

**ORAL HISTORY OF
JUDGE LOUIS F. OBERDORFER**

**Fifth Interview
January 17, 2008**

This is the fifth interview of Louis F. Oberdorfer that was completed as part of the Oral History Project of The Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewer is Benjamin F. Wilson. The interview took place at Judge Oberdorfer's chambers on Thursday, January 17, 2008.

Ben Wilson: This is an interview history of Judge Louis Oberdorfer, taking place in his chambers. We're starting at approximately 2:40 p.m., on Thursday, Jan. 17, —

Louis F. Oberdorfer: 2008.

B.W.: 2008, yes sir, thank you. Judge Oberdorfer, I want to thank you for taking the time to answer the questions I have for you today. I know that the Historical Society is eager to have us complete this, and obviously eager for others to hear from you.

I have a number of questions I'd like to ask, recognizing that your oral history was taken about 15 years ago. I know that I will plow over some old ground. I'll try to do that quickly, and follow up on some areas that might not have been fully explored before, and obviously we'll also talk about some new areas.

And what I'd like to do is maybe start with your family history again. If we could start, who were the first Oberdorfers in America?

L.F.O.: I suppose my grandfather Bernard Oberdorfer.

B.W.: Do you know approximately when he first came?

L.F.O.: It was before the Civil War because he was in the Confederate Army.

B.W.: Do you know where he was from?

L.F.O.: Württemberg, Germany.

B.W.: Is that Bavaria?

L.F.O.: Yes, I think.

B.W.: Do you have an idea of about how old he was when he came to the U.S.?

L.F.O.: I could reconstruct it. He died at age 75 in 1905 and he came here in 1855 when

he must have been 25.

B.W.: So that means he was born in about 1830 or thereabouts?

L.F.O.: Yes sir. He's buried in a cemetery in Charlottesville. It might be his birth date's on the tombstone.

B.W.: Do you know what your grandfather did before he came to America?

L.F.O.: No.

B.W.: When your grandfather came to America, where did he settle initially?

L.F.O.: New York, New York.

B.W.: Do you know what he did in New York?

L.F.O.: Yes, he worked in a cigar factory.

B.W.: Was he married when he came to the U.S.?

L.F.O.: Not married, I don't think, but I don't know.

B.W.: I know from having read your first history that his first wife died.

L.F.O.: My grandfather's first wife had died.

B.W.: Please tell me, do you know the history of how he met her?

L.F.O.: No.

B.W.: But then your grandfather married again and he married the sister of his first wife and they had five children.

L.F.O.: I suppose that's right.

B.W.: As I understand it your father had a twin.

L.F.O.: Correct.

B.W.: Did you ever meet your uncle?

L.F.O.: Oh yes, I used to stay with him. He was an optometrist in New York, a bachelor. He had a house at 128 East 79th Street and I was very interested to learn that my grandson Kevin, who now lives in New York and is a young lawyer, has just moved into an apartment on East 79th between Second and Third avenues.

B.W.: Not far away, about a block away! Is he aware that his great grandfather—actually uncle—lived there?

L.F.O.: I haven't been able to get on the phone to tell him.

B.W.: That's a nice story. Obviously, your uncle was an identical twin. Was he a similar personality and demeanor to your father?

L.F.O.: Identical. Identical in every way. I used to go, for instance, to college on the train to New York and spend the night or more at my uncle's house and there were no telephones. For instance, on public affairs, even without communicating, as far as I know, they agreed. For example, they both hated Arthur Krock who was a columnist for the *New York Times* and you could hear somewhat the same language, the same verbiage from either of them. Politically they were absolutely identical.

B.W.: Yes, and what was their politics, how would you describe the politics of your father?

L.F.O.: Wilsonian Democrat. And Roosevelt Democrat at the other end. And Cleveland Democrat.

B.W.: How was it that your one uncle went to New York and your father went to Birmingham? Do you recall what went into their decisions?

L.F.O.: I don't know what sent my uncle to New York but all the way through school they sat together and the story was that when the professor called on one of them, the one that was prepared would answer whether he was called on or not. They were known as Oberdorfer Number One and Oberdorfer Number Two and I don't know who was One and who was Two.

B.W.: I suspect whoever was prepared got the Number One moniker. That's alright. Where was your maternal grandfather from?

L.F.O.: He was from a place called Schneidemühl, the spelling of which I leave to you, which was in Germany, but is now, I believe, in Poland.

B.W.: What was his name?

L.F.O.: Louis Falk, F-A-L-K; that's my name, I am named for him.

B.W.: Tell me about him. What did he do?

L.F.O.: He was a merchant in Decatur, Alabama. Incidentally, there's a town in north Alabama called Falkville. According to mythology, he came there as a peddler and set up a stand which became a store—a general merchandise store. He later moved to Decatur, Alabama. Now where he was before he went to Falkville, I don't know.

B.W.: I read that he'd been a director of the Southern Railroad, is that right?

L.F.O.: That's right.

B.W.: Yes sir.

L.F.O.: L&N.

B.W.: Oh, Louisville and Nashville? So obviously he was a very successful businessman.

L.F.O.: He was, he was. But I never knew him.

B.W.: And your maternal grandmother?

L.F.O.: She died when my mother was two years old.

B.W.: What was her name? I know her last name was Goodhart.

L.F.O.: I'll have to fill that in, it doesn't come to my mind right now, obviously I never knew her, but it'll come again.

B.W.: I understand from having read the earlier history that your housekeeper was sent and she helped raise your mother, is that right?

L.F.O.: I know her name, Miss Emma Oppenhagen, O-P-P-E-N-H-A-G-E-N.

B.W.: Do you know how, I mean do you know why she came to Decatur?

L.F.O.: She was a seamstress for the Goodhart family in Cincinnati and later New York. Her great uncles were very, very protective of my mother, and as I understood the story, they were concerned about my mother being raised by a single male parent down there on the frontier. They arranged for Ms. Oppenhagen, who was the family seamstress, to come down and live there and be the housekeeper.

B.W.: Where was your maternal grandmother from? Was she from New York or was she from Cincinnati?

L.F.O.: I assume she was from Cincinnati. The Goodhart family had settled in Cincinnati, they later moved to New York, but they established themselves rather importantly in Cincinnati.

B.W.: Do you recall your mother ever telling you how her mother and father met?

L.F.O.: I do not.

B.W.: Now you say both of your grandfathers served in the Confederate Army. Do you know what rank they reached?

L.F.O.: Private. That's—I won't use the profanity—of private.

B.W.: Yes sir, I appreciate that. Do you know anything about what theaters they served in?

L.F.O.: Yes. My paternal grandfather was living in Charlottesville, and served in sort of the Home Guard in Charlottesville. The mythology about him is that he had a sister who lived in New York during the war, and he learned that she was penurious and ill, and he went through the lines to New York to take money to her and came back successfully.

My maternal grandfather was in a cavalry unit in the area around Decatur. His commanding officer was a Colonel Harris and the Harris family lived right across the street from him. At least when I was growing up, they were in the house right across the street from me. Ms. Harris was a teacher of my mother, and they were very close. But in any event, it was a cavalry unit. I used to know it, something tells me it was the Fifth Alabama or something like that. He was captured at some point rather early in the war, and the story is that there's a bridge across the Tennessee River at Decatur, and he made clear to me that as a prisoner, he was walked across this railroad bridge and then put on a train to the Libby prison. I think it's near Chicago.

B.W.: Okay, because Libby is in Richmond, there were also prisons in Chicago.

L.F.O.: I'm not sure of that, whether dim recollections or mythology.

B.W.: As I understand it, your mother was one of the first, if not the first woman from Alabama, to attend Vassar, was that right?

L.F.O.: I don't know about first but she certainly was one of the few.

B.W.: Right. Do you know about how that came about?

L.F.O.: I think that was the paternalistic role of the movement. By then it had moved to New York.

B.W.: You've been very gracious to help me get through some of the history. I think you explained to us that your father went to Birmingham; his sister had gone there before. Is that right, do you recall why she chose Birmingham?

L.F.O.: She married somebody from Birmingham.

B.W.: But you don't know what her married name was?

L.F.O.: Yes, her married name was Raywise.

B.W.: And then your father chose to go to Birmingham. Was he younger than his sister then?

L.F.O.: Yes, the twins were the youngest.

B.W.: He graduated from the University of Virginia School of Law?

L.F.O.: And University of Virginia undergraduate, too.

B.W.: Yes, and so had he practiced law somewhere before Alabama?

L.F.O.: No. Again, the mythology is that at that time you were admitted to the bar of Virginia after taking an oral examination by the justices of the Supreme Court of Virginia in a courtroom. And the mythology is that the Supreme Court at that time was meeting in Wytheville, Virginia, and he went to Wytheville to start his examination and went on from there to Birmingham. Now I don't know whether he settled in Birmingham at that time; there's another story.

B.W.: Now your mother, I think you told us, was a prohibitionist. Is that right?

L.F.O.: Yes.

B.W.: And do you recall what prompted her to be a prohibitionist?

L.F.O.: I think I explained it sometime.

B.W.: You did.

L.F.O.: Miss Emma was a Methodist, a prohibitionist. And my mother's religious education was in the Methodist Church in Birmingham, I mean in Decatur. She was a Methodist prohibitionist.

B.W.: Do you recall hobbies that your mother had, interests that she had?

L.F.O.: Well, she was a member, probably a very early member, of the American Association of University Woman, AAUW. She was active in the affairs of a chapter in Birmingham. She gardened and at some point she played golf. I never understood how, but she did.

B.W.: When you say you didn't understand how, why wouldn't she?

L.F.O.: She was most unathletic. She was overweight, short, all physical qualities that Tiger Woods doesn't have. And not particularly dexterous. I never saw her play, but I have her golf clubs.

B.W.: You say she was a member of the American Association of University Women.

L.F.O.: She also had something to do with the Democratic Party, but I'm not sure.

B.W.: Now, was your mother a baseball fan at all? Or does that come from your father?

L.F.O.: Yes.

B.W.: How did you and your mother spend time together, what was your relationship?

L.F.O.: Well, my mother raised me, my father was not a hands-on father in my childhood. My mother was the law of the house. She used to say my father was a guest in his own house.

B.W.: (laughter) What did he say about that?

L.F.O.: (unintelligible)

B.W.: He's a wise man. When you were growing up and in school, who was it that kind of made certain you did your homework, did your chores, and that you did a certain amount of things.

L.F.O.: She was it.

B.W.: Now, it must have been unusual because there weren't that many women who were college educated in that era.

L.F.O.: Maybe so, I don't know. I know that there were relatively few.

B.W.: I also recall in your earlier interview, you mentioned that you saw your father conduct a cross-examination.

L.F.O.: Yes.

B.W.: Can you talk about some instances of strong memories of your mother's that might be similar that are just as clear in your mind?

L.F.O.: Well I think I told this story earlier but our house was on the side of Red Mountain. And upstairs on what really was the third floor—because there was a basement that was above ground—on the third floor was the screened room which we called the sleeping porch where we slept in the summer. And it looked out over the city. But immediately behind our lot was an alley and I can remember vividly waking up early in the morning, daylight barely, and hearing a horrible cry from a male voice, "Stop that, stop that," or something like that. And my mother went to the screen and looked out and there were police beating a young black boy with a tire tread, and she yelled out the window, "You all stop that!," and they did. Drove away. The

boy walked down the alley sobbing, but it was a real alarm in the night; I was probably about ten years old.

B.W.: Do you have any idea how old the boy might have been that was being beaten?

L.F.O.: Older teen, nineteen, might have been up to some mischief.

B.W.: Yes, when I grew up in Jackson there were certain parts of the city that were white and black and we knew which parts of the city were yours, and if you stayed within that part, generally, you didn't run into any problems. Was this fellow in a part of town that he would not have been welcomed in?

L.F.O.: Oh it was lily-white but contemporaneously within the last few weeks I got a letter from a New York lawyer named J. Johnson, a partner of Paul White, saying that he'd just been visiting his sister in Birmingham and discovered that she and her family were living in the house that I was born in and grew up in, and that the neighborhood was integrated.

B.W.: Is that right?

L.F.O.: I want to show you the letter.

B.W.: Please, I'd love to see it.

L.F.O.: Wait a minute, I'll get it.

B.W.: It's very nice. Here's a picture of the house. And where would the sleeping porch have been?

L.F.O.: On the back side.

B.W.: I see. And structurally, is it as you remember it?

L.F.O.: Oh yeah.

B.W.: That would have been a very substantial house in the time that you grew up.

L.F.O.: Yes it was.

B.W.: What year were you born?

L.F.O.: Nineteen nineteen. That would have been a house built in nineteen fifteen.

B.W.: Yes. Was it built for your father and mother?

L.F.O.: No, they bought it from a man named Nerwill Wilner who developed the whole neighborhood. The guy's brother-in-law is an anchor of some broadcast network.

B.W.: Yes, I saw that in the letter. Thank you for sharing that. I wanted to ask a few

other questions about growing up. Let's spend a few minutes talking about your relationship with your father. I know you all went to baseball games together, is that right?

L.F.O.: Yes.

B.W.: And I think you went for walks.

L.F.O.: That was his exercise.

B.W.: Yes, yes. You also indicated you went to movies on Saturday nights with friends?

L.F.O.: Saturday DAY, not night. Saturday afternoon at five.

B.W.: Why wouldn't you go at night?

L.F.O.: As a youngster I didn't go out at night.

B.W.: And who were your best friends, do you remember their names?

L.F.O.: I do. My very best friend lived back in the back, their backyard and our backyard were separated by an alley. His name was David Massey.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

Ben Wilson: Tape #2, Thursday, January 17, at about 3:15 p.m. When last we left, Judge, you were telling me about your best friends growing up.

Louis F. Oberdorfer: Another was Hugh Nabers. His father was a doctor and his mother was a Comer, and his grandfather had been Governor Comer of Alabama. They were a very proper southern family, and Hugh Nabers' house was about a block and a half away. They had a very large yard where we used to play baseball and touch football, and that kind of thing. Next door, later, in my still very young life, was a family named Jemison. They were the real estate people in Birmingham. Elbert Jemison was the son my age, who later was an aide to General Patton. I don't know whether he went to VMI or West Point, but he was an aide to Patton.

Emil Hess, who was in my Sunday school class, was the son of the owner of Parisian's store. Dolph Speilberger, who lived a little further away, was also in our Sunday school class. Milton Jacobson lived up the street. I would say those were my closest friends.

B.W.: Did you maintain those friendships?

L.F.O.: David and I remembered all through the years, each other's birthdays.

B.W.: Yes.

L.F.O.: I always wrote him or called him on his birthday and he always wrote me or called me on my birthday. Until last summer I called down there and nobody answered. He and his wife had moved to a retirement home.

B.W.: I also recall your describing going to summer camps in Connecticut and Maine. Tell me about those camps.

L.F.O.: Well they were creations of my mother through a friend of hers who lived in New York by the name of Martha Barbe. The camp in Connecticut was called Housatonic after the river and it was on the river. I don't remember a whole lot about it except that we went canoeing and I guess baseball and stuff like that and hikes. The camp I went to the longest was called Camp Androscoggin in Wayne, Maine. It was on an island in Lake Androscoggin. Beautiful spot. It was run by a guy named Edward Healy whose brother, Jefferson Healy, had been killed in World War I. The camp had a kind of a military aspect to it. For example, I remember one evening there was a flag raising. The campers formed three sides of a square around a flagpole. I was the bugler and I blew the colors. The military aspect was underscored by the presence amongst the counselors of two West Pointers every year, undergraduates or underclassmen, or whatever you call them. The two counselors were cousins; one's last name was Herman. I remember he had two brothers, and I can't remember. Dick Herman, I think, and the other was Orvil Dreyfoos, whose name you will see on the masthead of the *New York Times*. He married a social worker and they were Dartmouth undergraduates. I went to Dartmouth by influence of them.

B.W.: Now you said Herman was a cousin of?

L.F.O.: Dreyfoos.

B.W.: Oh, okay but they were not related to you?

L.F.O.: No, no, no.

B.W.: Okay.

L.F.O.: And we went on canoe trips and hikes. Lots of softball every evening after dinner and it was a very competitive place in the way they gave awards. The highest award that goes

out to campers was the Jefferson A. Healy Memorial Trophy. There was a so-called select group called the Androscoggin Club. The way to be admitted in the Androscoggin Club was that the whole camp lined up around the ball field and the incumbent, I don't know whether it was the chairman, president of the Androscoggin Club and a couple of other members, would march around this group and tap very forcefully the person they wanted to admit and that person was directed to go to some undisclosed location and wait to be called. There was a lot of hocus-pocus.

B.W.: Now were you tapped ever?

L.F.O.: Yeah, later in my career there.

B.W.: Let's talk about school—growing up in elementary school and high school. Did you attend the public schools there in Birmingham?

L.F.O.: Yes.

B.W.: And tell me about your favorite teachers in elementary school, high school, junior high.

L.F.O.: My favorite elementary school teacher was Ms. Edmunds. By the way, to be a teacher in the white public schools in Birmingham, you had to be an unmarried woman, whether divorced or not, really I don't know. None of them were married and that was a requirement, as I recall. Another teacher who taught speech and debate was influential with me, Ms. Thomas. I also remember my unfavorite teacher was a Ms. Davis, who taught Latin. She had a nervous habit of popping rubber bands and every now and then one would break or come off and hit her in the face and she was a certifiable nut, I'm sure, but I took four years of Latin. I would not call her a favorite.

B.W.: Go back to Ms. Edmunds, why did you like her.

L.F.O.: She taught Geography and I was interested in it. She made a lot of sense.

B.W.: Yes.

L.F.O.: You know?

B.W.: As for Speech and Debate, I know you participated in Debate while at Dartmouth.

L.F.O.: And in high school.

B.W.: And in high school, but it started in high school. You were saying that the debate

coach or the debate advisor was one of your favorites.

L.F.O.: John Neal.

B.W.: Yes, what was the name of your high school?

L.F.O.: High School?

B.W.: Yes sir.

L.F.O.: The Erskine Ramsey Technical High School.

B.W.: Yes.

L.F.O.: Which is also now integrated, thoroughly integrated.

B.W.: Yes. And how many public high schools, if you recall, were there in Birmingham at that time?

L.F.O.: I can remember three.

B.W.: Yes.

L.F.O.: Ramsey, Phillips and Woodlawn.

B.W.: So there would have been three white public high schools and maybe one black public high school?

L.F.O.: None of those was black.

B.W.: Right.

L.F.O.: I don't know the name of the black high school.

B.W.: Tell me, what was high school like for you?

L.F.O.: Well, for the first time I ran into fraternities and sororities. It was obviously—it was just a given, never thought anything about it. There were fraternities that were all Christian and then there was one Jewish fraternity, I think. Maybe there wasn't a Jewish fraternity in high school. No I don't think there was, we just didn't get in it.

B.W.: Right. And, do you recall ever having a discussion with a Christian friend about that? Was it never talked about or was just assumed?

L.F.O.: If I did I don't remember anything about it.

B.W.: Yes.

L.F.O.: I just accepted it that was the way it was.

B.W.: What activities, if any, were you involved in in high school other than the Debate

Team?

L.F.O.: Boy Scouts.

B.W.: Right.

L.F.O.: That's a very interesting phenomenon. Troop 28 Boy Scouts met in a building attached on the grounds of the Independent Presbyterian Church.

B.W.: Yes.

L.F.O.: And, it, of course, was, in my sense of it, quite integrated. I remember one of the scoutmasters was a Mr. Booth, whose son Herbert Booth was one of my social friends, and then there was a guy name Scotty Erkert, who was a C Scout, and he was involved in the activities of the church. They met every Friday night at that church during school time. There was a Boy Scout camp, Camp Cosby, about fourteen miles from where we were and one of the things I remember was our hiking out there and hiking back—more than once. One of my good friends and colleagues was a guy by the name of Coburn Martin. He and I went through the Merit Badge system and got Eagle Scout, which was quite an achievement.

B.W.: Yes it was. Did you have siblings?

L.F.O.: Siblings?

B.W.: Yes.

L.F.O.: No. No, only child.

B.W.: So you were the only child?

L.F.O.: Which is a part of my persona.

B.W.: Now tell me this, did your parents have academic expectations for you, and, if so, how did they make them manifest to you?

L.F.O.: My father was sort of contemptuous of my intellect really. He was a very smart guy and I always thought he looked down his nose at me and what I read, what I thought, and what I did in school. I wasn't an all-"A" kind of guy. I was an "A" and "B" guy. My mother was supportive with a few lessons.

B.W.: Well, did your father think that the schools in Birmingham were not as good as the schools he'd attended in Charlottesville?

L.F.O.: I'm sure he did.

B.W.: Was he just an all-“A” student up in Charlottesville?

B.W.: Yes.

B.W.: Obviously you did very well in school. I saw where you had skipped a grade or two. (laughter)

L.F.O.: Which was probably a mistake.

B.W.: Why do you say it was a mistake?

L.F.O.: Well I went to college at sixteen. I wasn’t ready for college, and I struggled my first semester.

B.W.: Why did your parents encourage you to skip the grades?

L.F.O.: I don’t know, I’m not sure they did.

B.W.: What about socially, if you were a senior at sixteen there would have been some boys and girls in your class who were eighteen when they had graduated from high school?

L.F.O.: Well my social life was around Sunday school and I was thinking the other night about that. Our social activity was that we would get together, go to one of the groups’ house and play Twenty One. We couldn’t drive, so our parents had to deliver us there. I think I was allowed, because you could drive at age sixteen, but I was out of town.

B.W.: Did you date while you were in high school?

L.F.O.: That’s another thing. In the South at that time, the Jewish families in Atlanta, Montgomery, Birmingham, and New Orleans had events—the dance thing. In Birmingham, I think it was called a Jubilee. Contemporaries from Atlanta, Montgomery, New Orleans would come to Birmingham for the Jubilee. We would go to Montgomery. They had what was called the Falcon, and I forget where it was in the town. That was our mixed social life.

B.W.: Sure. But there must have been girls that you saw that you liked?

L.F.O.: One of them I married.

B.W.: Well, there you go. Did you like her even then?

L.F.O.: No.

B.W.: Did she pay any attention to you at all?

L.F.O.: No.

B.W.: Was it your mother who graduated from Vassar?

L.F.O.: She didn't graduate; she went there for two years.

B.W.: For two years, okay, but your mother had been to Vassar. Your father UVA undergrad and to the law school. Was there ever any question you would go to college?

L.F.O.: Oh no, no. I think there was a story certainly in that other interview about how it was assumed that I would go to University of Virginia and go into his law firm.

B.W.: Yes.

L.F.O.: Until my mother discovered in my preteens or early teens that at the University of Virginia they drank whiskey.

B.W.: Yes. Now, my recollection of Dartmouth, of course I went a little after you, was they drank a little bit of everything up there. If they did in my time, I suspect they may have in your time as well. (laughter)

L.F.O.: More than that. (laughter) She just didn't know anything about Dartmouth. (laughter)

B.W.: Now you clearly had some interest in Dartmouth; you met Dick Herman, you met Dreyfoos, and was there any other connection with Dartmouth?

L.F.O.: I had a friend at camp by the name of Al Eiseman E-I-S-E-M-A-N. We lived in the same bunk and I remember he was very active in Dramatics, and I had some role in that. His father had gone to Dartmouth and he was headed for Dartmouth. I heard about it from him. He was contemporary minded.

B.W.: Okay, so, where was he from?

L.F.O.: New York City.

B.W.: I see, and which camp was this?

L.F.O.: The camp in Maine.

B.W.: And so at some point you talked it over with your father, and I understand why your mother would prefer Dartmouth over the University of Virginia. What was your father's thought about it?

L.F.O.: I don't think he had any problem.

B.W.: I had some other questions I wanted to ask you, we'll stop it at 4:00 o'clock or anytime you say.

L.F.O.: 4:00 o'clock will be fine.

B.W.: I think you ran for president of your senior class in high school, is that right?

L.F.O.: I may have been president, I'm not sure.

B.W.: Well you had to have run before you made it. (laughter)

L.F.O.: Okay.

B.W.: Was that something you wanted to do?

L.F.O.: It just happened.

B.W.: It just happened, okay. Do you recall your opponent or the making of a speech or anything like that?

L.F.O.: I'm not sure there was one.

B.W.: You grew up in the Depression, and you would have been 11 years old in 1930. Is there anything, any personality traits, any impact on you, that are a result of growing up around the Depression?

L.F.O.: Talking about the Depression?

B.W.: Yes.

L.F.O.: Absolutely. I have a responsibility for a certain amount of money, and I have an investment advisor. I keep telling him that I am a child of the Depression and I remember when the stock market went down. I remember the Bank Holiday, (unintelligible) as my dad had gotten a fee of \$100 just before the banks were closed. And that was the only money in the neighborhood and they were handing out \$5 to this guy. That was an awful time, and it is burned into my persona.

B.W.: I read in the obituary of your father that bankruptcy was one of the areas in which he practiced for many years. He obviously was keenly aware of the financial issues.

L.F.O.: Oh yes. We had the Depression and I can remember listening to Roosevelt and all of them on the radio at night. We were very enthusiastic about him and what was I, 13 years old? In our household, our dinner table was quite animated with discussion about the Depression and the Administration, and Hoover, and Roosevelt.

B.W.: Right. I suspect your father held some strong views.

L.F.O.: Well yeah, my mother did, too, and she didn't mind expressing them—certainly in

the house for sure. She was also well read in current things. There was a group, I don't know whether I referred to this in the earlier dialog or not, but I should have. It was called the Sunday Night Crowd. Did I mention that?

B.W.: I don't think you did.

L.F.O.: A group of their contemporaries. A very sophisticated, well-educated group of people that started out meeting every Sunday night to discuss books that they read and of course it got into a social thing and then they were really part of our/my extended family. I called the man "Uncle" or the woman "Aunt." They were very cool and very, very sophisticated. At an early time I was welcome at their dinner and conversation, it was really part of my experience.

B.W.: Yes, yes, I can remember kind of listening to and sitting on the edge of adult conversations. It's amazing what a person can learn if that opportunity is afforded to you. You mentioned that Sunday Night Crowd as part of a family tradition and you mentioned the Jubilee and the Falcon and other dances that were part of traditions. Were there other family traditions that you recall?

L.F.O.: Not really.

B.W.: I read somewhere in here, if I can find it, this book is called *A Century of Jewish Life in Dixie*, and the author is [Mark H.] Elovitz. This is a remake of his dissertation, which is a history of the Jews in Birmingham in 1870.

L.F.O.: I wasn't in it?

B.W.: No. (laughter) I think there is a mention here, if I can read it, where they talk about Temple Emanuel. Were your parents members of that?

L.F.O.: I was confirmed there.

B.W.: Yes. And they talked about the Sisterhood of Temple Emanuel.

L.F.O.: Yes, my mother was very active in that. I forgot to mention it.

B.W.: It says, "Mrs. A. L. Oberdorfer, the President." I'll just show that to you right there. I don't know if you recognize the names of any of the other ladies.

L.F.O.: Oh, yeah, I know all of them. Dr. Morris Newfield was our Rabbi.

B.W.: Yes. And later in some of those sections that I have stickers by, there is a discussion of your father. The obituary that appeared in the paper upon his death, as presented,

and they discuss that there were a couple of other members of the Synagogue, in addition to your father, that are recognized. I think a Mr. Joseph who was a businessman and a Rabbi as well. Did you attend service regularly?

L.F.O.: I think in Sunday school we were supposed to be there every Saturday.

B.W.: Yes.

L.F.O.: I don't know whether I was or not.

B.W.: Yes.

L.F.O.: He always made a fuss about it.

B.W.: Yes. And I think your father was on the board there as well.

L.F.O.: Yeah, but very, very passive.

B.W.: When you say your father was passive, what do you mean?

L.F.O.: He was not, he was a realist, he didn't get as religious.

B.W.: No? And, how did your mother feel about religion?

L.F.O.: About what?

B.W.: About religion. You said your father was a realist.

L.F.O.: Well, she was sort of involved, but it was not a big issue or the subject of much discussion.

B.W.: Alright. In another section of this book it talks about the Klan in Birmingham in the 1920s. I'll just read to you this one author's opinion. He said, "By 1927, conscionable Birmingham came to realize they were dangerously close to being swallowed entirely by zealots and bigots. The Chamber of Commerce, the Jaycees, the newspapers and the bar association under the presidency of Leo Oberdorfer in 1928-29 fought the Klan."

L.F.O.: You read that to me once.

B.W.: Yes, I did, I was just reading it. (laughter) I think it was before we went off the tape. It said, "They achieved their convention against the Klan in the celebrated *Jeff Calloway* case in June 1927, and this plus the advent of the Great Depression served to rupture the decade-long Klan domination of Birmingham." Do you recall talking about the Klan at all with your dad?

L.F.O.: Well, you know my father and Hugo Black were very close personal friends?

B.W.: I was getting there eventually, yes sir. (laughter)

L.F.O.: It started when Black came to town. My dad when he first came to Birmingham wrote a book, I've got a copy of it, *Alabama Justices' Practice*, a handbook, not just a handbook but a very good practice book for practice before the Justices of the Peace.

[End of Tape 1, Side B]