

Ethnic Oral History Project, 1977-1978

Fresno Historical Society

Abraham Lincoln Cowings

Abraham Lincoln Cowings was a black senior citizen who was interviewed on August 17, 1977 at his home in Fowler, California. Cowings was born on September 23, 1895 in Woodbury, Georgia. He moved to Fowler in 1903 and lived there until 1921, when he moved to Caruthers, though Cowings returned to Fowler in 1943. Cowings' parents moved his family to California in 1903 in order to get away from prejudice in Georgia. His father was a carpenter and still has many buildings standing in Fowler. When Cowings moved to Fowler, he did not see many black businessmen until after he lived there for a while. Cowings graduated from Fowler High School in 1915, and he says that the school was segregated at the time he went there. While he went to school, Cowings says there were only about nine or ten colored families in Fowler.

Cowings recalls not having much of a reaction to America entering World War I. Cowings often saw several Ku Klux Klan meetings in Fresno, but he does not remember ever being bothered by it. Cowings was not a part of any church, though he did remember there being two colored churches in his area. Cowings says that the "Red Scare" did not create a problem for the black community, and that he did not remember anyone being afraid of it. Cowings recalls that during prohibition, Fowler was "the driest town in the county" mostly for religious reasons, but liquor was still available for illegal purchase.

During the depression, Cowings says he had a steady job as a foreman of a farm in Caruthers. Cowings discusses the WPA and how it helped people who did not have a job during the Depression. At the time, Cowings did not have an interest in politics though he was a member of the Republican Party. After Cowings got married in 1919, he owned a farm in Fowler that harvested grapes. Cowings had no trouble in selling his grapes since he sold to Sun-Maid. Cowings claims that Dr. Wallace was imprisoned for selling "dope" to his patients and he says he felt that it was all a set up. Cowings also remembers the attack on Pearl Harbor and his reaction to it. Cowings discusses the Japanese internment and recalls that it was one of the biggest mistakes that the California government ever made. Cowings says that there was less prejudice after President Truman passed the civil rights law. He remembers when he was young that if he was ever seen with a white girl, the constable would make a point to ask Cowings about it. Cowings talks about the Masonic Lodge which is a fraternal organization for black people in Fresno. Cowings also discusses his thoughts and feelings towards the NAACP.

Interviewer: Vivian J. Jones
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FRESNO CITY AND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

INTERVIEW WITH ABRAHAM LINCOLN COWINGS

AUGUST 17, 1977

Today is August 17, 1977. I, Vivian Jones, am interviewing Mr. Abraham Lincoln Cowings, a black senior citizen at his home in Fowler, California.

JONES: Mr. Cowings, what is your full name?

COWINGS: Abraham Lincoln Cowings.

JONES: When were you born?

COWINGS: September 23, 1895.

JONES: Where were you born?

COWINGS: In Woodbury, Georgia.

JONES: Where is your longest place of residence?

COWINGS: Fowler, California.

JONES: How long have you been in Fowler?

COWINGS: I was in Fowler from 1903 until 1921. Then I moved to Caruthers and lived there for twenty-two years. Then I moved back to Fowler in 1943, and been here till now.

JONES: What were your parents' names?

COWINGS: William Sherman Cowings, and Jeanette Woltz Cowings.

JONES: Do you know what their occupations were?

COWINGS: My father was a school teacher and a lawyer. My mother was a school teacher.

JONES: Did they move to California?

COWINGS: Yes.

JONES: What year did they come?

COWINGS: In 1903.

JONES: Why did they move to California?

COWINGS: My father moved to California on account of prejudice. He was teaching in Neal, Georgia, and the black students weren't getting their part of the government money and he attempted to sue the state to get the money. It caused a lot of trouble. So in order to save his life he just moved to California.

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JONES: Where did he settle when he moved to California?

COWINGS: In Fowler.

JONES: Why did he pick Fowler?

COWINGS: Well, he had a brother who enlisted in the Spanish-American War; he went to Cuba. After the war was over, he was mustered out in San Francisco, California. He had heard about this part of the country, so he came through and looked at it. He went back to Georgia, he and his friend got married. They came out here on their honeymoon. They liked it so much they stayed and set. In fact, it was the cause of a whole colony of Georgia people moving to Fowler. Because he and his friend's brother were the cause of it.

JONES: Do you remember in what part of town they lived in when they first got here?

COWINGS: Well, my uncle, his first residence was over on Main and 5th between 5th and 6th street. My father's first residence was on 2nd street, on the east side of the track.

JONES: What occupation did your father practice after arriving in Fowler?

COWINGS: My father was a carpenter, cabinet maker and a machinist.

JONES: Do you remember any specific buildings that he built here in Fowler?

COWINGS: Yes, there's still about eight or ten standing that he built.

JONES: Were they for black residents or . . .

COWINGS: Well, some were for black and some were for whites. He built several places for white people and he built several places for blacks. But most of his places were white.

JONES: When you moved to Fowler, were there very many blacks businesses or black professionals here at that time?

COWINGS: No, there weren't when I moved here. But a few years later, they just kept coming in.

JONES: What school did you attend?

COWINGS: I attended Fowler Grammar School, and Fowler High School.

JONES: Did you graduate from high school?

COWINGS: Yes.

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JONES: What year was that?

COWINGS: 1915.

JONES: After graduating from high school, what did you do for a living?

COWINGS: Just general work. Because there wasn't anything much for you to do here after you got out of school. Work on the farms, or different jobs in town. Sometimes I'd do carpentry work with my father.

JONES: Was it unusual for a black man in those times to graduate from high school?

COWINGS: There had been other men that I knew of, there was Patrick Young, and Ben Young. Then there were two girls that I knew of, Pearl and May McClendon. They graduated before I did.

JONES: Was there any segregation in the school system at that time?

COWINGS: Yes.

JONES: How was it segregated?

COWINGS: Well, in dishing out your studies, all the colored who went to school, before and after, they were generally advised just to take domestics, science, general science, well I guess it was just common labor. I guess things that would just constitute general labor.

JONES: Did they have activities at that time?

COWINGS: Well, yes. We had baseball, basketball, tennis, track.

JONES: Did you participate in them?

COWINGS: I belonged to the baseball team for three years, but otherwise I was too busy paying for my books. In those days, they didn't furnish your books, you had to pay for your own. So, most of my spare time I spent rustling money for my books.

JONES: Was the community in which you lived, was it considered a ghetto at that time? Did ghettos exist in the Fowler area?

COWINGS: No. There wasn't enough people to say there was a ghetto at that time, because there was only nine or ten families of colored people in Fowler, and they lived all over town. Later on it was ghetto though.

JONES: After you graduated from high school, besides doing general labor, what other types of work did you do? You didn't follow

your father's footsteps and go into carpentry work?

COWINGS: No, no because there wasn't enough money in it. As I grew older, there were carpenters of other nationalities coming in, and people, they didn't figure on hiring colored carpenters. The jobs you did get, you didn't get the pay you could get, and you couldn't join the union. Most of the good carpenter jobs were done by union carpenters. At that time, a black man couldn't join the union.

JONES: So your father was an independent worker; he didn't join the union?

COWINGS: No, no he didn't.

JONES: Do you remember what your reaction was to America's entry to World War I?

COWINGS: To tell you the truth, I didn't have much reaction to it. Because I didn't want to go to war and I didn't want to hear about being at war. Because I didn't want to go.

JONES: Did you have any friends who served in the war?

COWINGS: Yes, that was practically all the boys who left from around here were my friends.

JONES: Do you recall any of their names?

COWINGS: Well, let's see, there was Bigby, Calhoun, Young, Campell, my brother, Bill Cowings, and Ashby, De Foor, and Sutton.

JONES: Did the black servicemen who served in the war, did they get any type of recognition from the press here?

COWINGS: No, not as blacks. Most of the blacks who left here at first were put in the 91st divisions, combat division. After that, the rest of the boys were in the Quartermaster Department. But they never got much recognition for it, as far as that's concerned.

JONES: Do you recall a dinner that was given for the black soldiers who left Fresno City and County, that was given by the mayor at that time?

COWINGS: I remember hearing about it, but I was out in the country at that time and I didn't attend.

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JONES: Was the Ku Klux Klan ever a problem here in Fresno?

COWINGS: I couldn't say that I knew about it as a problem, but I can remember passing several of their meetings, seeing the cross burning and seeing their signs, "KKK" on street corners and things like that. But as far as being bothered by it, why I never noticed that.

JONES: How many black people were in this community at that time?

COWINGS: Probably, I could say a hundred families, that's in the community, in town and around town.

JONES: Do you know if Marcus Garvey attracted many followers in the Fowler area?

COWINGS: Not that I know of. I never knew much about Marcus Garvey till I got a little older and out of school, and had time to read and know about it.

JONES: Did you have any religious leaders in the community?

COWINGS: Well, I can't say if there was any religious leaders, but most everyone called themselves religious.

JONES: What church did you attend?

COWINGS: I didn't attend any. The only thing I did, if I saw a girl that I liked, I went to every church she attended. That's where I went. Being young!

JONES: How many churches were there in this area?

COWINGS: Colored churches?

JONES: Yes.

COWINGS: There was two.

JONES: Do you remember what they were?

COWINGS: There was a Methodist and a Baptist, and there was Bowles Church. They had a Methodist Church there.

JONES: How far was Bowles Church away from you?

COWINGS: Five miles.

JONES: How did you get there?

COWINGS: I rode a motorcycle sometimes. I hired out a horse and buggy from the livery stable, or I'd hook a ride from somebody, and finally I bought a horse and buggy of my own.

JONES: Do you remember how the Bowles Church was organized?

COWINGS: Well, yes to a certain extent. There was a bunch of colored

people living there and they were about five miles from Fowler. There was about twenty-five or thirty, they were closer to Bowles then they were to Fowler. Mr. Claude Pelkington, who at that time was lineman here in Fowler, he had a store in Bowles, and he said he'd let the church people have one of his lots in Bowles cheap, if they would build a church on it. So, I think that's how it got started. At that time there was a minister in Bakersfield, by the name of Reverend Price, I believe. They got in touch with him, and I think he volunteered to help them. Through Price, and different people around the country, they got their church going.

JONES: Did the great "Red Scare" of 1920 create a problem for you in this community?

COWINGS: No.

JONES: Do you know if people were afraid of it? If it was highly publicized?

COWINGS: No.

JONES: What was this community like during prohibition?

COWINGS: Fowler was the driest town in the county from 1910 on through till liquor was restored.

JONES: What was the reason for this?

COWINGS: Well, it was religion. Most everybody in Fowler belonged to some sort of church. So, I imagine it was the religion.

JONES: So liquor wasn't readily available here?

COWINGS: Oh yes, you could get all the liquor you wanted. I didn't say liquor wasn't available, I said it was a dry town (laughing).

JONES: For the liquor that was available, where would you purchase it from? Do you remember that?

COWINGS: Bootleggers.

JONES: Did they have them here in Fowler?

COWINGS: Yeah, everybody. That was their favorite industry from then on. Mostly the Armenians, Portuguese, Irish, anyone who was smart enough to make a still or wine. Mainly it was wine; see this was grape country. Most of them could make wine and that was the main thing that they sold.

JONES: Do you remember the period during the depression?

What did you do for a living during the depression?

COWINGS: I had a steady job during the depression. I was a foreman of a farm out in Caruthers. I got the job, in 1921, and held it until 1943. I was working for a printer, a printing company in Fresno. I was running the farm for one of the proprietors. of this company. So, I don't know much about being unemployed at that time.

JONES: Do you know how the other black people of this community survived during the depression?

COWINGS: Some few had farm jobs, some had janitorial jobs in town, but most of them were on the WPA.

JONES: What was the WPA?

COWINGS: The WPA was a company formed by the government for needy families. If you didn't have a job, or didn't know where you could get your next meal, well, then you could get a job on the WPA.

JONES: Did you take an active interest in politics at that time?

COWINGS: Not much.

JONES: What political party did you join?

COWINGS: Republican.

JONES: Why the Republican party?

COWINGS: Well, I'll have to say my father talked me into the Republican party. He said that was the only party he liked. After I found out about the Democratic and the Republican parties, I found out I'd rather have the Republican party. Because I didn't see any reason why a black man should belong to the Democratic party at that time.

JONES: During the time that you were voting, were you still in Fowler?

COWINGS: Well I only voted a couple of times in Fowler.

JONES: Were you married at that time?

COWINGS: I voted one time after I was married in Fowler.

JONES: What year were you married?

COWINGS: 1919.

JONES: What is you wife's name?

COWINGS: Eva Bell Clark Cowings.

JONES: Did you marry her in Fowler? Did you meet her here?

COWINGS: I met her in Bowles. We got married by a Justice of the Peace in Fresno.

JONES: After you were married, what did you do?

COWINGS: I took a job on a farm around Fowler, did whatever I could find to do, for the first year and a half. Then I got the job in Caruthers and we were there for about twenty-three years. Then I leased a forty acre farm in 1943. After I made the crop I purchased a farm here in Fowler, which I'm still living on now.

JONES: Did you have many people work for you?

COWINGS: No, not too many. My only crop is grapes, and I call myself an expert vineyardist. A lot of people thought I was an expert vineyardist. So, I always had a job. I did most of my work myself.

JONES: Seeing as though you were a farmer, did you have any problems in getting your crops harvested, or getting your grapes picked?

COWINGS: Not to speak of.

JONES: Did you have a problem in selling your grapes?

COWINGS: No, because I belonged to Sun-Maid. The guy who I bought the place from was in the Sun-Maid, that's a big association for raisins. So, I just left the place in the Sun-Maid, and I always had a market, I didn't have to solicit any buyers.

JONES: Mr. Cowings, what did you do for activities here in Fowler?

COWINGS: Not much, 'cause I was always too busy working. We'd go to a picnic or a party once in awhile.

JONES: Do you have any children?

COWINGS: No.

JONES: Who was Mr. Young?

COWINGS: Benjamin Young. He was a pharmacist in the Fowler district.

The only drug store that they had in Fowler at the time.

JONES: Was he a licensed pharmacist?

COWINGS: A licensed pharmacist, and the manager of the drug store.

JONES: Did you have any other black business men here in Fowler?

COWINGS: We had a shoemaker, a restaurant owner, off and on we had different restaurant owners. That's about the only business men, real business men I can think of.

JONES: Was there any attorneys in Fresno County you recall?

COWINGS: The only attorney that I can recall in the Fresno area, up until around 1940, was Alfred Cowings.

JONES: How long was he here?

COWINGS: He was only here a year.

JONES: Why did he leave, do you know?

COWINGS: On account of prejudice.

JONES: Can you recall a specific incident?

COWINGS: Well, I couldn't say that it was specific, 'cause it never was proven that somebody planted evidence on a corpus delicti in his case, but he didn't fight the case, he just pulled up and left.

JONES: Do you remember the year?

COWINGS: I don't remember the exact year, but I could say that it was between 1907 and 1908.

JONES: What did you do for medical care here? Was there any black physicians?

COWINGS: There weren't any in Fowler. Around 1924, there was one black doctor in Fresno.

JONES: Do you recall his name?

COWINGS: I don't recall his name, but later on, say, another five years, another doctor came, Dr. Henry C. Wallace. He was from Texas. He came to California for his health. He had weak lungs, so he decided to settle in Fresno because this was a drier climate. First he was going to settle in San Francisco, but this was a drier climate. He was the only doctor until Earl Myers graduated from medical school. Then there were two doctors.

JONES: Going back to Dr. Wallace, do you remember an incident when he was imprisoned?

COWINGS: Yes, I remember.

JONES: Do you know why?

COWINGS: They claimed that he was selling dope to some of his patients.

JONES: What was your reaction to that?

COWINGS: It was a pack of lies, it was a frame-up. Because I feel a certain party wanted to get rid of Dr. Wallace to make room for another doctor he was interested in.

JONES: After Dr. Wallace died in prison, what was your reaction to that?

COWINGS: In what way?

JONES: Well, he was supposed to come home and he had a heart attack and he died in prison. Do you remember what you felt about that?

COWINGS: I felt very bad about that. In the first place, I think he was framed, and having weak lungs and probably a weak heart is what killed him.

JONES: While Dr. Wallace was in prison, if you were to get sick or get hurt while working, what would you do for medical attention?

COWINGS: Go to the doctor.

JONES: They would treat you.

COWINGS: Sure.

JONES: So, you didn't have any discrimination as far as medical purposes were concerned?

COWINGS: No.

JONES: Mr. Cowings, were there any local politicians who were friends of yours or friends with the community here in Fowler?

COWINGS: There were a lot of so-called politicians who were friends of mine, people that I knew. I think that most of them were just out for the money. They'd sell you down the river for any amount of money they could get. I noticed that most of the good politicians would always go to a black minister, or a black business man, or somebody who was popular in the black community and ask him how much prestige he had amongst the people who were voting. They'd get to talking and they'd say, "How many votes can you carry?" He'd say, "I've got such and such a number that I can carry." He'd say, "Well how much money would it take to pay you to go around among the people and solicit votes?" Those people weren't solicit because they liked the party, but for whoever would give them the most money.

JONES: Do you know a Mr. William A. Bigby, Jr.?

COWINGS: I know him perfectly well, yes.

JONES: Do you know what his role was in the community?

COWINGS: Billy was a type of a person who was a good talker.

He was fairly educated. He always had some proposition that he would support enough to put over. He was well-liked by the community.

JONES: Did you know Leroy Calhoun?

COWINGS: I knew Leroy Calhoun.

JONES: What was his role in the community?

COWINGS: Well, he was Fresno's clown. He was a great singer.

He had a good, great voice. He would take jobs on different programs. Any time somebody had a smoker or a different type of program, they'd get Leroy Calhoun.

JONES: What did he do for a living besides sing or clown?

COWINGS: He worked in a drug store.

JONES: What was the name of that drug store?

COWINGS: The Owl Drug. It went out of business some years ago, and they changed the name.

JONES: How did you react to the attack on Pearl Harbor?

COWINGS: I didn't have much of a reaction over it. I felt sorry, but I just didn't know much, but I knew how England had treated Japan, and if there was a chance of them going in with Germany they would. Because Japan was one of the smallest nations that had a commercial fleet. England was the greatest commercial country in the world, and Japan was coming up on her so fast. Japan was just about to get United States business. Because when we'd buy from Japan, Japan would deliver the stuff and take it back a lot cheaper than the Britians would. As for Britain, if you sold anything to the British people they wanted you to pay them to haul it or if you bought anything from them you couldn't take your own American ships to get these products. It had to be shipped in the British ships. So, we didn't like that so much. Another thing I heard, I don't know how true it was, was that Churchill used to come over and collect, say, \$165,000,000 dollars from the U.S. and take it down to South America, and spend it with the South Americans for meat. We had meat to sell, and surplus as far as that goes, but, they'd buy a little cheaper down there. So, they'd take the American money down there and

buy. So, Japan wasn't that way, she'd spend her money with the U.S., where she got it. Now that was my opinion, that was nobody else's opinion but my own.

JONES: What about the internment of the Japanese citizens here? What was your reaction to that?

COWINGS: I think that was one of the greatest mistakes that our California government ever made. Now Warren was governor at the time. I think Warren regretted that till his very dying days, that he allowed that. Because that was an injustice to the most honest bunch of people I've ever meet, barring none.

JONES: Were most of the Japanese people, were they farmers here?

COWINGS: Most of them were farmers, and there were quite a number of business men, but the majority of them were farmers.

JONES: Did any of the Japanese who were born here serve in the war?

COWINGS: Yes, we had them. The fellow right down here, and there's a couple three over to town, the Honda brothers; they all served.

JONES: Because they were serving in the war, did that help their families in the camps?

COWINGS: No, no I don't know of anything, but it probably kept them from getting deported.

JONES: Mr. Cowings, do you know any black men from this community who served in World War II?

COWINGS: Let's see, there was James Leach and Albert Cowings.

JONES: Did they come home from the war unharmed?

COWINGS: Yes.

JONES: What was the community's reaction to them when they came home from the war?

COWINGS: They didn't seem like they had any grudge against what happened. There weren't any of them who had any grievances that I know of.

JONES: Were they able to find jobs when they came home? What types of professions were available after World War II?

COWINGS: I don't know of any that were available.

JONES: Was it still basically farming?

COWINGS: Basically farming, janitor jobs, something like **that**.

If they were able to buy a farm, or if their parents had a farm that they could lease to them or something like that. But to buy a farm, I don't know any who had the money after they came out of the army.

JONES: In the post-war years did you see any significant changes in this community?

COWINGS: Well, no. There might have been a little more prejudice for awhile. Of course after President Truman's time, after the civil rights law was passed, things got a little better just like in the rest of the country. But nothing that they didn't have to do.

JONES: Do you know what "June Teenth Day" is?

COWINGS: No.

JONES: When do you celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation?

COWINGS: Well, if we celebrated it, I'd celebrate the first of January.

JONES: Was that a community celebration here?

COWINGS: No.

JONES: What was your reaction to the civil rights movement in the '60's?

COWINGS: Outside of King's case, I didn't think so much about it. I think King, as you say, "Opened a Pandora's box," in Alabama, and it spread all over the U.S.. Beyond that, in fact I don't see what was gained, only gave a lot of people a chance to shoot off their faces or something like that. Because right now, near as I can figure from what I've read, around 46% of the blacks who've come home from the armies are idle in the big cities. They were pushed up North after they didn't need them as sharecroppers down South. They pushed them up North, and there was nothing for them to do. So, it still stands that way now. You hear them say, that now there's only 8% of the people unemployed, but they don't count these black as being people, or they wouldn't say anything like that. That's my opinion.

JONES: The question I also wanted to ask you, your name is Abraham Lincoln Cowings. Do you know why you were named for Abraham Lincoln?

COWINGS: Yes, I know why, and it almost caused a divorce (laughing).

JONES: Would you care to tell me about it?

COWINGS: Well, my grandmother on my mother's side, when she was brought to Georgia from Virginia, she and her mother, she was just a small girl at the time. You know how old folks thought Abraham Lincoln, was a god. Well, my grandmother stood against my father to name me Abraham Lincoln. When there was no reason in the world, because I was born the 23rd of September, I was black and I didn't resemble Abraham Lincoln no way, shape, form or fact (chucking).

JONES: Do you remember any stories that were handed down from your grandparents about slavery times?

COWINGS: Not many.

JONES: Do you remember any poems or songs that were handed down from generation to generation?

COWINGS: No, I don't remember too many. I was never around too many people to sing those songs. I wasn't in the South long enough to meet many old people. Then when I came out here I didn't have a chance to meet many colored people. My mother, and my father, they didn't take to that kind of stuff, you see, my father being an educator, he didn't look at that, he was always looking ahead. The only songs I knew about slavery, I got from school.

JONES: Have you always stayed with the Sun-Maid people?

COWINGS: Yeah, but I sold the ranch four years ago.

JONES: Did you have any problems before selling your ranch?

COWINGS: No, no.

JONES: How long have you lived in this house here?

COWINGS: Thirty-four years.

JONES: Did you build it?

COWINGS: No, I overhauled it, and made it livable, but I didn't

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build it.

JONES: Is it fair to say that today in Fresno County blacks enjoy a better life now than when you were growing up?

COWINGS: Yes, they have a lot more opportunities, but there's only one thing, I don't think they're taking advantage of the opportunities that they got. There's too many of them that are throwing their money away. Now that's my opinion. Now there's a lot of colored doctors and business people that come to Fresno. Now I know several doctors up there. Now there's some of them that have \$2 or \$300,000.00 homes. I don't think a person, unless they are a multi-millionaire, retired, needs a \$300,000.00 home. I think they could put that money to better advantage.

JONES: Did the police force here in Fowler, did they harass you or the members of this community?

COWINGS: At times, when I was a kid. The marshal, if we'd be on the streets, if we were loitering on the streets too much, they'd say to move along, this or that or something. After I grew up, if they'd see me with a girl that happened to look like a white girl, the constable would make it his business to meet me on my way to school, and ask me who that girl I was out with. The constable, being a neighbor of mine, he knew me pretty well, and he'd always come up with a smile. I know he really wasn't smiling, he just thought I was stepping over the fence.

JONES: Do you remember when Mayor Z.S. Leymel was in office?

COWINGS: Yes.

JONES: What was your opinion of him?

COWINGS: Well, I thought he was one of the best mayors that Fresno ever had, myself. At the time I wasn't living in Fresno, but I'd come in contact with him. I happened to go to a couple of colored banquets that he was invited to, and I heard him speak, and I had an opportunity to sit next to him and discuss things with him quite a bit, and I kind of liked him.

JONES: Do you think most of the black people liked him?

COWINGS: I know that he turned out to more, I saw him at more black affairs than any other mayor, outside of Mayor Ted Wills.

I don't know much about him, because I don't go to Fresno anymore.
JONES: Did you belong to the American Legion or any of the fraternal organizations here in Fresno?

COWINGS: Outside the Masonic Lodge, I can say no.

JONES: Are you a member now?

COWINGS: No.

JONES: Do you remember how they formed the Masonic Lodge here?

COWINGS: Yes.

JONES: Was the chapter here for all black members, or was it integrated?

COWINGS: No, no it's all black. See it's Prince Hall, there's Prince Hall, Kings Hall No. 9. Then they changed it to Prince Hall No. 6, and I don't know why. But it was an all-black lodge.

JONES: Is that located in Fresno?

COWINGS: In Fresno.

JONES: Did most of the men belong to that lodge at the time?

COWINGS: Couldn't say that because when I was in the lodge we had around forty-five to fifty members, and that was far from being most of the men in Fresno at that time.

JONES: How was you charter organized?

COWINGS: You mean for the whole lodge?

JONES: Yes, where did it come from?

COWINGS: It was brought to California, from Chicago, by a man named Barber, who happens to be my wife's grandfather. He brought the charter into San Francisco. I think the first lodge was started there, and that was some where in the 1850's.

JONES: Who brought it to the Fresno area?

COWINGS: I'm not sure, 'cause I didn't join here. I transferred from Firma No. 27, in Vallejo, California. So, I just don't know exactly. See, I didn't go in the army in World War II, I was working up in Mare Island. I had a job up in the Navy yard during the war. My mother had such a large family that the draft board wouldn't let me go over. I could make more money

and send it to the family then going into the army. I guess they just figured they had to donate more money if I went into the army then if I was working as a civilian.

JONES: How many brothers and sisters were there?

COWINGS: Well, there was thirteen of us.

JONES: Were any of them born here in Fowler?

COWINGS: All but seven.

JONES: Are any of them living now?

COWINGS: I have one brother and three sisters living now.

JONES: Where do they live?

COWINGS: My brother is in Fresno, my sister is in Madera, one is in San Francisco, and one in San Bernadino.

JONES: What was their role in the community?

COWINGS: James Cowings.

JONES: Did you know the Cooleys?

COWINGS: Yes, I knew them pretty well.

JONES: What was their role in the community?

COWINGS: They were promoters, even though a lot of people didn't agree with them. The older couple were very good people, good promoters. Even though I didn't like everything he did, he was advancing.

JONES: What was the Odd Fellows Lodge?

COWINGS: It's a fellowship lodge, it's a branch of the Masonic Lodge. Masonary is one of the oldest lodges in fraternity, and all the rest of these lodges, like the Odd Fellows, and the Elks, they're like a lot of churches who have branched off from the mother church. But the Masonic is the mother lodge for all the fraternities in the world.

JONES: It is the oldest fraternal organization?

COWINGS: It is the oldest fraternal organization, as far as I know. Of course, not counting the church.

JONES: Do you remember when American Legion Post 511 was formed?

COWINGS: Not right down to the date.

JONES: Do you know why it was formed?

COWINGS: Because they didn't want to join in with the whites.

They wanted to be to themselves.

JONES: Was there a specific reason for that?

COWINGS: It's just like any other black organization. Their reason is, if they belong with the whites, they'd be outnumbered, and never would be elected to any of the head offices. That's the only thing I can see about it. Because it didn't come up in rank with the white organizations. They had the opportunity to get into them if they wanted too, but the black man is a funny or something; I don't know. We're living in a country that is a melting pot. Yet they don't want to mix with the melting pot. We put it on somebody else when we're the blame for it, ourselves. They have an opportunity to join in a community organization and they don't want to do it. I guess you're old enough to see and read different things. It isn't the white man segregating the black, as he's segregating himself.

JONES: Do you know if it was a NAACP?

COWINGS: Yes.

JONES: How effective was it?

COWINGS: I'll have to say it's helped some, but how much I can't say.

JONES: Do you know the members of the NAACP?

COWINGS: No, not recently. I've been out of it for almost forty years.

JONES: What was your role in the NAACP here in Fresno?

COWINGS: I was secretary of the Fresno Chapter when it first started.

JONES: What year was that?

COWINGS: Around 1935.

JONES: How long were you affiliated with that organization?

COWINGS: Oh, a little over two years.

JONES: What type of work was the NAACP doing?

COWINGS: They were trying a lot of things, but they weren't doing what a person would think they ought to be doing. Seemed like they were doing more things to hurt themselves, then to benefit themselves.

JONES: Can you give me an example?

COWINGS

COWINGS: I didn't like the way they handled their politics. I thought they could've been a little more liberal with their politics. I mean doing things that would have helped other races instead of just doing things to help themselves. See, they were just a little greedy about that, and that made people look down on them. Now, if they would try to be a public community organization, when they asked for anything, don't ask for it just for the blacks, but ask in a way the blacks could get it and it would be shared among other people. So, it will be something they could get. The way they asked for things in those days, it seemed like they made it impossible for them to get it because they didn't know how to go about it.

JONES: So, you figured instead of being a national advancement association for the colored people, it should have been more liberal at that time?

COWINGS: Yes, the advancement would have taken care of itself. Trying to stick out like a sore thumb—if they would have blended in with the whole hand, they could have progressed a lot more. I think that the NAACP, and most of the other organizations of the blacks, they are separatists. We're not living in a separatist country. That's one thing this country was founded for, as to enjoy a place where we can be free. Now, the country is not all black, it's not all white, it's not all brown, see. I think that when you do anything, if you're doing it for a body of people, do it in a way that you're not tromping on somebody else. I think there always will be a way that you can do that and until we find that way, we're always going to be fighting a race war. Things are improving. The younger generation has made great strides along that line, if they just keep it up. Some day it'll come.

JONES: We'll be united as one.

COWINGS: Yeah, I think the world already started.

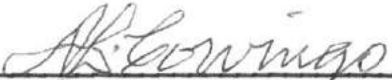
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COWINGS

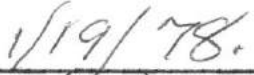
JONES: Mr. Cowings, thank you so much for consenting me this time.

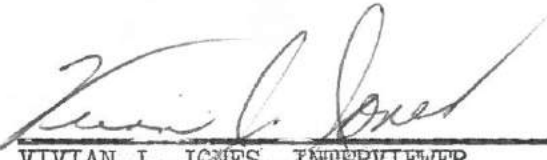
COWINGS: Don't thank me till you read it back to me, I just might
take it and tear it up [laughing].

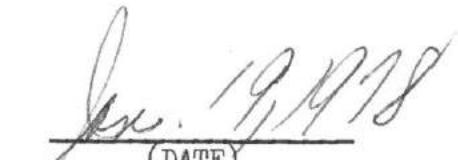
JONES: I do apperciate your time, and thank you.

"BY MY SIGNATURE, I MAKE THIS TRANSCRIPT AVAILABLE TO RESEARCHERS
IN THE FRESNO CITY AND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES."


MR. ABRAHAM LINCOLN COWINGS, NARRATOR


(DATE)


VIVIAN J. JONES, INTERVIEWER


(DATE)