

This interview with Luther Cobb took place at his residence on August 21, 1978. The interviewer was John Brennan*

JB: Mr. Cobb could you tell me where you were born, and when?

LC: Born in Covington, Tennessee, August 23rd, nineteen-o-eight.

JB: And you spent how many years down there before you came up to Indiana?

LC: About thirty four years.

JB: What did you do in Tennessee?

LC: I was farming.

JB: Were you sharecropping?

LC: I was renting!

JB: Why did you decide to move north?

LC: I just got tired of the situation down there.

JB: The racial situation? financial situation?

LC: Well, yeah...that was some of it. There was other problems. I tried to, you know, make it better for myself.

JB: You felt that for a black man, opportunities up north would be better?

LC: Well, I know--the job situation, you could make more then they would pay down there. Actually, they didn't have no factories around there.

JB: Were you married down there?

LC: Yes. I was married. Nineteen thirty-five.

JB: What year did you move north?

LC: Well, when I first left, it was nineteen thirty-seven. And at that time, as you know, the depression was still on. I couldn't find a job and I went back, and stayed until nineteen forty-two.

JB: You went up to Gary in nineteen forty-two?

LC: Yeah. I got a job in the steel mill.

JB: Where were you when you heard about work in the KOP?

LC: It wasn't no problem to hear about...cause I wasn't too far from it. I was living in Gary. Naturally, it was all over. Everybody knew about it.

JB: Were wages supposed to be better down there?

LC: You could make more out there than you could make down there.

JB: When you first went to work in the ordinance plant, do you remember that? The day it was?

LC: April 3rd, I think it was. It was around the first of April.

JB: Did you take a bus down there?

LC: Oh no. I drove down there.

JB: You had your own car?

LC: It wasn't mine. It was my brothers.

JB: Were there guards at the entrance to the plant?

LC: The guards were at the gate.

JB: Was there an employment office?

LC: Yes.

JB: How did that work?

LC: Well, you got in, filled out an application. And then you turn it back in. Then they call you in to interview ya.

JB: The same day?

LC: Yes.

JB: Were you hired the same day you applied?

LC: The same day.

JB: Did they tell you what your wages would be?

LC: Yeah ...yeah.

JB: What were the wages?

LC: The wages were ninety cent an hour. That's what they was payin to start off. I mean that was the old job. The wages was ninety cent.

JB: Did you commute from Gary to Kingsford Heights?

LC: Mmhhh.

JB: How long did you do that?

LC: About a year. I started there around April of forty two. And the next May, forty three, I moved out here.

JB: When were you able to bring your family up from the south?

LC: I brought them up in forty three. That was in...Oh, it was about the first of May. I got a place out here--and that's where I've been ever since.

JB: Did you buy or rent a place out here?

LC: I rented...rented. They was renting. They wasn't for sale.

JB: Were they government houses?

LC: Yeah. They were government houses.

JB: This town ...did it spring up because of the Munitions plant?

LC: Yes. This town...this place here was built solely for the Kingsbury Ordinance Plant employees. That's what it was built for. And if you weren't working at the plant, you couldn't rent a house here, because that's what they built. You had to be working at the plant to get a house.

JB: Before the Ordinance Plant was here then, this was farmland?

LC: Farmland. Yes.

JB: When you first hired on, approximately how many other blacks were at the plant?

LC: Well, I don't know, it must have been six or seven hundred cause ...I would say, there were two hundred on each shift.

JB: Were they living in this area? or were they commuting?

LC: From Gary, and Michigan City. And there was a few in LaPorte, And people'd move in from all over. A lot of em from down south. Some from Chicago lived out here. Because they was working at the plant.

JB: Did the blacks from down south--did they feel they had a better situation up here?

LC: Well, I guess they were just like me, and all the others. You could make a little more money, than we could anywhere else--because, in the steel mills when I was working in there, all you made was 84 cents an hour.

JB: What steel plant was that?

LC: At that time it was Carnegie Steel. But since then they merged, and it's U.S. Steel now.

JB: What were your first impressions of the KOP? Was it a huge plant?

LC: Yes. It was a huge place. It was built around thirteen thousand acres. And it was a huge place.

JB: What did it look like? What was it made of?

LC: Well, it was steel, the structure. But, you know, the roof and side: it was some kind of fabricated stuff. They built it out there because it was a better place--and with the type of roof they had on it; it was camo- flauged. If you was up in a plane, you couldn't see it. That's why they built it out there, so it'd be hard to locate.

JB: There's a forest out there. Was that around when they built the plant?

LC: No. It was farming land. There's still some forests around there. They got a lot of timberland there yet.

JB: What were the floodlight towers?

LC: They didn't have no tower out there with no floodlights. They didn't have no tower with floodlights.

JB: Was the place lit up at night?

LC: Yeah. It was lit up.

JB: Did they ever have any drills? Air raid drills?

LC: No. They had fire drills.. but no air raid drills.

JB: When you started working there, was the treatment by the supervisors better than it was in the south?

LC: All the supervisors that I ever worked under, they never tried to mis-use me, none of the rest of the employees there. As far as I know.

JB: Nothing overt?

LC: No.

JB: With the other workers, the white workers, was there any friction?

LC: Well you didn't work with the white workers. The white that was on that line was the ordinance man---of course they had colored ordinance men.

JB: Ordinance men?

LC: Yes. You know, ordinance dept. That was for the government. And your inspectors, your chief inspector, he was white. Black inspectors too. But that's all was working there. Production workers. They didn't have no white production workers. The whole line was black.

JB: What happened on the production line?

LC: That's where they made the pellets, and that's where they put the primers into the shell case. And then, they would send them down to the, to building 5. That's where they pressed the pellets in. I mean, the primers. And eventually the seven line went down, and they moved over to 3-2. And that's where they made the 20 mm. They put the nose of the shellthey had presses, press it in thereAfter the shell was filled with powder, black powder. But every onethey had a white line, and a black line.black powder. But every onethey had a white line, and a black line. They didn't work together, not during WWII.

JB: Were the jobs pretty much the same, but just taking place in different parts of the factory?

LC: When they filled em with the powder,then they had to be inspected. Then they would go down and put the detonator, the nose of the shell on. And then they would go down to building 5. They would start down there and come up. They'd put the primers in down there; then they'd come up to building 3. And that's where you put the powder and the projector. And they would put em in cases, you know, boxes. They'd dip em this wax, or parafin, or somethin--because when they shipped them down over there in theparafin, or somethin--because when they shipped them down over there in the Pacific they had to waterproof em so they wouldn't get, you know, wet; the water wouldn't get to em. So, I worked there over a year, on the 7 line. Then they transferred everybody over to the 3-2 line.

JB: Once the shells were loaded, and packed, did they leave the factory by trains, or trucks?

LC: They were loaded in box cars.

JB: Who did those jobs? The loading part of it.

LC: They had a loading crew. That's what they called a loading crew. They didn't work nowhere but out on the dock...you know, loading the shells into the box cars when they came out. You had to keep every lot, powder lot... separate, because some of the powder weighed more than the other. They was very particular about that.

JB: What different types of powder were there?

LC: Well, in the shell there they had only black powder. But they had a powder they called a lead azide in the form of mercury. That's what was put in the primer. And it was very dangerous. You could just take a little in your hand...just let it fall on the floor and it would explode. So you had to handle that carefully.

JB: Did you ever work with that?

LC: No, I never did.

JB: Was worker morale pretty good?

LC: Oh, it was pretty good ...because the work wasn't hard, and it seemed like everyone enjoyed going to work. Didn't have to work too hard. Most of the work was done by the women. Men didn't work too hard. And then, later on, on that line they made a ...demolition bomb they called it. That was made out of TNT.

JB: What was that made of? or rather, what was it used for?

LC: That was destroying ...blowing up bridges, and things like that. Get close enough, warehouses.

JB: How often were you paid?

LC: Every week.

JB: And most of your check would go for necessities?

LC: Yes, but then in those days you could do more with that than you could with what you doing now.

JB: What you could buy with 90cents an hour in those days, you could do more with what you can with 4 or 5 dollars an hour these days?

LC: Right! Because your clothes didn't cost a third of what you have to pay for em now. And food...you'd go in the grocer, back in the meat department, you could get the best meat, porkchop center ... from 18 to 20 cent a pound. You could just buy a lot with ten dollars. Now, you go in a store with ten dollars, you won't get over a loaf of bread. No use of going in there.

JB: Were you allowed to draw advances on a pay check, if you needed it?

LC: I don't think so. I don't know. Because I never did. Maybe you could get an advance. I would say you could..

JB: Was it strict there? or was it fairly loose? The discipline.

LC: The only thing that was real strict was the safety rules-because everybody was scared of the powder. But otherwise, it wasn't too strict.

JB: What was a woman stevedor?

LC: Pardon.

JB: What was a women stevedor?

LC: I never did hear anything about it.

JB: I read something about it in a book.

LC: I don't know. I never did hear the word flow around there. Course they had em in all departments.

JB: Were the women as well as the men separated?

LC: They all....as I said before, there wasn't nothing on that line but supervisors, and those that worked for the government, and the ordinance department. And process department. Process inspectors, that's what they called them. But they didn't work together...not then. Not during the war.

JB: Did they work together during the Korean war?

LC: Yes. They tell me they did. The didn't have no separated lines. Everybody together. And I don't know why it was like that in WWII. But that would be the set up that they would give you, you know?

JB: The line you worked on, did it have a conveyor belt?

LC: Yes. They had a conveyor.

JB: Could you describe some of the jobs that you did?

LC: Everything was on a conveyor. See the conveyor run from one end of the building to the other. Because where this shell first started being processed. Why they'd have tothe box was on the conveyor and they'd bring it up to the other department, where they could do that job on it. As I said, down in the five building, that's where they'd put the primers in the nose. And they would come on up to four build- ing. And they would do somethin else to it, and then they'd

come to three. That's where they put the powder and the projector in there.three. That's where they put the powder and the projector in there.

JB: What is the projector?

LC: That's what I call it. It's the nose of the shell. You know, the steel part where they explode. It's like, there's a bullet. That's what they'd put in there. And then when they'd get through with it, they'd have to inspect so many out of the case, you know.

JB: Mmhmm.

LC: If they found one, one projector in there loose, then they would reject the whole row. They had to go back through everyone of them.

JB: Did they find many?

LC: They found some. Yep. They found some.

JB: What did you do on the 7 line?

LC: The 7 line, that's where they was making the pellets, and the primers.

JB: How did that work?

LC: Well see, the pellets. They had a room, a big thick re-inforced concrete. And you'd have to put your container in there, a rubber cup. And then you'd come back on the outside and turn your machine on and look through the glass see ...when your cup got full, you'd shut it off and have to come back and get it. Course they'd never had any accidents, not on the press, as long as I was there.

JB: What did the men talk about, say among themselves? Was it about the War? Europe?

LC: They didn't talk about the war too much. But as you know, they'd call that in those days, lovenests. And that's mostly what they'd be talking about.

JB: About women?

LC: Yep. And during that time there was a lot of divorces all over. Over all it wasn't a bad place to work at that time. As I said, the work wasn't hard. People came from all over, everywhere, out of work.

JB: Did everyone keep pretty busy along the lines?

LC: Yes. They was busy. As I said, the women did most of the harder work. And that was working on the machine. Those that was oncatch- ing em coming off the machine on the belt, they had to put em in boxes. And that kept ya pretty busy, keeping up with the shells.

JB: That was at the end of the line?

LC: Yes. But I never did work on that line. I was fortunate enough I'd get an easy job.

JB: Has the town grown since you moved here?

LC: Oh itduring the war they had three thousand houses out here. And they all was just about filled. You had a lot more people then, than you've got now.

JB: What happened to the houses? Are they empty now?

LC: No. They're all filled. But you know, they moved out of a lot of these houses after the war. Some went to South Bend, and some went up to...Lansing, Michigan.

JB: What year was it that you were laid off?

LC: Well, I stayed there until they closed down. I think it was in July of forty five. They closed down after the Japanese surrendered. But it was up in July.

JB: Were you living in this house here?

LC: Yes.

JB: How big was your family then?

LC: Uh, forty five...I had four children. No, five children.

JB: When you were laid off, did the government help workers find other jobs?

LC: No. No they didn't do nuthin.

JB: What did you do then?

LC: I was fortunate enough to get another job. I didn't stay laid off... bout a month. I found another Job.

JB: Where was it that you found the job?

LC: In LaPorte, the Casting service, foundry. But I didn't like it; but there wasn't anything else to do--I had to take it.

JB: Was it hard for the blacks to get jobs in LaPorte at that time?

LC: Yea. The only place you could get a Job at that time was the Casting service, and Rumeley's foundry. They wouldn't hire you in other factories. Because I tried them all. And more than me

went. They just wouldn't give ya any jobs. Say, then to now--it's much better than it was. You couldn't get no job in Laporte ...not if you was black.

JB: Where did most of the families go after the plant was shut down?

LC: I guess that those who didn't stay here, they went back to where they came from.

JB: Were there Jamaican blacks working in the factory?

LC : Yes.

JB: Did they have trouble in this climate?

LC: Well I think they did because the most I saw, you know, they just had summer clothes, because they wasn't use to this cold weather. But they worked. There was probably two hundred or more out here in Kingsford Heights.

JB: Are any of them left here?

LC: No. Most of them went back, but I think a few of them stayed over there in Gary. But all out here, they all left. But they had to go back home anyway, because some kind of agreement after they ended. Then they went back.

JB: Did the KOP offer Insurance?

LC: Yea. They had health insurance.

JB: Did the blacks feel that WWII was a white man's war? that they were making munitions for a white war?

LC: I think some felt like that. I think that some felt like that. But of course ...when you have to go to war, and lose your life for something you're not getting, you feel pretty bad about it. And yet, it's still your country whether you recognize it or not. You had discrimination in every walk of life. Even then in the army, there was discrimination against black and white. You didn't stay in the same barracks when you went in the army.

JB: Were you in the army?

LC: No. No I didn't go.

JB: Any of your children?

LC: Yeah, but I know just what the situation was.

JB: What year did the houses here become available to be purchased?

LC: 1948. The government, they put it up for sale, and then the people that lived here, they all got together and formed a corporation.

JB: Whites and blacks formed this?

LC: Yes. And that's the way they bought this place from the government.

JB: Your wife said loans weren't available to blacks. How did you get around that?

LC: Some borrowed it from where they were employed. And some went to the finance company- they'd lend you money. It was pretty hard to get, borrowing money from the bank...at that time. And that's the way they borrowed it. Some had enough to pay down on it themselves. You had to pay \$300.00 down. Three hundred and sixty down.

JB: How much did the house cost?

LC: A five room unit was going for \$1250.00, I think it was. And a four room was \$1100.00. Then they had a three room, I think it went for a thousand. And that's they way we bought this place.

JB: Could you explain a little bit more about the corporation?

LC: They called it the Kingsford Corporation, and the Kingsford Realty ...See, they had land, and they had water, and electricity. So they had two different corporations. One was called the realty ...and the other was the Kingsford Corporation. And that included the water, sewage, and electric. And the realty was the land. They sold these lots after they got it surveyed and everything. And the people bought... just like a lot here next to me then, I had preference to buy that lot before anybody else could get it, because it was next to my house. So before anybody else could get it, because it was next to my house. So that's the way they carried it out.

JB: Was there a church here in the early years?

LC: Well, there wasn't no church out here. You know, during the war. But, I think the first one out here was the Assembly of God. And it was pastored by a lady. I used to go up there, because we hadn't got together and organized no church, so we'd go up there. And before that, they'd have services up there on the highway where they formerly had the rental office. But I don't remember who was carrying that service on. But that was the first service we had, was the Assembly of God. I used to go up there because I'd always been used to going to church. I used to go up there because I'd always been used to going to church.

JB: Was that a black church?

LC: No. It was for anybody that wanted to go: black and white.

JB: Was the KOP open between the Second world war and the Korean war?

LC: No. They didn't. They closed it completely down after WWII. And when this Korean war broke out then they opened it back up, but they had to renovate it. You know, different machinery and everything.

JB: Did your wife work there during the Korean war?

LC: Yes. I think she went out there in 1951. Worked there a couple of years. Too hard on her. Tried to work....I had to work. All the other kids was kind of small. She had to stay here with them.

JB: The children went to school in this area?

LC: Yes, all of them wentthey went to Union township, at that time that was the high school. The last two, they went to LaPorte High School. That's where they graduated. But all the others went to Union township. The older ones, they graduated from there.

JB: Did they ever run into any trouble out there?

LC: We had a little round over there once, I know, becausecommittee-

I was among one of them in the committee: talked to the principal. I think they had a fight over there or something. So we went over there to talk to him. And that's the lastwe didn't have no more, that I know of. They got that settled down and everything went pretty smooth. As I said, you still having discrimination in your schools right now...but it's not as bad.

JB: Do you mean it's taking another form?

LC: It's never been out! It's real ...but it's not as bad as it was, because they wouldn't give a fair chance at what you should of had. You know what I mean? And that's what I mean. That's right over there at LaPorte High School. Is that where you went?

JB: No. I went to Michigan City.

LC: They still got it in LaPorte some. They don't give those boys a chance to do what they can do.

JB: Are there any black organizations that help within the schools?

LC: Yes. They got the NAACP. They always go in them when something comes up where, they need to be. So right now ...they running pretty smooth, but it's still there.

JB: So you think it's getting better?

LC: Well I think it's some better. But it's not up to where it should be yet. You see a man is justyou just a human being. And one man wasn't created over another one. We all were created equal--but what makes a difference is the type of environment you come up under. That makes

the difference. Now some didn't have the opportunity to go far in school, you know; but now a man should be able to do whatever he's qualified to do, if the job is available. Just not because of the color of your skin. It depends on your qualifications in the job range. But I know right there in Gary, when I was working at the steel mill ...I knew this boy personally, we worked together. He graduated from the University of Chicago. He was in chemistry. He went to that steel mill, and all they would offer him was a common labor job. And also, there was another young

man there: his name was Lloyd. Now he graduated from Purdue. He came out of Purdue with one of the highest honors any student ever went out ...come out of there with in the history of Purdue. They wouldn't give him a chemistry job ...working in the chemistry department just because he was black. But he was qualified. And that ain't right. If you don't have that qualification, then you have to come back down to the common laborer; but now a man come out of there with a degree in chemistry now he shouldn't but now a man come out of there with a degree in chemistry now he shouldn't have to come out there and do manual laborlike the fellow that is unskilled. You know what I mean? But that's happened. When I was in there, the lowest job you got was the hardest, the dirtiest, and the cheapest... because you didn't have a union in there then. You couldn't get them other jobs. Today in there, whatever your seniority, and whatever you're qualified to do, you can get any job in that mill today. But you couldn't qualified to do, you can get any job in that mill today. But you couldn't do it when I was in there. Only thing you got was the hardest and the dirtiest ...and the cheapest. And I know that for a fact, because I was there.

JB: Was there a union at the KOP?

LC: They finally got one there, but it wasn't much, not worth the paper it was written on. Old Jasper, you mighta heard of him. He was the president of the union, and he wasn't worth two dead flies. But, after all of that, you still made it. You know what I mean? I think that in years to come, it's going to be men and women, because that's going to fade out. Never will be like it was once before ...for the simple reason, you got more kids going to school getting an education. They gonna demand more.gonna demand more.

JB: That's the key.

LC: Yes. Because you can't take ignorance and whip intelligence--but you can take intelligence and whip ignorance. So the government now If you didn't have money when I was growing up, if you didn't have some money yourself, there was no way you could go to college. You didn't have nothing to go on. But now, you can get a grant and go on and pay it back when you're finished.

JB: There are grants and scholarships available to blacks these days?

LC: Yes. But there wasn't nothing like that. You had to get it for yourself, or else you didn't get nothing. And you got more kids that are getting an education now.

JB: Thank you for the interview, Mr. Cobb.

LC: You're welcome. I tried to tell it just as straight as it was.

JB: That's what we wanted.

LC: It's all true because I was there. I know.