called in all of his "IOU's" and began to build a tremendous organization.

Bradley: What is the base of power that the trustee did hold or now
135 holds? On what basis does he build political friendship and political power?

Thrasher: Well, when I said he called in his political IOU's, I was not speaking primarily as trustee. Judge Couch, who was then Mr. Couch, who operated the Kelly Cigar store, as a matter of fact, had helped many, many people financially; he had helped them personally. He had been on the periphery, the outskirts, of politics, and he was in a position to help many people with the senators, with the governor of the state, with county and state officials. So he'd helped so many, many people in many ways that he already had a great base to operate from. Secondly, he had been potentate of Alhambra Shrine Temple and was very active in Masonic and Shrine affairs, too, and other civic and fraternal interests. So when you put them all together, he had the nucleus of a great organization before he ever came to "courthouse hill."

Now then, specifically, to your question: the trustee,

* Wiley Couch served as county trustee from 1932 to 1938. He reentered the political scene in 1941 when he was appointed to the newly created County Council. In 1942, he ran for County Judge against Will Cummings and won that race.

- (Thrasher): 150 of course, deals with people who have money, the people who pay large tax bills, or people of affluence, people of means, of substance, and therefore you rub shoulders, shall we say, with people who have money; the bankers, the businessmen, the business community. Therefore, it's easy to make new friends and new acquaintances, and come election time he knows the ones who can put in five hundred dollars and who, like the rest of us poorfolks, can't put in but a dollar, you know.
- Bradley: Then, when he ran for county judge against Judge Cummings, what year was this?
- Thrasher: That was in 1942.
- Bradley: And at that point had the commission form -- well, he must have come in then with the commission form of government.
- Thrasher: 165 I thought so, too, but I went back and checked my notes, and I saw that there were people named right after 1941. In 1941 Judge Cummings, of course, was county judge, and W. O. (Wiley) Couch was named as a county councilman, V. W. (Vick) Hallmark, he was a labor activist, and R. E. Holbert -- I don't recall him -- and a fourth one -- and my notes are broken off there. I tore the paper off uneven, and I just don't know who that other one was [James Pitts]. Now, they were named right after the bill was signed by the governor.
- Bradley: They were named by the governor.
- Thrasher: They were named by the governor, that's right.
- Bradley: As a transition matter.
- Thrasher: As a transition matter at the request of Judge Cummings and Mr. Couch at that time. [James W.] Jim Gentry was named as the county manager.* Those gentlemen served until the next election which was in '42, which was about eight to ten months away, you see.
- Bradley: [George] McInturff was not a member of that original four, was he?
- Thrasher: 175 No, sir, but he was elected the first elected commission. George McInturff, Jim Pitts from Falling Water, W. C. "Billy"

* James Gentry was the second county manager, having been appointed the replacement for D. S. Etheridge in September 1942.

- (Thrasher): Smith, who as I recall was a retired fireman, and Newton (Newt) Logan, those were the four who were elected, the first elected county commission.
- Bradley: And were they not elected from county-wide? They did not run from districts.
- Thrasher: No, sir, it was county-wide. They were on the ticket with Couch; you see, it was Cummings versus Couch for the county judge. [There were] other members of our society who wanted to be county council members, but these four were on the ticket with Judge Couch. So he swept himself in, and his entire ticket.
- Bradley: You mentioned Jim Gentry as the first county manager. The
180 bill specified it to be a commission-manager form of government.
- Thrasher: Council-manager form of government.
- Bradley: Council, I'm sorry.
- Thrasher: Yes, you and I are so used now to saying commission, it's hard; it's council-manager form of government.
- Bradley: Council-manager. But is it not true that the manager never played quite the role that was originally intended?
- Thrasher: As the teenagers of today say, "Norman, you got that right." He had about as much to do with it as the vice-president does in our United States government, that's right. He was a figurehead, and all of them were all the way down the line. But it was the creative intended purpose that he was to be very powerful, but he got relegated to the back. I don't mean just Mr. Gentry, I mean Mr. Gentry and all of his successors were relegated to the background.
- Bradley: Well, at this time then, they retained the county court, but deprived it of its legislative powers, right?
- Thrasher: That's correct.
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- Bradley: What was left to the county court at that point?
- Thrasher: With the creation of the session judges, that took their judicial powers away. They had the right, they had the opportunity and the duty to pass upon the budget. For some reason, they didn't take that power. You recall, then, once a year the squires would meet in July and pass upon the budget. That, too, was kind of a pro forma sort of matter. And they

- (Thrasher): 202 could appoint the county ranger and the county coroner and appoint notary publics, and that's about the extent of their power.
- Bradley: Did the power to appoint the superintendent of education pass to the --
- Thrasher: That passed to the county council.
- Bradley: During the latter stages of the county court, when the justices did have some judicial powers, there were frequent charges of fee-grabbing. Now, do you recall that sort of furor, Wilkes?
- Thrasher: Oh, yes.
- Bradley: What was the basis of that?
- Thrasher: They said that the justices of the peace were called "J.P.'s" which were the abbreviated initials for justice of the peace, and that stood for "judgment for the plaintiff" since they only got paid if the plaintiff won, and that was a source of the statement that they are fee-grabbers. And then the police officers -- you know, they didn't have a sessions court to go to or city court -- so they'd just run in before the justice of the peace and bring their ticket in and say, "Mr. Norman Bradley has been arrested for speeding," and they said, the justice of the peace said, "That's \$10 and cost, next case." So that's where they got the reputation of being fee-grabbers. However, I have been in some of the justice of the peace courts here, and I see very little difference in the operation of the justice of the peace courts that I saw in those days and the sessions courts of today, except they are more modernized. But, some of them were very conscientious judges.
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- Bradley: They also got a fee, not only in the civil cases if the plaintiff won, but they also got a fee if anybody was fined.
- Thrasher: That's exactly right; that's why I said it's awfully hard to get turned loose in justice of the peace court. That's why this is desirable for the session court, because session court judges get a salary whether they find the person guilty or not; whereas, they were losing money in the justice of the peace court if they turned a person loose.
- Bradley: Was there some basis for this charge of fee-grabbing, you think?
- Thrasher: I have seen evidences of that in other areas of our state,

- (Thrasher): 230 and especially in Georgia. I was too young to be able to give you a very candid evaluation, I was a junior -- elementary junior school at that time, they call it "middle school," I think, now, so I don't know enough about it to give you a professional evaluation.
- Bradley: They did not have a courtroom for each of the J.P.'s. Where did they hold court? Where did they hold hearings?
- Thrasher: 245 The justices of the peace had to arrange their own courtroom. I remember my father's courtroom was on Seventh Street upstairs, just below the Home Plate Cafeteria; I think it was the Violet Studio downstairs, as I recall, and there was a stairway that said "Justice of the Peace court upstairs." You'd walk up to the top of the steps, and he had rented the whole upstairs there, and that was a courtroom with chairs and benches and just like a modern courtroom except it was not modernistic like it is today. And Judge [H. F. "Pete"] Lawrence's, I remember his -- there's a parking lot there now -- about the base of the county parking lot was a building called The Rathskellar, and Judge Lawrence's was right there in between that [619 Cherry]; it was a ground floor and he had a huge room, about the size of an extra large living room, and he sat at the far end on a bench, and that was his courtroom.
- Bradley: How often or on what time schedules did they hold court?
- Thrasher: Five days a week and sometimes on Saturday.
- Bradley: Did your father consider it a full-time job or did it take -- I'm sure it took up a great deal of his time.
- Thrasher: Oh yes, it was a full-time job for those who operated a court because you had to keep clerks. See, right now the sessions court has a sessions court clerk. Well, each justice of the peace had to keep his own clerks; my father had three deputies, and they kept the big books like they keep at the courthouse and everything, so it was a full-time job.
- Bradley: They were deputy sheriffs were they or --
- Thrasher: The clerks? No, my father had deputy sheriffs; you'd go to the sheriff and ask that x, y, and z be named deputies, and they would come up and qualify and make bond and have a badge, and they were working under the sheriff, but assigned to that particular justice of the peace.
- Bradley: 260 Well, then your father, after the Rebel Squire period and on into the early commission years, he ran later for county judge.

Thrasher: Yes, sir. By your leave, before we go there -- you're talking about the officers -- my father had two white officers and one black officer. His name was Bob Chappell, he was always a favorite of mine. Bob and I became good friends. He always kept candy back there in his deputy sheriff drawer and, of course, you know that's the best way to get to a youngster's heart. So I'd always go sit and talk with Bob.

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One day my father had to fire Bob, and I came home that night and I said, "Why? He's my friend, Daddy, he's my friend." "Well, Son, you just don't understand; he has a drinking problem." I said, "Yes sir, I've heard that and I've smelled alcohol, but he's such a fine fellow." What had happened, Bob had gone down and he'd gotten himself a fifth and he went down to see "a wild west" motion picture show -- had his gun still on his side, of course -- and he kept drinking and drinking until he passed out. So, he suddenly came out and began to come to, and as he did the villain was up there about to shoot the hero and was about to tie the heroine to the railroad track, and she said, "Won't somebody help me?" and Bob pulled that pistol out and put five bullet holes in the screen up there. And, so, therefore, the theater man had appealed to my father, and my father said, "Well, we can't have that, I'll have to fire him."

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But, anyhow, he had an advocate, a young advocate even in those days. I think I was beginning to be a lawyer even at the age of ten or eleven, and I pled Bob's case with my father, and Bob was reinstated. But he had to pay, I've forgotten, out of his salary each week so much to the Rialto Theater for shooting up their screen. (laughter) By the way, he served as a deputy without being able to have a gun for the rest of the time, just a badge and a blackjack.

Bradley: Well, then your father, we were about --

Thrasher: He became county registrar next. In 1936 he became county registrar, and Judge Couch was still trustee, Judge Cummings was county judge, and my father was county registrar.

Bradley: That was an elected post.

Thrasher: That was county-wide, and therefore, you see, he didn't stay as a Rebel Squire until the termination. But that position came open, and so he ran for that. If I might digress one more time if you'll be patient --

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Bradley: Yes, sure.

Thrasher: I was fifteen, just turned sixteen during that campaign as

(Thrasher): 300 our first county-wide race, but they gave me the third district to drive my little sound truck in. They gave me a jeep which was fixed up with plywood into a little float, you know, like on parades, and I had a sound track that I could play military music and so forth, and go along and "Vote for Wilkes Thrasher for county registrar." And they sent me in a territory that I was familiar with, of course, my home bailiwick, the third district north of the river. And in this particular occasion I went to Daisy, Falling Water, Soddy, Sale Creek, and I went back in what they call the back ridges, wanted to go ferret out every vote I could find.

315 I was going along talking, riding, and all; I'd see folks out in the field, "Don't forget to vote for Wilkes Thrasher for registrar." I came to a little store over there, and I pulled in to get a Coca-Cola and I said, "Sir, I certainly hope" -- handed him a card -- "you'll vote for my father for county registrar." "Nope." I said, "Why, sir, I'd appreciate it if you would." "No sir." I said, "Why, sir, is there any reason why you won't vote?" "Yep." I said, "Well, why won't you vote for my father?" He said, "Son, you've been in Rhea County for the last thirty minutes, the county line's down there about a mile and a half; you're in Rhea County." (laughter) I said, "Oh." So I turned my jeep around and I said, "Please don't say anything about it back there." But word did filter back, and so even at the age of sixteen they were calling me "the boss of Rhea County." And, of course, naturally, we were not running in Rhea County, but they'd say, "Well, the precincts are not all in, what about little Wilkes' Rhea County, how did we do in Rhea County?" And they held my feet to the fire for a good ten years, calling me the boss of Rhea County. But one good thing came out of it, I learned where the county lines were, all up through there.

Bradley: From the back ridges on?

Thrasher: Even in the back ridges I can tell you where that county line was, yes sir. That was in 1936. And then he remained county registrar until --

Bradley: Yes, excuse me just a minute -- we are saying registrar, is it --

Thrasher: Register, really. The person is the registrar, but he is county register, yes, you're correct.

Bradley: And that is the keeper of records.

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Thrasher: Yes, sir, deeds and other delated documents.

Bradley: And that is Dorothy Brammer [who] holds that position now.

Thrasher: She does.

Bradley: Just to identify the office.

Thrasher: Yes, sir.

Bradley: Well, then, how long did he stay as register?

335 Thrasher: Until the death of Judge Wiley Couch. Judge Couch died in the spring of 1947 of cancer, and just before he died he sent for Mr. Joe Richardson and my father; they had been two of his lieutenants in his organization. And he told Mr. Joe Richardson, he said, "Joe, I want you to stay as trustee; I want Wilkes to succeed me, and I'd appreciate it if you would help him in his bid for reelection." They shook hands and sure enough, within about six weeks Judge Wiley Couch died, and my father was appointed as county judge in late '47. I think that [Couch's death] was in the spring, and then I think they had to run, there was an election of some sort in August [1948], and he was elected to fill the unexpired term, which did expire in '50.

Bradley: He was appointed by the commission or the court?

Thrasher: By the governor.

Bradley: By the governor; he had to be appointed by him. Who was governor at that time?

Thrasher: I think I might have to back up here; I believe it may have been the county council that did nominate, I believe so. I believe they nominated him to the governor and the governor had to sign the actual certificate of election or appointment. But it was made -- I'm mistaken -- by the county council at Judge Couch's request, and the governor did sign the certification.

355 Bradley: Well, your father then was a friend and ally of Judge Couch all during his --

Thrasher: Yes sir, staunch.

Bradley: Then when he became -- he ran then for a full term in 1950?

Thrasher: Yes sir, that was the big election; that was one of the bitterest, hardest fought ones we've had in these parts. If you recall, Mr. Walter Robinson was publisher and editor of the Chattanooga Observer here for many years, and he said that the

- (Thrasher): 1950 campaign was much more hotly contested than the Cummings -
365 Couch race of '42. He said it was the bitterest campaign he'd ever seen except the city elections of 1919, which, of course, was before your time and mine, when he said the Ku Klux Klan issue was injected into that city race. So it was one of the most bitterly fought campaigns in my lifetime, August the third of 1950.
- Bradley: Just for purposes for identification, Walter Robinson was a black Republican leader, was he not?
- Thrasher: Yes, sir, and publisher of the black paper, the Chattanooga Observer. And I want to say for the record, a very fine, genteel gentleman.
- Bradley: Why was he so influential in a Democratic primary, or was it in the general election?
- Thrasher: Well, he was influential either way. He was a tower of strength in the black community.
- Bradley: It didn't matter whether he was a Republican or Democrat.
- Thrasher: No, sir.
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- Bradley: As a matter of fact, the Republicans, the formal Republican strength at that time was not very great.
- Thrasher: Negligible, that's correct.
- Bradley: Well then, he was active -- his power and influence was in the black community.
- Thrasher: Exactly.
- Bradley: Not by party lines, but through friends.
- Thrasher: That's right, and primarily in the fourth ward, which was a black community ward.
- Bradley: Tell me about the so-called controlled wards in the city, which included the fourth, if that is a correct term or not -- the fifth, also.
- Thrasher: Yes, sir. Well, [when] they started out they were, quote, controlled wards, end quote, because those -- where they got that name was in the days of the poll tax receipts, and the officials and the ward operators -- I hate to use the word "heelers," I don't like that term -- but the people who were influential in the wards would go out and buy the poll tax.
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(Thrasher): And they had the poll tax receipts locked up in their desk,
400 and there couldn't anyone vote unless you had a poll tax receipt. And -- for example, in the third ward, there was a good example, big [William M.] Bill Grossman and a police officer named [William B.] "Monk" Elam worked together.

Bradley: Let's locate it --

Thrasher: That was Ninth Street, if you start back of the Read House and go up into the, now the -- what's that new area?

Bradley: Golden Gateway.

Thrasher: Golden Gateway. They were all houses up in there, Golden Gateway, and on over to West Side up into Cameron Hill, which has also been reduced now. They would go out and they knew the people that would come into their place to do business; they had grocery stores and -- I started to use the word "gambling parlors," I don't want to use that terminology -- where you might want to wager a little bet or something, and they would have --

Bradley: And could.

Thrasher: And could, yes. They would have my name, for example, where
415 I lived, what apartment I lived in, and they'd just go up and buy a poll tax and put it in my name and lock it up in the drawer. So, come election time in the West Side and in all these surrounding territories, they would call me and say, "Come on down and have a drink," or something, and I would, and they'd say, "Hey, we want to go over here and vote; we want you to go vote for this one and for that one, the other, here's your ballot." And so they'd give me a drink and say, "Come on back now, we'll have a little something to eat."

So I'm going down there to vote where the man -- it's his vote, actually, he wants me to vote, it's all right with me. I'm going to come back and have a few drinks and have some barbecue, so I went down and voted just like I was told to. So, in that sense of the word [it was controlled]; it was not just the fact we're talking "black." I want the racial overtone not to be there. There were some whites in this area too, you understand, so it was black and white. But they were controlled because the individuals owned the poll tax, and so, therefore, the individuals voted them the way they wanted them voted. So that's where the term controlled wards came from.

Bradley: Yes. What legality was there in possession of poll tax receipts
430 made out to someone else, or probably blank, I don't know?

Thrasher: Some of them were blank. I have seen them blank, let's put it that way.

Bradley: How great an illegality would that possession be?

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Thrasher: Well, being judge of the chancery court, I'd hate today to have that be brought in before me because I'd probably hold it was unconstitutional and illegal. But there again, it comes back to the power of the trustee; the trustee sold those poll tax.

Bradley: Oh, I see.

Thrasher: Yes. So if I were -- subjunctive mood condition contrary to fact -- if I were trustee, and you were my friend in the third ward and you wanted to buy a hundred poll tax in blank, I might just forget to fill in the names; you know, I could kind of let that slip by. You see what I'm talking about? So that's how the trustees in those days had tremendous amount of power, because you're talking about anywhere from 7,500 to 10,000 votes county-wide. Some people estimated, and I have no reason to doubt the ones who told me that, without mentioning names, that there were 3,500 to 4,000 poll tax receipts out. Well, if you had 3,500 to 4,000 poll tax receipts, which means you have that many votes, and the election's just going to be 7,500 to 10,000, 10,000 if it's a heavy one, and if you vote 4,000 poll tax and it's just 7,500 voting, you could elect anybody you wanted to elect. Don't you see what I'm talking about?

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Bradley: Yes. Of course, anyone otherwise qualified could go register and pay his poll tax himself and --

Thrasher: Many of them did, yes.

Bradley: Was it poverty, or if not poverty, just simply not wishing to pay \$2.00 -- as I recall it, \$2.00 or \$3.00 for the poll tax -- did that enter into it?

Thrasher: No, I don't think the economics of it entered in. For example, if we were over here on the West Side and we customarily go down to bet on the ballgames or to pull -- what was it?

Bradley: Slips.

Thrasher: Slips, yes, on Saturday afternoon it's fun, and someone would say, "Hey, why don't you get a poll tax, make an application?" "Sure, we'll go ahead and do that for them." They didn't have TV in those days, and this was a place on the West Side where they'd go for fun and recreation and fellowship and camaraderie,

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- (Thrasher): and here the man who's making all this possible asks you to do it, why, of course, you would do it. So that's the way it was; it was not so much a matter of economics. They just
475 didn't want to take the time to go; they didn't care who was elected. They knew the man that if they got a speeding ticket, who they could go see. If they got a parking ticket, they knew who they could go see. If their children got in trouble, they knew who they could go see; namely, the man in charge of that ward. So certainly, they'd go right along with him, and that's the reason for it.
- Bradley: Wilkes, how much has that been reduced over the years? Of course, the poll tax is no longer --
- Thrasher: It's gone, it's abolished, yes.
- Bradley: It's abolished, but how much of that element of control or influence directly has been reduced?
- Thrasher: Oh, it's been substantially diminished, no question about it. It just doesn't operate that way anymore; the influence would come from labor unions, from teachers' organizations, from civic groups, from NAACP groups, black caucus type groups, but they are no longer participating as they were before.
485 It's substantially reduced.
- Bradley: Wasn't the central element then the possession of the poll tax receipts, really?
- Thrasher: That was the beginning.
- Bradley: Because that was a chance to personalize the whole process.
- Thrasher: It was, yes, sir.
- Bradley: In your experience, did you ever see or know of any other sorts of irregularities in the so-called controlled wards or elsewhere in the voting process?
- Thrasher: Yes, we had the chain ballot. Nowadays, with voting machines, you can't do that; voting machines put an end to the chain ballot. If I might digress for a moment, back in the 1950 campaign, again in the primary, when my father was running against Mr. Hugh Abercrombie and Judge Cummings, Hub Dillard, or Herbert alias "Hub" Dillard, was the boss of the eighth ward. Now the eighth ward, for identification purposes, would be between Broad Street toward Market Street toward Howard
515 High School, or all in that area, starting about Main Street --
- Bradley: Primarily black.

Thrasher: Primarily, oh, yes, it was, almost totally. Hub Dillard had been a city detective, and he had worked the "good time" houses down there and knew who dealt in white lightning, as they called it, and who didn't. And he got control there. He, too, had participated heavily in the poll tax matters, but then he established and set up the chain ballot. And I ran into it, as I say, in 1950. I got to meeting with some of the black leaders there, and I said, "We've got to break the power of Hub Dillard, his supremacy here." They agreed with me, but we'd have to have a barbecue. So I go back and see my father, and I get another \$50, and we have a barbecue. That went on all during the primary, and I ended up spending about \$500. The last time my father fussed at me, and he said, "Son, you're just pouring water down a rat hole, you're not going to break Hub Dillard's strength." But I was so determined, and I was full of zeal and high purposes and so forth. Finally, he said to the treasurer, "Give him one more hundred dollars," -- that was a total of five hundred -- "but no more." I said, "Well, you're going to see the results. When the election returns come in, you-all will be sorry you fussed at me, because we're going to carry the eighth ward." Well, the eighth ward precinct came in, and they voted around 600. And we got ten votes, and Judge Cummings got about 585, 590.

By the way, to finish up part of the story, in the general election Hub Dillard was with us, and we were the recipients of the same thing, and Mr. Abercrombie got the eight or ten. But you see, it cost me \$50 a vote. And I was so amazed when I walked in then, as a friend, into Hub Dillard's inner circle. There were those same people I'd been feeding, and they just got a grin on their faces and said, "We sure thank you for that barbecue." Hub said, "I appreciate your feeding my men." So I was sitting there feeding Hub's men all along, but \$500 worth of education was worth it.

Now, what he did with this, they'd take an instruction ballot -- now the instruction ballot was almost identical to the real ballot, you understand. So the --

Bradley: Excuse me just a second --

Thrasher: This is the chain ballot --
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Bradley: Yes, it was also in the days of paper ballots.

Thrasher: Paper ballots, yes, sir, no machines, paper ballots. I would walk in and present my registration card. I'm voter No. 1, and they say, "All right, sir, here's your ballot." You go over in the corner to those little booths, you know, [and] take my pencil to mark it. I folded the real ballot No. 1

(Thrasher): up, and I stuck it in my shirt pocket. I took out an instruction ballot, which was almost identical, you know, and I marked it, folded it, dropped it in the box. Well, to use baseball language, I had bunted pitcher to first to send the other guy down to second. I knew that I was throwing something in there that was not going to count. I was sacrificing, I was giving up my vote, okay. So what --

Bradley: That's one vote.

Thrasher: One vote. What I left in the ballot box now was void because it was just an instruction ballot, it was not the real ballot. I had the real ballot in my shirt pocket and I walk right out and go next door into the marking house, and I hand it to Hub Dillard. Hub then marks the official ballot for the candidates he wants. Then you come along and he hands you ballot No. 1, and you stick that in your shirt pocket. You go in and get ballot No. 2, go to the booth. You put ballot No. 2 in your shirt pocket; you drop the real official ballot in and it just keeps -- that's why it's a chain -- it just keeps coming. All the voters are doing is just taking the ballot that Hub gave them, therefore, and marked them.

That's the reason at the end of the day when you go to some campaign precincts today and say, "How am I doing?" the workers say, "Well, I think you're doing all right." In Hub's day he could tell you exactly how you were doing because he had marked it. In fact, in the general election of '50 I said, "How are we doing?" He said, "Well, I have given him about six or eight," and sure enough that's what he had given him in the end of the day. So that's the chain ballot, and that, of course, also ended with the voting machines and the stopping the use of the paper ballots. And that's what stopped the controlled wards, and that's why it's changed so much from the original day of the poll tax, the chain ballots. They're all gone now, you see.

Bradley: What about the use of a dollar or two, well, however many dollars, and a drink of whiskey or whatever -- was that used to influence people who were not in on the chain ballot?

Thrasher: Yes, it was used a great deal, and I -- candor compels the admission; to some extent, it's used today, but a minimal amount, not like it was before. They would have anywhere -- I've seen some of the ward leaders have ten or fifteen cases of "bottled in bond" whiskey, rather than the white lightning, of course. It would not be Maker's Mark now, I'll grant you that, or some of the better brands. But it would be what they call "bottled in bond." And they'd come by and have a drink and go on to the polls and come back, and they come

(Thrasher): 615 back and have some drinks again, and barbecue and other food and so forth. I've seen that on numerous occasions, and to a certain extent today.

Bradley: What about payments to people who were influential in the wards, actual payments for transportation, for anything else that they might do? Was that pretty common?

Thrasher: 643 Yes, you have \$10 a day for the cab and \$10 for the man who rode in the cab, and they'd come by and pick people up, and you have a check-off list. That was a number of years ago when \$10 was \$10, and then it got to be \$20 and \$20, and then \$50 a day for the cab and the operator. But voters, a lot of them, got spoiled; they were waiting for those cabs to come and pick them up and take them to the polls. So that was done. That's why today when they say, "Roll the vote in the city takes \$12,000 to \$15,000," that's what they're talking about. It's nothing sinister, it's nothing illegal, it's nothing corrupt; some of the voters are just waiting for those cabs to come pick them up. They're not going to walk, and they don't have a car, and if they vote, somebody's got to come and pick them up. So that's why it takes money to get them to the polls. But the days of the poll tax, the days of the chain ballots, the days of voting for a dollar or voting for a drink of liquor, those days are gone.

End Tape 1, Side 1
Begin Tape 1, Side 2

Bradley: 012 We were talking about the changes, or really the elimination, of some of the electoral irregularities, and in your view that type of irregularity has been pretty well eliminated.

Thrasher: It's been eliminated for the most part, yes. If there's any vestige of it still hanging on, it would be fragmentary. No, it's not a controlling issue at all or a vital issue nowadays. You have those boys: the Bill Grossman in three, Ace Baker and "Piggy" Nolan in five, Leonard Lane also in five, he succeeded Ace Baker; those are the people who ran the parlors and so forth. See, those are gone nowadays. You can go into any place and get a mixed drink now, but you couldn't in those days. So, shall we say, they illegally operated mixed drinks places, and there's no need for them now. Just like there's no need for a running board in the car, you know.

Bradley: 025 Your interest also extended in politics and political affairs, Wilkes, extended beyond the bounds of the county. In '54, I think, you managed Gordon Browning's [gubernatorial] campaign.

Thrasher: Yes, sir.

Bradley: In the state or here?

Thrasher: Statewide.

Bradley: Statewide. Tell me, what difference did you find in a state campaign and in a local campaign?

030 Thrasher: Ninety-five counties are a whole lot bigger than one, I found out, and it's a tremendous state. Looking on the map, Tennessee's a little tiny place there, but when you start going across this state it's a large state. I found that out, and I found that we have three states in one; we have East Tennessee, Middle Tennessee, and West Tennessee, and you could just as well have three entirely different states. The terrain is different, the culture is different, the philosophies are different. All the way from the mountains of East to the flatlands of West Tennessee, it's just different.

Bradley: Was this Browning's last campaign, last successful campaign?

045 Thrasher: Yes, sir; well, we were not successful that time either. Frank Clement defeated us [in the Democratic primary], but that was his last major campaign. You also learn, just like I learned years before about where the county line was here in Rhea County and Hamilton County, you learned a lot by experience. I was green as a gourd and I went over there, and they said, "Now here's the map of Tennessee; you're familiar with East Tennessee, we want you to get a car now and go over to Memphis and take from Memphis and go all the way up the state there in the delta country and get the feel of it." And I looked over there and I said, "Obion (ō bē un) County, I never heard of an Obion County." Governor Browning's secretary raised up, and she said, "Sir, that's not Obion County, that's Obion (ō bī un) County and that happens to be my home county." So I learned then, too, you've got to be careful because you never know which county an individual's from; even though they're stationed in Davidson, they may be from any one of them, so you better be careful.

Bradley: Judge, Governor Browning later became a chancellor, as you are, in West Tennessee, didn't he?

Thrasher: Yes, sir, he did.

Bradley: And served what -- ten or twelve years, I guess?

Thrasher: Yes, sir, and he was a congressman, too, before.

Bradley: Well, we're going down through the years more or less chronologically, Wilkes. We're getting down to the time when you

(Bradley): entered as a candidate yourself. Your father was fatally injured, as I recall, in an automobile accident in 1960.

Thrasher: Yes, sir, March 3rd, 1960.

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Bradley: And he was county judge at that time.

Thrasher: Yes, sir.

Bradley: And you served by request, or by appointment of the county council.

Thrasher: At this time it was the quarterly county court, believe it or not, that had the authority -- we checked the code -- and they had the authority to designate an interim county judge.

Bradley: And you served about seven or eight months, I think.

Thrasher: [Five] months, yes sir.

Bradley: But you did not run for the --

Thrasher: Did not seek it. Norman, I knew several reasons. I had talked to my father. We were extremely close, very, very close father-son team, and I had been with him when the last budget was prepared -- that would be in the '59 budget -- and he said, "Well, we spared a tax increase." You know, he was extremely tight-fisted with the taxpayers' money. I wish he'd been half as tight with his own money; I'd be in better shape today. He said, "There's just no way in the world I can keep a tax increase down; it's just got to come," and he began to show me the reasons why either in '60 or '61 there had to be a tax increase. Well, they came to me while my father was still lying in state and wanted to know if I would run and I told them, no, I would not run, but I would serve until the next election, interim.

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I knew several reasons -- one, I couldn't ever hope to be the financier my father was; I wouldn't want to if I could have, but I wouldn't want to overshadow him, ever. But I couldn't, because he was the mathematical wizard and I can't add more than ten unless I take my socks off because I'm just not a mathematician. And I knew for a positive fact that he told me it had to be done. Well, I could just hear the taxpayers saying if I had asked for the job, "Well, the boy couldn't do it, but if the old man was still alive, he'd have found a way around it." Well, I knew he couldn't have found a way around it because he told me. But I figured then I would just be standing in his shadows. I couldn't do anything but bring discredit to his beautiful record, I couldn't add to it, and

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- (Thrasher): I would only subtract from it. And I felt that, coupled with the fact that I had children that had to go to school, and the county judge made all of \$10,000, plus \$5,000 for being county fiscal agent, and by the time the deductions got that, I was paying my secretary almost that much in the law office, so I couldn't afford to be.
- Bradley: Do you recall anything that you had to do in that interim period, which was only about seven or eight months, I guess?
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- Thrasher: We didn't raise taxes, I remember that. (laughter)
- Bradley: You didn't have to pass a budget.
- Thrasher: Yes, sir, yes, sir, I had to prepare a budget but I had some wonderful people to help me, people who had been my father's "right arms," and I give them the entire credit. They did a beautiful job, and I told them, I said, "Is there some way we can work this thing without raising the taxes?" -- for two reasons, one that I've just enumerated, and two -- [I said], "Our man [David M., Jr.] Dave Eldridge is running, and I don't want to raise the budget right here at election time, so how about raising them next year, if you've got to." We were hoping to help Dave Eldridge in his race against Chester Frost that way.
- Bradley: In that race, incidentally, Dave Eldridge was nominated and Frost ran as an Independent.
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- Thrasher: He did.
- Bradley: Was he defeated in the primary?
- Thrasher: No, no.
- Bradley: That wasn't the primary in which he ran.
- Thrasher: No, but Frost beat Eldridge by eighty or eighty-one votes. So again, I hope anyone who ever listens to tapes or reads the politics, they'll please go out and vote because there, just eighty-one more people going to the polls could have changed the whole county structure for eight whole years.
- Bradley: Or forty-two people had changed their minds.
- Thrasher: Either way, that's correct, yes, sir.
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- Bradley: Every vote counts.
- Thrasher: It does, most assuredly.

- Bradley: Well, this was in '60. In '62 then, you ran for Congress.
- Thrasher: Yes, sir, against J. B. Frazier, who was the incumbent of some sixteen or eighteen years.
- Bradley: What about that campaign? What lessons did you learn from that campaign? Wilkes, it was a successful campaign, I might add, as far as the Democratic --
- Thrasher: It was. We had some of the finest people in the world helping; many people who were stalwarts in my father's organization, people like Mr. John Crabtree and Mr. Gordon Gambill and Mr. Walter Groner, wonderful people, many others like that -- 110 [A. L.] "Chunk" Bender, [William R.] Bill Nobles, Harry [D.] Mansfield -- just a tremendous team, and they just did a bang-up job; they did a tremendous job. I had the endorsement of the Black Caucus group and organized labor, and all those people, they just did a good job. And we were successful in defeating the incumbent Congressman.
- Bradley: By what vote, do you recall?
- Thrasher: It was a small margin, it wasn't much. * I think we won it by two or three hundred votes, again, coming back to every vote counts, you see. So a change of two votes per precinct in the Third Congressional District would have put Frazier back.
- Bradley: He was accounted a very conservative Democrat.
- Thrasher: He was, yes, sir. And at that time I got the reputation of being an ultra-liberal Democrat, whereas in reality our ideologies and philisophies were not that far apart. Anyway, we are really three people: we are like we see ourselves, we are like others see us, and then we are like we really are, you know. I didn't picture myself as being ultra-liberal, I don't today, as a matter of fact.
- Bradley: As I recall, President Kennedy sent you to where, Cuba?
- Thrasher: No, sir, he made me a special ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago. 125
- Bradley: How long did you stay there? What was the nature of that?
- Thrasher: Well, right briefly -- bless his heart -- we had a member of the Chattanooga Times staff in Washington.

* Thrasher beat Frazier in the Democratic primary by a margin of 109 votes.

Bradley: Charlie Bartlett.

Thrasher: Yes. And our friends at the Times -- bless their hearts --
130 had contacted Charlie Bartlett for me, and I soon was talking
with him and found him to be a perfectly delightful, charming
man. And he was a close personal friend of President Kennedy,
so he talked to President Kennedy and said, "Look --" in so
many words -- I wasn't privy to the conversation, but some
way -- "we got a young Democrat down here who has defeated the
Congressman [Frazier], and he is a Kennedy Democrat" -- and
certainly I was that -- "and how about helping him." Well,
it wasn't three weeks until the ambassadorship, one of them,
opened up for Trinidad and Tobago, where Trinidad and Tobago
were going to get their independence from the Crown. And,
again, Kennedy, wishing to help, God rest his soul in peace,
appointed me. I went to Washington to meet him, and we had
our picture taken on the south portico of the White House; it
was on the front page of the Chattanooga Times, then our trip
at the airport, getting ready to leave, leaving Andrews Air
Force Base. I stayed over there; I did the job that was as-
signed to me satisfactorily and came back. That was Kennedy's
way again -- bless his heart -- of doing his best to say,
145 "This is my man and help him out; if you'll send him up here,
why, he'll certainly be a friend of mine," which was tremen-
dous with the people. And that would certainly have done it
except it was that particular time that Mr. Meredith decided
that he wanted to go to Oxford, Mississippi, and Mississippi --

Bradley: That was James Meredith.

Thrasher: A black gentleman, and if he'd just waited until the next year,
I'd have paid his tuition, for goodness sake. But he selected
this inopportune time to go to Ole Miss, and President Kennedy
sent word to his brother, Bobby Kennedy, and Bobby sent the
marshals down to Ole Miss to force them to let Mr. Meredith
in.* That was very damaging, coupled with the fact that at
that particular time Hugh Abercrombie was still mad at my fa-
ther for defeating him twice. Don't let me forget to say some-
thing nice about Hugh because there's a happy ending to that.
155 Hugh called Frank Clement and said, "Look, I've been your loy-
al lieutenant all along and I can't get to the man, Judge
Thrasher, he's dead, but this is his son and I want you to
back [William E. III] Bill Brock**, and let's beat him."

* James Meredith applied for admission to the University
of Mississippi in 1961 and claimed his application was denied.
He was admitted in October 1962 after the Federal government
intervened.

** Thrasher ran against Republican Bill Brock in the gen-
eral election and was defeated.

(Thrasher): Clement did, and the state organization went for Brock, switched from Thrasher to Brock at Hugh Abercrombie's request. J. B. Frazier was embittered because he had been defeated and his people suddenly went over and began to help Brock. Coupled with the Ole Miss fiasco, we began to feel that the tide was going out, and it's a horrible feeling, but you can't do anything about it.

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Some of our key people said, "Look, you've got to get on TV, you've got to repudiate John Fitzgerald Kennedy; you've just got to do it or you're a defeated man." And I listened to my people; they were diligent, they had worked hard, they were conscientious, they had my best interests at heart; I courteously and politely listened to them, let them all have their say. And I stood up and I said, "Gentlemen, I'll tell you how it is. First, John Fitzgerald Kennedy is my friend; number two, he's a Democratic president; number three, I'm a Democratic nominee. There's no way under the canopy of heaven that I'm going to repudiate John Fitzgerald Kennedy, my friend. If I must be defeated, I must be defeated. But I've got to shave, I've got to look in that mirror every single day, three hundred and sixty-five days out of the year, and I can't do something like that and still face myself. If it's inevitable, it's inevitable, but I am inseparably wed to Kennedy, and that's where I'll be." They said, "Well, you'll be defeated." I said, "Then I'll be defeated." And they called it and I was. We lost by about -- had over 100,000 votes, I think it was 104,000, 105,000 votes -- we lost by about 2,500 votes.

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But I thought we did exceedingly well counting all that switch, because I was immediate past potentate of Alhambra Shrine Temple, too, at that time, and people would go out to the Shrine Temple -- at meeting night it'd look like a Thrasher rally; you've never seen as many bumper stickers with -- I kid you not, three out of every four had bumper stickers on them. After Meredith and Bobby Kennedy and the marshals, if you could find one, it was rare; you could see where they had been, and they pulled off. So it was one of those things. Nothing is so important as an idea that has arrived, and nothing is so devastating as something that backfires in your face.

Bradley: Something that turns sour on you.

Thrasher: That's right. But it happened for the best because I wouldn't be where I am now and I'm much happier being among my own people on the bench here.

Bradley: Are you convinced that had the Abercrombie state forces not been active against you -- do you think that made a really viable difference?

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Thrasher: Oh, my goodness, yes, because Keith Hampton over in Sequatchie
190 Valley here, you know, in the Jasper area, he was the patronage
agent in this area, and he went from county to county in the
Third Congressional District and turned them. He could have
changed, and did change, we estimate, two or three thousand
people, plus or minus, that's it.

I wanted to say this, too; I'm glad you mentioned Hugh.
Hugh later became a victim of cancer, and one day he asked
me -- had his secretary ask me -- if I would meet him at the
Town and Country Restaurant. Well, that's very much like the
devil saying he wants to meet the Lord somewhere, you know,
you have misgivings about it, but I said, "Are you sure you
understood right, Mrs. Vandergriff?" She said, "Yes." And
I said, "Well, call back and verify that." She did, and it
was true, and I did go, and Hugh was there and his lieutenants
who had served faithfully with him, [Eugene] Gene Turner and
Ewton, T. L. Ewton, and a whole group were there. He called
me up and he said, "Look --." Then he told me what I just
told you, "Do not hold that against Frank Clement. I asked
205 him and it was wrong and I was bitter, and I couldn't get at
your father and I took it out on you, and that's dead wrong,
and it was small and little of me, and I just want to extend
to you my right hand." Said, "I've got terminal cancer, not
going to be here long, and I want to get everything right be-
fore I leave, and I hope you'll accept my apology." And I
did, of course, at once accept his apology and we forgave him
and embraced, and so Hugh and I -- he died as a friend of mine.
I thought it was very gracious of him and very big of him.

Bradley: Yes. What was your relationship with Clement? Of course,
rather distant after this.

Thrasher: Extremely. See, we had never been close.

Bradley: You had opposed him in [1954 when you campaigned for Browning].

Thrasher: Yes, I had, yes, I had, and I took his word for the fact, too.
That was in '54 when I opposed him and fought him as hard as
I knew how. In '60, when Senator Estes Kefauver brought us
together, he said, "Fine, bygones are bygones," and I said,
"That's fine, thank you, governor." And then I was at the
215 coliseum there, the -- I've forgotten where it was in Nash-
ville -- the Hippadrome there -- I was in the center and Ke-
fauver was on one side of me and Clement on the other, both
holding my hands up, and I thought Clement meant it. And so
I became disenchanted with him all over again after he double-
crossed me.

Bradley: You never have sought public office since then with the ex-
ception of your judicial one.

Thrasher: That's correct, sir. That's what I really wanted, and that
221 was another consideration when I did not run for county judge. County judge is like it is called now "county executive"; it was ninety percent administrative executive and ten percent, at most, judicial. I wanted a judicial job; I didn't want an administrative job. That's the reason I'm happy where I am now.

Bradley: Wilkes, were you appointed to a new chancellor's bench?

Thrasher: Ray Brock was renominated, shall we say, in 1974 as a chancellor in Chancery Court, Part I. After his nomination he found out that a supreme court situation was open, and he resigned so he could run for supreme court. He couldn't remain chancellor and run for supreme court. At that point the Democratic primary was over; therefore, under our bylaws, it has to go back to the Democratic executive committee for an election of the chairman and vice-chairman, who compose the Democratic executive committee. And I ran before them, along with four or five other lawyers, and therefore, I received the nomination of my party, my caucus, shall we say. Then I was on the ballot in the August election for anyone who cared to run from the Republican party or Independent.

Bradley: Yes, that was '74.

Thrasher: '74, yes, sir.

Bradley: So you've been reelected once.
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Thrasher: Yes, sir, during the ten years I've been reelected once, and than I was reelected now in '80 -- I mean I was elected then and I was reelected in '82.

Bradley: Yes. I could not recall whether that was the Chancery Court, Part I -- [Part] I was a new creation of the legislature when you came in. Well, as a sitting judge and a very special sort of judge or chancellor, what has been your reaction to the social pressures or changes that have come along since you've been on the bench? Has that been a factor in any of your decisions as -- I don't mean that pressure was brought upon you; I mean, just as we've come to view the way we live as individuals with one another.

Thrasher: I don't know, Norman, whether I'm really grasping what you're talking about.

Bradley: Well, as we progress as a society, have the cases which have
260 come before you given you an opportunity to express and put into effect what your concept of the way society should be going?

- Thrasher: If I understand correctly, I can't legislate from the bench, if that's what you're saying. Sometimes I do not concur with my own opinion; that is to say, I'm circumscribed by the law and by the rulings of our state supreme court, which is the court, of course, of last resort; I'm circumscribed by their interpretations of the law. So sometimes there are things that come up that I do not concur with, so I don't have a chance to legislate; I don't have a chance to change things, if that's what you're asking.
- 265
- Bradley: I guess I should have said in the way that you interpret the law, which is your duty in so many of these cases which come before you. How does a judge view the facts in a case as related to the law on the books? Do you think that has changed in the time that you've been an observer of the courts?
- Thrasher: I don't think so. Of course, we allow no one to talk to us about the cases, so pressure cannot be brought to bear.
- Bradley: Oh, no, no, this was not --
- 280
- Thrasher: I don't think so.
- Bradley: And you have been -- well, this would be a private opinion -- I started to ask you about your feelings toward court reform, but I think that generally speaking you have been opposed to what has been --
- Thrasher: Unalterably opposed, shall we say, to the concept of court reform and court modernization, because I feel that it is not to the manifest best interests of the people or the judiciary either one that that be done. Court reform -- essence of court reform is to remove the judge and put them in an ivory tower. Put an administrator out front and it divorces the court from its people, it divorces the court from its lawyers; lawyers never get to see the judges, people can't see the judges, and I feel that's wrong. I feel that as a judge of a court I'm accountable to the people who own the bench, which is the people, and I don't think there should be someone in between me who's appointed, not elected, who can tell the people they can't see me or the lawyers that they can't see me. And that's the basic concept of --
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- Bradley: Has it been your experience that the system itself, the Tennessee judicial system itself, has any structural weaknesses? And I'm not talking about how our judges rule now, I'm talking about simply structure as a system of courts.
- Thrasher: No. I notice the Banner in particular coming out talking about hodge-podge court system and all and --

Bradley: You're talking about the Nashville Banner, excuse me.

Thrasher: Nashville Banner. Old and antiquated and dilapidated court system. Of course that's dealing in emotionalism more than
305 in fact; the Banner gets that way ever now and then.

Bradley: It has during the years.

Thrasher: It certainly has and hasn't changed its format at all. Like all systems there's room for improvement, but it's not the system. You can have the finest system in the world, [but] if you don't have some good judge operating it, it's not going to do any good. That is to say, you can bring the latest equipment in here for Marines to use, but I haven't used Marine equipment in twenty years, so therefore a recruit who's just gone through is going to know how to use that equipment and I'm not. Or if you've got an energetic judge against a lazy judge, I don't care what system you employ, it's not going to make it any better. But our basic concept of Tennessee judicial processes is -- I'll put it up against anybody's in the nation, even those that have spent billions upon millions upon millions, and they're no further ahead than we are.

320 For example, California -- and I know it's a larger state -- right now they've brought some cases in our court this past week and wanted me to take them. And I said, "Why, no, the people from California, you people are in Texas," then I said, "Now, where's this suit filed?" They said, "California." I said, "I know why you're here. How long is it going to be before you can go to trial?" They said, "Five years." I can get them a trial in ninety days. Now, see why they wanted Tennessee. Why spend billions of dollars? North Carolina has spent untold millions and right now, up in the larger cities, they are a year to a year and a half; we can go to trial in ninety days. So you see, we've got a good system, there's no two ways about it, the Banner's position to the contrary, not withstanding.

Bradley: Well, the press certainly isn't always right. (laughter)

Thrasher: Our friends the press have down here, we have good -- really, I'm not saying it because you're the former editor of the
330 Times, but we've just got good newspapers here, really and truly we do. I hold court in other areas, you know, of the state, and I'm real proud of our press here.

Bradley: Your statement a moment ago brings up a point about which I knew nothing. How frequently do you receive requests to make judgment in cases -- how did a California case happen to --

Thrasher: End up here?

Bradley: End up here.

Thrasher: Well, there's a California corporation -- first, a Texas corporation said a California corporation had taken one of their employees away from them, and it was a key employee, and that the California corporation was going to steal the Texas corporation's secrets. And they found the defendant employee here in Hamilton County and served him the day he was moving to California.

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Bradley: That was the connection which enabled them to make the request.

Thrasher: Make the request. I said, "Now, he's back in California, you all go on back."

Bradley: This has been a wide-ranging conversation, Wilkes. Is there anything else that you think of in your very interesting career that you might want to add?

Thrasher: Well, I don't want to unnecessarily burden the tape here, but there is one thing. It's to reiterate what we have already said: the August 3rd, 1950, election which was between Hugh Abercrombie, Democratic nominee, and Wilkes T. Thrasher, Sr., Independent -- that campaign was, as we stated a moment ago, one of the fiercest, one of the most fiercely contested ones. And 621 votes is all that separated those people, again showing the importance of people getting out and voting. People think, "Oh, I don't want to go, my vote doesn't count." You see, it most assuredly did; that was a very close one. I notice in here in one of the sheriff's races back in '36, it was a cliff-hanger until the Brainerd precinct came in. Only three votes separated that sheriff's race. Here it is, Sheriff Frank Burns and John K. Tate, three votes until the Brainerd precinct came in, and they won by some twenty or thirty.* We've already commented on Frost and Eldridge. So it's just most important that people get out and vote.

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Bradley: You made the point there just a moment ago that in that '50 election your father ran as an Independent. He was, of course, a lifelong Democrat.

Thrasher: Yes.

Bradley: He would have sought election at least once after that, wouldn't he, run as a Democrat?

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Thrasher: Yes.

* Burns ran against Tate in 1934 and won by 2460 votes.

Bradley: He did not stay out of the party.

Thrasher: Oh, no. They said he bolted the party, and at one time he told me, he said, "If I had it to do over, even though we won, I don't know that I would, because I am a staunch Democrat, and they've labeled me as a 'party bolter'." That cut deep.

Bradley: What were the circumstances which led to his seeking that office as an Independent?

Thrasher: Well, Mr. Abercrombie was first, Judge Cummings was second, and we were third; it was very close but we --

Bradley: In the primary.

Thrasher: In the primary of 1950. Then a draft movement came, and
380 petitions with people's signatures, over ten thousand people asked him to reconsider. Then my late friend, Hugh Abercrombie, helped the cause inadvertently that night in celebrating -- it's easy, you get all excited and you say things sometimes that you shouldn't say. And he got all carried away as the celebration wound on down and he said, "When I'm elected your county judge, I won't let a Republican in the courthouse, not even in the basement, and then by the back door." And, of course, the Democrats there went wild -- of course! But it came out in the paper that way. And the Republicans who, heretofore, had not been with us -- of course, many of them just didn't even care to vote, but that activated them; that got them on some sort of time.

400 In addition to the ten thousand signatures, groups of prominent Republicans also called on my father and said, "Now, we know that that was said in the heat of battle and everything, but nevertheless, how about running?" So my father came home and asked my mother, and she was a saintly soul if I ever did know one, and she said, "We're going to pray over it," and she did. Later they got together and that's -- Judge Cummings then came in and said, "Okay, I'll go with you." So the number two and number three men got together with the ten thousand petitions and with the Republicans and were elected. And that's what brought in some of our Republican officials, you know, at that same thing, Rex Richey, Republican, beat Frank Burns, you see.

Bradley: For sheriff.

Thrasher: Yes, sure did.

Bradley: Were there others at that time? I guess not.

Thrasher: No, Walter [T.] Wood, who ran against the session judges, was not successful. However, Ernest Cushman on the council, he listed himself as a Democrat, but he still had Republican leanings, so it helped him.

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Bradley: Well, it's been a very, very rewarding conversation, Wilkes.

Thrasher: Well, I've enjoyed it. Norman, I want to say one thing, if I might. Senator [Nathan L.] Nate Bachman, you know, was one of our very famous senators here. There was a family up on Signal Mountain named the Miles family, some of them were later clients of mine, good people, good people. They had the reputation, one or two of them, of operating a copper distillery up in that area. One time Nate Bachman came down and he talked to my client's father, who was the patriarch of the Miles clan, and he said, "I want a gallon of your good copper whiskey to take back to Washington." And he said, "Why sure, Senator." [Bachman] said, "You see, I've a colleague and he's from Missouri, and he said he'd never had any copper whiskey, said he'd had regular, ordinary moonshine liquor, and I want to take it back to him." So that happened because my client -- they accused him of helping make it -- I'm sure my client did not do anything like that, you understand, but in any event the product was delivered and he went back to Washington. Now, that was in the thirties.

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When I was with the Marine Corps, I, at one time, guarded then Vice President Harry Truman -- and Truman, of course, was the colleague that he was taking it to. So when we were introduced [to] his four marine guards, he said, "First Sergeant, where are you from?" And I said, "Tennessee, sir." "Well," he said, "where in Tennessee?" So I was pleased to tell him Chattanooga, Tennessee. He said, "Come over here and have a seat." I said, "Aye, aye, sir." So I came over and sat down and he said, "You don't know some people named Miles there, do you?" (laughter) Well, he started out this way, said, "Senator Nate Bachman, I guess you knew Nate." I said, "Yes sir, I knew the senator." He said, "He brought me some good, good moonshine liquor," said, "Was it something like Miles?" I said, "Yes, sir, yes sir, that's correct." "Oh," he said, "that's some of the best I believe I ever had." He said, "You know, would you have their address?" I said, "Why, sir, I know the family, yes, sir." He said, "If you'll give me the address, I'll have the United States marshal go by there and see if he can get me one." I said, "Begging the Vice President's pardon, sir, I don't believe that's the wise thing to do, sir, if you'll forgive me, sir. But if you'll just let me know when you want it, I'll call my father long-distance in Chattanooga. Let us get it away from the mountain, and then you can have your marshal go by, but I wouldn't send my

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(Thrasher): marshal up in the mountains of Tennessee, I certainly would not." I did make the phone call, and now I don't want to implicate anyone, living or dead, but the request was complied with. So, you see, it's a small world.

Bradley: Yes, and the just fame of the region spread a little bit further.

Thrasher: It spread a little bit further, yes, sir.

Bradley: Well, thank you so much, Wilkes.

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Thrasher: Thank you.

End Tape 1, Side 2
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