

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

ROBERT (BOBBY) GANT

Interviewed by Carol Locke-Endy and Mel Endy
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At his home in Drayden Maryland

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[Begin Side 1, Tape 1 of 1]

CLE: Interview with Bobby Gant. November 11 of 1996. And, you were talking about George Aud and your job in Democrat party.

RG: Yeah, well, it wasn't politics at the time. It was just, I was the president of Knights of St. Jerome and George Aud was running, you know, he was in politics and he sort of saw that maybe it could do him some good without explanation. I didn't know what is was. And in the meantime, he was giving me this information about how kids could get jobs and thenB

CLE: Was he a Commissioner?

RG: He was a Commissioner at the time. He was running, you know, getting ready to run in the election again. And, he'd come in the store, and I guess I encouraged him because I was always talking. And my mouth—. [laughter] So anyhow, he was the one. And then, I find out that the jobs that they were giving, they didn't even ask on the application how much money you made or anything. They were—. Well, I found out later that these

commissioners had jobs that they were giving out to their political buddies. [laughter]
And I said, "I have no problem." All of my kids, just about, worked in summer programs. And, but, it always used to baffle me how these kids were getting these jobs and every time I went over, they always sent me too money. Made too much money.
"You make too much. You're kids can't participate." [laughter]

CLE: It didn't have anything to do with race, did it?

RG: No.

CLE: No.

RG: But it wasn't a whole lot of black out there. In a way, it did because most of the kids were white. Unless you were a black that was already participating in the political thing, you're kids just didn't get no jobs. They didn't have no summer jobs for them. But after I found out, you know, then I was able to help my kids get their little summer jobs, and it was a big help.

CLE: Now, have you had to do any campaigning?

RG: For George Aud?

CLE: Or for anybody?

RG: Yes, I participated in a lot of campaigns. You know, each one of Walter Dorsey campaigns, I was, participated in. George Aud's. And then, what happened was, by me being—I changed the Knights of St. Jerome's rooms completely. Because when I became President, it was a tight year to make a pledge that you, anything that went on in the meetings that you couldn't tell anybody except in confession to a priest. [laughter] I had that policy changed! [laughter] I basically made it an organization that was more community-friendly because if you didn't belong to it, you know, you're so apathetic.

I really changed them around. And, I did it through politics. I invited politicians down. I had political forums where they would come down and debate their issues. And, I got really tired of getting involved, and I also—.

When I became president, we had \$250 in the, in our bank account, and that was it. And, we were giving \$200, I mean, \$150 away at that time for if you died and was a member of the organization, your family got \$50. I changed all of that. When I left after seven and a half years, we had something like \$17,000 in the bank. I did about \$9,000 worth of work on the building. [laughter] And, a lot of the older people, they quit because they said I took religion out of it, but it wasn't going to survive if it kept going the way it was going.

CLE: It had to get back into the community.

RG: Right. Right, and it wasn't community-friendly, and we had one thing. Every year, we had this 50 notice there, you know, and they would work yourself to death all night long. The funny part about it was, you know, half of it was joining. They didn't want me to join in the beginning. Number one: the president didn't want me to join. My uncle and the vice president was friends. So what they did was the Sunday that the president was off, they came in and swore me in. So when he came back, I was already a member. [laughter] But, they advised me to keep my mouth shut and just sit back and listen. And, I used to question the way they did things. They would have despair and late that night, they would all go upstairs and just look where the old classroom used to be, and they count the money! You know, and they worked me to death because I'm new! [laughter] And then, but I couldn't be up there when they were counting the money. I found out this next meeting that they made \$200, you know.

And, I remember the first year I became president, we cleared, I mean, after expenses, we cleared \$1500 and that was amazing. They had never did that before.

CLE: Big change.

RG: I mean, I made a drastic change, and Father Walsh was the priest there at that time, and he sort of seen what I was doing; and we really got together and we changed the whole thing. We changed the constitution and everything.

CLE: He encouraged you.

RG: Yeah. [laughter] He was good for it. But like I said, a lot of older people, they left. They said, you know, that I took the religion out of it because they thought it was more a religious organization than, than—and I changed it. I had politicians down there from left and right. [laughter] We sold—when we sold dinners, it was basically to people who had—the members bought dinners and then some of the people, And people, they would come, but it wasn't nothing there. But after we got through, we sold more dinners than they could cook! [laughter]

CLE: So, you're proud of that contribution.

RG: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. It'll never go back to what it was. It'd never go back to what it was. You know, I put in all the little costs and it was for the better. And like I said, some of the people didn't like it so they got out, but you could stop, couldn't let that stop you. [laughter] And right now, now, it's mostly functioning well and it's functioning in the way that I changed it.

CLE: That's a real function now.

RG: Yeah. Right. We get around now. We give out scholarships and is has real—. You Know, one time, they didn't do anything but just sat there. And, I think I had belonged to

it for about five years. But I never forget: This old lady—she'd been into the organization about 30 or 35 years, you know.

CLE: So, it has women members?

RG: Members and men. Women and men. And, I remember this: Miss Helen Young, I never forget her because this Miss Alicia Butler had been president maybe for seven, eight, nine years, you know, and it was time for elections. And I never forget, he got up and said, "Well," he said, "What we going do is we just going to just swear in the old boys." And I remember Miss Helen Young, Miss Helen Young got up—and she was old lady—she got up and said, she said, "No. We going to have somebody running against you this year for President." And Miss Irene Butler just buffaloed. "What you say?" You know. And he say, "Who? Who will run against me?" Everybody got all quiet. And she, "Bobby Gant, that's who!" [laughter] And I won! [laughter] He never—don't you know, he never came back to another meeting! [laughter] That was funny! [laughter]

ME: What did they do before you came along and changed things?

RG: Basically nothing that—and like I said, the money was there. They'd come in and they'd hold meetings and I'm trying to think—.

ME: [inaudible]

RG: Huh? The only function they had was on—. Every year on the fifteenth of August or as close to the fifteenth of August they could, they'd have this thing, and the rest of the time, it was religion, you know. It was religion. And like I said, when I went in, when I went in—I went in and changed everything and, but they didn't like it. A lot of them didn't like it. Like I said, the president never came back. He paid his dues for awhile, but, and

then I think he even stopped doing that, but he never came back. But, I never—Miss Helen Young, I never forget her. She got up and said, “Bobby Gant, that’s who!” I was, “Oh Lord!” [laughter]

CLE: Tell me. Life’s changed a lot in St. Mary’s County and you’ve got more than 50 years looking at it. Has it been getting better or is it worse in some ways?

RG: I would say the period of the 60's—and I always said, I said in my prayers, if I was going live in St. Mary’s County and the other, the time of my life, I think the period of the 60's was the best time for African Americans.

CLE: Why is that?

RG: Because of the Civil Rights Movement. Because of Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson, and it sort of changed the mood. And, it happened right on up until Ronald Reagan got in, and I seen a reverse since then.

CLE: And, in terms of racism?

RG: Well, let’s put it this way: I was at the poll Tuesday. I work at the polls passing out literature and talking to people, and this guy came up. This old guy came up. Some white guy came up and—

CLE: Was this down in Ridge?

RG: Down in Ridge. Ridge. They got some of the worst racists that there ever was still living down there, and he came up. And this guy, you never seen. Most of the time, you see those guys, they come out two times a year to come out: election and Easter Mass over at St. Michael’s. I won’t likely see him, and he came up and he pulled his truck right up in front out table. He jumped out and he said, “I want a sample ballot,” you know. And another white guy I was sitting next to, say, “Yeah, give him a sample ballot.” And he

stood around for a while and he started talking.

CLE: This was a sample ballot.

RG: Yeah, a sample ballot. He wanted to—he said he wanted to pick it up and take it back home and look it over. But while he was there, I was standing there. He never—he didn't talk to me directly. So, he start talking about politics the way it used to be. So he said, "Let me tell you something." He said, "Me and my brother over there, we were cutting wood at the time," he said. He said, "Wood was slow, so we went over to the Seventh District. We had this store," he said, "and this colored fellow was sitting there. And the guy behind the counter, this store, whatever it was, you know, was saying, had ran for some sort of office and had won." And said, "This colored fellow was in there asking for a beer. The guy told him, 'You don't get out of here, I'm going to kick you.' "

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And, he's telling this other guy that, you know, and I'm standing there. And, he knows that I hear it, so it didn't bother him. He wanted me to hear it. And, the other guy was trying, didn't want, even didn't want him to tell the joke, but he insist on telling anyhow, you know. So, he was saying that the guy, that the black guy told this guy, he said colored fellows. Said, "the colored fellow told the guy, 'Look. Yesterday you gave me all the beer that I wanted.' And he saying, and then he leaned over and said, he said, 'You with the [inaudible]. Look here nigger, yesterday I needed your vote.' "

And this is a joke, he was telling, and I'm standing there. And so, the other guy who was the person who was the Democratic Club, you know, he didn't want to hear it. He's trying to just get the guy away. But anyhow, he ignored the guy and started talking to me. So, he start talking to me about my son and he said, "Hey Bobby, where's you

son?"

I said, "Oh, he works on the Base." I say, "He been there since he got out the Army." I said, "Since he got out the Army." And then I said, that this guy looked at me and said, "Look here. He get rid of the Base if he got up and say [inaudible]—. Why, he was so mad. I just took him by the shoulder and walked him to his truck.

I said, "Look. Enough is enough." I said, "I don't know what you trying to do or what you trying to provoke me into, but this is Election Day. I want to be here and try and get people to vote for my candidate." [laughter]

CLE: So, in some ways, things are going backwards in your view.

RG: It is. Things are—

CLE: What about the young people? This is an old guy who didn't get any better and it's still pretty bad, but what about the younger people?

RG: Some of the younger people. Well, my grandson has, you know, I came in contact because of him. He—. Kids don't know any better. He'll tell me, and he goes to St. Michael's School, and he meets these kids and they want him to come over his house and they want to come to my house, you know. And, I can sense that some of them are really, the parents are really uncomfortable with it, but they don't say nothing to their kids! [laughter] And, it's really funny! [laughter] And then, some of them are really funny, friendly, and some of them are probably surprised, you know, because they got this attitude that I'm living, probably living in a log cabin with a toilet outside, and they don't know any better, you know, until they come visit my house, and find out I live just like they do. You know? And I mean, this is happening now. Some of them are really surprised, you know. And some of them, I live better than they do! [laughter] So, but,

we still got those, this stereotype out there and it's being passed on from one generation to the next.

CLE: So, what's your prescription?

RG: Ah, is there a solution to this? I try to treat everybody as a human being and, you know, knowing that they're not, that this is not the general feeling. You know, just because a person dislikes you, you ain't got to dislike them back. And especially, with a simple thing. If he only find fault in me because of the color of my skin, you know, then he has the problem. I don't. I don't have a problem. So if he finds the fault, and a lot of them still do—

And there's a lot of racist things that went on. The younger generation has changed, you know. And—

CLE: Were you ever afraid, when you were growing up down here, because of race?

RG: Um hmm [no]. I've never been afraid. All the people that I grew up with, like, you know, the Dalmons [???] and the Uplers, [???] they all knew as a child, you know. And, I've never been afraid. In fact, I've always too, you know—. I've always been—I tell you I was known as a smart aleck kid because, you know, the Father was always telling on me when I said something, as a child, that should have been, let the grownups to say. And, that's the way I was, you know, and they always complained to my mother, but I never got beat for it. So.

CLE: Did you—? When you were up in Baltimore, comparing your black man's experience there to your black man's experience here, what was different?

RG: Basically, in Baltimore, all we seen was black, you know. Your neighborhood was black. You didn't go downtown at that time because at that time, downtown right around the

Harbor, that was white. You didn't go down there. All the white theaters. All your theaters was around Pennsylvania Avenue and Harlem Street. So, it was basically, you never, you know—. The only time you dealt with white people was when you went to the store.

CLE: That was in the 50's?

RG: Yeah. When you went to store. Well, it seemed big because there was a Jew on every corner. The Jewish people owned all the stores at that time. But basically, that's all you dealt with. You didn't deal with the right people. When—where I worked at was, I was in the white area, you know, but it was more like a company, so you still didn't [inaudible]. And, I haven't seen any difference in them. I think the 60's were the time that I think the black man got more respect. Rather, they got it out of fair, you know, or what, but they did. They got more respect from the—. Right now, you know, I get the feeling that the average white man, he don't care nothing about you, you know. You know, it's false respect is some easier to find.

And in the '60's, I don't think a lot of them respected you for the fact that you, because you are a man. They respected you for the fact that somebody burnt down a building. Or, Martin Luther King. Or, we had the Malcolm X's, you know and they, you know, it was sort of a fair thing.

CLE: Now, in the early '60's, the time of the March on Washington, when King spoke in '63, were there some people from the County that went up to hear that that you knew of? Did people talk about that a lot?

RG: I remember watching it on TV. I don't really remember anybody in particular. If they did, I don't remember anybody going up, in particular, to listen at that, but I remember

listening to it on TV.

CLE: And what did you think when you were listening to that?

RG: I basically thought that it was, what he was asking, really needed divine intervention [laughter]. You know. I mean, He was calling for black men or white men holding hands, you know, and he was talking about—you know. I just didn't feel it. With the experiences that I had, I just didn't think it was happening, would happen. And, there has been some progress, a lot of progress, but it's always—I'm just thinking that we're here and they can tell either way, and we don't have any control over it. The black man don't have any control over which way it'll go, and the white man has this control. And, his heart is the one that has to change. I don't think, you know, we can do all we can and we'll change some minds, but it's always going be this core group [laughter] that's going keep, you know, keep it tilting. And every time it tilt this way, you're [laughter], you think you're making progress, and you got this core group that's going, you know—I mean, somebody could come up like George Wallace in the '60's, you know. David Duke, you know. And, so many people agree with these people.

CLE: David Duke didn't make out too well.

RG: He didn't make out so well, but the idea was he had, he had a core of support. Yeah, in fact, he was on TV not long ago. Still got a core of support.

ME: I'm not supposed to ask questions, right?

CLE: Go ahead.

ME: Just one. In the South, I was involved the Civil Rights too. And in the South, there was a real fear of retaliation. We had demonstrations and things. Did—I know you seem to be kind of fearless in your own actions. Was there a sense that there might be retaliation or

violence in this, in St. Mary's County?

RG: I cannot remember any fear that there were going be some sort of retaliation towards you.

CLE: Did people worry about losing their jobs?

RG: I think the white people were worried about their jobs more than the black people did.

CLE: Bobby, was the Klan ever active in St. Mary's County that you know about?

RG: No. No. Calvert County. I've heard of Calvert County, but I've never heard St. Mary's County being, you know, being, being active in the Klan.

ME: So, it sounds as if St. Mary's County was different from the deep South.

RG: Well, I think the Base, the Base really changed a lot.

CLE: Ah, made a big difference.

RG: It made a big difference. Right.

CLE: It brought a lot of outsiders.

RG: Right. It brought a lot of out—brought some from New York. You know, and people had different ideas, you know. It didn't—but, it's very conservative. It's always been a very conservative county. I think it's because it's Catholic. To me, this, and they're conservative in their ideas.

I don't see that we're making a lot of progress. In other words, I don't see this thing that Martin Luther King dreamed up nowhere near happening. [laughter] It's not nowhere near happening. But, it's going to take the Lord's intervention. I don't think—I think black, the black community has really reached out.

CLE: I think so.

RG: Yeah. We really reached out, but well take the last election of the school board. That was really something, wasn't it? With Mary? [laughter]

CLE: I'm going to ask you one more question.

RG: Okay.

CLE: Then, you have to go have lunch. When you look back on your life, you have a lot of things that you feel real satisfaction in what you've done and the difference you've made. Is there anything you wish you could change, that you would do differently now, looking back?

RG: Yes. I think probably, if I would look back, I think I spent my whole life worrying about trying to bring other people around, and I really need neglected my personals. I see so many things that I could've did, and that's them days that I missed because all my life has been volunteering. I volunteered to help other people—and I really didn't even think about myself. And then I remember, I said, "Daggone! Somebody bought that piece of land."

You know, I had an opportunity to do it and I just, you know—. My self was sort of put on the side and I worried about other people the whole time. And, still I have a problem, you know, trying not to worry about other people's problems when I should be, you know, [laughter] trying to figure—. I'm 58 years old now and you know. [laughter] But other than that, I'm pretty well satisfied with my life, and I feel good when I see things happening that maybe I had a hand into, you know.

And, I've been able to—I think my kids have got into positions that they normally wouldn't have gotten into if it wasn't for me. You know, I have a daughter that's a Deputy Sheriff and I know she wouldn't have got it if I hadn't been active in—. [laughter] Like, I went in the State's Attorney's Office now, you know, and I was able to bring my son first came out the Army, they said they had a freeze on the Base, and I

knew the guy, head of Personnel. So, I just went down and talked to him and he got him a temporary job. And then basically, he's full-time now. So by being active, I got to know people and I was able to sort of help my kids. They realize! [laughter] They realize that.

CLE: That's remarkable. Thank you very much. You've been wonderful.

RG: Well, I really haven't gave you anything because, you know [laughter], I was, you know—.

CLE: We needed to ask the questions that the committee for the project wants us to ask. But, we like to talk with you again, if we can, and the next time, we'll give you warning in advance, and we'll talk more about the history of church.

RG: Okay. That would give me a chance to research! [laughter}

[Conclusion of interview about halfway through Side 1, Tape 1 of 1]