

JIMMY LEE: When I was a kid, the majority of the people on Rondo were not Black. And in the Black I lived in when I was a kid-- I first started going out six or seven years old or even four or five years old. In the neighborhood, it was only four Black families in that block between Dale and Kent on Rondo.

INTERVIEWER: So it was a lot of Southern European white immigrants?

JIMMY LEE: It was just ordinary. I'll tell you, it was a mixture of people. There were a lot of-- there were some Scandinavians and Irish, and so forth in the neighborhood. And that's the way it was; a few Jewish people at that time. And as I grew up, I saw it change. But for that to become a Black street, it took almost 50 years.

INTERVIEWER: A lot of people who lived on Rondo and in the neighborhood worked for the railroad, didn't they?

JIMMY LEE: Well, see, one of the things I think has to be clarified, when we talk about Rondo, we're not just talking about the street. We're talking about the neighborhood. And see, St. Paul was a railroad town. Now, almost half the people, whether they were Black or white, worked for the railroads in St. Paul in those days.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned the neighborhood at first was just a mixture of all sorts of folks from all over.

JIMMY LEE: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: When did it start to change?

JIMMY LEE: Well, I think it really started to change around 1928 or '29. Most of the Blacks were scattered all around town. The biggest Black church at that time was Pilgrim Baptist Church, and they were located at 11th and Cedar downtown. And St. James AME Church was at Jay and Fuller.

And about the same-- very shortly after the St. James AME Church, which is a Methodist Church, they built a deal in Central. Then once those churches were established, people from other parts of the city moved to be closer to their church. Because most Blacks, at that time, probably to this day, are either Methodist or Baptists. Once the Black community got into the community there, then through discrimination, they wouldn't let us out. But before that time, they were spread all over.

INTERVIEWER: Rondo wasn't really what we think of today as a ghetto, was it? It wasn't a poor neighborhood?

JIMMY LEE: Not as it is today. Because from Farrington to Rice Street on Rondo, heck, they were still places you couldn't even rent a house if you were Black. And just about all the streets along there, I'd say, up until the late '50s-- I'd say the middle '50s, there was an awful, awful lot of white people still living in the community.

INTERVIEWER: And it wasn't that poor a neighborhood, was it? I mean, people had work.

JIMMY LEE: No, it wasn't too poor a neighborhood. But then what happens after a lot of people deserted the neighborhood, it started to run down.

INTERVIEWER: What shape was it in by the late '50s, when the freeway came through?

JIMMY LEE: It wasn't-- it was starting to-- it was going to pot. Because my house-- I lived there at that time, and my house was torn down for the freeway.

INTERVIEWER: How tough was that for you, to see your house torn down?

JIMMY LEE: Well, at that time, for me, it wasn't tough. I wanted out. I wanted to build a new house. And I had no sale for my property. The property was not saleable. I was going to get cash money for the house and had an opportunity to go build a new home, it was-- I thought, for me, it was fine.

INTERVIEWER: I have to wonder, after all these years, more than 25 years since the neighborhood was bulldozed and the freeway was put in, why is Rondo still remembered? And why is it so important?

JIMMY LEE: Because people lived there. That's where their roots were. That's where my roots are.

INTERVIEWER: There's nothing left from the old neighborhood on Rondo itself, is there?

JIMMY LEE: No. There's no businesses. All gone.

INTERVIEWER: The changing of the name of the street from Rondo to Concordia, why did they do that? Do you know?

JIMMY LEE: Well, it is. You see, the street had a certain stigma to it. See? And when they changed the name, the majority of the people had no complaints. I don't think anybody raised an issue. As far as I can remember, as far as I know and remember, there was no objection to the change of that street from Rondo to Concordia.

INTERVIEWER: But now people are talking about it.

JIMMY LEE: Now, people are talking about it. And most of the people that wanted the change, they don't-- there was a lot of things on the street that weren't so pleasant. So I like to leave it at that. Let us remember the pleasant things. And the unpleasant things and the problems I think-- let's not live in the past.