

# ORAL HISTORY OF THE HONORABLE WILLIAM B. BRYANT

## Chapter 2

Washington in the 1920s and 1930s

Interview Date: May 6, 1994

**Bill Schultz:** I want to start by talking to you a little more about Washington in the late 1920's and early 1930's, around the time you graduated from high school. In particular, I want to ask you about segregation and about how that affected Washington. Can you tell me what newspapers you read, and what newspapers there were in Washington?

**Judge Bryant:** At that time there were *The Evening Star*, *The Washington Times Herald*, *The Washington Daily News* and *The Washington Post*. We had a lot of newspapers.

**Bill Schultz:** Were there any newspapers that Black people read in particular?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, early on there was a Black newspaper that circulated among the Black community and it was *The Chicago Defender*. That was the first Black newspaper that I have a real recollection of, and then the next Black newspaper of any influence was *The Pittsburgh Courier* and then the local *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper came into existence.

**Bill Schultz:** When was that?

**Judge Bryant:** I am not really certain. *The Afro-American*, I think is about 60 years old, give or take a few years, but *The Afro-American* was the local newspaper and there was also *The Afro-American* in Baltimore. As a matter of fact, I think the first one might have been in Baltimore, and it was put out by a guy named Murphy.

**Bill Schultz:** What papers did your family regularly purchase?

**Judge Bryant:** *The Evening Star* was the leading paper; that was the household paper. My stepfather used to sit down after dinner and open it up and read items out of it out loud.

**Bill Schultz:** And that was delivered every day--the paper?

**Judge Bryant:** No, no, no. He would buy it. He would bring it home. It wasn't delivered. He would bring it home every day.

**Bill Schultz:** And did he buy any of *The Afro-American* newspapers?

**Judge Bryant:** No. I don't remember him bringing *The Afro-American* newspaper home. I remember reading *The Afro-American* newspaper on my own. Sometimes I would buy it, and sometimes I would get a hold of it otherwise, but I don't remember him bringing it home with him.

**Bill Schultz :** What sort of news would be in that newspaper, *the Afro-American* newspaper?

**Judge Bryant:** News of events surrounding Negro life in the city. News of some late act of discrimination that happened either here or elsewhere. It kept up with the lynchings, and what not. Early on, there was a lynching every week or two, I don't remember a month going by when there wasn't a lynching somewhere in the country.

**Bill Schultz:** And would those lynchings be reported in *The Star*?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, I remember my grandfather, I mean I remember my step-father reading in the newspaper in *The Star* itself about the fact that some Negro had been burned to death or hanged. That was in the newspaper as I recall it. It wasn't headlined, but it was someplace in the body of the newspaper. It was reported in just a factual manner, on such and such a date this happened, in the regular paper, and in the Black newspapers it received prime time treatment, so to speak.

**Bill Schultz:** What was *The Negro Year Book*?

**Judge Bryant:** *The Negro Year Book* was a book that was put out by Johnson Publications. I think it was put out on a yearly basis, and it tracked the outstanding activities, I mean the copiousness of prominent Black Americans, and a sort of chronology of what were considered important achievements by certain Black people. Also, it was a statistical wrap-up of the violence in the country. It told about the recorded number of lynchings, and what not. As a matter of fact, we used to measure our progress in race relations by the fact that last year there

were 54 lynchings, and this year 48. We charted that as an indicator of race relations.

**Bill Schultz:** Would the typical Black person in Washington, D.C. know how many lynchings there were last year? I mean, was this something that was talked about and was very much in everybody's head?

**Judge Bryant:** I wouldn't think so. I think that the typical, ordinary Black person in the street would get wind of the lynchings from a daily newspaper of a lynching as it occurred, and express an opinion about it. I think this chronology in *The Year Book* thing was more discussed among students and teachers, and what not and on that level. I don't think that the average person on the street realized that last year there were 43 lynchings. They knew there had been lynchings, but I guess they kind of thought it was 100 of them.

**Bill Schultz:** The last time when we talked, I asked you about how much contact you had with white people, and you said it was fairly minimal, that your neighborhood was segregated and you talked about a store that was owned by a white person.

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah, incidentally shortly after, about two weeks ago, I had some company, and we were just sitting around talking, and Charlie Duncan voiced the same thing I told you. He had no contact with whites. The only white person he knew was a guy who operated the neighborhood grocery store and his children. But their lives were so separate on a racial basis, we really did not have any contact with any whites.

**Bill Schultz:** Now what about the police, what happened if the police came into your neighborhood because there was some problem there?

**Judge Bryant:** Well early on, Bill, there was one Black policeman, that I remember. And he was Mr. Tapscott, and he was a mounted policeman. He was a fine looking man and he rode through the neighborhood out in Benning. When I moved into the city I don't remember any Black policemen at the outset. There were none. And policemen got around on foot, they were patrolmen, you know. Each neighborhood had a policeman that patrolled the

beat. And we would see the policeman and were on speaking terms with him. You know, "Hi" and that's all. Nobody had any official business with the policeman. There wasn't any crime, so to speak.

**Bill Schultz:** What about the fire department?

**Judge Bryant:** The fire department? There was a separate fire department, a Negro fire house located in Southwest Washington. Southwest Washington was a literal ghetto, and poor Blacks were centered in Southwest, there was a heavy concentration of Blacks in Southwest Washington. They had a separate fire house in Southwest Washington manned by Blacks.

**Bill Schultz:** I haven't asked you about the racial composition of the neighborhoods in Washington. You said most of the Blacks lived in Southwest?

**Judge Bryant:** Most of the Blacks lived in Southwest and far Northeast.

**Bill Schultz:** Which is the Benning Road area?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, the Benning Road area and from 15th Street further out northeast. The northwest section was very predominantly white, the Mount Pleasant, Petworth and .... Now, the LeDroit Park section and the area around Howard University was always traditionally Black. Very substantial Black people lived in that area.

**Bill Schultz:** Now what about the area out 16th Street?

**Judge Bryant:** White.

**Bill Schultz:** That was all white? Now what about Capitol Hill?

**Judge Bryant:** White.

**Bill Schultz:** What about Anacostia?

**Judge Bryant:** Anacostia was predominantly white, except for the hill area, but predominantly white. Anacostia was predominantly white.

**Bill Schultz:** Now, if there was a fire in a Black neighborhood would the white

fire truck come to help out or vice a versa? If there was a big fire in a white neighborhood would the Blacks help or were the fire departments so separate that the Black fire house just serviced the Black neighborhood and the white firehouse the white neighborhood?

**Judge Bryant:** That's a good question. I lived at 1320 U Street in 1922. I lived in the northwest section. The separation of the firehouses still existed up to that time. During the Christmas holidays we had a terrific snow, and the Knickerbocker Theater which was at 18th & Columbia Road, the roof fell in and many, many people were injured and killed. I didn't know what happened, I woke up on Sunday morning and saw people trudging up the street in the snow. And the fire department from Southwest Washington came up to participate in the rescue effort there. So I guess under terrific emergencies I guess the color lines were blurred, and I remember that very well. I remember somebody making some remarks about the fact, "When the nitty gets gritty color doesn't mean much." I heard remarks like that. It was a tragic time, and many people were hurt bad, and Black firemen participated in that operation and somebody mentioned that that was the first time they had been out of Southwest in a long time. But I remember that, but what the routine thing was I don't know.

**Bill Schultz:** Judge Bryant, I was just recalling the conversation that we had a long time ago about this fire and you were telling me that there was a lot of discussion in the community about which fire trucks got there first, could you just tell me about that again?

**Judge Bryant:** As I remember, the tragedy we had at the Knickerbocker Theater at 18th & Columbia Road, the roof collapsed. It was during December or January of the year and heavy snow; the roof collapsed and many people were hurt and the fire department came and I don't know whether a fire resulted from it or it was just a general rescue effort by the fire department. And even though the streets were snowbound and what not, the outfit from the segregated fire department way down in Southwest got there kind of expeditiously and there was some pride in that. The Blacks took pride in the fact that these guys participated. We had such a

paucity of prideful attainments. When I remember that, we were very proud of that.

**Bill Schultz:** Now what about other facilities, were there Black swimming pools and white swimming pools?

**Judge Bryant:** The Black swimming pool was at Mott School out in LeDroit Park and then there was also a Black swimming pool at Banneker School.

**Bill Schultz:** And these were open to the public? Even though they were located at the schools, were they just for the school children or were they for the public?

**Judge Bryant:** As I recall it they were primarily for the kids in the schools.

**Bill Schultz:** Now what about golf? Did you play golf that far back?

**Judge Bryant:** No, no. I never played golf until, until there was a golf course built for Blacks out on Benning Road at about I guess 24th Street -- the Langston Golf Course.

**Bill Schultz:** So Langston was Black and then Rock Creek, and Fort Dupont....

**Judge Bryant:** Rock Creek, Fort Dupont and Haines Point were white, and they had been there a long time before Langston was laid out.

**Bill Schultz:** And was the city government completely white?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes. There were three commissioners. We had a commission form of government -- that was the earliest form of government that I remember. There was a police and fire commissioner and a separate school system. And as I remember it, the Board of Education was integrated -- I think I'm right here -- the Board of Education was integrated and there was a Black member on the Board of Education to represent the segregated Black schools. But the school system was entirely separated. From the cradle to the grave, so to speak, from kindergarten straight through college, the schools were segregated. At the highest levels of public educational institutions in the city, the Miner Teachers College was for Black people and the Wilson Teachers College was for white people. The school system was completely separated on the basis of race, from the teacher's college straight down to kindergarten. Separate Black

schools, separate Black administrators and separate Black teachers

**Bill Schultz:** When you graduated from high school, what were the possibilities you considered? Was it always assumed that you would go to college, or was that a decision that you had to make, and what other options were there?

**Judge Bryant:** I don't think it was assumed that I would go to college. I think it was assumed maybe that I would go as far as the public school system would let me go, and I think that was the assumption. When I went to college I guess I made that decision on my own, and I had to finance that myself. My folks didn't have money to pay any tuition for me, so I had to do that by working summer jobs and after school jobs. I didn't want to be a teacher. I don't know why. I loved my teachers; I liked them; but I didn't fancy myself as being a teacher.

**Bill Schultz:** What were the other options open to you?

**Judge Bryant:** The Government Printing Office and the Postal Service hired Blacks in some capacity. There were some Black postal clerks and some other job categories in the Printing Office, I am not certain what they were. But the Printing Office had a contingent of Black people working there. And Black males could aspire to get a job in the Post Office or the Printing Office, which were a little better than the so-called messenger jobs. Throughout the government, the messenger jobs were allocated to Blacks. The State Department, well, the State, War & Navy Department, all in one building up on New York Avenue, the Treasury Department, and all of the other government agencies hired Blacks as messengers. My grandfather was a messenger, my two uncles were messengers. Teachers were primarily female, and I think that one of the reasons I didn't want to be a teacher was because a teacher's job was a woman's job. I guess I was, you would call me a sexist now. But my aunts were teachers, both of my aunts were teachers and until I got to high school all of my teachers were women. I first saw male teachers in high school. I didn't want to be a teacher so I didn't go to the Normal School.

**Bill Schultz:** Did you consider going to school outside Washington?

**Judge Bryant:** I entertained the idea that I would like to get away from home, but I didn't have any money. I thought about Lincoln up in Pennsylvania, the University of Pennsylvania, and Morgan College over in Baltimore, they were outstanding. And there was a college up in West Virginia, I didn't think about any southern colleges like Tuskegee or Morehouse. I didn't think about that at all. I had no desire to go down South, let alone below the Mason-Dixon line. Going South was a "no, no" to me.

**Bill Schultz:** Were there other options in Washington other than Howard?

**Judge Bryant:** No. Howard or the Miner Normal Teachers College.

**Bill Schultz:** Did you go to Howard when you went to college?

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah.

**Bill Schultz:** And when did you start working to save money for college?

**Judge Bryant:** Well, I got out of high school in June 1928, and as I recall it the next day, or the next two or three days I went to work as an elevator operator at 2029 Connecticut Avenue, N.W. That was my first job. And from then on, in addition to my elevator job in the summers I worked as a laborer. I dare not let the elevator job go because that was my main stay, you know tuition wise.

**Bill Schultz:** What hours did you work?

**Judge Bryant:** Four to 11, 4:00 in the evening until 11:00. And then in the summer time I got a job working from 5:00 to 12:00. I would change because in the summer in the laboring jobs you worked from 7:30 to 4.

**Bill Schultz:** In the summer you worked two jobs?

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah, in the summer. I couldn't let that elevator job go because that was my main stay so I worked this other job, the laboring job. The elevator job paid \$45 per month and the laboring job paid \$3.20 per day, \$.40 per hour. That was big money. So for those

three months, or two and one half months, I made that money to pay my tuition and kept myself going on that \$1.25 per night that I made on the elevator job.

**Bill Schultz:** What kind of building was this elevator in?

**Judge Bryant:** It was supposed to be one of the most desirable residences in the city. It's still up there at 2029 Connecticut Avenue. It was a seven-story building and it had three apartments on each floor. The front apartments, those that faced Connecticut Avenue, had fifteen rooms in them. And those that faced Wyoming Avenue had nine rooms in them. And the back apartments had seven rooms in them. And the apartments were populated by millionaires and near millionaires. Dick Lyon, do you know Dick Lyon? Dick Lyon 's mother and father lived in that building, and they were the only Jews to live in that building, and they lived on the second floor. Simon K. Lyon was a lawyer, and Dick and Flora were his children. They lived on the second floor.

**Bill Schultz:** And they lived there when you ran the elevator?

**Judge Bryant:** He was a student at Central High School when I started working there. I remember him very well. He was a good guy.

**Bill Schultz:** Where is 2029? I'm trying to picture it.

**Judge Bryant:** On the corner of Connecticut and Wyoming Avenue, right across from the building that Pat Wald lives in, 2101. They built 2101 after I started working up there. It is a big building right on top of the hill on Wyoming Ave & Connecticut Avenue, with a driveway in the front. Justice Sutherland lived on the 7th floor, and Justice Sanford lived on the 4th floor. After dinner they would come out and light their cigars and take a walk.

**Bill Schultz:** Did you have any interaction with them or talk to them?

**Judge Bryant:** No. You didn't talk to anybody. Old General Pershing. Also Senator Warren from Wyoming lived in that building. And General Pershing was related to him in some sort of way; I think he married Senator Warren's daughter or something. General

Pershing was Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces during World War I. They go back a long way. Bill, can you imagine they had a woman named Miss Pusey; she was an heiress to the Dodge automobile millions. She lived in a front apartment, had a bunch of servants around her. I think she had about at least five. I can think of five servants, including a male secretary. And she had a sister who lived right across the street in the Dresden Apartment, right on that curve as you go up Connecticut Avenue. That job was a lifesaver.

**Bill Schultz:** Why do you say that?

**Judge Bryant:** Well, I had a job and as long as I reported there seven days a week; it was a seven days a week job. There were no off days, but it was my sure income.

**Bill Schultz:** When did you study?

**Judge Bryant:** When I went home, and before I went to work. I had classes up until about the middle of the day, I would go to the library before I went to work and then I studied some when I got home if I had to. You couldn't do any studying on that job. They didn't allow that.

**Bill Schultz:** Was there a lot of time when you would just sit and do nothing?

**Judge Bryant:** Let me put it to you this way, there was a lot of time that I didn't do anything, and that was funny. There were two elevators in the building. A freight elevator and a passenger elevator. I ran the freight elevator for the most part, and when the other guy had to go to the rest room or something I ran the passenger elevator. There was a lot of dead time after the servants went home, unless there was a party or something going on upstairs. After about 8:30 there was hardly anything for me to do running a freight elevator. There was more activity on the passenger elevator. There was some dead time.

**Bill Schultz:** What was Howard University like?

**Judge Bryant:** A good school. Howard University was a nice place, considerably smaller than it is now, of course.

**Bill Schultz:** Can you guess how large the student body was?

**Judge Bryant:** Look, I really don't know. I guess roughly around six or seven, or four or five hundred students.

**Bill Schultz:** In the whole University?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes.

**Bill Schultz:** So you would know most of the people in your class?

**Judge Bryant:** Oh, everybody. Everybody in my freshman class I knew. They lived in the dormitory, either in the boy's dormitory or the girl's dormitory and the rest of them lived in the city, and I had grown up with the rest of them. There weren't any, I was on speaking terms with everybody, you know, we went to school together. The professional medical school was down the hill so to speak, and I didn't know the medical students who were there when I got there. The law school was downtown at 420 5th Street, and I didn't know those people, but the students on the campus I knew.

**Bill Schultz:** What was the student body like? Where did they come from? What was their economic status?

**Judge Bryant:** They came from everywhere in the country, the Virgin Islands and even Africa. We had a couple of people, Aziekuie, a very prominent African politician from Nigeria. He wasn't a classmate of mine. I think Aziekuie was a year in front of me. He went back to Africa and was very prominent in the development of his country. And there was a guy named Nyabonga from Ethiopia, who was a prince, a member of the royal family of Ethiopia. And a good contingent of West Indians from all the islands. They were bright, sharp students, most of them went to medical school. But the students came from Connecticut, Detroit, New York and a large contingent from New Jersey. North Carolina fed a lot of students into Howard University, male and female. There were some students from Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma. I remember kids, I'm thinking of kids right now, I knew from Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, and

California. Arizona, you name it, Chicago, I mean Illinois, they were from all over the country. Howard University was a cosmopolitan place, I mean geographically the country was well represented. There was somebody at Howard University from nearly every substantial grouping of Blacks in the country.

**Bill Schultz:** There were no white students?

**Judge Bryant:** No white students. When I went, there were no white students.

**Bill Schultz:** Well, what about teachers?

**Judge Bryant:** A few white professors. A guy named Max Meenes was an outstanding psychologist. He was a top man in his field, Max Meenes. There weren't many at the college level. There was a white teacher in the law school named Bouchet from Wisconsin, and he taught me contracts.

**Bill Schultz:** Was there much discussion among the students or the teachers about segregation, about comparing experiences in different parts of the country?

**Judge Bryant:** There was a whole lot of that. I mean kids from Connecticut, New York, places that weren't segregated completely, you know, theaters and what not and public facilities, they would always talk about the complete separateness down here, and points further south, and they resented it. And of course those here resented it. We all resented it because from the day I was born I remember resenting the pattern of race relations in the United States. I always resented it and remember it being talked about among people.

**Bill Schultz:** When you talked did you foresee a time when segregation would be ended and race relations would be better?

**Judge Bryant:** You know, yes, I guess I did. I guess I did because I can remember there has always been some sort of protest against it, even in the family there were discussions that were anti-status quo. We didn't like it. They used to say white's do this or white's do that, some of the better department stores didn't serve Black people -- Garfinckel's,

Woodward & Lothrop, you wouldn't walk into Woodward & Lothrop.

**Bill Schultz:** Do you mean some of them actually did serve Black people?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, in Hecht's, Kann's & Lansburgh's you could go buy something.

**Bill Schultz:** You could go there?

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah, but women couldn't try on clothes. You could buy them and go somewhere and put them on -- no they couldn't do that.

**Bill Schultz:** White women could try on clothes?

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah, and you couldn't eat in anyplace. You couldn't go to one of these corner White Tower places where they served you a cup of coffee and a hamburger. You couldn't even carry it out. You just couldn't go in there. Things were pretty separate. Now you could ride the street cars. You didn't have to go to the back of the street car; you didn't have to do that. You could sit anywhere on the street car.

**Bill Schultz:** Who did you and your friends look up to in terms of national figures -- in terms of politicians or writers or athletes, either white or Black?

**Judge Bryant:** Oh, when I was a little kid in grade school, and early high school, we had a lot of male teachers in high school who were men who had their Masters and Ph.D. degrees and we looked up to them. The principal of the school -- I don't know whether he had any advance degrees or not -- but he was the principal of the school, and we knew about him before we went to high school. You know what I mean; we knew about him by reputation. National figures, I'm thinking about early on and then later on. I remember Booker T. Washington wasn't thought of too well. There was a kind of clash of ideas between Booker T. Washington who was a kind of "Uncle Tom" like leader, versus somebody like Du Bois who was more progressive and aggressive: he attacked segregation. That was something I was aware of early on. Du Bois's theories versus those of Washington. He was an intellectual. He was a

Harvard-trained man. I don't know where Du Bois was from, but Du Bois went to Harvard and was very distinguished and a very capable fellow who felt that the polish he received by virtue of his education -- he thought that he would be accepted, I suppose, but he found out when he graduated from Harvard that he was just another colored man, and after they counted the last white man, they might count him. He was deeply disappointed and he along with some liberal whites gathered in Niagara, New York and formed what was known as the Niagara Movement in 1909. The Niagara Movement was the predecessor of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the NAACP was the aggressive antagonist to segregation.

**Bill Schultz:** Was there a chapter of the NAACP in Washington; I guess there must have been?

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah.

**Bill Schultz:** When, would this be?

**Judge Bryant:** I know there was one here when I went to high school because we had a rabid pro-NAACP man named Thomas; we used to call him "Cat" Thomas, but his last name won't come to me. His first name was Norville, and he was a math teacher. He had a high kind of nasal voice, and kids named him Cat Thomas. He was the most vocal advocate of the NAACP principles in the District of Columbia; he was part of the local group and he taught about race pride. Any student who was in his class had to be subjected to his inoculations or emasculations, talking incessantly about the evils of segregation and discrimination.

I guess they talked about segregation and discrimination in the same breath because the two went hand in hand, and I think that the fight was against segregation and discrimination. Somebody asked maybe in the past some of the objectives of some of those who fought against segregation whether they were in fact fighting for integration. As I have come to look back over it and think about it, I think that the discriminatory patterns of segregation were designed to keep the races apart, and this involved necessarily some discrimination. I don't think integration for

the sake of integration -- when you talk in terms of social integration -- was really the objective of folks in those days. They were thinking of the disadvantages that were associated with racial segregation and discrimination.

For instance, if a white person with business in Atlanta might want to go to Atlanta, Birmingham, or to Raleigh, N.C., or might want to stop over there on the way to someplace else, they traveled by train then. And if a Black person wanted to go someplace and stop in the city below the Mason Dixon line, there usually were no accommodations for them, no hotel rooms. So we would have to find out from somebody about Miss So & So, or Mr. So & So, a house that you could stay in on your way to So & So. You had to make arrangements ahead of time to stay in private houses. That's the kind of inconvenience people fought against. You know what I mean; why can't I call up the local hotel down there and reserve a room?

But you know some picture would come, some heavily publicized movie or motion picture would come, and it would be shown in various theaters and it couldn't be shown at the Black theater, and so people couldn't go. The Belasco Theaters, the stage theaters were like classic plantations, Black people couldn't go. So with that exclusion from the cultural advantages and ordinary day-to-day conveniences, the people just rebelled against it. It wasn't integrating to rub elbows with white people. I don't think that that was it at all. I mean a man wasn't fighting for integration so that his children could marry some white person's daughter.

**Bill Schultz:** Not even to go to a white school?

**Judge Bryant:** That was it. I know for instance that when I was in high school or when I was in school, I don't remember the emphasis being on integrated schools, to tell you the truth. I don't remember the emphasis being on that in the District of Columbia, because I suppose if there was anything to being separate but equal, then I guess there was, because we had good schools. Now I think that we were the atypical city as a matter of fact. I think that in most communities the segregated schools suffered by virtue of facilities and faculties and that

kind of thing. But in the District of Columbia, we didn't have that, we really didn't have that.

The opportunities for employment were limited for males, so in high school we had several well-trained male teachers from Amherst and Harvard and some of the Ivy-League schools that took on a hand full of their quota of token Blacks. We had them in our high school, and of course Howard University was a mecca for top-flight people. We had some good teachers at Howard University.

**Bill Schultz:** What experiences at Howard stand out in your mind?

**Judge Bryant:** Well, Ralph Bunche, I think was my greatest experience. He was an unusual man. So thoroughly equipped and so far advanced in his thinking -- and political science was my major subject, I took a lot of courses under him.

**Bill Schultz:** These are courses in political science?

**Judge Bryant:** Political science and government.

**Bill Schultz:** When did you meet him?

**Judge Bryant:** I met him on the campus. He came to Howard University in 1928 when I came there. He came there as a freshman teacher, and I went there as a freshman student. I took Political Science 1 from him, and every subject he gave, and then he recruited a couple of guys who were very, very good. One was a fellow named Emmett Dorsey, a hell of a political science teacher and a hell of a lecturer. He was a fellow who was a graduate of Oberlin College and a good man.

**Bill Schultz:** How old was Ralph Bunche?

**Judge Bryant:** I guess he was in twenty's.

**Bill Schultz:** And where had he gone to school?

**Judge Bryant:** UCLA and Harvard.

**Bill Schultz:** And he came from Harvard to Howard?

**Judge Bryant:** He went from Harvard to Howard after his Master's, and he was

working on his Ph.D., and I think he got his Ph.D. before the end of the first year. He got his Ph.D. shortly after we started out.

**Bill Schultz:** Was he immediately seen as a star at Howard?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, he was immediately seen as a star at Howard. As a matter of fact old Mordecai Johnson, who was the president at Howard, made him his assistant, the special assistant to the president, and Bunche took the job, but his first love and his first obligation was to the classroom.

I remember because we had these seminars and he had an office in the library, the second floor of the library building. One end was the president's office and the other end was Ralph's office. He had his classes in his office. The seminars were small, and he would have his class right there in his office. I remember one morning something happened, and Ms. Robinson who was secretary to the president called, and said the president wanted to see Dr. Bunche. Ralph had made the commitment to take this job, but it wasn't going to interfere with his teaching. He would do the job, but it wasn't going to interfere with his teaching job. So he was teaching, lecturing, and it was towards the end of the class, and I guess it was in the last part of the class, and he said, I'll come, I'll be right there. But the word came back; the president wants to see you now. And the word went back that the president will see me at the end of my class. And I remember thinking he has really got some .... Mordecai Johnson wasn't to be denied, but Ralph Bunche .... Then I said to myself, here's a guy who is teaching and that's his business and he likes it, and he likes his students. It was a thrill for me to sit in Ralph Bunche's presence with three to four other people. We had classes of that size.

**Bill Schultz:** Is that right, that was typical at Howard?

**Judge Bryant:** Oh yeah, in advanced courses it was typical at Howard to have small groups of people. And I sat in classes with Ralph with five students. You know, that's something. He was such a guy, he was such a well-informed, earnest guy. He was just terrific.

And Dorsey was a good lecturer. And that was a strong department, and I guess other than the English department, and of course, the sciences.

The sciences have always been very strong, because the guys who got their advanced degrees in science at the University had nowhere to go. I think the Glidden Paint people took on a person named Percy Julian who was a hell of a chemist, an internationally-known chemist. I think they took him on the year after I graduated, but otherwise the University was a sort of stagnant pool for all of this talent that couldn't go anywhere else which made it wonderful for students. Every now and then some of us will get together and talk about how some of us had the best of all worlds. So I think there was a time in Washington when at least in the educational field, Blacks did not suffer.

**Bill Schultz:** How long did Ralph Bunche stay at Howard?

**Judge Bryant:** How long did he stay? He came in 1928 and he was there when the Myrdal study was being done, and he had a leave of absence when he went to New York and wrapped up the Myrdal study. Then the war came and he went to the Office of Strategic Services under Donovan. From there he went to the State Department and then the United Nations, he never got back to Howard. His stay at Howard was from 1928 through 1940. So I think that Ralph Bunche was the greatest thing. That's the memory I have of Howard University. When I think of Howard University, I think of him.

**Bill Schultz:** Is that why you ended up majoring in government, because of him?

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah, I think, well in high school I had a great history teacher named Perkins, Frank Perkins was a good history teacher, and he taught history and civics. Now civics was kind of government, you know what I mean? And between him and a fellow named Saunders who taught me some government, he got me involved with the government, and the law. That's why I went to political science and government. And then when I got in there

Bunche taught those aspects of government, international law and so forth and so on, and I got kind of sucked into that, and I liked it. And liked the English, we had some terrific English teachers in grade school and high school. A Ph.D. in high school taught me English, and when I went to Howard University, the second year I was up there she left the high school and came to Howard University. And there was another Ph.D. in English, we had a strong English department. So my minor was English. I liked them.

**Bill Schultz:** When you were approaching the end of college, what were your options? How did you choose law school?

**Judge Bryant:** Bill, that's a tough one. When I graduated ... I went to college between 1928 and 1932, and as you know the Great Depression hit us in 1929. Those were long, lean years when I went to college. And a whole lot of Americans, Black and white, had bleak possibilities for the future. So there was really not, I just can't think of it, I hadn't thought about the law school until kind of late. I think Bunche thought that I would go to graduate school, political science and government because a lot of the good students in history and psychology and economics and government went to graduate school. I didn't have any idea that I wanted to teach, I didn't want to do that, but I hadn't really made up my mind, thought about being a lawyer, until my last year. I think the thing that prompted me was the fact that I had worked with people. I had worked menial jobs and what not, and I had a strong desire to be independent. I was tired of being under somebody's thumb and I associated the professions, medicine and law, with being independent, you know like a shoemaker. And as I say, I'd been attracted to the legal aspects of things--civics, history and government in high school. And in college I got involved deeply in constitutional law as a very attractive subject, so I was leaning in that direction. I thought about going to law school, but I didn't have any money, and in 1932 that was the height of the Depression. Herbert Hoover spoke at our graduation.

**Bill Schultz:** Is that right?

**Judge Bryant:** He came there and spoke. I think they timed him at three minutes, and then it was all over with. He had nothing to say. And I got a job, I graduated on June 4th or the June 5th, and I went to work Monday morning as a laborer.

**Bill Schultz:** This is from college now? Did you decide to go to law school right after that?

**Judge Bryant:** I wanted to go, and I called up and asked, and I didn't have any money. And I hadn't saved any money because I wasn't in the position to save any really. I had had a hard time going through college. But you asked me what I remember about Howard University. I think of the positive things, I think of the negative things.

**Bill Schultz:** Are you talking about college now, or law school?

**Judge Bryant:** College and law school. And let me emphasize this, it wasn't on account of me, I mean I wasn't singled out, nobody had their guns out for Bryant. It was just the system. But I called up, and asked about any possibility of scholarship to the law school. I had been a good student in high school and went to summer school two summers and finished the high school course in three years, and it was ordinarily a four-year course. I had good grades, and if scholarships were available at colleges I would have easily applied for scholarships, but they were not available at that time. And then, of course, I got very good grades in my college studies, and I was eligible for some scholarship at the law school.

I called up there to ask about that, and I was told to read the catalogue, and the catalogue would indicate that they don't have any scholarships on the basis of need. Scholarships were awarded on the basis of merit. No freshman entered the law school with aid. After he got there, if he proved himself, the highest ranking student in the freshman class for the sophomore year he got room, board and tuition scholarship. The second highest ranking student got a tuition scholarship. That was true for the middle year student and the senior student, but for the freshman there was nothing there. I said thank you, and I just went on to work, and got a job as

a laborer.

**Bill Schultz:** Which is what you had done every summer?

**Judge Bryant:** Yes, I got a job as a laborer that summer, and towards the end of the summer and the beginning of the following school year they decided to open what was to be the nerve center in the University, the switchboard of the University, 24 hours a day. Well I had some experience working in these apartment buildings operating the elevators and switchboards. See in the elevator job, after 8 o'clock at night the switchboard operator went home and the guy that ran the elevator took charge of the switch board too. So I had some experience with the switchboard, and I got the job as the switchboard operator from 12 at night until 8 in the morning at Howard.

That was manna from heaven. After one o'clock at night you could hear a rat walk on cotton. Nothing happened except the watchman would come in about every 40 minutes and stay around until he went back out on his watch. No phone or anything. I could study. So I made an application to law school. I was going to law school. Hell, I had the best job in the world. I could study from 12 at night until 8 in the morning uninterrupted, and go to law school from 9 in the morning until the middle of the day, so what would be better? So I went to law school.

Charlie Houston, the acting dean, was Harvard trained, Amherst and Harvard, and University of Madrid. He was given the mission to make Howard University Law School the Harvard of Black education. He decided he was going to do it, and one thing you couldn't do, you could not work any job and go to "my law school. The law is a jealous mistress."

By the end of the year I knew I had the room, board and tuition, but I didn't want the room and board, because I lived at home, all I wanted was the tuition, and that was free, so I got married. Astaire and I went to Baltimore on August 25, 1934, and I got married.

**Bill Schultz:** You figured you could quit your job?

**Judge Bryant:** No, I wasn't going to quit my job, but I figured that I didn't have to

pay any tuition. I figured I could get married because I had won my scholarship. On the 9th of September I was called down to the law school and I was told that the scholarship was awarded on the basis of scholarship, merit and need, and I had a job with the University so I wasn't in need.

**Bill Schultz:** And this was all because of the fact that you were working?

**Judge Bryant:** Yeah, and the message was gotten to me that you can't work and go to school. And it was kind of brought to me by different routes.

**Bill Schultz:** Now, when you decided to go to law school, what was your family's reaction?

**Judge Bryant:** My grandfather thought I was crazy. I had just finished college and they thought I should apply for a teaching job or something, and that I should have been working somewhere. The places that you could get a job--you could go down to the Post Office, and close your eyes and grab 15 guys who were Black, and you would get maybe about 24 degrees. Pharmacists and bachelor's degrees and various other things.

My aunt was going with a fellow who worked in the Post Office, and he said he would get me a job down there. He knew the guy that headed up the Postal Alliance, Black people had formed a union, the National Postal Alliance of Postal Workers, and he knew the guy who headed it up, and he could get you a job in the Post Office. So he made an appointment for me to see him at 9th & U Street in the office, and the guy didn't show up. I waited around there for about an hour or an hour and a half, and he didn't show up, so I left. I came back and they wanted to know what happened, and I said the guy didn't show up. So they called down, and he said that he had gotten busy but he said come on down such and such a day. I said, "OK," and I went down. I started down there, and I got within two or three blocks of the place, and I said "I'm not going down there. I don't want this job, the hell with it. I don't want this job." I turned around and walked on home. I was thinking about going to law school, and my grandfather told

me, "You crazy?" He said "Black lawyers, negro lawyers don't amount to a damn." I couldn't say, no, look at so and so. I couldn't do that.

**Bill Schultz:**           There were no lawyers ....

**Judge Bryant:**        There were no lawyers prominent enough at that time for me to say, "Look at him," because if there were, he wouldn't have had that attitude regarding the legal profession and lawyers. Because you see, the atmosphere, the white courts -- the courts were run by whites, most of the other lawyers were white, and that was a pretty hard thing to conceive of. So I was designated as a prime fool by my grandfather. He thought that I must be crazy.