

Jim Gerlich
Narrator

Eleanor Benson
Macalester College
Interviewer

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EB: Would you mind stating your name?

JG: Jim Gerlich.

EB: When and where were you born?

JG: I was born in 1945 on Fuller Avenue and Dale in Rondo neighborhood.

EB: Do you still live there today?

JG: No.

EB: Where do you live now?

JG: I live in Minneapolis near Cedar Lake.

EB: Did you single-handedly create the poster of the Rondo neighborhood?

JG: Almost single-handedly. The story is...I've continued, for years, to have friends in the Rondo neighborhood, mostly through basketball connections. Frank White, who you maybe know, is someone I've known since high school. He's very involved in the Rondo neighborhood, in fact he's just about to come out with a book on black baseball in Minnesota. One time I saw a little piece in the paper that someone was going to do an oral history of the Rondo neighborhood and was looking for volunteers. I responded to the ad, and it was a woman that lived in Saint Paul...and she offered me various things and one of the things that I was interested in was doing a map. She said, we need a map for the book, so I said I'll do that. So I started on the map and she sent me to someone at the University of Minnesota by the name of David Taylor who was at that time the dean of the General College which they have since eliminated at the U. He had been born the same year I was in the Rondo neighborhood, which was kind of fun [Laughs]. He had

started a hand-drawn rudimentary map. He had laid out basically the boundaries, as a black man, what the boundaries were for him as a child. There were actual boundaries, and you knew what they were if you were black. If you were white, you probably weren't that aware of them, but they were Lexington Avenue on the [west], Marshall Avenue to the south, University Avenue to the north, and downtown was fairly fluid but generally Rice Street. So he had that, and he just had the streets drawn and he had a couple of little notes in there. He said, you can have this, I don't have time to do this, you can have this.

So I took that and I just kind of ran with it, and I spent like the next two years at least doing research to create this map. I spent probably a hundred hours interviewing Rondo people, I'd go to the Rondo old timers meetings, double and triple checking all the information. I read every single issue at the historical society of the Saint Paul Echo, which was the Rondo area newspaper. I don't remember his name, but it was...the Wilkins Auditorium, was that Roger Wilkins? His brother was the editor and he was a brilliant writer. He was an incredible writer but he died when he was like thirty years old. I read all of those articles. I would make notes, I would notice what was at certain addresses, I had all of the addresses and I'd just keep filling them in. Then I went through all of the directories at the various libraries. The most complete ones were at the Saint Paul Library, none at the historical society, theirs were missing things. Eventually, when I got all that information, I started going around interviewing people and checking everything I had and getting background stories on all of the information I had gathered.

And about the boundaries: I had a woman tell me that one time she walked across University Avenue, she was standing on the other side to do some shopping, and a policeman came up and said, what are you doing here? You don't belong on this side of University Avenue. That's how things were. Eventually I got in a dispute with this woman. She wanted to eliminate everything from the map that wasn't about black history or about black culture in the Rondo neighborhood and I refused to do that because I was from that neighborhood, and I knew this was an integrated neighborhood that worked really well. My grandparents who lived there my whole life, and we were there a lot in the Rondo neighborhood, and we visited them a lot even after we moved out. They never had a car. They walked everywhere. They did all the grocery shopping by walking, they did everything by walking. And I never in my childhood or ever at any time heard them express the slightest fear of anything. It was a neighborhood that old people could walk around in. All their neighbors were black, and the grocery stores were mostly owned by Jewish people. Everyone was intermingling and everyone got along really well. So I refused to do that because I said no, that's not really the history of the Rondo neighborhood. It became that slowly after the suburbs with the GI Bill after World War Two. Two of my uncles who lived in that neighborhood with their wives and starting families, they left and went and built their own homes in North Saint Paul, that was the American Dream, go and build your own home. White people with the GI Bill and with their jobs had the ability to do that. Black people still couldn't leave that area until Civil Rights. It became more black after that.

So then, I had this map, I'm hand-drawing it. I drew it many times, that map, by hand, over and over. I'd draw it, I'd fill in new things, I'd have to change things, I'd get things wrong, I'd interview people. David Taylor had it upside down. All maps north is at the top, and he had North at the bottom and South at the top. I kept recreating his map, and I realized, I just can't have it like this so I had to turn the whole thing upside down which was a huge amount of work to do and redraw the whole thing [Laughs]. Eventually I was at the point where I needed a graphic designer to help me. I hired some guy in Duluth and he was very good but something went on in his life and he didn't get anything done and finally I had to fire him. Then I found another guy in Minneapolis who did the actual professional layout as you see it on that map. I had another friend help me with the colors, she was a graphic designer. So that's how the map came about, that's the story of it.

EB: You put so much effort and time into this project, and you clearly were very passionate about it. Why do you think having a map of their neighborhood is so important to Rondo?

JG: If you have a community that really works well, the memories of that community are pretty valuable. I get a little choked up about it because people have really appreciated it, especially the black community has given me lots of fabulous feedback, and I'm a little humbled by that [Chokes up]. No one else had done it, and things were disappearing. The stories were disappearing. People can look and say, Oh, we were there, and this happened on that corner, or whatever [Pauses].

EB: It gives people agency and reminds everyone that they were there.

JG: Right.

EB: Even if their house isn't still there.

JG: The freeway came through, 94 came through, and took out Rondo Avenue. That was the end of the community. It couldn't recover from that, plus almost at the same time Civil Rights happened. There was a strata of people that could move out. I can't think of his first name, but the first black police captain, Griffith, he moved out right near Roseville and loved it out there. He said, we would never have been able to do this without Civil Rights or without the money that the city gave us for our house. He said, they gave us way more than it was worth, he thought. Other people say they got cheated on it. If you hear all the stories, it's a community, everyone thinks this way or that way, there are disagreements. Some people think, wow it was great. Some people think, Oh, God, I was glad to get out of there [Laughs]. That's what makes a community. There's not a uniformity of ideas or opinions or anything. The map in a sense shows that. Even in that community there was something called Cornmeal Valley and Oatmeal Hill. Well, oatmeal costs more than cornmeal. The further you got from downtown towards Lexington, the more affluent you were. It took more money to live near Lexington. When I was a kid, around the

capital there were still dirt streets and there were outhouses. That was Cornmeal Valley. Officially, the dividing line was either Dale or Western Avenue but people would fudge that. Everyone liked to say they lived on Oatmeal Hill. You could get away with living three blocks or four blocks into Cornmeal Valley and still present yourself as living on Oatmeal Hill. So, like I say, it was a community, and all those things went on.

When I was a kid, my grandparents' was an amazing place. It was this whole block brownstone building on Central Avenue from Dale to Kent I think, or maybe on the other side. It amazed me as a kid that to get around the back yard if you were in the front you either had to go through the house or all the way around the block, there was no other way to do it. It was kind of weird, you know? [Laughs]. If you walked in the front door, and you went to go out the back, you had to go down a huge flight of stairs because the kitchen was a whole story up because there was a big hole in the backyard down in the alley. It was narrow and their heat was a gas stove in the dining room, and then they just had holes with these metal grates over the floors for the upstairs, that was the heat for upstairs. It was a lot of really fun memories. I remember walking down to the store with my uncle or my grandmother, there's a corner store everywhere. Everyone just seemed friendly and everyone seemed to get along. I think my map represents that in some way. Something that doesn't exist anymore obviously, but it was a community that people valued so there's a nostalgia for it. I think the map feeds into that nostalgia.