

Narrator: Morris McCollum
Date: April 28, 2015
Interviewed by: Jay Robinson
Place: Tacoma, Washington

The Oral Tape "Label" Interview Introduction:

0:00 This is Jaynetha Robinson. Today is April 28th 2015, I am interviewing Mr. Morris Lee McCollum for the second time. The interview is taking place at his business location at 1124 South Martin Luther King Jr way, Tacoma Washington. The interview is being conducted by the University of Washington Tacoma and is part of the Tacoma Community Oral history project.

[Jaynetha Robinson] So Mr. Mac, I know you've been interviewed a thousand times before, but this is an attempt to know more about you as a person so if I ask you any questions you deem too personal to answer I will respect that. So when and where were you born?

[Morris McCollum] Denver, Colorado.

[JR] And did you stay in Denver long?

[MM] No. No. Ah, Ah, I was there for a short time and um, uh, my mother went, we went on a farm in Iowa and then from Iowa and I went to Aurora, Nebraska and ah stayed with my grandparents. While ah a year later my brother was born and, and ah they stayed in Iowa for a year or so until ah Earl McCollum died and my mother moved back with my younger brother to Aurora and we stayed with our

grandparents.

[JR] Ah hmm and ah how would you describe the community you grew up in?

[MM] A small royal, rural community a country, a country atmosphere. A lot of farming of course around the city. The town was practically only a mile square. A little over, but it was a farming community.

[JR] Was there um ethnic diversity there, was there any Blacks in your town?

[MM] I think there was one Black gentleman that lived there. [Ah hmm] That was all, yes.

[JR] And uh what kind of stories did you hear about your ancestors?

[MM] Well I don't know, they came from Sweden and, and ah, ah, they settled in the Midwest and some became doctors and farmers and such. My, my grandfather was a . . . ah worked, he had a grocery store and he had it until he couldn't, couldn't afford it anymore [Mr. Mac starts to say because] and he gave away groceries and people never paid him in the depression time. And eventually he became the chief of police in the city of Aurora. And he died of a blood clot. Fairly early in life for an older gentlemen. And so uh, my grandmother and mother and my brother we lived together, and uh I went from

3:00 grade school up to the high school and when I got into the senior year of high school graduating in 45, why five of us fellows enlisted in the service. Some in the Navy, like I. Some went in the army. Some went in the Air Core, and graduation time we then left town to be of service to our country. Our mothers went up and got our diplomas for us. And it was really nas, nice. I was in the Pacific at the, through

my service aboard an APA troop transport taking soldiers and sailors and such overseas and uh when the war ended I was in the Philippines aboard ship. I didn't see any ah very active war time ah situations although we had some, some warnings about submarines and such, but ah was never was in any physical ah fighting, and uh we was, was good. And when I - the war ended why I came home and had enough points to get out. I did get out. And uh after getting out of the service I entered the University of Nebraska Wesleyan University in Hamlock which is near Lincoln, Nebraska. And I went to school there for two and a half years. After that I got involved in the women's ready-to-wear business and started trimming windows and doing stock work and, and whatever. And ah in fact when I was going to college why I used to work in a restaurant wait on tables and in the afternoons work in the department store in the shipping department to earn a few dollars along with my Navy helping me with being out of the service I think I got a few dollars a month. And then got involved in this retail business and uh stayed in the retail business for women's wear for several years. And uh, then exploited that in the Carolinas and Kentucky and Chicago and got then involved in ah, in ah, a marriage and, and ended up in Peoria, Illinois and started working at JC Penny's and the JC Penny manager who had been out in Tacoma before and lived in Washington wanted to come back out. So he had the opportunity to come back out here to work for some company and ah he asked me if I wanted to come along with him and become a partner in the department store, a junior department store which

6:00 was the K Street Department Store. In fact it's in the same building that I'm in

today.

[JR] The one that ah, the very one we're sitting in right now?

M: Right now is the same. So what goes around comes around. It's very interesting. So I was here for about a year and then we sold the business to a gentleman called Bob Hammer who was here for many years with uniforms and such and I went back east and he called me again and said "I have a store I'm buying to liquidate would you come back and run it?" I did. I came back because I wanted to be, come back out here. And got involved in, in radio and TV commercial work selling radio and TV time and then got involved with another discount operation and then got involved with a gentleman that had several young men's stores called Bernie Brotman, Brotman Men's Stores. And in turn he asked me to come to work for him, which I did and ah at that time he was starting to consider going to the Tacoma mall when they opened up their new mall location. So we had this location in downtown Tacoma at 1130 Broadway and ah he had these other stores that he had, he wanted a place where he could take merchandise and offprice it, sell it off. So ah a gentleman, Jerry Coski, you met him yesterday, [Yes] "What can we name this store? Well Mac he's a, he's a slocker he can sell merchandise, let's call it Mac the Knife, Cuts the Price. So we, we named Undoubtedly I didn't think we'd ever be able to get a, a corporation by the name of General Merchandisers Inc. I mean, that's kind of ah ah very old wording and I didn't think it'd be registered in the state, it'd be already registered but it wasn't so we registered as General Merchandisers Inc., DBA which is *doing business as* Mac the Knife Men's Wear. And we started

at, at Bernie's location at downtown Tacoma. And I started ah running ah discount operation from his stores and then I got involved in the ethnic clothing of sharp colorful clothing. I started doing good business with Fort Lewis and the general public and did real well and I had partners and in likewise why I've always had my dream of owning my own store so but I was doing business and my partners wouldn't sell, but finally I got 'em to sell. And ah there's a stories behind that, but ah is mute, [an employee begins unwrapping merchandise nearby, the sound you hear is cellophane] anyway meanwhile we opened a store at downtown Seattle at 214 Pike Street. It was very

9:00 successful. And so I had the two stores for several years and then it got so expensive in Seattle and ah my store in, in Tacoma was going down, going downhill in traffic because the downtown Tacoma was had been sucked out by the stores in the mall. So downtown had become a kind of a desert ghost town for a while. So in turn I left the store in Seattle to a guy name Leroy Shumate, an attorney, he's still there. But he named it Leroy's and uh I went out to Tacoma south where Villa Plaza and ah bought a store called The Mailbag and changed it to Mr. Mac and then they incorporated a large amount of rent for the new owners and I left and came up through to 11th and MLK, which in those days was K Street. I've been here ever since, at four locations. This is my fourth, location and in turn this property now is in the, in the operation of being sold to Tacoma Housing, we'll see what happens but I got a year and a few months to go before they'll ask me to leave. So hopefully in turn I can find a location up here if I still want to remain in

business. Long as my health is in good status I'll try and remain in business. I have no children so I have nothing to leave it, leave it to, unless somebody wants to come along and still capitalize on my name which I think I've maintained a good position name-wise in my industry of men's wear business. So we'll just have to let time tell, let the lord, lord make his wish ta keep me going. But ah, I enjoy what I do, otherwise I'd be out of it. And ah I think I told you yesterday that I had an opportunity-Bernie Brotman of course was a very good partner and he looked at the situation at San Diego and he got involved in going up to Seattle with his -to see his son Jeff, an attorney, and stating that if they can raise 7-8 million dollars they can probably open up an operation in the Northwest like down in San Diego. So they did and they named it Costco. So I don't have to tell you about that, that's worldwide now.

[JR] Did you get an opportunity to be a founding member for that?

12:00 [MM] Well I could probably gone with them but I was, it was a situation that ah my desire was to stay in the men's business and I was doing, being successful and when you enjoy what you do, that's what I tell young people. "Enjoy what you do. You know Life's a short journey as it is" I've had the opportunity to have a longer life than most. But do things that you like to do. Of course monetarily you have to raise money to survive or support your family and whatever. But, but ah I always tell people that is to have a good attitude and have good communication and ah be happy in what you do. Some, but ah, some a lot of people get a lot of work because of monetary paycheck every month but they don't like what they do and ah I like

what I do otherwise I'd be out of it. Certainly would. But I've enjoyed it and had reasonable success, maintained a livelihood, maintained a business that's been acceptable to the public and that's, that's the important thing -is to have merchandise in your store that people like, the price is right, I always say to run a store you got to buy right to sell right. So the important thing is to maintain a stable and honest way of doing business. And people will respect you and people will patronize you. So I've had that opportunity and Thank God. In my new store here that I've moved to now is my biggest store I've ever had and we're doing more business but ah like we always in retail always can do more business, we want to do more business. But you have to do business at a profit. Otherwise you can't stay in business. And it's difficult at times because we've gone through recessions, we've gone through monetary things with this, with these, with our, country. And so businesses falter with that situation. People don't have monies to spend why they have to not open their pocket book as well as they used to but we've had the opportunity now to have a, the employment starting to go down, I mean getting more people working and so doing that why there more people that can spend money for clothing and things for their family and cars and homes are now getting more easy to buy, or can buy. So all these things are very uh tangible to all kinds of businesses you know and people got money in their pocket. Gas prices naturally if they go down any more why, it doesn't take a big billfull to put gas in your car. Because the car is such an important thing today of transportation and uh that's another thing is the old

15:00 theory about stores is Location! Location! Location! So the old theory about you

gotta be somewhere at a good location for traffic and for visibility. And we have that up here we always could have more but we're very fortunate that the area up here has ah subsided quite, quite heavily but when I came out here in 1958 from 9th street to 15th street there wasn't a hole in the wall up here. In fact the K Street area, retail-wise, was the second largest in the community. Downtown being the biggest. Since then it's deteriorated but it's coming back but it takes time for any area to build. As many areas in the city, like 6th Avenue is doing real well, Proctor is doing well South Tacoma to some extent, Lincoln not to well. But K Street has the opportunity to ah enlarge over the next few years. Because we have the two highest employment of medical centers in the city, Saint Josephs and Tacoma General. And downtown, we're up on a hill from downtown. So if there's any activity of being filled downtown, there's no other place but to come up the hill and that's what I hope will happen in the next 15-20 years that the expansion of people will broaden the growth up here because there's no other place to go. So hopefully that will happen.

J: Yesterday you told me some golfing stories. You're an avid golfer, sports fan?

M: I used to be. I used to love golf. Still do, but can't play the game like I used to, naturally.

17:00 [Phone rings and Mr. Mac excuses himself to take the call]

Anyway, uh golfing is I was a member of Fircrest Golf Course for 35 years and I played many, many golf courses in the state and down in Palm desert, Palm Springs and uh I still enjoy the PGA tournament and ah but I'm really upbeat on

this new U.S. Open that's coming to Tacoma that'll be here in just a month and a half now. It's going to cause a lot of, a lot of discussion throughout the whole country, even worldwide because of the type of course it is. It's not going to be an easy course.

[JR] Have you played it?

[MM] No I haven't played it.

[JR] Have you been out there?

[MM] I've been out there and it's beautiful and it was in the paper today. Some very well-known ah golfers say it's going to be a sensation. So we're looking forward to that. I hope the weather is good for 'em it might be good windy and a rainy day for one day, show 'em that we got a little mixture of climate out here but the important thing is we're gonna be on the map, televised for a whole week. So we may have a big rush of people coming,

20:00 wanting to live out here again. We don't know. But anyways it's uh it's been a ahh been a ah Golf to me has been real great, and of course I was a, a professional boxing judge for many years. And also past President of Tacoma Athletic Commission where I got involved in boxing with Stan Narrarato and ah Clay Hunnington and ah we've maintained an amateur boxing golden glove program every year for going on I think for 67, 68 years and every year I give the best fighter of the evening a belt that they can wear around stating they were the best fighter of the evening and ah I hope to perpetuate that by giving the TAC some money to maintain that for a few years after I'm gone. But ah it's all helping young

kids do, don't have to be all boxing, we do a lot of things for soccer and ah swimming and ah wrestling and ah basketball, I mean the Tacoma Athletic Commission we're devoted to amateur athletics and civic betterment. So in turn we've been doing that for many, many years.

[JR] Did you ever box yourself?

[MM] A little bit in the navy. But heh, I always say "well I had to quit" and they say why and I said well they were starting to put advertisement on the soles of my shoes.

[JR] Oh, [laughing] okay.

[MM] A joke.

[I hand him a picture of him giving the title belt to a recipient]

[MM] Yes, Yeah that's the golden, that's the belt I give every year. And ah it's been a joy to do that because some of the boxers we've had here locally have gone not only national but worldwide as world champions. Ray Seals, Davy Armstrong, ah Lockridge, Bumpas, ah been many, many ah young men that have come up through the ranks and quit boxing and become beautiful citizens in our area here. Which is wonderful, because it's, its - boxing for young men is not a lifetime situation. But they learn discipline they learn technique. They learn a lot of things in boxing. And people think it's beating on somebody but if you take the technical side of it there's a lot of discipline and that's what you need in life is discipline, and help. So these things are important.

23:00 [JR] You mentioned yesterday you had George Foreman walk into one of your

stores up in Seattle.

[MM] Yeah, he worked, I work with him and then a few years ago when he was going coming back, on his road to become world champion again, he had an exhibition out in Fort Lewis. And I had the opportunity and go out there and judge the fight, wasn't really judging the fight because he had he was in an exhibition. He didn't want he didn't do a real battle because he didn't want to get hurt because he was coming up for a major championship fight. And after he was back there with the kids, I got to see him. Talk to him again. He remembered me from Mac the Knife days and when he came over to Seattle and he fought a guy, he knocked him out in the first round. He was coming up and I says, you didn't give, I talked to him, went back in the boxing room after the fight, and I said George, you didn't give the public the chance to see your, your ability. He says "I can't take a chance with anybody" I says well that gentleman you were fighting, he was scared as stiff. You coming across. Which he was, he came across, hit him, and that was it.

[JR] You remember that boxer's name? The one that lost?

[MM] Ahh, I forget the name of him, he was kind of a street fighter, but they weren't putting anybody in heavy duty with him because he was coming up the ladder and ah ah when he lost to Muhammad Ali over in Africa I was surprised but those happen, just like Tyson got beat over in Japan too. So even the champions have defeat so.

[JR] Well Rocky Marciano never got defeated.

[MM] Well no, but you got Mayweather coming up this weekend and he'd be 49

wins if he wins, and he'll go for 50 probably chose [coughs] choose a man that he can beat so he can become the only man who went undefeated for 50 fights but- boxing today is not like it was thirty forty years ago, I mean uh they used to go 15 rounds they used to let 'em get a cut. But it's now down to 12 rounds and ah you get any cuts of any type why they stopped the fight, which is reasonable because boxing is is is not a ... it's dangerous, anything dangerous when you're being hit in the head. Just like this cage fighting. I disagree with it very. And I don't like women boxers, but they want equal, so I guess that's the way the

26:00 music stands and that's the way it's gonna be, equal equal, but ah cage fighting that's where they beat you until you're, your, you're out. I mean it's not a good thing. But it ah shows what people want ta see. Like you know, they, like in professional football, they wanna see the linebacker kill the runner you know? And it's it's it's the, it's the thing that in sports is, is skill, and the the record to beat, but it's also a dangerous, dangerous, and when dangerous comes to the body or your mind, or your physical body, that's when I stop, I mean I don't like to see that but...

[JR] Golfs not so dangerous, I mean what's the worst you can do is put out a headlight or something

[MM] Yeah I did that one time. But it's the thing about golfs it's an individual sport. You're the only one hitting the ball. I always say it's it's it's not the arrow, it's the Indian. You make a mistake. It's not the club, it's you. You're the one that used the club, to dictate what you're going to do with that ball.

[JR] You mentioned yesterday you've met some golf grades. Arnold Palmer, ah

hmm.

[MM] Oh Jack Nicholas and, and ah Couples and ah Amy Alcott and ah those are –there was a woman golfer here that was an amateur from Seattle-years ago. My memories escaping me now, but I ah used to go to the PGA tournaments in Seattle and see Gary Palmer, Tre Trevino, Weiskopf, ah Ben Hogan and all, you know, I used to see and remember them all. They all had techniques, they all had their right of fame. But ah Arnold Palmer was the... probably the biggest growing thing in the century of golf because they called it armies, Arnie's Army, but he resolved that the senior tournament, the senior golf, where we had to be over 50. That's become a real real inspiration for the older golfers. They do real well, do real well.

29:00 [JR] So you were growing up during the great depression umm what what stands out for you? Did you have to work to help support the family?

[MM] Well, we did the chores around the house. I had a paper route, and I worked in the grocery store, going through high school and ah it was tough times but ah my mother was very gracious and ah so we did, we lived comfortably, my brother and I. We had ah, we had three sets of clothes. We had Sunday clothes, school clothes, and work clothes. And when we we'd go to church on Sunday, we'd have our church clothes and when we went to school we had our school clothes and when we got home from school, we went to our work clothes so we could bring in the coal or the fuel we that needed for the household. Do anything that mother wanted da done, go down and get the ice from the icehouse, put it in the refrigerator in those days. So, uh-

[JR] Do you remember your first TV?

[MM] Uh, I don't. But I used to know the radio, I used to listen to Joe Lewis on the radio yeah when he was boxing. And uh, but TV I don't recall.

[JR] What kind of music did you listen to as you were growing up?

[MM] Well, naturally we didn't have too many musical things in the, in the house. But ah later in life I liked jazz. I like smooth jazz. I don't need to rock and roll. And opera, I can listen to it but jazz, soft jazz, is my, is my uh- is my, is my uh- I like him best.

[JR] You mentioned you were in the choir with your brother when you were in church, yesterday.

[MM] Yes, we went to Swedish Evangelical Mission church. I was confirmed there and baptized. We used to sing on Sundays. The McCollum boys would sing. And ah I went to bible school. I must of had three or four or five bibles given to me for going through the summer school. Bible study. And ah religion was a very important part of our community and of our family.

32:00 [JR] If I remember my research correctly, you're brother went on to be a music teacher?

[MM] Yes, well he, he, he was a, he ran church choirs. In fact he sang in Major Bowes ... [Mr. Mac interrupts an employee who has begun working to near the interview "Keith, Keith too much noise"]. He was a, he was a. Major Bowes Amateur Hour in Chicago. He won a reward there. He had a beautiful voice. Outstanding. Mine wasn't so good, but he went on to lead a lot of everywhere he

was in his community. He was, most of the times, he was the choir director in the church choir. And ah I still have some of his records. He passed away last June. He was a year younger than I, but he was very much in music. Yes.

[JR] Do, Did you remember the ah Orson Wells War of the Worlds ah radio broadcast. Was that was that scary?

[MM] Well, I kind of faintly remember it. I mean I can't remember the attitude or the thought about it. Of course it struck the nation pretty vividly. But in most cases we lost memory on that.

[JR] Is your high school the same high school it was when you were young?

[MM] The high school that I went to burnt down. It's a new high school now. But in my in my school I did track, basketball, and football and in fact, I got my letter in the mile, basketball and I was a forward and a small forward, and in football I was a halfback. In fact we won our division while I was in high school three years running so we were very much an athletic situation. With me anyway, not my brother, but I was, I was tied up with athletics all the time.

[JR] Are you still involved with the Upper Tacoma Business Association?

[MM] Yes, I'm a member. I've been, I was past president for 10-12 years, and when I was a K street boosters. But ah now it's the hilltop business association. But I'm a member and active and helping when they need it.

[JR] Do you um . . . during the 50's and 60's- 70's, it was a time, a time of great civil unrest. Do you have any personal memories of any of those movements? Um, where you ever involved in any of marches, er?

35:00 [MM] No I wasn't. I was. . . I was very disturbed . . . at Martin Luther King, his treatment. Ah he did wonders for the black community. I could never, I have never tolerated in my mind of uh-of color. I treat everybody as equal. Some are better than others, naturally. But as far as uh. . . When I worked in the south, I could not believe, I could not believe, I could not believe the ah, the ah disparity of race against each other and ah being from the north, well we didn't have that. At least not in the extreme. And it was very, very disturbing to me when I was down there. When they had separate bathrooms, separate drinking fountains. I mean I ran a store down there where, it was people on the street, the black people would get off the sidewalk and walk in the road. I couldn't comprehend that, I didn't like it. But that was the situation in the South, when I was growing up but ah it's changed a lot, but still there's a multitude of changes that could be made yet. It just that uh . . . Time is a big healer of all, but where are we gonna go our next, hopefully the next 100 years that we will have a breakthrough equal to everybody. I don't know, it seems like if you look back in history, it seems to be fighting all the time with countries, people of religion, politics and such. I don't know if it'll ever quiet down.

[JR] Do you remember the mother day riot of 69 here in Tacoma?

[MM] I can't recall it, no. I have never been involved in any racial thing. I don't believe in it. And I've supported uh, I've supported equal justice and ah leave it by. I mean, I'm not a drum beater out there beating on drums on it, you know waving flags and everything. I, I, I, leave that to the experts. But ah, I - when I was

downtown I had my store down there, I was probably the first store that hired a black, a black high school kid to work for me. In

38:00 fact I hired a lot of black people. And sat down with 'em and talked to them about being honest. Doing things. And the severity that they gonna have in their life. But they can overcome it by being good citizens. And 4 or 5 of my youngest men that I had in my first store Mac the Knife went on to become very good citizens. And very good jobs. So proud of them. Ah Dennis Williams. Sunny Buyers, I could go on and on about, uh, I have some older gentlemen that come in my store now and said "remember when I worked for you?" and I say, I don't remember [laughs] But they, they uh, they learn something from me. Cause I used to sit down with them and talk to them. You know, like I said to you. Attitude and communication. You got to sit down and communicate. If you have a problem, don't let it aggravate you. Even if he worked for you, or you worked for them, or whatever, come to the table and discuss it. And you can mediate, and make the best of it because you both want something. Well, what do you want? And so if you express your opinion, and I express mine, we can come to a meeting of the minds. What's best for all of us, not for the one individual, but you want to help each other and that's . . . my young people that work for me, ah . . . was in a, a racial . . . a racial bias situation. Ah, and ah most my young men they were, became . . . they're gentlemen today, they're businessmen, they're um , they're um. . . They learned through trial and error and that's how life is anyways. A bunch of trials and errors and you try to overcome 'em by getting the best out of it and doing the best but sometimes it's difficult.

Where you look at somebody and they say 'oh he has easy street. He's easy. He's got everything. He's got everything.' Well er we're not equal in that situation. Because we're all brought up differently. We all have monetary values and monetary things and wants and needs, you like Cadillac's, I liking a car that runs ah you know, so we all have different diversions of life and expectancies of what we want. It doesn't always happen and comes drops in your lap and says "thank you." Sometimes you have to work hard for it. And you sometimes think it's never gonna happen. But you never give up. That's part of life, never give up.

41:00 Because uh, it's probably right on the edge, and you'll see it if you keep trying.

[JR] Mr Mac, do you mind if we take a break from this interview? I'm concerned with my battery, it's going dead.

[MM] Yeah, let's stop.