

CAYRUTH, Lucretia  
INTERVIEWEE

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**Interview # 253**

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**Abstract:** In her interview with Michael Cooke, Lucretia Cayruth discusses her experiences growing up in South Carolina and her involvement with the Progressive Democratic Party. Mrs. Cayruth details her education, and experiences that lead her to become involved with the Progressive Democratic Party as well as the efforts to enable the black community to register to vote in South Carolina. Mrs. Cayruth discusses her interactions with John McCray and her role in the Progressive Democratic Party in Columbia South Carolina.

\*This is an edited transcript. Our transcription guidelines are available upon request/on our website.

Time	Keywords
00:00:00	<b>MC: Today is February 3, 1986. I'm conducting an interview with Lucretia Cayruth. Did I pronounce that correctly?</b>
	LC: Lucretia Morris Cayruth.
00:00:11	<b>MC: She resides in Columbia South Carolina. Mrs. Cayruth could you tell us something about your life? When were you born? Where were you born? Your education and your occupation.</b>
	LC: I was born in Barnwell County, April 22 1917. I came to Columbia in the— during the depression, so about '29. I came with my father because he lost everything, mules, everything, he had there to build the place is called now Lake Murray but when we lived and he came to work there it was Saluda Dam. So I entered Waverly Elementary School. I was there through the sixth grade. Due to the depression I had to quit and babysit and work. Do domestic work to help my family survive so I could have food to eat. Through those years they did not have adult education so by the time I was old enough or got where I could go back to school I felt like I was too old to go back to school with the children. That I was in school because my classmates had already gone through those grades. Then in

'69...or let's go back—back during those years before I entered back in school I did domestic work and then in 1940 I got a job working for Saks and Co. as a maid. I was there for several years, finally I got promoted to working as an elevator girl. From elevator girl I got promoted to working on the desk. During those days only white girls had elevator jobs and working at the desk. Then a year or so later I got promoted to the marking room. That's where you retail work and mark retail merchandise.

00:02:26 In 1940 February 5, I was married to my husband Matthew C. Cayruth. We were married about 13 years. During that time I was still working with Saks and Co. and Saks and Co. was sold to Davidson. I continued to work there. Which totaled up to 13 years, my time with Saks and Co. and Davidson. So around 13 years I got pregnant with my first child and I went on a leave. I was on leave about six months. Went back and worked about three months and I found I was pregnant with my second child. My first child was a boy, he was Stanley. My second child was Belle. So I felt I was too poor to pay somebody to take care of my children as they should be taken care of. So I stayed home about two years with them. Then I went with Young Fashion. I was meant to work in somebody's place as a maid for two weeks but after working a while I found myself working there a longer time as a maid and then got promoted to stock room girl. Then later we had a man who had finished NYU, New York University, in window displaying. Each time that he fixed a window I found myself having to go back in to the window, my boss thought that I could do a better job than he did. So when this young man, Bernie Louine [spelling?] was leaving us to go with Coins on Main Street, the job was offered to me as a display manager. My boss decided, he was Jewish, that I could do a job as well as the guy who had finished NYU. I had no formal training before then. I accepted the job. I worked with Young Fashion as a display manager. In 1969, in January, Young Fashion decided to close up. I wondered what I was going to do. I had no other thought of where I was going to work after working one job for 14 years. However, Bob Hudson of JC Penney knew me. Also some of the people that there was on Main—none of those stores were integrated during that time. They only had janitor, maids, and what-have-you but no black sales women. So Mr. Hudson had read where Young Fashion was closing up and he knew me and my ability so did Berry's on Main. Both people called and asked me what was I going to be doing after that. Not that they wanted to recruit me, at the time I was with Young Fashion, but after Young Fashion finished closing up would I come talk with both. I had become accustomed to working with better merchandise and the upper class of people. I would talk with JC Penny's manager and I also talked with Berry's. I was convinced in going to Berry's because I felt like I could do a good job there. I was hired. Went with Barry's, I was there two years.

00:05:58 LC: After working two years I was called into the office. First time I had been in the office since I was hired. I was wondering if I had insulted a customer or done something wrong. Roy Mitcham [spelling?] was the manager then. When I walked in he told me have a seat. I turned it into a joke. I asked him what I had

done wrong. He says 'No Mrs. Cayruth. I want to commend you on a job well done. You have brought many customers into Berry's. We want to promote you from a sales lady to assistant manager of our children department at Berry's at Dutch Square.' Which is a very exclusive...shopping mall. I was elated. I was very afraid. It was near the end of the year. I loved to dance. I went to many parties dancing. That New Year's weekend was most miserable because I was worried about whether I was going to say 'yes' or 'no'. I discussed it with my husband and he told me he felt if I turned that job down it would be a closed door to negro/black sales ladies because that was going to be one of the first of us so far as a manager in any store in Columbia. So I felt that this I needed to do to prove what black women could do. So I accepted the job at Berry's at Dutch Square. Then two years later, I was called in again by Roy Mitcham. This time the job was to offer me a job as manager of the children department down town. So this was another challenge. After serving as assistant manager at Dutch Square, I had done a beautiful job there. He said the Main Street store children department was going down, they needed a strong person there. I went back to Main Street. I stayed with Main Street until they decided that they were going to close the Main street store. However during that time I saw where the Federal Reserve Bank was coming to Columbia and I could see that this business was beginning to close up. So for three years before that, before the store closed up, they had ads in the paper. They wanted employees. So you had to sit a test. I went out and took the test with them and I applied for the third shift. For the last three years with Berry's, I worked eight years, I worked eight hours with Berry's, I worked eight hours with the Federal Reserve at night. I was still manager at Berry's, an assistant buyer down town and a control clerk in checking for the Federal Reserve. When Berry's closed down, I continued to work with the Federal Reserve.

00:09:04 LC: However—I'm a little ahead of myself. Due to the fact that while I was with Berry's, which was in '69, I decided to go back to school. Adult education. I got an eighth grade certificate. So when I got an eighth grade certificate, I realized how important education was. Now Berry's had never asked me how much education I had or anything like that. So I entered night school at Columbia High. I got the eighth grade certificate within just a few weeks because my average was so good and I just went right on through. So I decided to enter high school. Within two years I graduated earning 18 credits. Graduating with honors from Columbia High. Got accepted at the University of South Carolina. So in the meantime, this is one of the reasons why I was able to get the job at the Federal Reserve which I had at the time when I returned to school. It was more or less for my benefit but had I not finished high school they would have never considered me. To start out with even to fill out the application. So in the meantime I was in school at University of South Carolina majoring as Retail Salesperson, graduated with Honors there. Then after being with the Fed [Federal Reserve Bank] I went to American Institute of Banking, got a certificate in Principle Banking. When finished with that I went back with Bank Cards. Got a certificate in Bank Cards. Returned back to the American Institute of Banking and got a certificate in Law in

Banking. These are the things that have happened to me since I graduated from high school. Now I'm employed with the Federal Reserve with a top job. ACH, automation clearing house, that is you working with checks and top secret there. I'm enjoying my work there. But getting back to John McCray...

00:11:37 **MC: Yes. When did you first become interested in politics, I mean even maybe before John McCray. What was your first recollection of black participation in politics or did they have any role in the 1930s, '40s, '50s, '60s—**

LC: Oh. This is— The only time that I really was interested was electing the President. At—back there you really didn't get too involved. Really you couldn't vote.

00:12:07 **MC: In state politics?**

LC: Politics.

00:12:09 **MC: Why couldn't black people get involved in state politics? Why weren't they part of that particular facet of politics?**

LC: At that time blacks could not vote on the state level or your local level. I can remember doing domestic work and I was working for the Mayor of Columbia.

00:12:30 **MC: Who was that?**

LC: Mayor Fred D. Marshall. Mayor Fred D. Marshall who was a very kind fellow to me. But however Mayor Fred D. Marshall at that time—I can remember a write up in the paper where he would never—I think it was blacks were wanting to work for the fire department, but he never did recognize them during that time. However, he had the paper vote that he tried to get the domestic help to sign to carry in to vote. They was counted in white votes. You see those names were in there because a lot of times we didn't have the voting machines then, we had paper votes. So meeting Mr. McCray and becoming friends at that lunch do...

00:13:22 **MC: What was his role? I mean what was John McCray's role in you becoming more active in politics?**

LC: John H. McCray was a very strong man. He was interested in the blacks being first class citizens. He didn't think that we were first class citizens. Then I began to realize that we weren't because we couldn't vote. We owned property and we paid taxes, we went to war but we couldn't vote for the person that was helping to make the laws for us or for the people. So I felt there was a need. When the Progressive Democrat was formed, which they were already formed when I became a part of it. We needed to get people registered because we knew we were going court to see if we could fight so we could be full-fledged voters.

00:14:23 **MC: When did you join the Progressive Democratic Party? Can you remember that?**

LC: I think it was way...maybe in the late '50s or the early '60s. Date I don't remember.

00:14:35 **MC: What were some of the activities of the Progressive Democratic Party that you participated in? That you can recall.**

LC: During that time I managed Mr. Orville. I knew lots of white people. I mean the ones that were in politics because serving parties and what not, I got to know them. They seemed to like me and I felt like I could influence them. They thought I was a very stable person. They liked the way I conducted myself professionally as a maid. So my part was that serving on these parties, even some of these same politicians at big parties, and I happened to be one of the people that was invited to be more of a personal entertainer. I wouldn't say entertainer—a hostess like a- which way you serve your silver [cough] or serve a drink.

00:15:38 **MC: So you were kind of a consultant.**

LC: Yes. That's what I was. Then becoming a part of the Progressive Democratic Party with all these politicians thinking I was so great as a hostess and making their parties look great, I could kind of pull them and maybe talk to them in a way that they would know and give us a chance. So I had a chance to talk with many of the politicians. They had a chance to talk with me, and I expressed how I felt to them. I can remember [clears throat] one that said to me 'Gosh'—this was back long before integration but they knew that we wanted to get the schools integrated. But before Judge Waring's decision one or two or maybe even in stores people where I was a maid they would say 'Well I wouldn't mind my children going to school with your children because you are a nice person.' I can remember one of them a time saying to one of the ladies, one of the customers in our store while I was a maid and I would say to her I said you'd ever give black children a chance. There are many black children out there that have a IQ far better than I have or my children have. If you—have to come live with us to get to know us. She looked at me and she said 'well I guess you're right about that but you're just a different person.' I said, 'No. I'm still a black person and I am a Negro.' I said 'but you haven't given us a chance to prove ourselves. What we can do.' These are the things that stuck with me. I did have a chance to win some of these same politicians that negros could not vote for in the vote for years. My job or my part was when we started going registering blacks to vote was to get in touch with lots of people that I knew who were black. Who were my friends and lots of them were college graduates. Which at that time before hand I hadn't had a chance to enter high school less enough college but I had a stronger hand going into it then they did as much as they had finished college because I had done the best at work. I had worked with these politicians on parties. They got to know me

personally and they found out what blacks could do even those that didn't have a college degree. So what my job was to go to my friends and get involved. I was working for this Jewish guy who had really been oppressed himself.

00:18:28 **MC: What was his name by the way?**

LC: Ralph J. Freeman. He was manager of the Capitol Theater here. It was an all-black theater. Ralph Freeman's father was Jewish. His grandfather migrated here from Russia. He was Russian Jewish. Could not even speak English. So Ralph and I were more like a brother and sister. We were reared up together. He understood where I was coming from and I had a chance that I didn't have to worry about losing my job. He was really behind me. And having his store he knew that if more blacks could get better jobs and vote, it really meant more money for his store if they were more educated. He was behind me in everything I did. Really my retail background was really came from him. That's why the exclusive stores on Main Street wanted to get me into their stores because they knew Ralph was a business man. They knew that anybody went through Ralph's rigorous training got a background. He had an exclusive business, in fact. Which was where the exclusive stores were. So that's why they wanted me on Main Street, to bring them some traffic.

00:19:50 **MC: So in other words, you said you were part of the voter registration drive, so you weren't potentially—you were not a likely candidate to be blackballed because of your activities. Let's say blacklisted.**

LC: No.

00:20:10 **MC: Because you had a strong supporter. A person who believed—**

LC: My boss was a supporter so I wasn't going to lose my job. He knew what I was doing out there. So...I wasn't afraid. Black or white.

00:20:27 **MC: What about some of the people you were trying to get registered though? Were they—did they feel the same way or were they very concerned about their jobs? Their wellbeing.**

LC: They were concerned about their jobs. They wanted to register, they wanted to vote but they didn't know how to go about it. Well when you speak of the teachers, they knew what it was all about but all the teachers in the Richland County District, practically all of them were afraid to come forth and say yes. They were afraid to recruit people. They were the ones we really needed to recruit but they were afraid to recruit.

00:21:06 **MC: Why do you think that the case?**

LC: The case was they were afraid that they would lose their job and as far as I can remember there was something to a law about teachers and being a member of PUSH [People United to Save(or Serve) Humanity] or being a member of NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. These things they didn't want to lose their job so instead...they couldn't do what they really wanted to do. They wanted to do it but they were afraid.

00:21:33 **MC: Did they never-the-less some of them secretly participate in these drives?**

LC: Yes. They did.

00:21:39 **MC: But under the condition that they wouldn't become public knowledge? Did that happen?**

LC: Right. Yes.

00:21:48 **MC: Did any of these teachers ever come out in public and say that we believe that black people are capable of doing much more than we have been allowed to do and that we should have the right to vote, we should have the right so have equal pay, have the right to have equal opportunity in any endeavor and we want to teach our school children. Did any teachers of the Columbia area ever make such a stand publicly?**

LC: I can't remember but I'm sure there was but there, you know, some of the people then too might be [unclear]. Later on they might be able to come tell you more about that. As I said—

00:22:29 **MC: But not many. If any.**

LC: Not many. Not many and I can remember—speaking of John H. McCray, Reverend James Hinton was my pastor. When they had the adult education, when they first brought it here, he preached about people who hadn't had education and needed to go to school. He was really instrumental in me going back to school. Not talking with him directly but listening to him from the pulpit.

00:23:02 **MC: His inspiration.**

LC: His inspiration.

00:23:05 **MC: Who were other people that perhaps were inspirational in terms of their stress of the need for blacks to get involved in politics because this was an arena that would help pull blacks out of the mudsill of American society? Were people like John H. McCray and Reverend Hinton the only voices or were there other—**

LC: No. We had I. P. Stanbeck [spelling?] who was manager of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance. We had Willis S. Johnson. We had A.T. Butler, Daniel H. Thompson and many other people who felt the same way I did. [telephone rings]

00:23:58 **MC: Could you—the people who were vocal in their desire to see blacks have a better stand in society were they quite often independent in the terms of economics and they had some support where they didn't have to worry about intimidation or pressure from whites?**

LC: Well, Modjeska Simkins she was one. She was not in our Party completely but she had another citizen committee. She was a vocal type person but I think she had a strong hand in. I think there were many others but just right now it's just not coming to me. Right now I can't—

00:24:45 **MC: Can you recall some of the times that you were trying to help people to register to vote? Do you remember any memorable experiences you might want to relate?**

LC: Very much so and it's something that will always stay with me. One of the ones was at Richland County Court House and they had this white lady who was signing up people to vote. The people were lined up. So we had a line, we had blacks and whites standing in front of each other. She walked over to this old black man who was way up in age, white hair, and she said to him 'Uncle, can you read?' He says 'Yes ma'am.' He took the Constitution and he read it. She says 'Fine.' Right behind this elderly black man was a young white man. Standing right behind, and I was standing in line. She said to him—she didn't say anything to him, she just assumed being white and young. She hand—and I imagine this young man was about 21 years old. She handed him the Constitution to read. He was backing up and pushing so I could have got hit in the head because he couldn't read and didn't want to say he couldn't read and write. She says 'I'll read it for you.' So she read it and let him register. All the blacks had to read or have a tax on some property but this young white man she read it for him. This is what this white woman did. Then I was more determined than ever to see right there in the line where people registered or trying to get registered, she was prejudiced right there. Here was a white boy about 21 years old, couldn't read. She read it for him and signed him up. So those are the things, then—

00:26:44 **MC: When did that happen? Can you remember roughly when that happened?**

LC: I would say back in about '54 or '55, I think. It's back from there. So it was in the '50s.



00:26:58 **MC: So that was very typical. Were there any efforts on the part of some people to intimidate blacks from trying to register? Did that ever happen from time to time?**

LC: Yes. Yes. I can remember another time I was carrying some people up there and kept going back and forth and one of the white guys was standing in line. He said 'Who is that nigger woman?' Of course it didn't affect me. I didn't look back to see who he was talking about but I knew that's what he was addressing. He wanted to know who I was. I think it was because I was such a brilliant person and I went right on doing my duty I felt was due to my country and to my race. It didn't ever frighten me. Then I can remember another time that when we had registered and were qualified to vote, I had taken some people over to another school over in the area that was called Olympia over there. Even the politicians as much as they were—when they were behind closed doors they would call the poor whites Rednecks. I can remember serving parties where even the white politicians called the group of people that lived in Olympia part rednecks. However it was still a place where the whites over there could vote and the blacks couldn't. It turned out they had precincts and there was some blacks coming from another part of the area there in Olympia. I had taken them and I was there. I carried them there to register to vote and when they got a certain distance out they saw these white men standing around and they were afraid to go on in. So they had us where they were starting to just stand...and talk to these people. I would reach out there and tell them to come on and go in. They'd go in and vote and come back out. They would come round and 'Thank you, Ma'am. Thank you, Ma'am. I'm so glad. I'm glad you were standing there.' They'd go tell somebody. The man would ask me 'Is it alright for me to go?' and I would say 'Yes. Come on, I'm going to get every one of you in there.' Some of the white men would stand around, some would be chewing tobacco and spitting, but they were so mad. They could see—but they saw that I wasn't afraid. So this is the way it was.

00:29:24 **MC: Did you provide free transportation?**

LC: Yes. We did.

00:29:27 **MC: So that was one of the—**

LC: The reason why we would bring—we had men bringing them there so they could vote. They didn't have transportation.

00:29:37 **MC: How did you know who to approach as far as whether or not that person was already on the rolls? How did you know? You have a door to door canvas or did you have a list of the people who were eligible voters?**

LC: Yes. They had that registration service.

00:29:52 **MC: But what I'm saying, did you have a list of people to canvas?**

LC: Yes.

00:29:58 **MC: So you got that from the authorities?**

LC: Yes.

00:30:02 **MC: Then you systematically—did you canvas? Door to door?**

LC: Some. If there was good candidates that we felt—because we had [unclear] need. People that we knew and had dealings with. Some that we felt like they were so die hard that we didn't need to try. So we were trying to get the best we could at that time.

00:30:30 **MC: Did you endorse candidates?**

LC: We did. At the beginning, yes.

00:30:35 **MC: Did you run candidates for say the Progressive Democratic Party itself have people—**

LC: That we felt were more qualified than others and they would give—

00:30:45 **MC: Were they members of the Progressive Democratic Party though?**

LC: No. When we got the point where everybody could vote. Most of—to begin with these people were white.

00:30:59 **MC: So by the time you were a part of the Progressive Democratic Party they no longer had candidates—**

LC: At the beginning we did not have blacks running. At the beginning we did not have blacks running. I was a part of the Progressive Democrats before we had any blacks running because at that time blacks couldn't vote anyway.

00:31:21 **MC: But by the time you were a participant—**

LC: We still didn't have [recording warps, unclear] —the first time blacks had a [unclear] [recording stops]

00:31:28 [Recording resumes]

**MC: You can continue [recording warps] on the question. Why didn't more blacks run for political office at the time that you were a part of the Progressive Democratic Party?**

LC: At that time the blacks didn't run because the blacks were ineligible to vote so they weren't eligible to vote either.

00:31:49 **MC: So it took a while. So what you tried to do was find the lesser of maybe two evils. That is finding white candidates that perhaps were one that was less repulsive than the other.**

LC: Took a while. Lesser evil.

00:32:06 **MC: Just trying to sum this up. What were some of the major achievements of the Progressive Democratic Party that you can recall? What do you think after some time away from that party? What do you think were the major accomplishments of that particular party?**

LC: I think the achievement—when some of these white men found that we were so strong and that the will power that we had, they felt that we had the strength that if we got enough—the white men then found that they had the chance to get in there by the black voting. So we felt we had accomplished something by showing them the strength that we had by getting those in that we endorsed. So then that became known so then we had other guys that were coming around. Some of them wouldn't come in daytime, they would come around at night. Trying to get—trying to contact you. Trying to get you as an individual to talk to some of your other black friends to see if they couldn't get you. They would even—when we would have our meetings they would even give us money to hold the meetings to buy the rental building or have the paperwork printed up for them. Things like that. Then they would work at night getting slates out, hashing out who that we thought was the best candidate. We would even talk with these guys and we would kind of go around and see their attitude. After we talked to them in the public about their meetings. We'd go and listen to them talk to their audience and then we would come up with some questions and ask them. In the audience when they had a black and white audience what their ideas, what they thought. Some would still hold in to their racial card. The other would kind of mellow down and come across. Not all the way, but we could see where they were coming from. I think some of them really wanted to help but it was a voting thing. That we couldn't vote and this was the reason why they stayed at distance but when they found out that we could vote and got into it then everybody started rallying to it. Very few. And today if you notice Strom Thurmond has mellowed down. So this is the way we see today. I think the Progressive Democrats had a big bearing even on Strom Thurmond.

00:34:54 **MC: What about some of the problems I guess with this now new found interest with blacks in the political process by white candidates? As you just alluded to there were some problems, some people thought that while maybe we could buy some of these votes.**

LC: I think some of them could and I think some of them did. I really think some of them did. And too, I still—

00:35:18 **MC: Do you think they were—were they able to actually purchase votes or there were something that they felt they should do but were black votes actually purchased? Let's say a block of black people say well the word is that you should vote for this person, it's already been paid for, we should vote this way.**

LC: I think through—I do think that through some of the people who was not in...I would say these poverty stricken people but I think quite a few of the candidates had followers. They had places like that. I think they could offer those people a few dollars because they were depressed and they didn't know the source until they were further educated. But I don't think you could do something like that now, however I still think there's a need for people to be more interested in voting. Because we still feel that there's not enough strong enough votes to get a lot. We have quite a few qualified black candidates for the Senate and Senators not that we're interested in putting all blacks or all whites we just think there are qualified—or I—this is my belief. I think there are qualified people in both races. I really believe that we should, as blacks, we should be more interested in voting and politics than we have been and really care to.

00:36:52 **MC: What about the—you mentioned rural blacks. What about blacks who live in Columbia? The city limits of Columbia. Were there successful or unsuccessful efforts on the part of some white politicians to purchase black votes?**

LC: I think it was also because you do have some areas that are still distressed. I mean the people don't have the know-how. There are some people that are still afraid.

00:37:26 **MC: So there might have been cases that—**

LC: Yes, I do think they had some cases.

00:37:31 **MC: Where black votes were purchased in the city of Columbia.**

LC: I would say this, I believe there have been cases where some of the politicians have even gone to the extent that they have had some of the parties in areas like that or might have made people so high from drinking the next day they didn't even know there was an election going on. I think things like that have happened too.

00:37:55 **MC: What about the role of blacks, I mean black leadership? Were they part of this—**

LC: No. I don't think as many, not in our group anyway.

00:38:06 **MC: Well were there a possibility that some of the people were involved in this though? Taking money on the side?**

LC: I think it could have been, but I just felt that—I just believed that it was...from my standpoint I just felt like nobody could buy me for no way for the simple reason it was a thing that needed to be done and I felt just as strong about this as Charles Bowlin and [unclear] was about their own space. This is how I feel about it today. I'm 69 years old. I feel about it today as I did 20 years ago and I'm going to continue to make history and see that history is made in this day as well. I have very good health and I'm looking forward to live many more years continue working as I have worked. Because it pays up as I told you before about being the first black to be nominated to become a member of the American Business Association. We had 2000 women and still predominantly white nationally. I had the highest honor, white or black in this state. We do have eight chapters. When I became a member, we had eight chapters in Columbia. The first black in South Carolina. So you see these things—voting has a lot to do with it because you get to know people. People get—and I still think that still might have played a part because women are in politics, saw me out there and knew what a strong and what a dedicated person I was and they felt I would add something to the American Business women Association.

00:39:47 **MC: Ok. I think we have covered most of the questions. I thank you for your contribution. Thank you.**

00:39:56 **End of Interview.**