

DATE: February 10, 1956
TIME: 12:00 Noon
PLACE: 1253 S. Perry
OCCUP: Police Commissioner, Montgomery City
Commission

Interviewer: Anna Holden
Respondent: Clyde C. Sellers

General Statement: Commissioner Sellers is a man of about 50, a native of Tallapoosa County, Alabama. Didn't inquire into his background, but had learned earlier from other sources that he attended Auburn about two years, his father was deputy sheriff (of Tallapoosa County) for a while, but was so mean to whites and Negroes there that the voters refused to reelect his father until he signed a statement saying he would not put Clyde back as a deputy; represented Montgomery County in the state legislature; worked his way up in the state police but was kicked out because of his conduct; runs a termite company on the side. Sellers was elected to the Commission last spring; defeated Dave Birmingham. He made the statement during that race that he "would not trade his Southern birthright for any number of Negro votes"--a statement that he now repeats on all occasions when he gets before a large audience. Made a dramatic entry into the Citizens Council in January of this year, spoke at the NCC rally when Eastland appeared February 10th.

Sellers is well-groomed and well-dressed, wears expensive-looking, conservative suits. Somewhere along the line he has acquired an outward polish that I did not expect, considering what I had heard of his background. There is no doubt in my mind that he is exploiting the situation to his best advantage, but at the same time, I think he is exploiting in terms of something he believes in. He impressed me as a supreme egotist, anxious to get plenty of attention and basking in what he gets.

Presented myself as from Fisk, working on a study of Montgomery, interested in the bus situation. (Don't think Fisk registered anything--either he didn't recognize it or he didn't pay any attention to what I said)

Interviewer: I have been here several days now and have talked with a variety of people. I have been impressed with the tension in the community and would like for you to comment on it, if you will.

Respondent: "I think most of the tensions are caused by rumors. Whites and Negroes both blame everything that happens now on each other. We are doing the best we can to keep the situation in hand. I would like to show you the memo that I sent to the Police Chief--it will show you our policy in the police department."

(Hands me memo to Police Chief Ruppenthal dated January 25, 1956, "Re Negro Boycott situation" Memo stresses the importance of taking steps to make certain no incidents arise. Asks Ruppenthal to stress that with all men. "We are desirous of maintaining the best of peaceful relations with the Negro and we want to be particularly careful that enforcement is carried out in a fair, impartial manner to all people, regardless of their color or beliefs.")

"That is just a restatement of our regular policy, but it is important to emphasize it now and I wanted you to see it."

Interviewer: It has been my impression that people have been quite concerned about the boycott, particularly since the bombings.

Respondent: "This thing could have been settled long ago, but for outside agitation. Money and help are coming from people who do not understand and do not want to understand and it is keeping the thing going--adding fuel to the flames. There there is some radical support from whites in

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the city who won't stop at anything. I mean a few people like Aubrey Williams--he went up to Boston and made a speech on this the other day. That sort of thing is stirring up more trouble."

Interviewer: I have gotten the impression that people are very much afraid of violence at this point. Does it seem like there will be violence? I know there have already been the two bombings, but I mean violence on a larger scale.

Respondent: "That's something nobody knows. We are doing our best to prevent it, of course."

Respondent: "This boycott has done damage than can never be repaired. It has done more harm to the Nigra cause than anything else. It will take twenty-five years to build up the good feeling that it has torn down. You know, the Nigras in Montgomery were treated better than any place else. They got everything from the whites--they went to the whites for everything they wanted and they got it. You should see the schools and the churches the the white people here built for them. They are still giving them money for things, but they are giving it reluctantly now, they don't want to do it anymore. They keep on because they feel sorry for them. They know that most of the Nigras here don't really want this thing and that they are suffering. The leadership--the ones who started it--are not bus riders. They are riding around and it isn't hard on them like it is on the rest of them."

Interviewer: What is it that they want--the ones who are keeping it going?

Respondent: "Everybody agrees that it is part of a plan to get rid of segregation. King has said so himself. He said in the paper that he wouldn't stop until they got their full rights. The buses are just the first step."

Interviewer: I guess at this point, everybody is wondering how it can be settled.

Respondent: "We have laws requiring segregation on the buses and if they want to ride the buses they will have to obey the law. They can walk until they are ready to obey the law."

Interviewer: I saw the Commission's stand of two weeks ago that there would be no more negotiations with the boycott leaders. Has there been any change in policy since then?

Respondent: "The Commission will do no more negotiating. They can get back on the buses anytime they want to."

Interviewer: "I thought maybe there might be some change since the bombings--that seems to make a settlement more pressing."

Respondent: "You don't even know who you can deal with. Let us tell you about this. This will show you how they do. The Mayor called a meeting a few weeks ago with three Negro preacher who represented fourteen churches. They agreed to go back to the buses and we thought it was settled. Then when King came back in town and found out about it, they were threatened with physical violence. One issued a statement that he had been fooled and didn't know he was making an agreement. The other two didn't withdraw, but they were threatened, too, and all of them asked for police protection to keep their own people from harming them. When they act like that, you don't know who you can believe or who you can deal with. This King has set himself up above everybody else like a God. He wouldn't let the agreement go through. He thinks he's way above everybody else. He won't see anybody except by appointment and he has press conferences and appears on TV shows. He thinks he's the President or something. Well, the Commission is through with that and the only way to settle it now is for them to come back to the buses."

Interviewer: This whole thing puts the bus company in a bad position, doesn't it?

Respondent: "They can't break the law. They have to operate under our state laws. Of course, one of the things the Nigras wanted was courtesy. You know yourself that people return the courtesy you extend. If you are polite, and treat people with respect, they will be polite to you in return. If you act mean, they won't be nice to you. They won't get courtesy from other people until they are ready to mend their own ways and treat other people with courtesy."

Interviewer: (Sellers had another appointment and excused himself at this point.)