

# ORAL HISTORY OF THE HONORABLE WILLIAM B. BRYANT

## Chapter 1 Family and Childhood: 1911-1920

This interview is being conducted on behalf of the Oral History Project of the Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewee is Judge William B. Bryant. The interviewer is William Schultz, Esq. The interview took place on March 18, 1994.

**Bill Schultz:** Judge Bryant, where were you born?

**Judge Bryant:** A wide spot in the road in Alabama called Wetumpka, Alabama. I guess about 14 miles from Montgomery, Alabama.

**Bill Schultz:** What do you know about your ancestors -- your grandparents and great grandparents?

**Judge Bryant:** I knew my grandparents and their families. My grandparents on my mother's side lived in Washington. I lived with them when I was young.

**Bill Schultz:** What were their names?

**Judge Bryant:** Their name was Wood. Charles and Elizabeth Wood. And my grandparents on my father's side, I knew them because we visited them when I was young. His name was William Bryan, that was the family name. And her name was Julia. I remember them. I also remember my great grandfather on my mother's side, my grandmother's mother and father, Nathan and Nettie Noble.

**Bill Schultz:** What do you know about the lives of your grandparents and great grandparents in Alabama?

**Judge Bryant:** I remember what my grandparents and my aunts and uncles told me about them. I don't know so much about my grandparents on my father's side. I knew them and I knew their families. They were loveable people, but they lived in Alabama and I lived in Washington after I was 11 months old. So I didn't have the closeness to know them that I had with my grandmother and grandfather on my mother's side who came to Washington.

**Bill Schultz:** Do you know what sort of work that your grandfather on your

father's side did?

**Judge Bryant:** No, it was some kind of merchant business, I don't know. When I saw him he was kind of old and in ill health, as a matter of fact. He was a kind of heavysset fellow with kind of a round face and a bald head, a nice old man, but he was sick at the time I saw him. His wife was a very lively spirited woman, very loving too.

**Bill Schultz:** And he was born in Alabama, as far as you know?

**Judge Bryant:** I don't know, I suppose so, but I don't know.

**Bill Schultz:** Now on your mother's side, you said you knew your mother's mother's parents?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, my great grandfather and my great grandmother. Yes, pretty nice folks. He had been a teacher or something. Very tall, straight, dark-skinned man with gray hair, and well built, and he spoke in kind of perfect diction. She was a nice lady. The old man was looked up to by a lot of folks. He was known as Mr. Noble. I never heard anybody call him Nathan, not even my great grandmother. That was the first time that I had been in a house where somebody was always formally addressed as Mister. That's true.

**Bill Schultz:** Do you know anything about any of your other ancestors? When they came to this country or anything else about them?

**Judge Bryant:** I don't know. I regret the fact that I never engaged my grandmother or my grandfather in that kind of conversation. I never asked them about their parents. What I know about my other grandparents, I know by virtue of what my aunts and uncles have said. But I never had any conversation with them directly about their parents, and I am sorry I didn't. I am often very curious about both of them. I knew Nathan and Nettie Noble. I met them when we visited Alabama twice after we came to Washington. After we came to Washington, as a youngster before I was 10 years old, we made two trips down there. It was before I was 9 years old, and I met the mother and father of my grandmother. I never saw the

mother and father of my grandfather. From what I understand his mother was a Creek Indian that I never saw, and his father was a Confederate Army captain who was referred to as Cap Pennington. I never saw him, but I had heard about him since I was a little boy.

**Bill Schultz:** Was he alive when you were a little boy?

**Judge Bryant:** I think not. I think he died within my first 5 or 6 years. But I heard a lot of talk about him through my aunts and uncles, not from the old man. When I say the old man, I mean my grandfather. They say the word was down there that everybody in the small town knew that Charlie, that is Charles Wood, was "Cap's boy" because Cap made it known. As a matter of fact he set him up in a business in a general store in the town.

**Bill Schultz:** This is your grandfather who owned the general store?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes. And I understand on Sunday mornings he would bring his horse and buggy over to the house to pick up some of the children, and some of the grandchildren, and ride them up the countryside and thereabouts. I don't know.

**Bill Schultz:** This would include your mother who would be one of the grandchildren?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, my mother would be one of those. I used to hear my mother talk about Cap Pennington. But I never saw him.

**Bill Schultz:** What else do you know about the life of your mother's parents who lived in Alabama?

**Judge Bryant:** I don't. I don't know much about it. My mother's family lived in a house in maybe what amounts to a couple of blocks away up the road in another house from where my father's family lived. So they were neighbors and very close friends. My aunts and uncles on my father's side and my aunts and uncles on my mother's side were very close and almost grew up in each other's households--they were very close people, and that I gathered from the time I was a little boy.

**Bill Schultz:** Now you were born in 1911, and then when you were 10 months old you left Alabama?

**Judge Bryant:** Eleven months. I understand they brought me up here.

**Bill Schultz:** What do you know about the circumstances under which you came to Washington, D.C., when the family brought you here?

**Judge Bryant:** Well, the old man came to Washington as the result of some incident in Alabama. When he came here, he sent for the rest of us.

The old man was about, I guess 5'6" or 5'7", and if you soaked him two or three days he might weigh 135-145 pounds. He was a relatively small guy, but he had a lot of temper and he was a little defiant. He didn't respect the mores that governed the relationships between Blacks and whites in the South, and apparently I guess he thought that he wasn't bound by the rules.

You know in the old days people carried guns like they do today. They liked to bear arms, and the story that they tell us about him was kind of weird. Charlie was from time to time disruptive and insolent and spoke his mind, typically when he was fortified with whiskey. And folks had complained to Cap Pennington about Charlie from time to time. There was talk that he could get away with some of his insolence because he was "Cap's boy". Apparently Cap Pennington was an influential man because he was a plantation owner--a landholder, an influential fellow.

The old man, I called him Papa, had Ada, Emma, my mother (Alberta), Josephine and Nettie (Elizabeth), five girls and three boys, and they were all in Alabama. The old man had one of these general stores downtown, and among the things they sell were the general stuff, things like buggy whips. Do you know what buggy whips are? And the buggy whips would be standing up in a rack outside, right outside the door or something.

The story goes that one of the girls, Ada, or maybe Emma, I don't know, but all of the women were pretty nice looking people. Apparently in those days youngsters hung around down

the main street and around the stores just like they do now. One of the daughters went down to the store for some reason or another, I guess sent down there by my grandmother. But anyway, they went to the store and some white teenagers were hanging around, and one of them was alleged to have made some remark to her that was off-color. And the old man was supposed to have taken one of those buggy whips and run him right out through the door and down the street, and they weren't going to stand for that.

Charlie could say what he wanted from time to time and be a little disrespectful, but they weren't going to stand for that. So they went to the house to bring Charlie out. This I know because the first and second time I went down there they showed me. They came out of the town, up to the area where he lived, and said "Charlie, come on out now, we don't want to hurt the rest of the family. You might as well come on out now." And he is alleged to have shot through the front door, and shot through the side door and then come out on the front and said "All right, goddamn it, here I am," and there was nobody out there.

Then a mob formed, and he dressed up in women's clothes, and with the accompaniment of an uncle who was a relative of my grandmother, they circulated through the market place saying, "We're going to be late for church, you gotta hurry, you gotta to hurry, we're gonna be late." They got through the market, and escaped and went to Birmingham, and then came to Washington and that's the story. And after he came here he sent for the family. So all of the Woods came to Washington.

**Bill Schultz:** He sent for his wife, your grandmother?

**Judge Bryant:** His wife, and all the children came to Washington shortly after he escaped.

**Bill Schultz:** Were there any other grandchildren at that time?

**Judge Bryant:** No.

**Bill Schultz:** So you are the oldest?

**Judge Bryant:** I am the oldest grandchild.

**Bill Schultz:** Did you and your mother live with her parents?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes. My mother and I lived with them when they came to Washington. They were living on Benning Road, that was country then. I think the house is still out there, I think it is. It was a couple of years ago, because it was one of two houses. There were adjoining houses.

**Bill Schultz:** I might make you take me to show me those houses.

**Judge Bryant:** I think they are still out there.

**Bill Schultz:** Now your father, what was your father's name?

**Judge Bryant:** My father's name was Benson. My middle name is his name.

**Bill Schultz:** Benson Bryan?

**Judge Bryant:** Benson Bryan, B r y a n.

**Judge Bryant:** You see, they say, and this is true, the old man on my father's side -- on my father's side the grandfather's name is William Bryan, and they all called him Will Bryan. My grandmother, his wife, named all of the grandchildren after him. One of my aunts on my father's side was named Sewell, and she had a boy named Clifford Sewell. My grandmother named everybody Willie, so he was named Willie Clifford. Another aunt was married to a guy named Lindsey. And she had a son, and my grandmother named him Willie Boyd, so there was Willie Boyd, Willie Clifford and Willie Benson--that's me. In other words, all the grandchildren, all the male grandchildren, were named after her husband, Will Bryan, all of them, William Boyd, William Clifford, William Benson. All of them were named after him.

**Bill Schultz:** Do you have any recollections of your father?

**Judge Bryant:** No.

**Bill Schultz:** He didn't come to Washington?

**Judge Bryant:** As a matter of fact, he had left Alabama before they did. I don't

know what the particulars are, except that he left us -- maybe before I was born, I don't know, or right after I was born. I know that his family -- everybody -- held it against him. I do not know what the circumstances were; I don't know why, maybe the responsibility was too much. I don't know why he left, but he left.

I remember visiting my aunt, who was his sister, when I was in the U.S. Attorney's Office. She lived in Chicago and I remember she talked about him in derogatory terms. They held it against him because all of the girls were close. All of the girls in my family on my mother's side and all of the girls on my father's side grew up like sisters. And the boys in both houses were like brothers. They grew up like a whole family. My father's nickname was Buddy, they all called him Buddy.

**Bill Schultz:** Do you know where he went?

**Judge Bryant:** To New York, and he stayed there and married somebody later on. I don't know who she was. I heard my aunt say, "That woman Buddy is married to is crazy," or something of the sort. I don't know who she was, and I think she had some children, a daughter, maybe a son. I know he had a daughter. I never saw him and never saw anybody related to him until one day I, ....

One day I came off the bench, it was in the Nixon Administration, and there was a guy who came to town, whose name I don't remember, but he was a nice looking guy. He came here for one of the inaugural functions or something. He had something to do with the Republican Administration, not in any high ranking capacity, but as a lower worker. But he was a Republican and represented himself to me as my brother-in-law. He was a nice enough guy. He was married to my father's daughter by this other marriage. He came in here; he's been here twice. He came and talked a few minutes and I was courteous to him. He hadn't done anything to me, I didn't know anything about him. I didn't express any interest in my father at that time. I don't know about the chronology of this. I don't know whether that happened first, or this

happened first.

One day I came in off the bench, and Mrs. Riggs told me that somebody called from New York and that my father had passed away. I think that happened first, I suppose. And then this guy came down, or maybe the guy came down first and then later I got the call. I don't know, but the point is that that's the only contact I had with my father was through this guy. And I rather suspect that the word that he passed away came first, because I remember coming in here and I had never discussed my problem with anybody. I had a stepfather who was a nice man, and I never knew my father so I never even thought about him. So when I got word on the bench this late in life that my father had died, I remember I sat, and I thought a moment, and said to myself so what. I mean I didn't see any reason to do anything about it, so I didn't. And since that time this guy has come, and I have talked to him. He is a pleasant enough guy, but that's all I know about him.

**Bill Schultz:** So, you were saying you lived on Benning Road? Is that where your grandfather moved to?

**Judge Bryant:** My grandfather, when he came to Washington, that's the first recollection I have--of living on Benning Road.

**Bill Schultz:** Do you know the address?

**Judge Bryant:** I think it was 43 something, either 4305 or 4503 I think. I remember it very well. That area out there was all country. It was a dirt road in front of the house. It was all country.

**Bill Schultz:** How old were you at this time? How old were you when you lived there?

**Judge Bryant:** I lived there until I was about 3 or 4 years old. Because I remember going to the kindergarten. When I went to kindergarten I lived at 1507 B Street, N.E., which is now Constitution Avenue, and my mother was married to my stepfather then.

**Bill Schultz:** Did your grandfather continue to live on Benning Road?

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah. He continued to live on Benning Road. They lived there for a while, but not too long, because it wasn't long after that he moved from Benning to 745 Girard Street, N.W. He moved the family from Benning into town on Girard Street, N.W., and got a job at the State, War & Navy Department. That's when the State, War & Navy Departments were in one building.

**Bill Schultz:** Was that the Old Executive Office Building?

**Judge Bryant:** I guess so, on New York Avenue, or something. I never knew this, but I think this is so. I think the old man got some kind of backing from Capt. Pennington because he came to Washington, apparently right out of the middle of Alabama. He came to Washington, and I never knew him to be out of a job. He was an expert shoemaker. He could make a pair of shoes out of a piece of leather. He worked in the government in Washington, D.C., and from time to time I can also remember him coming home from work.

**Bill Schultz:** What do you remember about Washington when you were a boy?

**Judge Bryant:** Well, so far as I knew, the world was Benning Road for the first two or three years. But then we moved to 1507 B Street, N.E. My mother had married my stepfather and we moved there.

**Bill Schultz:** What was your stepfather's name?

**Judge Bryant:** George S. Washington. Nice guy. He was a porter at Union Station. The only job he ever had, and was there until he died, a nice guy. His wife had passed away, I think his wife was sick the year we moved here, and during the course of her illness I think my mother had something to do with taking care of her, or something. He lived across the road in a kind of diagonal on Benning Road. Two or three years after she died, her husband and my mother got married.

**Bill Schultz:** Did he have any children?

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah, he had two sons. One of them died, and I don't know what ever happened to the other one.

**Bill Schultz:** You grew up with them?

**Judge Bryant:** I grew up with one of them for a while, and then he went to live with an aunt somewhere in New York, and I never had any more contact with him thereafter.

**Bill Schultz:** And did your mother ever have any more children?

**Judge Bryant:** No.

**Bill Schultz:** I'm not sure I asked you what your mother's name was.

**Judge Bryant:** Her name was Alberta.

**Bill Schultz:** How long did your mother and your stepfather live?

**Judge Bryant:** They married in I guess 1916. I was born in 1911, and they were married when I was about 5 years old. I think they were married in 1916, and they stayed married until he passed away. I think he died around 1947 or 1948.

**Bill Schultz:** And your mother?

**Judge Bryant:** My mother passed away about 20 years ago.

**Bill Schultz:** You grew up with a lot of aunts and uncles and cousins. Is that right?

**Judge Bryant:** No, I grew up in the house with my stepfather and my mother and that was our family unit. We were very close. I visited my grandmother where my aunts and uncles were living almost every day. After they moved out of Benning and my mother and stepfather moved out of Benning and into the city, we lived at 1507 B Street, N.E. When my grandfather moved on Girard St, we moved in town and were not too far away from each other. I spent a whole lot of time in my grandmother's house under her apron string, so to speak. A lot of time. My grandfather lived on Girard Street, for not too long and then he bought a house at 1004 Euclid Street, N.W. and stayed there. The house was sold about three years ago after my

aunt died. That's why I say I think the old man had some backing from Cap because he bought a house in 19\_\_\_. Oh my God, I don't know when -- he bought a house over 70 years ago. I guess I was about 10 years old when he bought that house on Euclid Street, and he was a Black homeowner. For a guy coming out of Alabama with no apparent resources to buy a house, that was a nice house in a nice little neighborhood, in the 1000 block of Euclid Street.

**Bill Schultz:** How did you get around? How did you travel?

**Judge Bryant:** Well, this is how travel was done. We had street cars then. We had two street car companies in the District of Columbia. Washington Railway & Electric Co., and the Capital Transit Co. They were competitors. Can you imagine that in this little city? 15th & H Street, N.E. was the end of the car line, and there was a big car barn right east of 15th Street on H Street. That became Benning Road, as you kept out on H Street, it became Benning Road, just as it does now.

You got off the street car there, and you walked where you were going, from there on you walked. After they all moved in town, of course, we all got around by walking. I often say now I walked to every part of the city at all times of the day and night, and never had any apprehension about anything. Now after sundown I don't want to walk two blocks from my home.

**Bill Schultz:** There were no horses and buggies?

**Judge Bryant:** Oh, yes, horses and buggies, and the ice man with ice and a wagon and a horse, a man selling groceries, hucksters selling cabbage, beans and everything else. Now I don't remember any horse-drawn trollies. I don't remember that, but I am satisfied that there were, just before we came out of Benning Road. I think there were horse-drawn trollies. I don't have any recollection, but I remember the fire engines were pulled by horses and the patrol wagons were pulled by horses, that was the method of transportation, that was the power.

**Bill Schultz:** That's hard to imagine.

**Judge Bryant:** That's right, it's hard to imagine. Yes sir.

**Bill Schultz:** When did your family first have a car?

**Judge Bryant:** The first automobile in the entire family was bought by my Aunt Josephine's husband.

My Aunt Josephine was a teacher in the public schools, and she married a man who graduated from the Howard University Medical School. The year he graduated he bought a Ford Roadster. That was the year I was in college. That was in 1928. That was the first car that I remember anybody in the family having and that was something. He was a hell of a guy.

Of course, economics were very important, and when the old man came he got a job working in the government. He was the only breadwinner, and then later on, both of my uncles. There were three uncles--one of them died during the flu epidemic in 1918. There were two uncles, I don't know how far they went to school, but I know they ultimately got jobs--the old man got both of them jobs. Both of them went into the Navy. Both of them were youngsters who went into the Navy in 1918 for World War I, and when they came out both of them got jobs as messengers. I think one of them was in the Navy Department and the other was in -- both of them, I think, got jobs as messengers in the Navy Department and worked until they retired.

Now the oldest girl, Aunt Ada, married a guy, and she died early. She died in Kentucky with her husband. I think her husband got tuberculosis or something and she died, but she died away from her siblings. My aunt, the one who lived longest, Aunt Emma, worked at Kann's Department Store. She was a wizard with her hands. She was a seamstress. First she worked at Kann's and then she got a job working at Garfinckel's. Garfinckel's didn't sell clothes to Black people, but Black people worked there, and she was a seamstress. Josephine and Nettie were the younger girls. They went to high school and then to Miner Teachers College, and both of them got jobs teaching. Josephine was the first one. She got her job as a teacher first. That was the first break into the so-called professional level, and the teaching job was her job.

**Bill Schultz:** This was in the public schools?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, and she had this job as a teacher, and everybody was happy about it, and of course the family was happy about it because it meant something economically to the family. She grew up, and met this guy who was in medical school, and she liked him and they went together and they got married. And it was the only time that I saw any meanness in any part of the family. That was the only time I had ever seen my grandmother in a negative light in my lifetime. She resented it. My grandfather resented it, but not as much as my grandmother. The family resented it because they thought this guy didn't have anything, and that he married her because she was making some money, and they didn't like it. But, in fact, he was a hell of a guy, and they all came to love him later on. He went to Detroit and became a very successful physician, and provided for my aunt in a way that she was a queen. He bought a house in Detroit, and made some money and he was a tough guy. He was a guy who resisted organized crime when they tried to make him peddle dope. They put explosives under his house out on Arden Park and he stood up to them. His name was John Edwards. His son is the one who lives in Honolulu and is my only living relative on my side of the family, other than my immediate family.

**Bill Schultz:** Why did your grandparents resent their daughter marrying a doctor? Today that would be every parent's dream.

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah, it would be every parent's dream, but you see, she married him when he finished medical school and wasn't making a quarter, and started interning at \$30 a month or something. They thought he was being taken care of by my aunt. He himself was born and raised some place in Mississippi, but it was clearly an economic thing with the family. They thought that he was living off her wages and they didn't like that. You know the old Southern mores about men taking care of their wives. The wives don't take care of the men, and they didn't like it.

That was the time, of course, when women who had jobs as teachers in the District of Columbia married a lot of professionals who didn't make it too well in their professions, and the women who were teachers were the economic backbone of the family. That happened in particular where lawyers were concerned.

I can remember when three prominent Black attorneys were in a law firm -- and all three wives were teachers. And if they had not been the husbands would not have made it because the economics for Black lawyers was terrible. Two were graduates of Ivy League law schools. All three of them were outstanding guys, good capable people, but as professionals they had a very, very hazardous condition.

**Bill Schultz:** That was typical of Black lawyers in those days?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes.

**Bill Schultz:** What about Black doctors?

**Judge Bryant:** Black doctors, they were a little bit different. If a Black doctor got a toehold, he could make some money. Dentists weren't as prosperous, but doctors were very prosperous. I remember, for instance, when my uncle, whom my aunt married, had graduated from medical school he interned in Howard University Hospital, in the old Freedman's Hospital. When he got ready to practice, I was 18 or 19, I guess. He and I rode around the town. He rode around town looking for possible places where he might open an office. He didn't want to leave Washington. He didn't want to take Josephine away from the city, and he liked Washington, he had been at Howard University Medical School. I remember he drove in far northeast, he drove in various places in Washington. He didn't cotton toward it well--he cottoned towards Detroit.

**Bill Schultz:** Where was he from?

**Judge Bryant:** Mississippi.

**Bill Schultz:** So he came up here to go to medical school?

**Judge Bryant:** He came here to go to medical school. I don't even know where he

went to undergraduate school, but he came up here to go to medical school, and he graduated, and interned. When he finished, that summer I remember riding around the city with an idea of opening an office, but he decided not to stay here and went to Detroit. And that's another thing that they didn't like. Josephine had to quit her job in Washington and go to Detroit. So you know that's an old story.

**Bill Schultz:** That's an old story?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, an old story. Yeah, but he was a good man, and they never regretted it. They raised a good boy, John is a good boy, John is a good son.

**Bill Schultz:** Now what schools did you go to -- elementary school?

**Judge Bryant:** Lovejoy Elementary School.

**Bill Schultz:** Where was that?

**Judge Bryant:** That was at 12th & D Streets, N.E., from kindergarten to 8th grade they ran. I went there until I finished the 3rd grade at Lovejoy, and then my mother and stepfather moved from 1507 B Street, N.E. My mother was nomadic. She moved from 1507 B Street to 1320 U Street, N.W.

**Bill Schultz:** When was that, when you were in the third grade, in what year was that?

**Judge Bryant:** I was 9 years old then, so that would be about 1920. Then I went to Garnett-Patterson Grade School in the fourth grade, and graduated from Garnett Patterson School and went to Dunbar High School. Garnett Patterson was a good school. You could feel yourself grow in those schools. You know, in the third grade and the fifth grade those are critical grades. I remember during those times you could feel yourself grow and develop in those schools.

**Bill Schultz:** Do you have any teachers that you remember, or that had a particular influence on you?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, Yes. One that stands out first in that regard is my fifth grade teacher who taught me geography and history -- she was Charlie Houston's aunt, Miss Cloteil Houston. She taught fifth grade at Garnett-Patterson School. And then in the grade school there was a lady named Miss Brooks who taught me mathematics, I remember her. They were good teachers, good solid teachers. Then in high school there were several others who I think would necessarily leave a mark on anybody. Dr. Dykes, who taught me English, Dr. McNeil who taught me English, and a man named Jackson who taught me mathematics, and a man named C.O. Lewis who taught me mathematics.

**Bill Schultz:** My wife is always trying to figure out what makes a good teacher? What about these teachers was important to you in your education?

**Judge Bryant:** I don't know. They apparently knew their subject matter, and they definitely made it known that they wanted you to understand it. I don't know how else to say it. Their interest was apparent; that they wanted to impart whatever they had to you. They wanted you to understand, and they were frustrated if you didn't do it. They showed frustration with you.

I had a teacher in the sixth grade named Daley. I never will forget her, she had some sort of skin condition that kind of discolored her. I don't know if she was burned or what happened, but she always wore blouses right up to her neck all of the time. A very neat, nice looking woman and her name was Daley, and she taught us, and she would get frustrated. I used to be an anxious student who would hold my hand up. You know, I would always try to sit up front, but the teacher sometimes would sit me in the back row. I would be close to the back row, and she would ask questions. I would start holding my hand up and shaking, and I would end up in the front of the room, trying to get her attention. It was the funniest thing.

**Bill Schultz:** What grade were you?

**Judge Bryant:** Oh, I used to do that in the fourth or fifth grades all the time. And

of course she was trying to get a hold of some student that didn't understand. But I didn't understand that. She knew there were some other kids in there that didn't understand, and that maybe I knew what the answer was, so she was trying to get somebody else. So she would get frustrated, and she would walk up and down the front of that room, and she would holler and complain, "I teach, and try and try," and she would scream. She would lose her temper and say, "I try, try and try, and will you learn? No, my golly you won't learn anything." She would scream and raise hell. I'll never forget her. Miss Daley was her name. I would see her get so frustrated that I would feel sorry for her.

But that's how dedicated those teachers were. They all wanted you to learn, and they spent time with you. It was obvious that they had that interest, and it was obvious that the kids had that interest. Miss Daley was a good teacher, and I always figured that the schools I went to were capable of taking up any of the slack which may have existed at home in some cases, do you know what I mean? School was a wholesome experience from day to day. From day to day you wanted to go to school. I remember I wanted to go. When I went home my mother didn't let me go out and play until dark with the kids. We lived in apartments more than anything else, and we didn't get that closeness to families. When we moved into the city we were living in an apartment on U Street. We didn't know the people up and down the street, so my mother kept me home, in the house. You didn't run up and down the street when you are living on the third floor -- you didn't run down the street -- you didn't know these people. So I spent a hell of a lot of time at home -- in the house -- and you didn't have televisions and telephones, then, you know. You just had to do a little reading, so school was an outlet.

**Bill Schultz:** Did you have electricity?

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah, we had electricity.

**Bill Schultz:** What about indoor plumbing?

**Judge Bryant:** Well, we didn't have electricity on B Street, and we didn't have

electricity on Benning. We had electricity on U Street and from then on, because I remember the kerosene lamps -- you ever heard of that? The lamp shade and the wick?

**Bill Schultz:** I've heard rumors that there used to be such a thing.

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, indeed. I remember the oil lamps on Benning Road and B Street, N.E.

**Bill Schultz :** What about indoor plumbing?

**Judge Bryant:** Indoor plumbing on U Street, no indoor plumbing on Benning Road, but on B Street there was, but Benning Road was country.

**Bill Schultz:** Now I know you don't like to talk about yourself, but what kind of student were you? What was your attitude towards school?

**Judge Bryant:** As I said, school to me was an outlet because I socialized in the school and I played. I had an opportunity for my recreation during recess. All of my social life was at school. As I said, when I went home I stayed at home until the next day when I went back to school.

**Bill Schultz:** Did you consider yourself a student who studied hard or didn't study much?

**Judge Bryant:** I think I studied because there was nothing else to do. I mean there was nothing else to do but study. But I think that I got most of it in the classroom. I listened to the teacher, I listened to the teacher and I did my studying. There was nothing else to do. I don't pride myself on being a very studious, dedicated, devoted student. I think I did my work because there was nothing else to do. You know, it may be that I would have been a good student in ordinary circumstances, I don't know. I suppose now if I came along with two telephones in the house, and a television in every room, maybe I wouldn't be such a good student.

**Bill Schultz:** Was it a priority for your parents that you did well in school?

**Judge Bryant:** I can't say. I think they were glad I did. I can't say it was to them. I don't remember being urged on by them, but I remember being encouraged to get good marks and their approval of it.

**Bill Schultz:** Did you have subjects you liked more than other subjects?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, I liked them all in the grade school. In the grade school you know from time to time there was some good natured rivalry in school when I went to school. And we kind of got pride when you got the highest mark in arithmetic. The more precise things lend themselves to making that kind of assessment. You know, I got them all right, most, you know, two right, so on and so on. I liked English. I can't say that I didn't like anything because as I say, at that time there was nothing that was going to expand your mind, or attract you except school work. You knew nothing else, no television, nothing else, so it was school. So I think it was the school work, not just for me, but for everybody, that was good and familiar, that just naturally developed students, there was no other thing to do, and no other attractions.

**Bill Schultz:** Do you know if you had aspirations--if you thought about being a lawyer, for example?

**Judge Bryant:** I wanted to be a doctor.

**Bill Schultz:** Why was that?

**Judge Bryant:** Well, he worked for himself. He was independent, and he drove an automobile, and everybody looked up to a doctor. So early on I just knew I was going to be a doctor, but I didn't like to see people sick.

**Bill Schultz:** What was your social life like?

**Judge Bryant:** The usual association that kids will have with each other on a playground. I played a lot of marbles, and pitched horse shoes. Are you talking about in grade school?

**Bill Schultz:** Yes.

**Judge Bryant:** In high school we did the same things. We played little games in the gym. I remember the cadet corps in high school. All the guys thought that was something new. I was a high school cadet, and I liked that.

**Bill Schultz:** What's a cadet?

**Judge Bryant:** You know, you wore a uniform and carried a rifle. Like the ROTC. They had that high school cadet corps in the high school years.

**Bill Schultz:** Were there dances?

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah. There were school proms the senior year. But I couldn't dance. I never did learn how to dance, I still don't. I was always awkward in that respect.

**Bill Schultz:** What about, was there dating?

**Judge Bryant:** Not then. Let me put it this way. There was always some little girl in your class who you thought the world of, but you never told her. You didn't say that to her. There was no open dating or anything.

**Bill Schultz:** Not in high school?

**Judge Bryant:** In high school, I remember walking home with a girl, a girl who was named Clara Shippen. I guess that amounted to the closest thing to a date, walking home with her, and I wonder where she is. She was a nice girl, but I didn't really get into the dating business until I got out of college. Astaire is my first date.

**Bill Schultz:** Is that right?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes. I never really dated, so I didn't have much experience in dating.

**Bill Schultz:** Was it typical, going back to the high school years, that girls just didn't date the way they do today?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes.

**Bill Schultz:** Not through high school.

**Judge Bryant:** Late in high school you might find this boy-girl relationship develop when they were seniors. Today you say so and so goes with so and so -- you didn't say that then. You said so and so likes so and so. But there was not -- the extent of the dating was somebody walking home with a girl. And, of course, everybody walked. You didn't ride the bus or a street car, I don't give a damn where you lived, if you went to high school you walked to the high school. Of course, if you lived a great deal of distance from the high school, and the girl you liked lived a great deal of distance, you had ample time to date.

**Bill Schultz:** But that could be a regular thing, where every day you would walk the girl home from high school?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, Yes. And then there came a time when the house party thing developed. I think kids were in college before they went to that business, really.

**Bill Schultz:** To what business?

**Judge Bryant:** House parties, and what not. In high school you didn't go to parties like you do now. I remember I didn't go to the senior prom because I didn't dance. I told you I couldn't dance, but that was the social event. I guess that projects the young boy and girl into the adult life or maturity. That was the launching pad for boy-girl relationships, I believe.

**Bill Schultz:** Where did boys and girls learn to dance?

**Judge Bryant:** Learn to dance? I don't know. They would just show up at that prom. I don't know where they learned how to dance, to tell you the truth.

**Bill Schultz:** Did you ever go to the movies?

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah, I went to the movies maybe once or twice a month. The moving picture was something back then. We lived on U Street and there was a theater on 11th Street, just north of U Street, called the Hiawatha Theater. The Howard Theater was a vaudeville theater stage. That was a landmark in the city. When I was a little boy, you didn't go to that Howard Theater until you got a little older. You didn't see stage shows until you got a

little older. I remember when the Lincoln Theater was opened. The Lincoln Theater was opened when I lived on U Street. I remember when they built the Republic Theater right across from us. In 1922 there was a Knickerbocker Theater up at 18th & Columbia Road--a huge theater. That's when the town was completely segregated.

One Sunday morning snow was on the ground. I woke up and looked out of the window and I saw people walking, walking, walking, and found out an "Extra Paper" was out. When something happened, they called "Extra Paper", EXTRA, EXTRA, EXTRA PAPER, EXTRA. The Knickerbocker Theater roof had caved in under the snow, and killed a lot of people. It was a great tragedy--one of the greatest tragedies that we had.

**Bill Schultz:** Where was this theater?

**Judge Bryant:** 18th & Columbia Road. The Knickerbocker Theater caved in in 1922.

**Bill Schultz:** I've read about that.

**Judge Bryant:** And a lot of people were killed. The roof gave way under the snow.

**Bill Schultz:** Was that a segregated theater?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, everything was segregated.

**Bill Schultz:** Was that a Black or white theater?

**Judge Bryant:** It was a white theater. The town was completely segregated then.

**Bill Schultz:** Who would you go to the movies with?

**Judge Bryant:** Some kid in the neighborhood. Early on my stepfather took me, so I didn't go often.

**Bill Schultz:** What about sports. Did kids play sports in school?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, we had teams. We had a basketball team and a football team and a track team. Yeah, we played, and we had some good athletes. I didn't play on any school

team, but I played a lot of sandlot baseball and a little basketball. But I had to fit it in on my way home because after school I had to go directly home. I could do a little loitering, you know, play a little bit on the playground and then get home. I guess I got emancipated when I started working.

**Bill Schultz:** How old were you then when you started working?

**Judge Bryant:** 16.

**Bill Schultz:** So that was while you were still in high school?

**Judge Bryant:** The end of high school. I graduated that year, and got a job running an elevator at 2029 Connecticut Avenue.

**Bill Schultz:** Tell me, we are still talking about your high school years. What are your memories of segregation -- how your parents talked about it, how you felt about it, and what your teachers said about it, if anything?

**Judge Bryant:** Well, the town was separated on the basis of race. As I grew up in it, it really didn't make a hell of a lot of difference to me early on. I went to school and I went home. I went to the little theater once or twice a month and we saw the movies. The business of race with me was left in me at an early age on the basis of what happened, not in Washington but elsewhere in the country because of the story of my grandfather coming out of the South in front of this mob. As a matter of fact, on the visits when they took me down there when I was a little boy, they showed me the bullet hole that the old man put in the door. So they were kind of still talking about it. And it hadn't been too long. I was only about 4, 5 or 6 years old when I went down there. I think I had a deep hatred for the system. I knew it was wrong.

**Bill Schultz:** So when you went back to Alabama, he did not accompany you, is that right?

**Judge Bryant:** Who, my grandfather? No, no, that's right.

**Bill Schultz:** It was just your mother?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, it was just my mother. So they took pride in showing me those bullet holes. And of course we knew of many lynchings during the year. My stepfather would come home and bring home the paper, and sit up and read. He would read the accounts of the lynchings in Arkansas and Mississippi and Alabama or Georgia. And this was happening once or twice a month. And for a long time we measured the state of race relations in the United States by virtue of the fact that last year we had 72 lynchings and this year we only had 69. We gauged our progress in race relations on that score for a long time.

I was mortally afraid of Southern whites. I was afraid for my safety in the South. The two trips I made to the South as a boy frightened me to death. Those were the most horrifying experiences I ever had. Not after I got down there, but going down there, or one after I got down there with this crazy cousin I had. But the first time I've ever been scared to death, really scared was on a trip to the South.

From here to Alabama is a long train ride. We had a dining car on the train, we had Pullman cars on the train, but no Blacks were permitted in the dining car, and no Blacks slept in the Pullman car. There was a Jim Crow car on the train, you didn't sit in the other coach, you sat in the car immediately behind the baggage car and that was closest to the engine. It was a steam engine propelled by fire, and the smoke would come out of the stack, and it would hit you--you know there was no air conditioning, and the windows would be open and you would catch hell from not only the smoke, but the cinders came through the window.

**Bill Schultz:** It was called a Jim Crow car?

**Judge Bryant:** Jim Crow car. And I had heard about how for no reason at all Black people would be killed by white folks. It was in the days when the mail was transported by rail. And you've heard of the great train robberies, and what not? That was when the bandits would get on the train and rob the mail sack. So the mail handlers, the people who handled the mail in the terminals, were armed. They were armed mail handlers and they would pull the sacks

off and load the sacks on the train. There was a mail car, a baggage car and a section of the baggage car would be segregated for the mail.

The first major stop out of Washington going south was in Danville, Virginia. I remember this like it happened this morning. You wrap your food, and pack it up, and put it in little shoe boxes because on the way down there that's the only way you can eat. And we had just eaten something when the train stopped in Danville, Virginia. I found out later it was Danville, and I guess I'm about, I'm not over six years old and the train stopped and when the train stopped it went "cha cha cha cha" and came to a stop. This big guy jumped on the train -- jumped off the platform onto the train with a big gun on his hip, and I became almost crazy. I remember my mother, my mother had to slap me. I was hysterical. I'll never forget that as long as I live. I was frightened because I thought he had jumped onto the train to kill us.

Then when we got down there, I think this was the second time that I went down there. I didn't want to go down there anymore. When we got down there, I think I was about 7 years old. We went down there twice because my stepfather worked as a porter at Union Station, and he could get passes. So we took advantage of it so we went down there.

I had a cousin who was about my age, the son of my father's sister, I told you about William Boyd, Willie Boyd? My father's sister was a very light-skinned woman, and anyone who wasn't in the family wouldn't look at her twice because she looked like a white woman, and she married a fellow named Lindsey, who was a similarly light-skinned fellow who passed for white. He was a fireman on the railroad, otherwise he couldn't, well you know.

Well, Willie Boyd was a very light-skinned boy with reddish hair, and he was down there in Alabama walking through a little town. He was just making a lot of noise, and I was scared when he was making the noise. I don't remember what I did, but I remember what his response to me was. He scared me. I never will forget it, he said, "Well, I don't care, let the white man hear me." So evidently I had said, "Sh, sh the white folks will hear you." It scared me, just

scared me. I was scared to death. You know the stories I had heard, and the fact that my grandfather had come out of there, and the holes in the door, and my stepfather reading to me the accounts of the lynchings just scared me to death.

So the first time I'm down there -- you asked me about segregation and racism and how it affected me? Well, the first time I'm down there -- Southern people used to get up early in the morning. They get up at the crack of the day when the sun rises; when the cock crows they get up. So there are two things that bothered me in Alabama. My mother and my aunt used to talk about a certain part of the area, there was some place between where my grandmother and my mother lived, and my grandmother on my father's side lived. In that area, in between there was a place they used to pass, and there used to be a lot of snakes. They would see snakes from time to time. I'm scared to death of a snake, and I heard my mother talk about the times every now and then when someone would spot a snake in the house. So I've got that in mind too when I'm going to Alabama.

So listen to this. I had a hell of a time sleeping, because I'm always thinking these snakes are going to be in the bed. And then I'd go to sleep, and then I hear in the morning -- after lying awake in the early part of the night, and then going on to sleep -- in the early morning, I would hear bump, bump, bump, bump. That wakes me up in the morning, and when I first heard it I thought that people were knocking on the door to get into the house, and I'd be real quiet, and the next morning bump, bump, bump, bump, bump. Southern people eat early, dinner is around midday. We eat dinner shortly after midday, and we eat early morning breakfast. For breakfast, they don't have a glass of juice, and slice of toast and some coffee. They eat potatoes and meat and stuff like that. After about three or four mornings, you know what I found out that beating was? They beat steak. They would take a piece of steak and have a board, and take a hammer and beat that steak. Have you ever heard of that?

**Bill Schultz:** Yes.

**Judge Bryant:** Well, when I heard it, I thought that they were going to break into the house. You know, so when you talk about racism and fright, I mean I haven't been afraid, I haven't been mortally afraid since I was hysterical on that train.

**Bill Schultz:** So you remember that?

**Judge Bryant:** I remember that, I remember that like it happened this morning. I will never forget that. I remember that guy. I remember what that guy looked like. He had on khaki trousers and a light khaki shirt, and a great big six gun on his hip. He jumped on the train, and I didn't know what the hell he was doing when he was coming in that door. That was what frightened me, and of course with Willie Boyd that made me mad. Here he was, he wasn't any bigger than I was, and he didn't care, so he had more nerve than I had. So that was funny, and I look upon the beating of the steak as kind of funny too, but Willie Boyd was kind of funny, and that was kind of hilarious. But that train thing kind of scared the hell out of me. It scared me so that I decided that I wouldn't go south again. When Bunche went down with the Myrdal study to do field work in the South, and he wanted me to go, I said no, I'll stay here and open the mail. I wouldn't go down.

**Bill Schultz:** Did you ever go back to the South after those two trips?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, when I was in the Army. That was back in the 1940's. But you know it wasn't too comforting then. I had a friend, a guy I met when I was in college, a close friend of mine and a hell of a guy a nice guy, a decent guy, and he was killed. He was a 1st Lieutenant stationed in some place down in Georgia, and he was riding on the highway coming home to visit his parents who lived over on Irving Street. Somebody rode up beside him and shot and killed him.

**Bill Schultz:** Just because he was --

**Judge Bryant:** He was in a uniform and he was shot, just because he was Black. And I know that he didn't offend anybody. This boy would not have offended anybody in the

world, they just killed him. So I didn't lose my fear until ...

**Bill Schultz:**            Until you knew that you didn't have to go back. But in Washington, D.C. you didn't personally have any incidents?

**Judge Bryant:**        In Washington, D.C. you lived in a separate world. The only contact I had with whites in Washington, D.C. was when I was very young. Across the street from me at 1507 B Street, N.E., there was a fellow with a grocery store, a fellow named Rezneck and he had several children, and I remember Harold Rezneck and Betty Rezneck. Betty and I were good friends, and had good times because we played together. Mr. Rezneck and his sons and I played together. And I remember Bennie and I liked him very much. But that was the only white contact I had.

**Bill Schultz:**            That's your only memory of white people?

**Judge Bryant:**        As a baby, yeah. When I say as a baby, I mean somebody under ten years old. I had no contact at all--no reason to.