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Civil Rights in the National Park Service Oral History Project



Thaddeus Bell, M.D.
February 5, 2021

Interview conducted by Lu Ann Jones and James Harper II
Transcribed by Teresa Bergen
508 compliant version by Lauren Pash

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

With

THADDEUS BELL, M.D.

5 February 2021

Interview conducted by
Lu Ann Jones and James Harper II

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The narrator has reviewed this transcript.

[START OF TRACK 1]

00:00

James Harper II: Okay, so we're about to begin. The time is now 1:30. So once I press record, I'll let everybody know that we're recording. And then I'll organize my screen so I can begin to ask the questions. So, are you ready, Dr. Bell?

Thaddeus Bell: Yes.

James Harper II: Dr. Jones?

Lu Ann Jones: Yes.

James Harper II: Okay. We are now recording. Today's interview is being conducted by Dr. Jim C. Harper II, chair of the Department of History at North Carolina Central University and member of Omega Psi Phi fraternity, Incorporated. The second half of this interview will be conducted by Dr. Lu Ann Jones, the oral history program coordinator for the National Park Service. The date is February 5, 2021. And this interview is taking place virtually on Zoom. Thank you for allowing us to talk with you about your career and your experience as a park ranger for the National Park Service while you were a student at South Carolina State University. For the record, please state your name, when you were born, where you were born and grew up.

Thaddeus Bell: Well, thank you very much, very, very much, for asking me to be a part of this program today. I'm Dr. Thaddeus John Bell. I was born in Columbia, South Carolina, May 17, 1944.

James Harper II: What did your parents do for a living? And how did each of them influence you?

Thaddeus Bell: My mother was a schoolteacher, and of course she influenced me because she was a very, she was a humanitarian type of person. She gave to everybody. I can remember times when she would actually be driving from one place to another, and if she saw a piece of junk out on the street, she would stop and pick it up and bring it home and make us fix it and give it to someone in the neighborhood who could use it. So, she was just that type of person. At the school that she worked at, she worked in the rural community, and it was not uncommon for her to take clothing and food to the students of the parents where she taught school to give it to them. So, she was a very, very giving type of person.

Thaddeus Bell: I remember when I was growing up, she would oftentimes make me go to elderly people's homes and clean up the home. Then she would say, "You'd better not accept any money if they offer you any." So, I remember doing that all the way until I graduated from high school. Very, very important lesson.

Thaddeus Bell: My father was a barber. Tenth-grade education. A very smart man. Interestingly enough, his barbershop was between two HBCUs, Allen University and Benedict College. Dr. Harper, you'll appreciate this. So, he had the opportunity to rub shoulders with a lot of African American professors and teachers at these two schools. I remember one day I saw him with a dictionary. One Sunday afternoon he was looking up words in the dictionary. I asked him, "What are you doing?"

Thaddeus Bell: He said, "You know, these professors, these Black people that I'm coming in contact with, they use these words that I don't understand sometimes. So, I write them down and then I look them up so when they use these words, I will be able to know what they're talking about." So, over the years, he developed quite a vocabulary. And so, when he spoke to people, he sounded like he was a college grad.

Thaddeus Bell: He was also a man of principle. He always told me that your word is your bond. So, if you promise someone that you are going not do something, you don't tell them that you can't do it You are dutybound to make sure that you follow through with that.

Thaddeus Bell: Of course, being a barber, he was very conscientious about how he looked. So, he always told me, he said, "You can always tell a good man by looking at his head, see whether or not he has a fresh haircut, and looking at his shoes to see whether or not they're shined." (laughs)

Thaddeus Bell: And so, I came up with two very, very good parents who played a major role in the life of my siblings as well as myself.

05:59

James Harper II: How many siblings did you have?

Thaddeus Bell: I have two brothers and one sister. Dr. Harper, my brothers—my fraternity brothers as well as my brothers—Dr. Gary Bell, who is a CPA and has a PhD in healthcare administration. My youngest brother is an RN nurse. And then I have a sister who is a retired school principal out of Norfolk, Virginia.

James Harper II: What was life like growing up in your hometown?

Thaddeus Bell: Well, I grew up in Columbia, South Carolina. In my early life, I grew up in the projects of Allen Benedict Court. I didn't know that we were poor people. Hell, I thought everybody grew up in the projects. But when my parents, when my dad--I remember in the fifth grade, my dad bought our family home, which we lived in for more than fifty years. We just sold it, by the way. So, I had a very wholesome childhood. I went to Carver Elementary School, went to [W. Curry?] High School went to C.A. Johnson High School. If I had the time to give you the names of

some of the people that I graduated with, you would really be impressed. One of those people would be, Dr. Harper, our fraternity brother, Charles Bolden, who's an astronaut, all right? So, I grew up, there were a lot of Charles Boldens at the high school that I went to. So, I had a very, very wholesome childhood. I still have high school friends that I communicate with on a regular basis.

Thaddeus Bell: If there was a downside of my childhood, when my parents bought their first home, the place that they bought this home, I guess it was kind of middle-class. So, in order to get to my high school, I would have to run through a white neighborhood in order to get to my high school. So, I spent a lot of time running, okay. And that really is kind of interesting because it had a lot to do with some other things that I did later on in life that I'll tell you about.

08:55

James Harper II: While you were in school during your formative years, were there any influential teachers? Were you a part of any extracurricular activities, like football, the STA, if they had those back then?

Thaddeus Bell: Yes. I went to C.A. Johnson High School in Columbia, South Carolina. Which was, we were known, well, let's put it this way--most of my teachers in high school had master's degrees or were PhDs, okay? It was really kind of interesting, because I went to this school during a period of segregation. So, the people that taught me, they could only be schoolteachers, lawyers, college professors in HBCUs. Okay? That was all that was available to them. So, I grew up with outstanding high school teachers. I knew what a PhD was, and I knew the importance of education. I knew all of those things.

Thaddeus Bell: I was particularly influenced by Charles Bolden, who is the father of the astronaut Charles Bolden, who also by the way, Brother Harper, was one of our fraternity brothers. So, I grew up, I grew up, he was our football coach. He had a major influence on me because not only was he a graduate of Johnson C. Smith University, which I knew all about because he used to talk about it all the time, but he was a great historian. So, I played football for him, but I was also in his class. So, we knew about Black history. I had some concept of what that was all about.

Thaddeus Bell: One particular instructor that I remember, he was my advisor during the time that I was in high school. I was the winner of the national science fair. I represented South Carolina at the World's Fair in 1962. I won the national, international science fair, and I represented South Carolina in Seattle, Washington. The person who was my teacher was the person who helped me do that science fair project, and so he had a major influence. Of course, I was fortunate enough to have a doctor in my family who played a major role, was a great role model for me in becoming a physician. So, I was surrounded by, I was surrounded by good people, I was surrounded by role models. Men and women.

12:06

James Harper II: How about extracurricular activities? Any athletics?

Thaddeus Bell: Yes. I played football when I was in high school. I was a very good football player in high school. In fact, I received a couple of scholarship. But my dad was not impressed with me being a football player. And he said, "Look, I want you to concentrate on your academics in school and graduate on time. Because I don't have a whole lot of money. And you repeating courses and repeating a year, and you've got three other brothers and sisters that I need to try to get out of school." So, I played football, and I did the national science fair in the time that I was in high school. So those two things.

Thaddeus Bell: It was very, very important for me when I was in high school to not be perceived as a jock. I always was aware that it's all right to be a good athlete, but you also need to let people know that you can think and you [unclear]. So, it was very, very important to make sure that I projected that type of image when I was growing up in high school. So that's what I tried to do.

James Harper II: So, prior to you going to college, were there any other transformative moments in your life? Any other events or memories that you'd like to share?

13:45

Thaddeus Bell: Yeah, you know, as far as Black history is concerned, my parents were very, very much involved in the movement. My mother could not be as involved because she taught school in the public-school system. Therefore, African Americans had to be very, very careful lest they lose their jobs if they were very out front on civil rights issues.

Thaddeus Bell: My father, however, was a barber, and he was very much out front. I remember one Sunday afternoon he was sitting down writing a letter. I asked him, "Who are you writing a letter to?" He was writing a letter to Orval Faubus. Now you may not remember, but Orval Faubus was the governor of Arkansas at the time of the Arkansas Nine. When the first African Americans integrated schools in Arkansas. He was writing a letter chastising Orval Faubus because he would not call in the National Guard to protect those Black school children. I was very, very impressed with that. He never heard from him, and Orval Faubus probably tore up the letter. But the mere fact that he thought enough, he wanted to do something, he thought enough to sit down and write that letter. It made an impression on me. I never will, I never will forget that as long as I live. Then, of course, my dad was a, he was a good father. He worked hard. He did the best he could with what he had.

James Harper II: What college did you attend for your undergraduate studies, and what was your major?

Thaddeus Bell: I attended South Carolina State College. It's now a university, an HBCU in Orangeburg, South Carolina. I had excellent role models while I was at South Carolina State. Most of them were members of Omega Psi Phi fraternity. So, it didn't take me long to figure out that's the direction that I was going to go. Dr. Louis [Roche?], who was the chairman of the Natural Science Department at South Carolina State was one of my role models. Another one of my role models was a gentleman who recently passed away. You probably heard about it. Mr. Frank Staley. Frank Staley passed away at age ninety, ninety-one years old. These were men who taught school at South Carolina State College. Frank Staley was my mathematics professor. And then, of course, there was a lady at South Carolina State College that I worked for for the entire four years that interview as there. Her name was [Avelle Stewart?]. Dr. Stewart was the first African American to get a PhD in biology from Clemson University. She taught me, she did this after I graduated from South Carolina State College. She was very, very tough on me. I worked for her for four years. And I never shall forget, she gave me a C. I asked her, I said, "My average is better than a C. Why did you give me a C?"

Thaddeus Bell: She said, "I gave you a C because you can do better than a B. I wanted to send you a message to do better." I was mad with her until I graduated. (laughter) But after I got my MD degree, I got back in contact with her to let her know how appreciative I was. So yes, I had a lot of good role models while I was in South Carolina State College for sure.

Thaddeus Bell: Then, of course, I got a master's degree from Atlanta University. At the time that I got my master's degree, Atlanta University was the premier African American graduate school that you could go to in the United States. I don't know whether you knew that or not. But it had a reputation of not letting you graduate unless you had your stuff together. And so, I got a scholarship to go to Atlanta University to get my master's degree in science education. Because I was still teaching school. So, I'm very proud to be a graduate of South Carolina State College and Atlanta University, which is now called Atlanta Clark University.

19:07

James Harper II: Did you become a member of Omega Psi Phi in college?

Thaddeus Bell: (laughs) I certainly did. In 1965, April the fifteenth. In the fall of 1965, I went over in the Omega Psi Phi fraternity. In fact, I just got my fifty-fifth-year pin. I became a life member of Omega Psi Phi fraternity in 1972. It was the year that I entered medical school. and I never shall forget that being a life member of a fraternity was so important to me. When they came out with the life membership thing, it was three hundred dollars. That's how much the life membership cost. So, I didn't have three hundred dollars. But what I did is I saved my lunch money that my wife was giving me every week to buy lunch when I was in medical

school. I saved it up until I got three hundred dollars. So as a result, my life membership number is 327; 327. Yeah, so Omega Psi Phi was very, very important to me. I think the thing that was so important to me, I've got hooked on the cardinal principles, which to me was a natural. Because I was already brought up with manhood, scholarship, perseverance, and uplift; I already knew about those things before I became a member of Omega Psi Phi fraternity. Because my parents used to emphasize those kind of things to my brother and myself all of the time. So, joining Omega Psi Phi fraternity was just a natural.

James Harper II: How many were a part of your process, how many LBs did you have? Line brothers?

Thaddeus Bell: Well, you know, I had nine-line brothers. I think that I may be the only one that's still living. I may be the only one. There were nine of us that, I think I'm the only one that's still living.

21:30

James Harper II: And what is the name of your chapter, undergraduate chapter?

Thaddeus Bell: Xi Psi Chapter.

James Harper II: And which chapter are you currently affiliated with now?

Thaddeus Bell: Interestingly enough, I'm affiliated with two chapters now. That's a little bit unusual. I'm affiliated with Epsilon Nu Nu, which is the brand-new chapter that they just started in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. So, I wanted to be, I live in Mt. Pleasant, and I know all the brothers that live over there. So, they asked me would I help them get that chapter started, and I said absolutely. So, I checked with the DR, and he told me that I could help make that happen. So, I wanted to be one of the original brothers in that chapter.

Thaddeus Bell: But my other chapter is Iota Beta Beta, which is in Saint Stephens, South Carolina. So, I serve as the health initiative chairman in both of those chapters, and I thoroughly enjoy it. I thoroughly enjoy it.

James Harper II: Did you hold any offices or committee chairmanships as an undergraduate or currently?

Thaddeus Bell: As an undergrad, I was never interested in the politics of the fraternity. However, my senior year, I was Omega Man of the Year at Xi Psi. And I've been Omega Man of the Year at every chapter that I've been a part of.

Thaddeus Bell: As far as holding any office, no. But I've always been very, very active. Of course, on the district level, I'm the chairman of the health initiative committee, and have been its only chairman. Brother Charles Worth, Dr. Charles Worth was

the person who's made me the chairman of that committee. So, I have taken that committee to another level. Of course, during this pandemic, we have been very, very busy educating the brothers of the Sixth District about the perils of the coronavirus.

24:12

James Harper II: What year did you graduate from South Carolina State University?

Thaddeus Bell: I graduated from South Carolina State in 1966.

James Harper II: At this time, Dr. Lu Ann Jones is going to take over the interview.

Lu Ann Jones: So, this is the advantage of me being an outsider and not knowing the fraternity inside and out. So, what does it mean to be a line brother? What's the importance of that?

Thaddeus Bell: The line brothers are the brothers that you went through hell with trying to become a member of Omega Psi Phi fraternity. Now, we don't do the kinds of things the young men that we used to do back during the day, all right? But when you became a lamb, that was the initial stage of becoming a member of Omega Psi Phi fraternity, for about three months you went through hell because you were at the beck and call of all of the brothers on the campus. You literally had to do everything that they asked you to do. And it was hell. So, you learned a lot of things, you bond with a lot of people. You spend almost 24/7 with your line brothers. You just got to be very, very close. So, your line brothers remain some of your best friends for the rest of your life. I think that's the best way to explain it.

Thaddeus Bell: Even today, you will find that brothers will try to get together with their line brothers to relive what they went through as they became members of Omega Psi Phi fraternity. So, line brothers are very, very special.

26:18

Lu Ann Jones: Great. Thank you. Thank you so much. I think I told you; I heard the discussion that you and Mr. Etheridge and Mr. Baptiste were part of last summer. So really fascinated with that conversation. And had also heard about your getting together in Charleston at an ASALH [Association for the Study of African American Life and History] meeting, I believe. I don't know if you were part of that.

Thaddeus Bell: Yes.

Lu Ann Jones: So, I am fascinated. So how did you learn about this seasonal position in the National Park Service? How did that even come about?

Thaddeus Bell: Well, I was a junior at South Carolina State College. And I was made aware that the dean called everybody in the dorm together in a meeting one Sunday afternoon and told us that a representative from the Department of Interior was going to be visiting our campus. And that he was specifically looking for young African American men to be a part of the National Park Service—I didn't know what the National Park Service was; I had no idea—to be park rangers. I said, hmm. That sound like something I'd like to do. So, the dean said that he was going to select fifty people for the representative from the Department of Interior to talk to, and out of the fifty people, the representative was going to select three people. So, he interviewed all of us. He interviewed me. I think it was my background, but I was selected to be one of the park rangers at Yosemite National Park in Yosemite, California. I had never heard of Yosemite National Park. I had never been outside of the state of South Carolina. The mere fact that I was going to be going to work in Yosemite National Park for three months during the summer was, I was just blown away by that. My family was very thrilled about it. So, it was the beginning of a wonderful experience.

Thaddeus Bell: Not only was I selected, but two people that I knew very well. I knew Jim Etheridge very well. I have a very good friend by the name of Robert Bradley. He was also selected. And so, it was just very, very special.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, you said you had a great upbringing. But still, what gave you the confidence, I guess, to say okay, I'm going to go the whole way across the continent to this place I've never heard of before and doing something I'm not quite sure what it is?

29:40

Thaddeus Bell: Well, I've never lacked confidence. I always felt that I could get along with people. I had relatives out in California, in Los Angeles, California, and I got in contact with them. They thought it was the funniest thing that I was going to be a park ranger. They say, "You're going to be a *what?!?*"

Thaddeus Bell: I said, "I'm going to be a park ranger out at Yosemite National Park." Now to put this in some historical context, the governor of California at that time was Ronald Reagan, all right? I went to California the year that they had the Watts Riot. That's the year that I went. The movement that was going on in the country at that time was the hippie movement. Woodstock had just taken place or was about to take place. So, I had been kind of reading about all these things. To go out to California where all of this stuff was happening, I just thought it was just a great opportunity, and so I looked forward to it.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, you know, and I think the civil rights movement as it was unfolding in California might have been a little different than in the East. I mean, you were going to have pretty soon the Black Panther Party emerge there as a significant

part. So, any thoughts about just what, in terms of civil rights, in addition to just general cultural change, you encountered there.

Thaddeus Bell: I had a wonderful experience. I was aware that I was doing something that was going to make a difference for the first time. Because the person who they sent to interview us told us that the government was interested in making sure that African American men had the opportunity to be a part of the National Park Service and to be park rangers. And so, I did have a sense that I was doing something that no other person had had that opportunity to do for the first time.

Thaddeus Bell: Of course, before we went out there, the dean met with us. He said, "Now look. Don't screw this up. Don't get into any trouble because other men are going to be coming behind you." So, I was aware of all of that. And then, of course, being from the kind of parents that I was from, I wasn't about to screw it up, okay?

Thaddeus Bell: Then of course, the other thing is, I'd never made that much money before. I mean, I was like a GS-4. Back during that time, GS4s during the summer made more money than schoolteachers in South Carolina during the regular year. So, I was making more money as a park ranger during the summertime than most schoolteachers were making during the same amount of time in South Carolina. So, it was a financial opportunity, also, that I appreciated.

33:08

Lu Ann Jones: Well, do you happen to remember what that salary was?

James Harper II: Yeah. I was making about \$4500 a year. You've got to remember, that was 1965. All right? So, to be able to make that kind of salary in three months, oh, I was doing well. Because I had already had jobs as a lifeguard at various Boy Scout camps and Girl Scout camps, and I wasn't making that kind of money. And then of course to have the experience. Now, grant you, I had to spend money in order to buy my uniform and all of that. But hell, I didn't care. My parents helped me do that, too, you know? It's good.

Lu Ann Jones: What did you think of that uniform?

Thaddeus Bell: You know, I was, it's interesting that you should ask me that question. Because when I got that uniform, I wore it to church. I wore this big hat to church and the green uniform. And you know, people were so proud of me because what this represented. I said, "Hey, listen, I'm getting ready to go be a park ranger out at Yosemite National Park. So, my family and friends, they just thought it was a great thing. And it was. It was. And I notice that the uniform hasn't changed. The material has changed, but the basic uniform has not changed. You know, the wide hat. You know, the knee pads and the gray shirt.

Thaddeus Bell: And then, you know, the interesting thing. When I first got to Yosemite National Park, my first assignment was at Arch Rock entrance station. So, my job was to collect money and give people tickets, and give them instruction about the park, things you are not to do. So that was my job for the first year. But when I went back the second year, they gave me a promotion. So, they put me in the center of the park, and I was the radio dispatcher. So that means that I knew everything that was going on all over the park. Because I was responsible for sending cars, sending rangers and everything. So, everything came to the center part of the park. I was on the radio dispatching all accidents, all emergencies. I was right there, the person who was making it happen. So, I thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed that. As a result, I made friends from people all over the park. Because I was told, people said, "Thad, we can always tell when you come on, when your shift starts, because no one sounds like you." (laughter) I had a very Southern drawl, at least they said so. So, they could tell that my personality came out through the mic. And so, it was a good experience.

36:45

Lu Ann Jones: Well, how did you get to California from South Carolina?

Thaddeus Bell: Now, you know, that was an interesting experience. I had only flown once or twice. My first-time flying was when I won the national science fair, because I flew from Columbia to Seattle, Washington. But other than that, I had never flown before. So, my parents said, "Look, we don't have enough money to give you to fly. So, you're going to go by the train." So, I took a train from Columbia, South Carolina, to California. It took me five days. (laughter) Brother Harper, I had more chicken in chicken boxes than you could shake a stick at. (laughter) My mother made me about three or four days of chicken, and I ate chicken sandwiches the whole time out there. I flew back, though. I said no, I ain't going back like this. But it was quite an experience.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, the advantage of the train is that you get to see the countryside.

Thaddeus Bell: Yeah, yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: So, what did you think as you were going west? At least on the ground for the first time.

Thaddeus Bell: I did see the countryside. I remember I got to Yosemite late, though, because there were a couple of floods. So particularly the route that I was supposed to be taking, they had to change my ticket to go around the floods that I would have had to encounter if I had stayed on the original route. But I tell you what, I had my train ride across America. I saw a lot of America (laughs) riding on the train. I certainly did.

Lu Ann Jones: So then, do I understand correctly, you took a bus into Yosemite? Or how did you get from LA to—

38:46

Thaddeus Bell: Yeah. I got to LA. My cousin said well look, we think you should take a bus from Los Angeles to Yosemite, which is up in the mountains. So, I took a bus there. It only took a day, so that was good. id

Lu Ann Jones: So, did you go to Los Angeles? Was that the place that you arrived at in California?

Thaddeus Bell: Yeah. I went to Los Angeles. Because I had cousins there that I had never seen, okay? My grandmother said, “Look, you got cousins there.” And she got in contact with them. So, I mean, I had like about thirty cousins out there, and they all came to see me. So, to this very day, I have a relationship with them. So, from that standpoint, it was quite an experience.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, you mentioned the Watts riots. Were they actually going on when you arrived? Or that summer? Or was that at another time?

Thaddeus Bell: No. The Watts riots occurred in '65. So, I was working in the park when the Watts riots went down. I never shall forget, during the time we worked in the Park Service, we would have days off. So, I told my mom that I wanted to go down to Los Angeles and spend my days off with my cousins. And so, when I rolled into Los Angeles on the Greyhound bus, the Watts riots had started. My mom said, told me, “Call me soon as you get to Los Angeles.” I called her, and she said, “Get back on the bus and go back to Yosemite.” (laughs) She said, “Don’t spend any time there.” So, I did. I called my cousin and said, “Hey, look, I got my marching orders to get back on the bus and go back to Yosemite.” So, I did. I went back to Yosemite. I eventually went back to Los Angeles, only after the Watts riots were over.

Thaddeus Bell: And see, the Watts riots were in Compton, California. That’s exactly where my cousins lived. All right? Now none of their stuff got burned down, but it was like one or two streets over. That’s how I remember Compton very, very well. So, when I went back to Los Angeles, they took me over there to where, so I saw where that happened firsthand.

41:33

Lu Ann Jones: Had your family gone out there during World War Two, by any chance, for jobs? Or how had they—

Thaddeus Bell: My grandmother, first cousin, lived in California. So, she maintained a relationship with them. And that’s how she told me, “Look, you got cousins are

out there. And we going to get in contact with them, and they going to take care of you.”

Lu Ann Jones: Got you. So, what did you think of Yosemite National Park when you first saw it?

Thaddeus Bell: I was blown away. I had never seen anything like that in my entire life. I didn't even know that such beauty existed. And I was like twenty years old. So, I oftentimes during by days off would take these hikes. Oftentimes by myself. Yosemite is about the size of Vermont, okay? So, you can go on hikes into the mountains, you can go across the deserts, across the plains. I just had a chance to see beauty that I never knew even existed, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. And you can tell, though, that I was from South Carolina because I always hiked with the wrong kind of shoes on. I didn't know anything about hiking boots. My whole world was Allstar Converse shoes. (laughter) Can you imagine, a young Black boy from South Carolina walking down the John Muir Trail in a pair of Allstar Converse? (laughs) So it took me a while to learn hey, no, you don't wear those kind of shoes out here. Listen, it was a learning experience. I had to learn a whole lot of things. I had never heard of rock climbing. And I learned how to do that when I was out there.

Lu Ann Jones: Wow.

43:58

Thaddeus Bell: You know, how to rappel off a mountain. I was twenty-one, twenty-two years old. I was willing to try it and I learned how to do it pretty good. But I didn't know you had to have special kind of clothes to do that, being from South Carolina.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, I think you also said during the summer program that you, did you run the Falls Trail, the Yosemite Falls Trail?

Thaddeus Bell: Yeah. I was young, I was like twenty-one years old, and I was in great physical shape when I went out there. It was not unusual for me to run. Instead of walking the trail, I run the trail. I jogged it. So, I never shall forget, when I was working at Yosemite Falls, there was a trail they called the Yosemite Falls Trail. It was that the bottom of the valley and it was switchbacks, about three miles of switchbacks. And it was very popular. So, I said you know, I think I'm going to run the trail. I used to run it all the time. People were walking. They'd see me, I'd come running in my Allstars shoes, by the way. (laughter) So I tore up a lot of shoes, it took me a while to learn, don't do this, don't do this in tennis shoes. You need to get you some, you need to get you some boots. Hiking boots.

Thaddeus Bell: But here is the other thing. Here is the other thing. I met people from all races. Which was new for me, being a young Black male from Columbia, South Carolina. Went to an all-Black high school, all-Black university. Most of the other rangers were white people, okay? So, I learned, I developed very close friendships

with the people who didn't look like me. Which was new for me, and a new experience. And that was good. That was good.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, where did you live at Yosemite? What was your housing like there?

46:39

Thaddeus Bell: The first year that I was at Yosemite, I worked at Arch Rock Entrance Station. And Arch Rock, all entrance stations have housing for park rangers to live. So, I lived in the house that was provided for me at Arch Rock Entrance Station.

Thaddeus Bell: When I got moved up, my second year in Yosemite, I worked right there in headquarters. So right across from headquarters was a dormitory that they had set up for the park rangers. So, I could just literally walk out of my dorm right to headquarters. So, my last two years, I lived on the valley floor, which was headquarters.

Thaddeus Bell: My third year, by the way, got to be even more interesting. Because they told me that I could do anything I wanted to, all right? So, I decided that I wanted to ride a horse through the campgrounds. So, I had to learn how to ride, and that was an amazing experience. Because I got a chance to get off the horse, talk to people, sit down and have picnics with people, etcetera. So that was truly an amazing experience. Thoroughly enjoyed that.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, it sounds like you really won the confidence of your supervisors. And that's always important to have a good relationship with your supervisor. So, can you talk some about those relationships over the course of those three years?

Thaddeus Bell: When I got to Yosemite, my presence there kind of spread like wildfire. "There's a Black guy down at Arch Rock. He's really, really nice." So, I never shall forget the superintendent of Yosemite came down to meet me. And we just hit it off. So, he told me, he said, "Well, when you come back next year, I'm bringing you to the center of the park." His last name was Boyd. I oftentimes wonder what happened to Superintendent Boyd. He introduced me to his family. He just made me feel like I was, he just made me feel very, very special, and I never shall forget that. It was genuine. It was really, really—you know, even at that young age, you knew when people were genuine, okay? So even during the time that I left the park, he stayed in touch with me. I remember when I got married, he said, "Well, Thad, if you want to come back to the park, you can come back." And I did go back. Because after I got married, and I'd already been teaching school. But hell, I was making more money at the park than I was teaching school. So, I went back out to California. (laughs) So that's what I did. It was a very, it was a very, very good experience.

50:09

- Lu Ann Jones: Well, what about the reception from your fellow seasonal rangers or other rangers? I mean even today, African American employees can tell me some kind of horror stories in terms of the reception they, or incidents they've had, I'll put it that way. Was there ever any trouble? I mean, bad feelings along those lines?
- Thaddeus Bell: I must tell you that I cannot think of any—I remember, the only thing that was different is white people were surprised to see a Black ranger. But other than that, I really had to be careful because people would stand in line just to talk to me. I was almost like a celebrity. And I was working, I'm supposed to be working, I'm supposed to be greeting other people, and they want me to sign their autograph. So, I did not, where I was, I did not experience any major hostility at all. None.
- Lu Ann Jones: And that was true from visitors as well?
- Thaddeus Bell: That was from visitors. And you know what? I'll tell you; I had an interesting experience. So, I'm working at Arch Rock and I'm selling tickets. Lo and behold, some people from South Carolina State visits the park, all right? So, they said, "Thad Bell, what are you doing out here?" It was so funny because I didn't know that they were coming. They didn't know that I was there. We later had dinner together that night. So that was an interesting experience. So, it just goes to show you, you can go halfway around the world and suddenly you're going to see somebody or meet somebody that you're going to know.
- Lu Ann Jones: Well, on the one hand you saw some home folks there. But Yosemite, at least today, and I expect even some then is a pretty international park. Did you encounter international visitors at that time? Particularly from Asia?
- Thaddeus Bell: Yes. Yes. There were a lot of dignitaries that were brought to Yosemite from all over the world. We had a lot of people visiting from all over the world. I remember one time even the governor had a group of people that he sent to Yosemite to view the beauty of the place. That's when I began to learn about national parks throughout the entire country.
- Thaddeus Bell: You know, I haven't been back to Yosemite since that time. My daughter and I were planning on going this past summer, but the pandemic hit. So, I'm hoping that I'm still going to be in good enough health. I know I won't be able to run up and run back and forth in the switchbacks. (laughs) But I certainly would like to be able to walk the John Muir Trail and all of these other trails.
- Thaddeus Bell: Here's something, and experience, too, that I never shall forget. They had a big fire out in Yosemite. They asked rangers would they want to volunteer to fight. So, I said yeah, yeah, I definitely want to volunteer to do that. I thought when you fought a fire, they gave you a water hose and you just shoot water on the fire. I didn't know that you had to dig trenches and cut trees down and set fire lanes, and that's what I had to do. So that came as a marked surprise to me. I never shall

forget, I'm working down there for about three days, and I said no, I don't want to do this no more. I don't want to do this no more. It was quite an experience.

54:30

Lu Ann Jones: Well, that's the thing about the Park Service is you can end up doing just a little bit of anything when you're a seasonal ranger.

Thaddeus Bell: That's exactly right. And you know, here's the other thing. I went on a couple of rescue missions where it turned out to be a tragedy. People fell or we had to recover the bodies. Here's another thing, too, that I remember. When I went to Yosemite, I was one of the few people in the park. And so, I had to go get a haircut. So, I walked into this barbershop. So, there are three white barbers. So, I said, "Have any of you all ever cut any Black people's hair?" So, this one guy said, "No, I never cut any Black people's hair, but I like to learn."

Lu Ann Jones: On you.

Thaddeus Bell: He said, "If you let me cut your hair, I won't charge you for it because I'd like to learn how to do it." So, for a couple of weeks, he messed up my hair. But oftentimes he would cut it, we'd have to cut it off because he'd just screw it up. But we got to be very, very good friends. I walked into the barbershop one Saturday and the barbers told me that he was killed in an automobile accident coming to work. So about two days later, his family got in contact with me and asked me would I come to the funeral. I didn't even know that his family knew me. His family, his mother said that "My son used to talk about you all the time. You're the first Black person he ever met. And he used to talk about the conversations that you all had. And I would love for you to come to his celebration." And so, I did. I went to the celebration. It was unlike anything that I'd ever experienced, because I was accustomed to going to funerals in South Carolina where everybody's sad. But at this celebration, it was a big picnic. It was just a big picnic. Lots of food. People playing music. You know, they said some words about him and etcetera. And that's the way they celebrated his life. So, it gave me a different perspective. It gave me a different perspective. But I never shall forget that as long as I live. He was young. I was young. But he lost his life coming to work. Because there were a lot of curves in Yosemite. And I think he tried to negotiate a curve too fast and ran off the cliff or something.

57:22

Lu Ann Jones: I've talked to people who were search and rescue rangers at Yosemite and there's a lot of accidents there. So, when you would be called out on a search and rescue mission, or perhaps it was going to be sadly recovery, did you, did they give you any kind of preparation for that? I mean, that can be kind of hard work.

Thaddeus Bell: They did. They did give me, yes. We did. We did do that. And then after a while, I got called out on a lot of them. Particularly the search and rescue where we would have to recover bodies. But I tell you what I did do. I was working at the central station, dispatching. A lady called in and she said, "I just saw a man jump off of the El Capitan." That's one of the big mountains in Yosemite. She said, "I just saw this man jump off the El Capitan with a parachute. And he never did land." So, I thought she was pulling my leg. But two or three other calls came in saying the same thing. Well, it was true. A man jumped off the El Capitan with a parachute. But he did not jump far enough out. And so therefore he killed himself because the parachute got hung up on a ledge, okay? And I said, wow, that's absolutely—but now, people do that all the time. And in fact, they have climbed the El Capitan, because the face of it is flat as my hand. And they've had people start at the bottom and go to the top. So, I'm always amazed that I used to hear those stories how people could do that. Quite an experience.

Lu Ann Jones: Well so that third, so did you leave the second year assuming you would go back a third year when you left Yosemite?

Thaddeus Bell: When I left the second year, the second year I'd just graduated from South Carolina State. The Vietnam War had already started.

1:00:00

[END OF TRACK 1]

[START OF TRACK 2]

Thaddeus Bell: They wrote me, I got a letter from my draft board telling me come back to Columbia and sign up for the draft. So, I wrote them back and said well, I'm out in California working as a park ranger. So, they wrote me back and said, well, go to Fresno, California, and sign up, which I did do. The only thing that kept me out of the service at that time was teaching school. So, my life took a change. Because I got the opportunity, I was recommended by the folk in South Carolina State to be the first Black teacher in an all-white high school in South Carolina. I was working out in Yosemite National Park when that happened. So, I could either take the job or go to the army. I decided, take the job.

Thaddeus Bell: So, I ended up in Gaffney, South Carolina, where I was the first Black teacher in an all-white high school in Gaffney, South Carolina. So, I stayed there for a year before I got married. So that kept me out of the perils of the military. Because at that time, there were not enough schoolteachers. So, they gave you a choice. You could either go to the service or you could teach school. I never planned on teaching school. I always wanted to go to medical school.

Thaddeus Bell: I came back and taught school. So, during the summertime, I'd just gotten married. I didn't have a job. And so, I had the opportunity to go back to Yosemite.

So, I did. So, I'd just gotten married. So, I left my bride and went back out to Yosemite where I worked for three months before I came back.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, you said that that year you wanted to learn how to ride a horse, for one thing. So, what were your duties that third summer?

02:05

Thaddeus Bell: That third summer, Yosemite is made up of parks. Parks all over the place. So, my job was to, I had a horse. And so, I would just ride through the park answering questions, taking care of disputes. Taking care of arguments, stopping fights, helping people start fires. Sometimes my job was just to sit there and just mingle with people, all right? I mean that fit my personality just fine. And so that's what I did. So I was, I would say that that year was more satisfying because I got a chance to meet a lot of, the hippie movement was going on then. It was the love movement. But everybody was the flower movement. So, flower people, there was flowers everywhere, and they saw a Black guy, they want to talk to you, and they want to find out what you're like. When they found out I was from South Carolina, well, what is it like in South Carolina? You know, I understand you went to an all-Black school. How is it to go to an all-Black school? The thought of those kind of things just never—they'd never thought about being out of California. So, it fit my personality just fine.

Thaddeus Bell: Here's one other interesting thing, too. When I got selected for Yosemite, I had already been involved in the civil rights movement at South Carolina State. So, when they did a background check on me, that arrest that I got, that I had, see, I was arrested when I was at school at South Carolina State. Only thing that saved me is when it came up, it said that I was arrested for safekeeping. So, there was no criminal record or anything like that. But they told me that that did come up in their background check on me.

Lu Ann Jones: Now do I understand that you had law enforcement authority that third summer?

Thaddeus Bell: Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: Were you able to write tickets, do arrests, even?

Thaddeus Bell: I had law enforcement, that's exactly right. I had a gun, which I chose not to carry. But yes. Park rangers are the official law enforcement officers in the park. So, I have a Billy stick which I never did carry. I just had a tablet and a ticket thing which I—I don't think I wrote no tickets the whole time I was there. (laughs) Yeah. I always, always found a way to talk to people and get around that part of it. So, it worked out.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, was there ever any thought of going with the Park Service permanently?

05:25

Thaddeus Bell: Yes. I thought about that. I certainly did. I thought about particularly after recognizing they got a raise; Park Service got a raise during the time I was out there. So now I'm making almost twice as much money as I'm making teaching school. All right? The only reason I didn't stay out there is because my wife didn't want to stay out there. Because she said, "Look, I don't want to work for the park. I want to stay in Charleston, South Carolina." So that's what I had to do. Yes, I thought about that.

Lu Ann Jones: Well so, just in terms of how your career unfolded, at what point did you go to medical school? And I think you, from what I gather, had a very distinguished career as a physician. So could you talk about that some, of finally getting to medical school.

Thaddeus Bell: Well, during the time that I was at South Carolina State, my junior year I started making preparations to go to medical school. When I say preparations, I start applying to MUSC here in Charleston, okay? At that time, the Medical University of South Carolina was not accepting African Americans to go to school there. So, I got turned down, okay? So, I applied one other time. And they turned me down again. So, during the time that they turned me down, I continued to teach school.

Thaddeus Bell: So, in 1965, '66, the federal government said, look, you're not going to get any more federal money if you don't start accepting African Americans to go to school there. So, the racial barrier broke down and they eventually accepted one African American of Charleston, South Carolina. His name was Dr. Bernard Gates. He's passed away now. But he had a very, very distinguished career. As fate would have it, when I became Director of diversity at the university in 1996, I had the opportunity to invite Dr. Bernard Gates back to the university. And we recognized him as a distinguished graduate of the university. But until that time, he was so angry with how he was treated, because he had to repeat one or two years at the university. And it was all racism that made him repeat these years. So, when he left, he had a very distinguished career in the Air Force. Ended up being a colonel. He was an oncologist, and from Charleston, as I've said.

Thaddeus Bell: So, when I became Director of the Office of Diversity, one of the first things that I did was to reach out to him. Because I wanted him to come back to talk to our students about what it was like to be the first African American doctor to graduate from the university, which he did do. And our school gave him all of his honor that he should have gotten long, long before that time.

Thaddeus Bell: But, so, sorry about that side story. So anyway--I applied back to the medical university. In 1972, I got accepted to MUSC, and I graduated from MUSC in 1976. It was a very rough experience, a very traumatic experience for me, because I experienced a lot of racism. That's where I began to recognize the issues of health disparities. Because I saw African Americans and people of color being

treated with such disrespect and being given poor medical care. In fact, actually seeing students literally practice on people that looked like me. It just made me sick. I thought it was something that was just a problem at MUSC. But as I later went on in my training, I noticed that these disparities and this lack of respect was something that was universal in the country. So, when I got out of medical school I said, what I'm going to do, I'm going to work in the underserved area. Which I did do. And found out that I really enjoyed working in the underserved area. But as fate would have it, I was in the grocery store, and I ran into one of my professors. And he said, "I'd like for you to come to work for me at the VA Hospital." It paid a lot more money. And he said, "You will get a chance to become a member of the faculty. I'll help you with that."

Thaddeus Bell: I said, "Well, I am interested in being a faculty member, but I still got a lot of bad feeling." But anyway, as fate would have it, I did go to work there. I did get offered to be a faculty member, which I did do. And then one thing just led to another.

Thaddeus Bell: The dean there, some medical students came to the dean at the time and said, look, and this was in 1991. Some Black students, by the way, the medical university was still not accepting a whole lot of Black students, but they were accepting some. So, five students came to the dean, and they said, "Look, our experience here is terrible and we wouldn't encourage any Black students to come to school here."

Thaddeus Bell: So, the dean got in contact with me, and he said, "Look, I would like for you, I'm going to offer you a job as Assistant Dean for Minority Affairs at MUSC. I want you to look into all of the issues that Black students have. I'm going to give you the authority to look into them and solve them."

Thaddeus Bell: And so, I did do that. Then he moved me up to associate dean. Then in 1994, the job that I was doing in the College of Medicine was a good one. So, he recommended me to the president to be director of diversity for the entire university, which I did for ten years.

Thaddeus Bell: During that journey, I experienced major tragedy. I lost my son. My first born, who was a student at Morehouse. Right after graduating from Morehouse College, he was out playing basketball and broke his leg. And after a short illness, passed away. I was devastated. During the time, I had been offered this job at MUSC and I turned it down. I just told them to give it to somebody else. But they held it for about six months until I could get myself together, and then I decided to take the job. So that's how my tenure at the medical university started.

Thaddeus Bell: During my time at the university, I saw a lot of things that I didn't like. One of them was not having enough African Americans in the healthcare profession. And so, I started some scholarships at the university. I also started some programs to help better prepare students graduating from HBCUs to be successful in minority

medical schools, particularly the medical universities. So, our enrollment at the medical university went up, for minority students, went up significantly as a result of some programs that I put in place there. And still are in place. So, it worked out pretty good. I had a very good career there. I ended up being an associate professor in family medicine and director of diversity for the College of Medicine while at the same time being director of diversity for all six colleges. And put in some programs that are still present today. So, when I look back on that, I did something worthwhile.

15:24

Lu Ann Jones: Well, I was going to ask you what you did to make diversity more of a success. Because I think many organizations, the National Park Service included, has been making tremendous efforts, but they do not always pan out quite as well as the institution would like for them to. So, I think trying to figure out what systemic changes can happen that will have a true effect is very important.

Thaddeus Bell: I was very fortunate in that there were two white men who really—one of them was Dr. Layton McCurdy who came to me and said, “Look, I’ve kind of done a survey and asked folk who would be the best person for this job. And your name kept coming up, so I think you would be the person for this job.” So, I never applied for the job. So, when he recommended me to the president, I was actually in an interim role.

Thaddeus Bell: Because I told them, “Look, I don’t know anything about diversity and inclusion. I know about how to practice medicine.”

Thaddeus Bell: But during the four months that I was there, I made some major changes that they liked. And they said, “Look, the job is yours if you want it.”

Thaddeus Bell: So, I accepted. So, I continued to practice in my private practice while I was director of diversity at the medical university. As I pointed out, we made some major changes with reference to hiring African American faculty members, increasing the number of African American students who were successful and graduating, and breaking down a lot of the stereotypes that the school had about African American students. I think that was very important. And then at the same time, looking at the health disparities. Because that’s where I got the idea from to deal with health disparities. When I got put in a position that I could make some differences. One of the things that I recognized is that there were a lot of things that were contributing to health disparities. But the one that I felt like I could make a difference in was the education fields. I think that probably came from my experience as a schoolteacher. I felt that the way that things were being explained to African Americans, how it was being explained, contributed significantly to our outcome. So, I started a thing called Probing the Gap in Healthcare in which my primary objective was to number one, dispel a lot of the myths and untruths that African Americans over the past hundred or two hundred years brought into

their own healthcare, but also explaining in a way in which we could better understand how to better take care of ourselves. And so, I must admit that my alma mater, the medical university, has played a major role in closing the gap in healthcare being successful. I just endowed a chair entitled the Thaddeus John Bell Family Endowed Chair for Health Disparities. It's a scholarship that I give out every year for ten thousand dollars for a student of African American descent to matriculate at the medical university. So, we are very, very proud of that. By the way, that scholarship is not just for doctors. It's for any student that goes and matriculates through any of the six colleges, be it nursing, pharmacy, health professions. So, it's the only one of its kind at the university. And we've already given it out eight times already, so I'm very, very proud of that.

19:52

Lu Ann Jones: Wow. Congratulations to you. Yeah. One more question I have, on several occasions you're really breaking the path. You're one of the first young African Americans to serve in the Park Service out west. You were one of the first African American teachers to teach in an all-white school there in South Carolina. And then breaking a path there at the medical college. So, what gave you the fortitude, the capacity to do that? Which at times could have been very hard, I would assume.

Thaddeus Bell: You know, that's a very, I appreciate that question. I've never considered myself to be a super smart person. I remember when I got into the medical university, I made a promise to the good master that if he let me in and helped me get out, I would give back. I guess I'm just trying to fulfill my promise. I've had a very interesting career. My life has been one of ups and downs. I would be remiss if I didn't mention I've lost two children. I lost a son at age twenty-one and I lost a daughter about four years ago at age thirty-three, who was very, very much a part of me developing Closing the Gap. She graduated from Howard University and died from a rare form of cancer. So, you know, my life has been one in which I've seen the ups and downs of life. But through it all, I'm still here. I'm divorced times one. I always say that because most people divorce times two or three. But I always say that because my first wife and I got to be very good friends before she passed away. So, no question, she played a major role in my career and gave me three beautiful children. So, it's been an interesting journey. It's been a good journey.

Lu Ann Jones: Well here lately you must have been very busy in the time of Covid-19, yes? Just in terms of your—

22:51

Thaddeus Bell: Yes. I said to Dr. Harper that right before this Zoom conference, we launched my inaugural program. I'm on the board of AARP in South Carolina. So, they asked me would I create a program to help educate people fifty and above about good

health. The name of it is called “Living Well with Dr. Bell.” So, we did the first episode of it today. We spent the whole time talking about vaccine hesitancy. And so, I kind of explained why that hesitancy is, because there’s a very interesting history behind that. A lot of people think it has a lot to do with the Tuskegee experiments, which it does. But I reminded people that the history of distrust and mistrust that African Americans have with the healthcare profession goes much further back than the Tuskegee experiments. Which, by the way, ended the year that I started medical school. Ended in 1972. It started, I think, around 1932. But the disparities and the hesitancy and the distrust goes back over two hundred and sixty-three years. So, I understand why there is a hesitancy. But at the same time, the medical profession is not like that now. I’m trying to convince people that if they still harbor those same feelings and not move forward, it’s going to affect us in a detrimental way. So, I’m trying to convince people that African Americans have been involved in the making of the vaccine, we’ve been involved in the clinical trials. Most African American healthcare professionals are encouraging their patients to take the vaccine. We also have to recognize that if we don’t take the vaccine, it could wipe out a whole generation of Black people. Not to mention other folk. But I’m just talking about Black people alone. So it is, I think we’re making some headway, but I think we’ve still got a long way to go. And of course, I have been particularly happy that I’m in a position to help my fraternity brothers appreciate health literacy regarding the vaccine. Because that fraternity is very, very important. I love the fraternity. And I’m at a place where I can help make a difference with this vaccine.

Lu Ann Jones: Right. Well, I think I have asked the questions. It’s been a delight. I’ll pass back over to Dr. Harper if he has some follow-ups or comments.

James Harper II: Dr. Bell, we’d just like to thank you for taking the time to interview with us today. You’ve served with a life of courage and absolutely impressive. And we’re thankful for you. I’m going to end the recording now, unless you have something you would like to say, Dr. Bell.

26:50

Thaddeus Bell: One other thing, I would be remiss if I did not remind people that I had an interesting career in track and field.

Lu Ann Jones: I saw that on your [website]--yes, tell us about that.

Thaddeus Bell: Yes. Well, you remember I told you that my dad said to me when I was in college, he didn’t think I was smart enough to play sports and go to school at the same time. However, I’ve always had this burning desire to be a good athlete. I really was blessed with good speed. So, after I completed my medical school training, I was over at the Citadel running around the track one day. A friend of mine saw me running, and he said, “Hey, are you familiar with this program called Masters Track and Field?” I said, no. He said, “Well, these are people who compete

against people in their age group all over the world. It's very well organized. And I saw you running, and I think you would do well in it."

Thaddeus Bell: So, I looked into it. I decided that I would pursue it. And I did do well. Jim, you'll appreciate this. When I first went on the track and I ran in my first meet, Dr. Jones, one of my friends came up to me. He said, "Now, Thad, you've got good speed, but you look like you're running from the police." (laughter) He said, "You've got to learn how to run. Right now, you've got your head all back, your mouth open." He said, "You look like you're running from the police. You've got to go back home to the Citadel and get your coach to work with you."

Thaddeus Bell: And so, I did that. As a result, I literally turned into a world-class sprinter. Two years afterwards, I won the world championship down in Melbourne, Australia in the 100-meter dash in the men 40-44 age group. I ran the 100-meter dash in 10:92. Then I repeated it, I won the world championship the second time out in Eugene, Oregon. Then I found out that they had a similar competition for just physicians. I won those three different times. I've been on several world champion relay teams. So, the 100-meter, 200-meter dash became my favorite event. So, for about seventeen years, I was a world-class athlete. It was acknowledged by our local newspaper. At the turn of the century, I was named one of the best track and field athletes of the twentieth century for South Carolina. And so anyway, I got a chance to turn into a runner whose running like he stole something, (laughter) a real fast sprinter. So, anyway. So that's been the highlight of my track and field exploits.

Lu Ann Jones: That's fabulous.

James Harper II: That's a great story.

Thaddeus Bell: Thank you. Thank you.

James Harper II: All right, so I'm going to end the recording now.

Lu Ann Jones: And I'm going to end my recording now.

30:55

[END OF TRACK 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]