

860210-005

DATE: February 10, 1956
 TIME: 12:00 Noon
 PLACE: 1453 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."

Interviewer: I understand there have already been some instances of rock and egg-throwing and attacks on person--enough to cause concern.

Respondent: "Well, there have been a few instances of juveniles throwing rocks and mud. They are over-enthusiastic teen-agers on both sides who think they are helping. We have settled those cases outside the courts since they are juvenile and kept it from getting in the papers. I don't think it's fair to bring a boy into court for something like that and have it go down on his record. He might be applying for a job years from now and think that he didn't have a police record and then when they checked, they would see that he had an offense. He would have an offense on his record, even though it was something like this, and I don't think that's fair."

Interviewer: Have there been other instances of violence that haven't gotten to the papers?

Respondent: "Whites and Nigras are blaming everything that happens on each other, but there haven't been many cases. It's gotten so that people make something out of the slightest thing that happens. If a white person bumps into a Nigra on the street, or vice versa, each one thinks the other one did it on purpose. People don't think anything about something like that before the boycott. Let me give you an example to show you what I mean. This is off the record. A few days ago a five year old Nigra boy was run over by a hit-and-run driver and when the police got there, there was a Nigra man who said he had been standing on the corner and had seen it and that a white man was driving the car. When we investigated the case, we got five more witnesses who said the driver was a Nigra and it turned out to be a Nigra driver who had two Nigra women in the car. But the Nigra who saw it blamed it on a white person. That works both ways, of course. I had a case the other day of a white lady reporting that four Nigra men had broken into her house and hit her on the head. She had a bad blow on the back of her head, and she said that they were sitting down at the table when she heard a noise in the back of the house. She said she thought it was the people who came to take her maid home and didn't think anything about it. The next thing you know, she heard a lot more noise and went out and found four Nigra men throwing bricks and rocks in the house. She said that one of them hit her on the back of the head. That was her story. We sent some men out to investigate and when they got to the house, they found a broken flower pot on the porch with the dirt scattered around it and a broken window between the porch and the inside of the house. There were no signs of bricks and rocks or a struggle inside and all the evidence showed that the flower pot had been thrown from the inside out. We

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hold of her husband and he said that he had hit her. He said he had come home and found her in bed with the Colonel (Maxwell people?) and had hit her a few times and she fell against a table(?) You see how it is? People are blaming everything that happens on the other race, and lots of things that haven't happened."

Interviewer: Are you doing anything to check that? Is there anything you can do?

Respondent: "We are trying to run down all the rumors. We check all the rumors that we hear."

Interviewer: How do you find out about them and what do you do when you find out something is a rumor--when do you tell that it is just a rumor?

Respondent: "People call us every time they hear something. Our phone rings constantly. I don't think there are any rumors going around that we don't hear about. We check them right away and then we know it is a rumor and can tell people that. The phone has been ringing ever since the thing started. My phone at home would be ringing all the time, too, but I had it listed under my business and I have closed it out since I came on the commission (✓) and the phone isn't listed under my name in the book (?). Most of the calls come to me down here, and that's how I was able to keep the threats I got away from my wife. I have been getting threatening calls since about the second week in December, but my wife didn't know about it until the night King's house was bombed--a call came to the house and she answered the phone. Then, of course, I had to tell her that I had been receiving threats for weeks."

Interviewer: Have many people involved in this received threats--the other commissioner for example?

Respondent: "Well, of course they pick on them, but lots of white people have been threatened who haven't had anything to do with it."

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Respondent: "They just pick names out of the phone book and threaten them. Any white person will do--they call the person eight or ten times and say they will kill him at a certain hour. Then they call back and say they have decided to do it another hour and they will call back again, and so on. We are used to that, but it is very upsetting for most people. There are a number of white ladies who have been badly frightened by calls."

Interviewer: Someone just picks out a number and calls for no reason?

Respondent: "That's right. It's a very upsetting experience for some of the women, especially, who have received calls. The person will go over their anatomy, from head to foot, and say what they will do to each part of their body. Some of the ladies who have received calls are sensitive, refined people who are badly disturbed by that sort of thing. They use filthy language, too, that they are not used to hearing."

Interviewer: Do you have any way of knowing where these calls come from?

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Respondent: We don't know who they are, but they come from Nigras."

Interviewer: I suppose it works both ways--there are white people threatening Negroes, too.

Respondent: "There might be a few white people threatening Nigras, but most of the threats Nigras report are from their own people. King and also Nixon have reported threats and asked for police protection that we were glad to give them. But those threats come from other Nigras. Others have been threatened, too.

Interviewer: Do the person calling identify themselves?

Respondent: No, but they can tell they come from Nigras."

Interviewer: It is really unbelievable that some would pick a stranger's name out of phone book and threaten him like that.

Respondent: "It might be hard for you to believe, but you are young and haven't had experience with this kind of thing. I have been in law enforcement for a number of years and I have found that the world is full of mean, vicious people who seize a situation like this and use it to vent their spleen. They take an opportunity like this to take out their meanness on other people--it doesn't matter who. I don't agree with Father Flannagan's philosophy that there are not bad boys. Some people might be better if they had a better environment, but you when you have that streak of meanness, you can't get rid of it."

Interviewer: This thing has lasted over two months, now. It's surprising it has lasted that long, considering how bad the weather has been.

Respondent: "Ninety per cent of the Nigras want to ride the buses, but they are afraid. I wish you would stand at one of the bus stops downtown and watch to see what happens when a Nigra tries to get on a bus. You see Nigra women at the stops waiting for buses and when a bus comes up and they start to move toward it, one or two Nigra men will come up and stand beside them and say something and they they will back away from the bus and when the bus has gone, the men will go on. If you ask them about it, they say that the men wanted to know that time it was or how to get to a certain place. They are afraid to tell you, but those men were threatening them, telling them what would happen if they got on the bus. That is how they have kept them off the buses. They want to ride, but they are afraid of the "goon squads".

Interviewer: I suppose you have a record of cases where persons have been harmed for riding the bus. How many person have been harmed so far?

* Respondent: "Well, there was a case a couple of weeks ago. You may have seen it reported in the newspaper. A man was tried and convicted of assaulting a Nigra woman because she rode the bus."

Interviewer: Yes, I did see that. I believe he said that he had gone to her house to buy whiskey.

Respondent: "That's the case. Of course he wouldn't admit the reason, he cooked up that story about buying whiskey. At the time it happened we had five Nigra witnesses who were willing to testify he had beat her for riding the bus. When the trial came up, three left town and the other two refused to testify. Not that will show you what we are up against--they were

afraid to testify. But nobody believed that story about the whiskey--she wouldn't be mixed up in anything like that, she is not that kind."

Interviewer: I suppose the family she worked for was able to help her in clearing the charge. (Heard this was the Mayor's maid, trying to find out.)

Respondent: (getting suspicious)--what do you mean?

Interviewer: I was thinking that if she worked for a family that were known to be decent and law-abiding, their word as to whether she would be in an illegal business would hold some weight.

Respondent: (relaxing) "Well, she works for a good family, all right. She works for the Mayor's mother-in-law. (Note: The Mayor lives with his mother-in-law)

Interviewer: Then I'm sure that their word would help clear her. What about other cases? How many others have there been?

Respondent: "Well, that is the only actual case so far. You see, they are afraid to report them and it's impossible to find out about them. I have never run into such a blank wall as far as investigating and reporting cases are concerned. They won't tell us anything and we can't track cases down if they won't give us any information to work with. They are so afraid, they won't tell us anything at all.

Interviewer: I can see where a situation like that would present quite a problem.

Respondent: "This boycott has done damage that 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 that 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."

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- 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 me tell you about this. This will show you how they do. The Mayor called a meeting a few weeks ago with three Nigra 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.)