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**An Oral History of Glenn Grossman
Conducted by Susan Conwell**

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Abstract: Glenn Grossman was a civil rights activist in Baltimore. In this oral history interview, he discusses his perspective on Baltimore's socioeconomic and political situation, and how that affected the city's participation in the civil rights movement throughout the 1960s and early '70s. Grossman further discusses bus and school integration efforts in Baltimore, as well as the lasting impacts of the 1968 riots.

Note on Oral History: Oral history is a methodology of gathering, preserving, and sharing the voices and memories of individuals and communities. As primary material, it documents personal reflections, commentary, and recollections, and is not intended to present a verified or "complete" history of events.

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Glenn Grossman was interviewed on January 10, 1976, by Susan Conwell at the Marylander Apartments, 3501 St. Paul Street, in Baltimore City. This interview was done as introductory classwork for a class in Oral History held at the Maryland Historical Society (now Maryland Center for History and Culture) in January of 1976. It was meant to serve as a “practice interview” for the McKeldin-Jackson Project.

Conwell [00:00:02] This is an interview with Glenn Grossman for the McKeldin-Jackson Project of the Maryland Historical Society on January 10th, 1976 at the Marylander Apartments. The interviewer is Susan Conwell.

Conwell [00:00:19] We're all set. Um—When did you come to Baltimore?

Grossman [00:00:23] September, 1968.

Conwell [00:00:27] And you were going to school here?

Grossman [00:00:28] That's right.

Conwell [00:00:30] Were you involved in the civil rights movement here at all?

Grossman [00:00:34] No. Not at all.

Conwell [00:00:36] Did you read any articles about it or—?

Grossman [00:00:37] Oh, yes. I was—

Conwell [00:00:38] (speaking at the same time) What kind of—?

Grossman [00:00:38] —well, I was a minor in Black history at Hopkins.

Conwell [00:00:38] Mhm.

Grossman [00:01:00] And I was exposed to a great deal of Black literature and a great deal of (unintelligible) concerned with the civil rights movement.

Conwell [00:01:05] (speaking at the same time) In general—?

Grossman [00:01:05] Research and things like that. And, of course, some things that dealt with the riots in Baltimore.

Conwell [00:01:12] What kind of things did you read about the riots in Baltimore?

Grossman [00:01:15] Well, I don't—

Conwell [00:01:17] (speaking at the same time) In '68.

Grossman [00:01:17] I'm afraid I don't remember what it was that I read, but of course, it was an extremely significant event, and therefore there was a great deal of media coverage. Even as late

as September and October. And of course, the whole country was going up at the time so there was a great deal of comparison to the riot in Baltimore and the ones in Detroit and (unintelligible).

Conwell [00:01:49] Did you think that was a valid comparison? What kind—in other words—

Grossman [00:01:50] Well, yes, I think it was, because I think that the same problems that were facing Blacks in the poorer areas of Baltimore were faced by the same sorts of people in the same sorts of circumstances in other cities. You see, I think that what people don't understand or what they don't—maybe don't know about, is the fact that Baltimore's Blacks. The fact that Blacks are in a slightly different situation than they are in other areas of the country. Of course, I am not as familiar with other areas of the country, but we have, possibly, a poorer, less well-educated, and possibly a smaller core of people that are employed in civil service, government jobs, and things like that. In Baltimore, we deal with—Well, let's put it this way, we don't deal with, but we have a greater incidence of living better for less money. So people who live here are, what we might call, absolutely poorer than they are in other northern cities.

Conwell [00:03:23] What kind of a difference do you think this made on the depth and the impact of the riots here?

Grossman [00:03:37] That's a good question. Well, I think that Baltimore has one of the greatest—one of the largest, certainly—areas of urban renewal in the country and it may have had some effect on that. There's a great deal of activity—or was a great deal, I don't know if it's true anymore. In fact, I am pretty sure that it isn't. But we had a great many, great society-type programs: a lot of the CAA, Model Cities, Urban Renewal, all this kind of thing. And it's possible, although I can't say with any degree of certainty, that the riots had an effect on that. But, once again, I think the city because of the poor nature of—

[00:04:36] *pause in recording*

Conwell [00:04:36] There we go. Uh, continue.

Grossman [00:04:36] Well, when I say that the city is poor, I think it is easier for Blacks to get along in Baltimore. In fact, it's easier for poor whites to get along in Baltimore, because it seems that there's a high incidence of homeownership, taxes are fairly low, that kind of thing. And so people haven't got the impetus here to go for higher wages and that kind of thing. So it might be easier to be poor, so to speak. But another thing that strikes me that is peculiar in Baltimore, in terms of the Blacks here, is the fact that there doesn't seem to be any real, significant leadership in the black community. And even when one considers the devastation that the riots caused, even leaders didn't come out of that. What has happened is that now, many years later, there are still no Blacks in the city government worth a damn. And the ones that are there, are there because of the Byzantine political ploys that the Black politicians in this town make, just like the white politicians. (unintelligible).

[00:06:05] *pause in recording*

Grossman [00:06:13] Yeah, alright. We've been talking now about your recent impressions of what's gone on since the riots. Do you have any feelings about what went on here or in the state in the civil rights movement before the riots and what may have led to the riots? You mentioned poverty of leadership. What kinds of factors would you attribute, sketchily of course, to leading up to the riot? Sketch, of course. Um, to leading up to the riots.

Grossman [00:06:43] Hmm.

Conwell [00:06:44] Um, and—

Grossman [00:06:44] Nothing. I really can't even discuss it. I would imagine that the riots—Well, first of all, of course the spark was Martin Luther King's death. But, as far as what led up to the riots, I'm sure that there's a hell of a lot of literature which I know—that we both know (unintelligible)—that explained—and not to my total satisfaction—the cause of the riots in other cities, and I'm certain that they would hold true for Baltimore. You have a substructure of poverty, you have housing problems, employment problems, crime problems. So, I don't really think that the riot was peculiar to Baltimore. It was a bad riot, but I can't say that there was anything in Baltimore different than any other place, that would cause the riot. I think there are things in Baltimore that are different that cause the continuing lack of power, lack of progress.

Conwell [00:07:52] So if you had to write a little essay on what has gone on since the riots, this is how you would view it.

Grossman [00:08:03] Well I—

Conwell [00:08:03] Would you say that the civil rights movement has been significant or strong? Do you think it's made much of an impact?

Grossman [00:08:12] Oh, well. It's difficult for me to say whether the civil rights movement has done anything in Baltimore, because I'm just not familiar with it. What has done things are federal laws; the 1964 Civil Rights Act has had a tremendous impact here. And of course, we're still seeing _____ (??) play games with the city's government and the state's government as well. So, if one views this sort of thing as a battle, then the battle isn't over yet. One has to realize that Baltimore is pretty much a southern town. And there's a very stratified class and very segregated racial situations, so—And the fact, of course, that Blacks have been pretty much leaderless or have had irresponsible leadership in the past. And as a result. I don't think that Baltimore has been in the vanguard of the civil rights movement.

Conwell [00:09:26] Going back a little in time—Perhaps it's too early to go back in time since you've only been here since '68. Can you tell me anything, any impressions you may have had of Governor McKeldin and his role in the civil rights movement?

Grossman [00:09:47] No. I am not familiar enough with him to say anything.

Conwell [00:09:50] Or the city governments, say, in general over the past—

Grossman [00:09:53] (speaking at the same time) Oh, I think—

Conwell [00:09:54] —as far as you can go back?

Grossman [00:09:55] I think if anything the city government and the state government to an extent as well, has, if anything, been a block to the progress of so-called civil rights. As I said, remember, the way politics is set up is so Blacks don't seem to be able to make it, because there's too much infighting. And that's what I meant by irresponsible leadership. There are—we have one Black congressman now, and I have a very low opinion of him. And of course, there's a family structure

to Black politics in this time. I think if anything, the Blacks themselves have hurt themselves and I think the city government has helped them hurt themselves, by doing things like—well, very recently by doing things like keeping Blacks out of appointed office.

Conwell [00:11:05] In what way would you say that's been accomplished?

Grossman [00:11:09] Well, the way it's been accomplished is to eliminate or to a great extent limit Black participation. And the city government—Well, the city government, of course, is controlled by the city's politics, and the city's politics are controlled by very few people. And those very few people are not Blacks and have very few Black ties. So therefore you constantly get the same people and the same bosses, and they have no ties to the Blacks. Now, what happens is that through old-time politics and patronage, Blacks are co-opted into accepting less than they could be getting if it was a different kind of situation. The fact that the city is more than half Black and it doesn't have a Black in any of the top three offices indicates that the whites have managed—the white politicians have managed to co-opt the Blacks. Offered them significant things, of course, but the people who are getting them, are not rank-and-file poor Blacks. They're Black politicians and they get some patronage jobs and that's about it. Now, that might change. In fact, I think it's going to have to change eventually because there's just too many Blacks for that to happen or for that to continue.

Conwell [00:13:03] Hm. By eventually, what kinds of things do you—Do you see anything in today's city politics or state politics that would indicate such a change could take place in the near future? Or do you think its just a—

Grossman [00:13:18] (speaking at the same time) Well, yes, if all the whites—

Conwell [00:13:19] (unintelligible; speaking at the same time) a matter of time.

Grossman [00:13:19] —if the whites all get indicted, I think that there will be a very large gap. But I really don't see anything in the very near future that's going to change anything, because—Except possibly a reform—not among the Blacks, because I don't see that at all—but among the whites. And if there is a strong enough reform movement, then the Blacks may see their opportunity to split the white vote. Now, that is probably not going to happen, but I cannot see Blacks winning anything until whites are so divided, that a Black can finally win. Now, the fact that a very viable Black candidate, George Russell, couldn't win against Mayor Schaefer when another Black was running—the two of them together couldn't get as many votes as Schaefer—indicates to me that the Blacks have a long way to go. And that, certainly, what happens is that the Blacks kill each other off. I think that's going to have to stop too. And I don't see that happening either, because it's just too much money, just too many jobs, and just too much pride involved.

Conwell [00:14:49] Hm. Do you think that Baltimore will ever reach, in the very near future, the same crisis point, or whatever you want to call it, that it reached in 1968?

Grossman [00:15:00] No, I don't see that happening.

Conwell [00:15:03] Why?

Grossman [00:15:03] Well, because I think that Baltimore, despite what I've said before about its poverty and that kind of thing—It's a very, very complacent town. (unintelligible) it has always struck me, that my impression has been, it's an extremely complacent town. It's complacent

because the politics is corrupt and everyone knows it, which makes it a little bit—When your politics is corrupting, how do people notice it? It's interesting because the politics of this town is not what I would call inept or inefficient, it's just corrupt. So people have turned off from that kind of process. Uh, as I said, there's very little leadership, and I don't think unless something very, very off the wall occurred—which I don't expect—I don't think they'll be more riots. I don't they'll be riots anywhere because there's too many Blacks in the middle class now. Even here in Baltimore. And they don't want that to happen. In fact, you know, after all, when you have a (unintelligible) in the streets candidate getting twenty percent of the vote in Black precincts, it indicates to me that there's a great stream of Black conservatives. And that, of course, would mean the end of radical (unintelligible).

Conwell [00:16:38] Um. I understand at one point you did some work on Black ministers in the city. From that research that you did do a few years ago, how would you characterize these potential leaders in the Black community? And thinking now in terms of—

Grossman [00:16:59] Oh, ministers you can throw away. I mean they are—That was the greatest impression I got from the research, was that the Black ministers are, in many cases, worse than useless. It is very tragic that the best—at least the most effective—leader among the Black ministers that I interviewed, was murdered.

Conwell [00:17:24] And who was that?

Grossman [00:17:28] His name was Revered Swan.

Conwell [00:17:28] S-W-A-N? Uh-huh.

Grossman [00:17:33] Yeah, he was killed. But incidentally, that's also my own impression. Now—

Conwell [00:17:33] (speaking at the same time) Yes.

Grossman [00:17:33] —Revered Dobson, who is probably considered to be one of the strongest leaders in the Black community. And I don't think that (unintelligible). That's Vernon Dobson (unintelligible), there's another Reverend Dobson who (unintelligible).

Conwell [00:17:57] What is Reverend Swan's—What was his first name?

Grossman [00:18:05] I don't (unintelligible).

Conwell [00:18:05] No? So, that is also a difference then, would you say? In other communities in the country.

Grossman [00:18:10] Well, I don't know. I think that we don't have any leaders at all worth spit in this town. You know, and it's sort of a shame, I guess. But we just don't. And ministers haven't come up with anything. As I said, it's a complacent town. The ministers are much more interested in the gospel than they are in social progress. And I was getting that again and again.

Conwell [00:18:41] Mhm.

Grossman [00:18:41] It's it's sort of—Well, what's happened, you see—Now don't forget, this is a few years ago. Now things may have changed, but as of a few years ago, I got the distinct

impression that what was going on was a removal of the churches and the church sort of structure from the south—a rural southern kind of atmosphere—to the neighborhood Black community in the urbanized North. And you're not going to get anywhere with that kind of thing. So the ministers are not, you know, they're not in the forefront of any activity. And besides that, I happen to—you know, I think that, for the most part, civil rights per se is pretty much (unintelligible).

Conwell [00:19:27] Why is that?

Grossman [00:19:28] Because the battles have been—The battles of the fifties and sixties, I guess, are won. The problems of poor Blacks are the exact same problems of the poor whites. They're not being discriminated against to any great extent. Much less than was the case a few years ago. Particularly, I think that the '64 Civil Rights Act has succeeded. And now, you know, when you have these problems with the educational integration, even the Blacks are divided on what they want. So, you know, there's a great deal of disagreement in Black ranks about the efficacy of busing. So who knows, you know, if—I'm saying that civil rights is a dead matter. And now the issues are much more—excuse me, are much less emotional than they used to be.

Conwell [00:20:28] Um. To turn for a second to the question of busing, which has certainly hit the country in the past couple of years: What kind of effect do you think the events in other cities have had on Baltimore?

Grossman [00:20:47] Very little, very little. Because we—Our busing problem was every bit as significant as the one in Boston, but we didn't have anywhere near the kind of reaction as Boston. And I think it's a very important issue down here because people have made it so, but I have never understood why people didn't call busing what—you know, not busing itself, but the reaction to busing—what it was: racism pure and simple. Not to say that, incidentally, I support it, but I do think that that is the basic reaction, which is people don't want their kids going to school with Blacks. For any number of reasons, not necessarily that they are Black. I don't think—From research I've seen, is that there's a tipping involved and that as long as Blacks are a minority in the school, then the whites don't care about sending their kids to it or at least don't care enough to take them out. But as soon as Blacks are a majority or even a little less than a majority, then all of a sudden whites find themselves with a problem and take their kids out of the school and this and that. But that has to be—that has nothing to do with the quality of the school. There is a definite point of tipping. And that means that if the school is 42 percent Black, and it has a fair level of academic standing and then becomes 43 percent Black—obviously, the academic standing's not going to change. But whites will perceive it to have changed and will take their kids out.

Conwell [00:22:48] Are there any reasons that you would off-hand ascribe to this difference in reaction? Here.

Grossman [00:23:00] What do you mean here? Oh, yes, I think—

Conwell [00:23:01] (speaking at the same time) Well, in Baltimore—

Grossman [00:23:01] —it's a very conservative town. And I don't want to give the impression that there hasn't been any reaction, there has been a tremendous reaction, I'm sure. It just hasn't been as violent as in other places. I can't give you a reason why it hasn't been violent. It has been in a few cases, it's definitely minor skirmishes. But there's been quite a reaction. It's sort of a conservatism, a complacency in the population.

Conwell [00:23:35] What—How would—?

Grossman [00:23:36] It's a working-class town. And while that—The same story as in Boston I suppose.

Conwell [00:23:48] How would you characterize the reaction here?

Grossman [00:24:05] Ah. You mean to busing?

Conwell [00:24:08] Yes.

Grossman [00:24:08] Well, I think the reaction here is the same as it is in every other place: the most people oppose to it, at least it seems that way. And it's just a matter of how much level of opposition you're talking about. I think there's a distinct opposition to it here. It's just—Fortunately, it's just not widely (unintelligible), at least it seems that way. And incidentally, I think that what may happen is the AGW will back down to some extent on some of this—not only the busing issues, but the state colleges and universities and things like that. It's tough to integrate a school system which is predominantly Black. And I don't even think that—I don't think it's an important issue because the schools are terrible, absolutely terrible. And they're not educating anybody, Blacks or whites. And they're so bad that people are losing sight of what it is that they're arguing about. I think that there's no—it doesn't seem to me anyway, that they're arguing about education because there's no quality of education here anyway. Schools are all white but still going to be unbelievably bad compared to other places and certainly compared to the suburban schools.

Conwell [00:25:41] Well, it looks like we're running out of time. Thank you very much.

Conwell [00:25:44] You didn't even let me say what I wanted to come here to say, about what happened—You didn't ask the one question.

Conwell [00:25:49] (speaking at the same time) What?

Grossman [00:25:49] What the effect of the riots were later. See, I know something about that. Because I was here for the later bit.

Conwell [00:25:55] (speaking at the same time) I though I did. Well tell me about that, then.

Grossman [00:25:56] Yeah, but that wasn't what I wanted to say, you know. I wanted to say that the riots caused—in the years '68, nine, '70, and maybe '71—tremendous fear in this town of the riots, see. Like nobody knew that this was the end of the riots; that '68 was going to be pretty much the last year that we were going to have riots. So what happened was, you had a large burnt-out area, you know, where the riots were. But all over the city, you get riot architecture, which is concrete, cinder blocks in the front, no windows, lots of barrings, and that sort of thing. And, basically it's a merchant's fear and that kind of thing. Maybe not without complete justification. But certainly, in 1976, no one expects a riot and yet this kind of commercial fear of a riot still exists. Now, of course, it's difficult to divide a commercial fear of a riot with the fear of vandalism, which, of course, is still in town.

[00:27:29] *end of recording*