



Oral History with Jerry C. Cooper, Office of Associate Director for Data Collection and Processing, (Census employee from 1941-1942 and 1946-1973. Formerly served in Machine Tabulation, Foreign Trade, Business, Economic Operations, Public Information, and Field Divisions), December 13, 2016

SHARON TOSI LACEY: Welcome. Today is December 13, 2016. I am Sharon Tosi Lacey and with me is David Pemberton. We're sitting down with Mr. Jerry Cooper who was an employee of the Census Bureau for 27 years to talk to him about some of his time and experiences at the Census Bureau. Thank you Mr. Cooper for sitting down with us.

Jerry Cooper: Well thank you for coming out to talk with me. I think your arithmetic might be a little amiss because it was possibly nearer 31 years, because I served four years during the war.

LACEY: Okay.

COOPER: But I signed up for the census in 1941 and I retired in 1973 and I think my arithmetic says that that's around 30 some years. I'm just kidding about that part [laughing].

[laughter]

LACEY: We were only going by your [retirement] article.

COOPER: Yes, well anyway, the article was written by a member of the public relations staff at that time, Samuel [H.] Johnson [Branch Chief, Community Services Staff], and I don't think he put in the article how I recruited him.

[Laughter]

DAVID PEMBERTON: You recruited Sam Johnson?

COOPER: I recruited him. There was another article he did where he indicates that a wife—when I say “a wife,” I was married to a young lady who later became a court of appeals judge—and she and Sam had been at a meeting and she was very impressed with him, and said she thought he was a kind of person that the young people would like, and that if he'd start telling

them about the census that it might help. At the time, I was assigned to the Public Information Office.

LACEY: I don't want to get ahead of ourselves, so why don't we start this in a logical fashion. Why don't you start by telling us a little bit about your life before the Census Bureau, growing up, your childhood, parents, your educational background that led you to the Census Bureau.

COOPER: Well, the background, I'll go right to the point. I went to high school and junior high school in the District of Columbia. We had lived in West Virginia before that, but my father died when I was about 8 years old. My mother moved my sister and me to Washington to finish her education at Howard University, and she did. The unique thing about this now, she also went to work for the Census Bureau when we first came to Washington in 1930. So, I went to junior high and high school in Washington and upon graduation from high school, I went to Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia, and that's where I finished a course in printing.

Then I came to Washington, I think it was right after the Olympics, usually I discuss things in terms of games and things like that, I was always interested in the Olympics, and the 1936 Olympics I got to know some of the people that won those races. I got to know Mr. [Jesse] Owens and I got to know John Woodruff, and people like that. I mean I had a real close friendship with John Woodruff. So I got know many of the 1936 Olympic champions. But, I was only 15 years old, I mean but I knew them when I was about 19 or 20.

When I left Hampton, I had finished my course in printing. I came to Washington and took an examination to go into the Government Printing Office and because of the rules at that time, that you had to be member of the local union, but the unions were segregated and they did not take blacks at that time. And the union where ... you had to be in one in order to get an apprentice job at the Government Printing Office. From that test, the Commerce Department called me and they asked me to show up for a job application at the Census Bureau, which was then located at 2nd and D St., SW. I was in New York doing something—maybe playing basketball or something—but anyway, my mother took the inquiry and she went down there and signed me in. Within about two weeks, I was called to come to the Census Bureau.

When I showed up for a card punching job there were about, oh, 249 women and me [laughter] so it was supposed to be just for women, but nobody at the Census Bureau would make any comment at all, they just put me in a section and told me to just start punching cards. [laughter] These were manual card punching machines, and you had to use force in order to punch the cards and the women's arms would be injured quite frequently. I didn't have that same kind of result. I'm in a section where I'm the only man punching cards and maybe 500 women and being 20 years old, or something in that neighborhood, I felt that I could handle all

499. [laughter] They would take me to lunch...do all kinds of things. I was scared to death. They say we got him in here now so, let's treat him like he's our little brother and in 2nd and D Streets, as soon as that bell rang, whatever time, 5:00, or 4:00, I would sprint out, I almost run home. At that time, we lived right across the street from Howard University. But I learned how to punch cards very well and then within about 6, I'd say about 4, maybe 5, months they came around and said "Jerry, you're going to be assistant supervisor." Nobody put up any kind of a protest. All the women, they applauded and everything and then they said, "What section are you going to assign him to?" At that time the pay scale was \$1,260 a year, but if you could punch a certain amount of cards without errors and things you could get up to \$16-something, \$1,640, something like that. Everybody wanted to get to the \$1,640. This is a year now, this is not a month. \$1,640 a year. So, they knew that whatever section they would assign me to, I would do all the errors for the women who were punching and so everybody wanted me, but I went to one section, you know just some section that they assigned me to and that section knew that their salaries were going to go from \$1,260 immediately to \$16-something because I'm going to do all the errors. And it worked out. And then the war started. And when I went back in the next day I suggested to the big boss, who had been in World War I, that I wanted to go and volunteer. Now this is December 7 when Pearl Harbor [was attacked], and it was the next week, maybe December 10 or something because the 7th was a Sunday and I said that I want to go join, but in order to join I found out the next day that we were segregated in the Army and in the—well there were no blacks in the Navy except as mess men and officer's aides and things like that, so I told my boss that I wanted to volunteer to go in the Army and he said—well, he cried. Right in front of me and said, "You can go, I'll give you time off to go any day you want." and I was going off playing tennis and different things and finally I just walked in the navy recruiting office and they took my facts down, they said, "Well you can go tomorrow if you want to go." I said, "No I want to go when the Redskins finish their last game in December." So I waited for December –

LACEY: in 1942?

COOPER: 1942. And went in the Navy. And when I got to the Navy, I found out I was in another segregated activity. They were recruiting people but there was still segregation in the Navy and Army. And in the Navy, those of us who had had some kind of college training, they kept us all at Great Lakes [Naval Station Great Lakes, IL] for the most part to train others. And I was one of those who [did that]. Then I think they started when basketball season came around they suggested that some of us who had played in college, play for the Navy. And then when they found out I could play a little bit, I say a little bit [chuckling], they assigned me to an athletic office where I didn't do anything but recruit athletes.

LACEY: You played for the Washington Bears, didn't you?

COOPER: I played for the Washington Bears. And so they knew that when I got up there. And they assigned me to recruiting athletes. And not necessarily basketball, all kinds. And football. And some names, I won't bore you with the names of people I was able to recruit at Navy and I

could keep them there. And some of them became well known after the war. And so at that point, I was able to stay there until the end of the war. Of course we had segregated teams in the Navy at that time...but it so happened that when President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt passed, President [Harry S.] Truman decided that he didn't understand the term segregation and he posted something on the bulkheads that said "Failure to obey a command in time of war is punishable by death." And immediately, there was no more segregation. And at that point, those of us who had been there and playing ball, we played with everybody, so except that when Great Lakes, the war was over, Great Lakes had been playing with people affiliated with the Big Ten conference and our commander was a gentleman named Paul Brown. He was a commander. And Paul Brown called me in and a fellow named Charlie Harmony and said we couldn't play for Great Lakes because he thought that the Big Ten Conference might be going back to the segregation in basketball [laughing]. But they didn't segregate in football or track and field. But segregation in competitive Big Ten was in basketball and swimming, and we didn't understand that and so I was shipped off to California where I played with some people who later became big names in professional basketball.

LACEY: And this is still playing for the Navy?

COOPER: Still playing for the Navy. And that's where I got discharged in California. But the team I was playing with was the team I had—Nick McGuire, a fellow that went to Boston to coach there, I got to know quite a number of professional basketball players.

LACEY: Now was your mother still working at the Census Bureau all through this time?

COOPER: No. My mother worked at the Census Bureau until she got her degree in Sociology and then she got another masters [degree] or something, and she was hired by the District of Columbia and one of the first to be a guidance counselor, and she became quite well known as a guidance counselor in the district public schools. And that ended that part because the schools had been, no the schools hadn't integrated, but I mean she was assigned to those things.

LACEY: When did you come back to the Census Bureau?

COOPER: I came back to the Census Bureau after the war. That was the end of the war and I came back to the Census Bureau. Everybody at the Census Bureau at this time—I don't know about everybody – I would just say the majority of the people at the Census Bureau tried to do everything possible to help us veterans. Any of us that were veterans and had been in three or four years like we'd been, they didn't ask whether you had faced a bullet, they just say you were there you couldn't get out you had to obey the rules of the Army and Navy and what not. And the people at the Bureau I mean to a great extent tried to end segregation. They weren't able to do it. But they tried as hard as they could. They gave all us veterans real wonderful types of job opportunities and things like that.

PEMBERTON: Do you remember when you went back to the Census Bureau?

COOPER: Yeah. I went back, well I got out at the end of, let's see the war ended, what year did the war end?

PEMBERTON: 1945.

COOPER: 1945. I didn't come back until '46. They gave me a job. They just raised me a grade level and put me in Business Division or something—I'd always worked in machine tabulation and they put me in some division I'd never worked in. They did everything they could to help us returning veterans.

LACEY: Do you remember who you worked for when you moved over to Business?

COOPER: Not really. I mean I don't remember now. There was a supervisor that I remember. Her name was Mary Gibbs (Foreign Trade Division). And she just tried to help all of us veterans. I mean everybody at the Census at that time tried to help us in whatever way they could. And we were still in segregated units. But many of the people there I would say, and my memory's not that dim, I mean my memory's pretty good on how I was treated and to the extent throughout my career at the census. I had people who were pushing me, and helping me to get ahead and sometimes I could go out and preach the census to other people. I wasn't too bad at preaching then [chuckling]. And so by the time the 1960s rolled around and they started to change, I hadn't worked in population or anything like that, I'd always worked in some other division.

LACEY: Before we get into the 1960s, can you give us some kind of idea what you did in Business in the 50s and 60s?

COOPER: I had various jobs. Somehow or another they thought I could supervise a little bit. Now, I supervised exports and imports and then they assigned me to maybe some other division, Geography, something like that, I don't know what it was, but it was something connected with sending out regular census forms and getting the information back, and I would probably be head of the census group and usually given some kind of supervisory task, and then along with that somehow or another I would acquire a secretary [chuckling]. I'd get to that point they'd give me a secretary, and then when the ... I'm trying to get up to 1964 when we went out to Watts [California] and nobody wanted to go.

LACEY: What was your role in the 1960 census? Were you in Population [Division] yet?

COOPER: No. I wasn't in Population. I was still in, let's see, it may have been exports and imports. Because I was head of that section. They got in all the exports and imports that came into the United States and that's why right now I'm having a great problem with eyeglasses because eyeglass frames like this at that time cost 2 cent. They came from Pakistan, they came from India, they came from everywhere all over the world and when we would export them in and you could buy a pair of glasses for \$6, \$8, and now I go try to get a pair of glasses and they say the cheapest they have is \$125 [laughter] and it makes me choke almost and as I said I was working in exports and imports and I know what they cost, they cost 2 cent [laughter]. And I

mean I just had some recent problems with glasses because I hope you don't me just taking them off and putting them on because these glasses here are 30 years old because I broke my new glasses just last week. But I was chief of that section and so what happened...I'm going to jump now let's get to 1963 and the Population Division is talking about changing the method of collecting the data. In other words, instead of hiring people to go door-to-door in all the communities that they've been doing ever since I guess they've been taking census. A fellow became senator from New York had a survey, I mean had a study, what was his name...

PEMBERTON: Javits [Jacob J. Javits]?

COOPER: No. I may even have it in here.

LACEY: We can look that up.

COOPER: Yeah. He became a senator, but before that, this is right after the 1960 census, it was determined that they'd missed so many minorities. Now I had never worked in Population and they had found out that they were going to start revising the whole method of taking the census instead of hiring young people, and generally the people that they hired were young, white housewives who just wanted a temporary job to go to houses during the census period. And they found that in many communities, particularly in the major cities, that the young ladies primarily were not going into black neighborhoods. And so they missed maybe 15-16 percent of black people. They told us that they had a method of trying to determine how they got to that figure, that most people don't object to recording a child when it's born when it's like two minutes old, very few people object to when you're dead that they don't write you up as I mean you don't put up an objection for that, I mean somebody writes your name down that you died at 10:45 and nobody ever says anything about that. Births and deaths are generally recorded every time that they happen, it's recorded good. So anyway, these experts in colleges and things like that came to the census and say we've done all this work now we got to find a way to try so then they say it's mostly in minority communities where this happens, these young ladies were generally young housewives, white, but they weren't going down district. They would sit at home and make out what—they'd say there were two people, two adults and two children but there eight children, there were two adults there but instead of two children there were maybe eight or six. But they didn't go down there, they'd make them out at home, they got the right address, but they wasn't going in those neighborhoods. Now once they got that established, then all these experts say try another process, which is mailout. Never tried it. Mailout/mailback the whole country. The first example of that is going to be Watts. Watts must have had some powerful congressman who said come and do it in my district and they got a lot of black people that live out there and that will give you a chance to find out. Well everybody said fine. So they selected Watts for their first test. But as soon as they got ready to mail out these forms, they started shooting and burning down this place called Watts. And it so happened that the Census Bureau in its wisdom didn't have any black supervisors in California. None. Zero. Of course, the basic Census Bureau, now this is just my evaluation, not necessarily ...the director of gathering data throughout the whole United States the census man was the

boss of all the twelve regional offices, and he did not hire many black people, and he hired a lot of young, female, white census takers and they were the people that weren't going in the houses.

LACEY: Are you talking about the head of Field Division?

COOPER: Head of Field Division. Jefferson [D.] McPike (Chief, Field Division), I know his name, I know a lot of names. [laughing] But Jefferson McPike was the man that was—I didn't know him, I worked at the bureau say 25 years and I did not know him at all because I had never worked in field division. So they asked some of us who were in the census at that time and other divisions would we volunteer to go to Los Angeles because they didn't have any black supervisors out there. And they couldn't get anybody to volunteer. So one of my good friends, Naomi [D.] Rothwell (Housing Division, Coordination and Research Branch Statistician), who was one of the key people in devising this method of how they were going to do it called me one day and said, "Jerry, if they ask you to go, take a chance and go. You've never been in any kind of work like this, you've never been in that division, and said that you might be able to get along with all of them, be able to come back and tell us what happened." And so I did that, because I liked this lady and she was very helpful to us in many ways and her name was Donnie Rothwell and she worked for Tom {Thomas D.} Jabine (Chief, Statistical Research Division). So they selected me and this Mr. McPike, who was head of all these things, called me down one time after they gave me about a three week course in census taking in California. Well they sent a public relations man with me on the airplane, one that worked in public information and he was white, and we get on the plane, we talk, and see the thing that most people didn't know, I'm a nondrinker, been one almost all my life, I mix up ginger ale with soda and say this is gin, I mean I just didn't like to drink. So he took a few drinks and he neglected to tell me that we are on the airplane and as soon as we got to Los Angeles, we were not to go to a hotel or to the office, we're going to a television studio, like I'm facing right now. [laughter] And I said, "Why didn't you tell me? I would have dressed." He said, "No they want you to come and be televised just as we get off the plane." I get off the plane and go in the television studio and I hear this man saying, "Today we have somebody from Washington coming out here to resolve the riots." [laughter] Resolve the riots??? I don't know nothing about no riots! We're going too start a program where we're going to mail some information to the household and tell them to fill out that document—I don't know anything about no—I don't know anything about anything. I don't know if the chief in Los Angeles—he sent somebody down there to greet me. Incidentally, I never did meet him, except over the telephone, and I stayed there 13 months. Because after I got there, there was another thing that came up. When I got on TV (television), and the first thing when I went in there, they started patting my head with a powder puff, so I guess my baldness wouldn't show on the screen or something. And I didn't know—he said, "Now Mr. Cooper, you come out here to resolve the riots." I said, "That's not my job. We are out here to do a test," and I said, "I'm out here basically to hire about 3,000 people." Well I didn't get the 3,000 out because I had said 'hire' and that switchboard started to lighting up and I don't even know which office this is, nobody told me at the address and that switchboard

lit up and they want to know what kind of, what do you need to get a job. "Oh," I said—I'm in heaven now—"[You]} just have to be 18 and above and know how to read and write English." And that's all they wanted to know, where can we apply because that switchboard, I could see on my right over here that thing was just flashing because somebody was calling in there every second wanting to know where these jobs were and they didn't want to talk about nothing else, they didn't want to talk about me resolving the problems of Los Angeles. They wanted to know what it took to get one of those jobs. I must have talked for ten minutes on how the census was going to hire these people and I say the ability to read and write English was the main thing, no specific educational qualification except we did ask that you be a high school graduate. Well I was just talking, I didn't know what really I was talking about, because they hadn't really prepared me for this. And so anyway I got through with that. And everybody said I did alright. And then my brother-in-law [Warren E. Allen], who had just about ten years earlier, or 15 years earlier, had won a Silver Star for killing about 35 or 40 men when he was in a parachute in Korea, coming down in a parachute he was shooting a machine gun and he got a Silver Star for the number of people they thought he might have killed, and he stayed in the Army and had just retired about three weeks prior to that and he saw me on TV and called me that night and he had gone up and watched but he lived in Pasadena now of course. He retired as a major in the Air Force and at that time he came down and we met and we were married to sisters and the one I was married to was the one that became court of appeals judge, Judge Julia Cooper Mack and she was the first black woman to be accorded a federal judgeship in the District of Columbia. So anyway, at that time, we were still good friends and he'd said he'd been out of the army maybe three or four weeks, I said what are you doing? He said, "I'm not doing anything, I'm retired." I said, "How about coming down and helping me." He said, "I hoped that you were gonna say that because I'm being bugged at home." He had a little daughter about 10 or 11 years old with his wife. He came down there the next day. He had grown up in Watts so he knew the whole area, he knew everything. I said all right well you got a job. You are second in command here. And I hired him right there on the spot.

LACEY: What was his name?

COOPER: Warren...what was Warren's last name...I got to have his last name somewhere... [chuckling] When I say I got to have his last name...Warren was his first name...umm Mary, I'm trying to think of their names, I mean their married names, I'll think of it sometime...he was Warren [Allen]. And his wife was Mary, my wife's sister, and they had a daughter. Right now in public relations like you people. But she works for the city of Norfolk and I'm doing all this to try and remember their last name [laughter]. I just remember their first name. But anyway, Warren was there to help me. He'd been in regiment this type of activities all his life. I wasn't much on regimentation but I liked to go talk to people and that's what happened. He started setting up the office and fortunately the Los Angeles people had made the office out in west Los Angeles, wasn't anywhere near downtown or down towards Watts or anywhere like, so people loved to come to where they would be signed up for the work. Now they're going to work down where the burning and the shooting was going on, but it was dying out by the time we

got there. So I assigned myself the task of meeting with the mayor, the city councilman, and people like that. And Warren more or less got into hiring people to give the tests and things like that. We had got enough people to hire and we hired across the board. I mean we had Hispanics, blacks, whites, whoever came in. And they had to take a test and we got it started. One of the unique things was that the Los Angeles director for the census never once came down to my office. Never once. He sent people down there but he never once came himself. And I don't know if that was what the Field Division was made up of then, I didn't press the issue. And it didn't make any difference to me because I played ball with all kinds of people. I mean I think somewhere down the line I played with an Indian, I mean from India, not somebody out there in North Dakota or somewhere and I just didn't know anything about bias and people being discriminated against and naturally my brother-in-law...he had been in an integrated Army, parachuters, he said, "Well you jump out one of them planes and you know everybody's the same color you know or coming down and bullets don't, you know, they hit everybody." He was that kind of person. And me, I was color blind, I just didn't know much about because I had worked with all kinds of people, played with all kinds of people and the people that had helped me at the census had been very kind to me and this was something brand new to me, I never been involved in this type of activity. So anyway we finished up the Watts.

LACEY: How did you conduct the test in Watts?

COOPER: Nobody put up an objection, we would send all the information out back to Washington. Apparently we were doing pretty good.

LACEY: So you would mail out the censuses and then send an enumerator?

COOPER: No, well it was the first time we ever tried this process. The questionnaire had already gone to the household. Now, at the household, if you filled it out and sent it back we didn't send nobody there. Now, if you didn't send it back, then the census enumerators would go to that house. Now this is just a sample, was not all of Watts, just a sample. And got a lot of visitors from Washington coming out trying to find out how was it going, were we able to hire people in sufficient amounts, that they could do the work or do what the census wanted done. And they were getting information and was working out alright. And so when we finished going door to door, and we did so well it got so much notice in Los Angeles that the east Los Angeles people were primarily Hispanic, said why would you leave now, just do east Los Angeles [laughter]. South Los Angeles is primarily black, we got a lot of Hispanics around here that may or may not know how to fill out this document either. The congressman from that district prevailed and we got to stay there for four more months to do east Los Angeles. I stayed out there over a year and but I had friends and I made friends out there. That was the first time that I had ever worked with anybody in the Field Division. Well when I came back to Washington, I went back to the Public Information Office in the census. But Mr. McPike, the Field Division man, said, "Wait a minute, said I got to interview him." He interviewed me and we was sitting down talking and I said, I asked him, I said, "Where did you go to school?" He

said, "I went to University of Indiana." I said, "Your team won the basketball championship in 1940 and 1941, two back-to-back collegiate NCAA championships," and he said, "Yeah that's right." I said you had, and I called their names off, like [Paul C.] Armstrong, whatever his name...I had played with these guys in the Navy, they won the college championship NCAA two years in a row. Now there were two of them, I played with them in California, I played with them on a team that they were also playing, and I knew them. And when I said I knew these basketball players, this Mr. McPike, aaww he just...at that moment...now I'm actually assigned to public information and I guess that's what you all are now and I was assigned to that office. He said, "No got to get him down here," and he was trying to pull all the things he could pull and he would call me every other day or so and we got to be good friends, we got to be Jeff and Jerry. And I got him in the car one day and said, "Let's go to Charlestown [Charlestown Racesm Ranson, WV]." I'm an inveterate horse better [laughter] and he didn't know about horses but we went up there and that's two hours going up to Charlestown and two hours coming back and I got somebody in the car for four hours, we talk and we talk. Next thing I know we went through all of the kinds of things we grew up as young boys. Now I got him in the car four hours going back and forth and we become Jeff and we become Jerry. He must have said to himself because he didn't say it to me he said, "I'm going to get you out of that Public Information Office, I want to have you in the Field Division." Because he was so good with the congressional southerners, nobody would ever dispute Jeff's word. I mean the people around the Bureau they couldn't move him because all these southern congressmen gave Jeff McPike all the money he needed to collect data, he didn't just collect it during the census, he collected it for everything else because he was the boss of all these regional offices. And they had to call him every day and stand up when they called him that's what I said but [laughter] I'm not sure they stood up in their offices. He ran a very tight ship for the Census Bureau and so now the two of us he just keeps telling people he wants me. Now they're going to do a final pretest of the 1970 census and it's going to take place in a place called Trenton, NJ. And somebody around there they got all these scholarly people that they want to go up and the next thing I know this Mr. McPike says, "No the person that's going to run that is going to be Jerry Cooper." And he prevailed. Jerry Cooper came to be all, do all for the last trial that we're going to run before the 1970 – is that it?

LACEY & PEMBERTON: Yes.

COOPER: 1970. And again I didn't call him.

LACEY: So you went to Trenton.

COOPER: I went to Trenton and stayed up there about eight months. And did the final, the whole city. And I could hire people pretty good. I got to know the governor of New Jersey [Richard J. Hughes] and the mayor of Trenton [Carmen J. Armenti]. I got to know everybody. And the thing about it they had selected the place I didn't have anything to do with this they selected a formal furniture store. It was empty but it was also at night time the police were...the prostitutes walked the streets and they came in and asked me [if I would] leave the

lights on in the window [laughter] and so I was being cooperative with the citizens of Trenton. I said, "I don't have an objection to leaving the lights on," and then not only that after I had been up there three or four months I found out that all these young ladies that paraded in the streets around that building at night came in looking for jobs. [laughter] I said hire them! I said they know the area and I hired them! I got to know everybody in the city, the police commissioner and everybody else. They liked that. The fact that I was using the neighborhood people and the children of these people that lived in the neighborhood they know [inaudible] and things and it worked out fine and again I didn't call Mr. McPike but he had my back I know that. Nobody would bother me. And again the director, census director [George Hay Brown], who was right over there in Philadelphia, never once came to see me. He'd always sent somebody. [laughter] Of course when they came to see me I'd take them to some restaurant that I'd been going to all week. I don't drink but everybody around me drinks and they go in these restaurants and tell these bartenders, "Yeah he's done a good job." I pay checks but I just don't like to drink I mean alcohol I mean I tried to drink a beer but I didn't like that either they don't know why I drink so much milk but because I don't drink anything. Anyway, that's the census thing. After finish Trenton, we start decennial and Mr. McPike says, "I got a job for him," and they put me in this job to reduce the black undercount. And he hires me to recruit community educators. Is what we call them? So every regional office was asked to try to recruit and send people to meet with me and we were going try to devise methods that the minority communities would be better represented and so I started recruiting people through the regional offices of the census and one of the unique ones was a fellow named, I'm sort of name dropping now, Vernon Jordan, was a friend of mine and I asked Vernon—during the period right after the...I think it was right after leaving Los Angeles I went up to Harvard to see him. He was in a class for political studies and I told him that the Census Bureau give me a job of recruiting minorities in various regions and centers to help what we're going to do for the 1970 census and I said, "You worked out at Atlanta and I'd like for you to recommend somebody." He was up in Boston and he said ok. I had known him by going around the country and then my mother was a very bigwig in the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She was president of Missouri NAACP, but she was also on the boards of the national NAACP and I had contact with all of NAACP but Vernon recommended somebody [inaudible] and I called him and got his resume and different things and told him...and maybe a week before they were supposed to come and meet with me in Washington from all our regional offices I had recruited these people who were going to go back and just try to find out how we can enhance the ability of minorities of counting and the director down in Atlanta said, "Well uh Mr. somebody one of the Republicans had heard that Vernon Jordan had recommended somebody said they were all Democrats said [we have to get] some Republicans down here [laughing] that I think would serve the same purpose [laughing]." So I called Vernon and told him, "I don't think your recommendations are going to stand," and they sent me another man that I'd never met and when he showed up, I find out that he's a millionaire and he only wants a dollar a year but he just wanted recognition that he's going to be working with this program. He turned out to be a wonderful person.

LACEY: What was his name?

COOPER: [laughing] I'm trying to think of it now! And he had a son that was undersecretary of HUD or something...what was his name...it'll come to me sometime. Anyway he came in to ... a Republican congressman from Georgia at that time sent him and he came up and he loved it and he would go back and get on the telephone and call people and ask them different things but he was very good but he was also a wonderful businessman and had been a real good Republican. I was not one because my mother was a big time Democrat and I got cooked up with the Democrats but I knew that in order to placate most people I would have to hire Republicans if they asked for it because they were the ones in charge.

LACEY: So what did this council do, it devised the field...?

COOPER: No, this group that I'm gathering together now is going to go back to their areas and do whatever they can to enhance minority participation and going to hire minorities. See I'm not necessarily...I mean they weren't going to do it. They were going to try to have the cities and the counties and different people to make sure that they hired minority people. Of course we thought at that point we would get a better count and each regional office was asked to send in three or four people and they did and they would come in and I would sit down and suggest to them various things I mean they had carte blanche to do anything they wanted to do to enhance the community. I was the one getting them football players and athletes that would open doors for me to come in or open doors for them to come in go to their meetings in the cities and try to make people aware that the census form filling it out wasn't going to hurt. We were running into a lot of the community organizations and had a lot of black things, make black count or something...maybe don't make black count. You had people who didn't want to participate or would say so and then the people that I was trying to cage were people who would try to turn them so they could get the data and could get them to come in and apply for jobs and things like that and I was able to get every organization that had anything to do with ... beauty parlor people, the hair dressers I thought of all kinds of crazy things and people that never thought of before and we were able to get them. Well they thought I was a little crazy too sometimes I kind of was during those days. I was a little bit younger, I could talk a lot longer and I like to go in bars and things I wasn't cheap you know I'd run them around a little get a group four or five of them not the whole place [laughing] treat them just trying to do business with people let them that this was a government employee that was trying to help them and we were trying to help them because the better data that they have for the metropolitan areas the better off you are and the city started seeing that. I got to the mayors and to the council people things like that. Particularly I said, "If the governments got a lot of money to give you and don't know where you are how you going to get it?" That was my whole thing—be available to get it if you're there. Well the thing about it the Congress was concerned because they didn't know whether they would lose a congressional seat because if these minorities aren't being counted, well, Texas and California they going to count theirs and a lot of these places on the east coast they definitely going to lose...they're going to lose anyway because

people were moving out of their states but they wanted to make sure that they got everybody counted.

LACEY: And so in 1960 you said there was about 15% undercount of minorities, in 1970 did you see that number improve?

COOPER: Oh yeah we saw it went down to around 3%.

LACEY: Wow.

COOPER: That's what it went down to. I mean in our group, I mean for each regional office, we had a minority group that was assigned to me and I'd bring them in here we'd sit down I'd take them out to my sister's house. I wasn't too much of entertaining 20, 30 people but my sister had a nice swimming pool. Her husband was a major general [Major General Benjamin Hunton]. They helped me and I mean I had a lot of help and they knew it but I wasn't afraid to go to anybody anywhere and see like the people like Vernon Jordan people like that they were just buddies I mean they didn't represent the elite at all because my mother was a bigwig in the NAACP and I could rely on her.

LACEY: So after the 1970 census what job did you move to?

COOPER: Well whatever follow up we needed to do and then I was not threatened, I was getting ready to resign and join a group that had been following me since I was in California in the early 1960s and this was on the side I don't care about it now because I mean everybody knows what happened. A group that handled funeral supplies had approached me about being their representative in the minority community east of Mississippi and I think three weeks before I was supposed to go with them they were found to be the largest transmitter of opium and cocaine [laughing] in these caskets of anybody in the country [laughter] about three weeks before I was supposed to join them. Well naturally I didn't join them [laughing]. [laughter]

LACEY: You stayed at Census Bureau a little bit longer.

COOPER: I stayed at the Census Bureau a little bit longer! Just a little bit because there were some other groups that wanted me to come because I knew where they could get data from and these are the guys that worked primarily, minority people, who worked for large corporations well add to one corporation Best Foods that put out Knorr soups and things like that he was the greatest salesman that they ever had because he would start telling them large home building and home supplies he said who do you think buys all those things we use to clean your kitchens and your households and so the big bosses started to think about that and said, he was implying that maids did all the buying you know the people that worked for them paid for them but the product that they bought, they bought the same kind of products that they liked to use and he could sell that better than anybody in the country and all these big corporations. Then I had another friend very close who Chrysler corporation recruited to help them, he had suggested just in passing one day that if Chrysler had so many minority employees in Detroit in the Michigan area that he was going to try to get the Black Caucus in

Congress and help them get a loan for Chrysler rather than having them go to the international market somewhere, and it passed. So naturally he was the biggest thing in Chrysler and I think Lee Iacocca or somebody like that was the president they wanted to know from me during the course how many people this and that but they got the loan from the United States government. It saved Chrysler. So my friend was really in seventh heaven because they let him do whatever. He would give me jobs and things like that and the Knorr soup man the two of us went into business --

LACEY: After you retired in 1973?

COOPER: After I retired in 1973, when I retired we went into business making data available to any corporation in the country. We'd tell them who's buying it. We would go to them and show them who buys that soap or who buys that cleaner. That maid that's doing the work. The household boss don't buy nothing. I mean they paid for it but the person who goes and actually picks it out is the person who's doing the scrubbing and we figured out at least 40 percent of the people are using minority help. I mean we just lowballed probably more than that.

LACEY: So looking back at your time at the Census Bureau, who did you consider your biggest influence and your biggest mentor when you were there?

COOPER: Naomi Rothwell. Donnie was sort of her nickname. Donnie Rothwell. And she worked for Tom Jabine and Conrad Taeuber [Associate Director for Demographic Fields]. Now today I was going have another person here, Jim Gibson, he was head of the Potomac Institute which was financed by some family named Mellon and he was their head person. Jim Gibson, he was the one that recommended people like me be sought after.

LACEY: And he sat on the advisory committee for the Census Bureau too.

COOPER: He may have been I mean I'm just saying he was the first one that approached ... Naomi Rothwell got him, but she was my big influence and then McPike, the head of the Field Division.

LACEY: What do you think was the biggest change or innovation that you saw during your time because you were there during a pretty exciting time period.

COOPER: The biggest thing I saw at the census was integration. When I first went there we were segregated and all the work programs and anything we did, everything was segregated. Cafeteria, you ate white on one side, black on another. Not necessarily official but it was total segregation. People segregated themselves and in all the jobs for the most part except the executive jobs and at the time that I first went there hardly no blacks in executive jobs and not many women.

LACEY: Looking back on your years at the census were there any decisions during your time there that you would have done differently or things that you wish that you had pursued?

COOPER: Well since I was in sort of a unique position naturally I think after the war I just thought that maybe more things could have been integrated at a faster rate than they did. See because really the whole government didn't integrate really until Mr. Truman won but it took him at least two days [laughing] to change the integration of the government when he got reelected. I guarantee you he was the worst thing that segregationists could have ever run into cos he had been one and he broke it up better than anybody. You couldn't have hired anybody better than Mr. Truman and he said I mean it today not three weeks or a month from now, Today. Because in the service he had put up that sign "Failure to obey a command in time of war is punishable by death" and he had it post on every doorway in the service. That "punishable by death" is a quite a statement and he posted it all over. I had a great deal of admiration for him because he was a real politician and the minority community had voted for him real good and everybody thought Mr. [Thomas E.] Dewey had won including Chicago Tribune with their headline "Dewey wins." But they didn't do that this time with Mrs. Clinton I mean they didn't put Trump wins because they had to wait for California.

LACEY: They probably learned their lesson.

COOPER: Yeah, had to wait for California.

LACEY: So just to wrap up, what's your final thoughts on your time at the Census Bureau?

COOPER: I have to say I liked it because people there were so good to me and I went from segregated units to mixed units and to being able to handle any jobs that they gave us they promoted us to I mean when us I'm using us as just entire black I mean not necessarily the females and males but entire black [inaudible]. They did us as well as possible in my opinion as any government agency that I'd ever heard about. I mean we saw many things that they, you saw the utilization of computers. Many of the minorities worked on the first computer that was ever I mean not the first one but the first one they brought into the federal government had tubes instead of transistors and things like that.

LACEY: Probably because they came over from the keypunch division?

COOPER: Well they started in the keypunch division but they started with the first large computer that was at University of Pennsylvania they brought it down to Suitland and they started a night shift because every day they had to do something every day, they had to charge it up or something. They were using tubes not transistors and things they laid on you put it in your hand a computer. We had several wings [laughing]. We had the whole first wing of the building with nothing but computers and the tubes and things like that. I don't know how they got me mixed up in that because they sent me to Chicago Institute of Technology. I didn't go into all that, to head a unit out there with some census data. Well I knew Chicago well so maybe that's why they sent me to this day I don't really know but it was at the Chicago Institute of Technology. They had three computers at that time. One at an army base in Rochester, some place in California, and the census had one but I never tried to get...they liked me for the fact that I could communicate and I liked to communicate and when I say communicate,

communicate with city officials or with congress people things or things like that. Well my mother was a grade A in that but I could do it pretty well on my own and the census they didn't suffer from that because they tried as best they could to integrate and bring people together because of what their job was to get the data and use it for everybody. I mean the data when you collect it you don't collect it for one set of people, you collect it for everybody, and it was that kind of thing that motivated many of us who worked under the conditions when you segregate us all together, different kind of thing as when you're integrated. Look at my brother-in-law...I mean how do you get to be a major general...I have no idea, no idea in the world how they name a building after you [laughing]. I don't know anything about this the National Guard building out there named after him the one out here in Maryland [MG Benjamin Hunton Memorial Reserve Center].

LACEY: In Gaithersburg.

COOPER: Is it in Gaithersburg? Yeah I heard about it but seemed like every time they had some kind of presentation I was always out of the city or something, but my sister she brought me here and she passed away about a year ago and but she and Bennie, they did a good job. She was an integrationist too and seems like I don't know about the Army but seems they let the women they big bosses. I mean my sister was just as big a boss as he was [laughing] so I don't know about that.

LACEY: Well on that note we thank you for your time. We thank you for sitting down and sharing your memories with us, especially during your time at the Census Bureau.

COOPER: I looked forward to this when they told me about it and just one final thing I'm going to give you this thing that Sammy Johnson wrote up, we wrote up a lot of things and I heard that nobody could hardly find them, a lot of things...when we finished the 1970 census we had a lot of things on tape but it was ancient kind of tape then and not like you all got these transistors and I don't think we had transistors then.

LACEY: Well thank you very much.

COOPER: Thank *you*.