Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

The University of California Black Alumni Series

Marvin Poston

MAKING OPPORTUNITIES IN VISION CARE

With an Introduction by
Norvel Smith

An Interview Conducted by
Gabrielle Morris
in 1984 and 1985

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a modern research technique involving an interviewee and an informed interviewer in spontaneous conversation. The taped record is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The resulting manuscript is typed in final form, indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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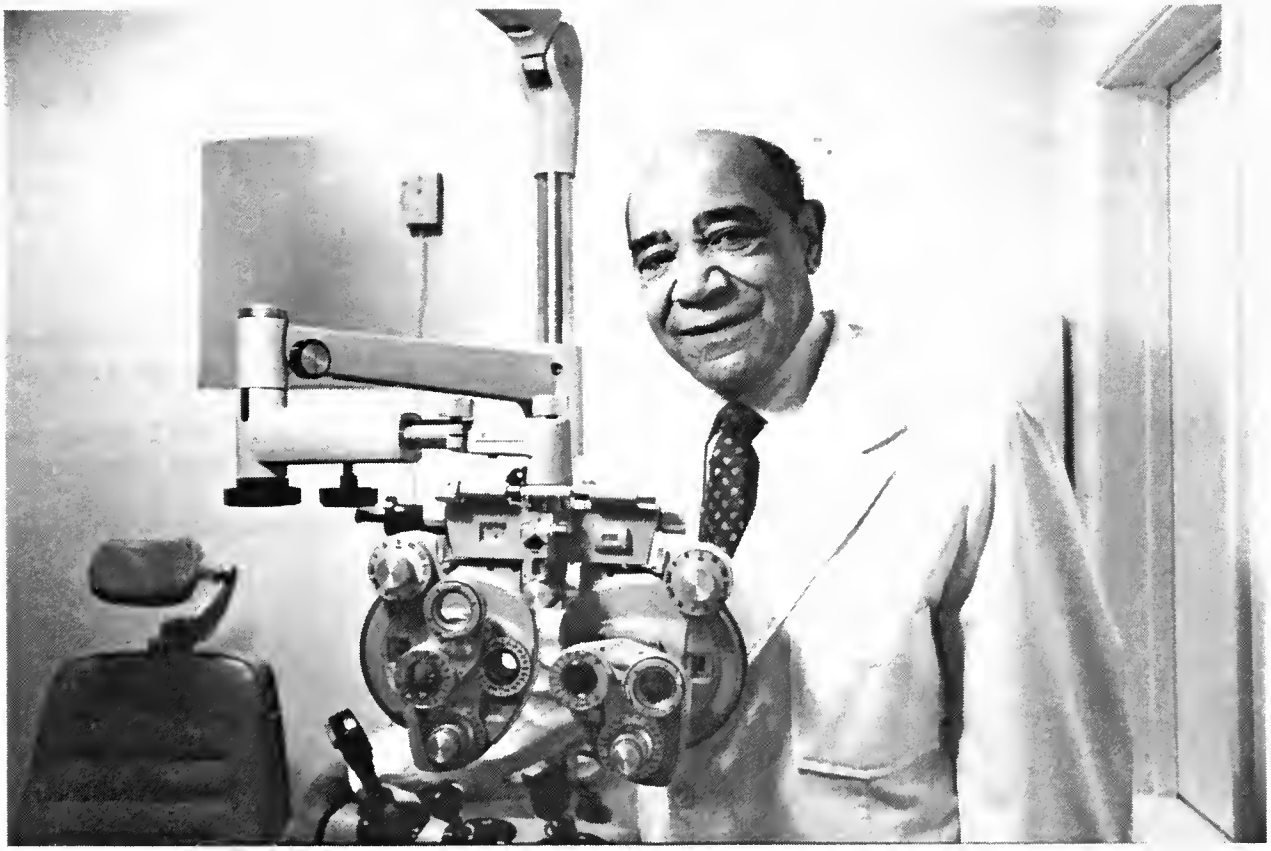

Marvin Poston in 1982

Photograph by Janet Fries
Courtesy, California Monthly

Cataloging Information

POSTON, Marvin (born 1914) Optometrist

Making Opportunities in Vision Care, 1989, iv, 90 pp.

Experiences as one of a few minority students at University of California, Berkeley, in the 1930s; optometry training, practice, and community activities in Oakland, CA, 1940-1980; creation of California Vision Services; counselling young professionals; member, State Board of Optometry, 1964-1972; race relations.

Introduction by Norvel Smith, former vice chancellor for student affairs, University of California at Berkeley.

Interviewed 1986, 1987 by Gabrielle Morris. The Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

University of California Black Alumni Series

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BLACK ALUMNI SERIES

Interviews completed or in process as of November 1989

Walter Gordon	Athlete, Officer in Law Enforcement and Administration, Governor of the Virgin Islands, 1980.
Ida Jackson	Overcoming Barriers in Education, in process.
John Miller	"Issues of Criminal Justice and Black Politics in California," in Legislative Issue Management and Advocacy, 1961-1974, 1983.
Tarea Hall Pittman	NAACP Official and Civil Rights Worker, 1974.
Marvin Poston	Making Opportunities in Vision Care, 1989.
Emmett J. Rice	Opening Doors as a Professional Economist, in process.
William Byron Rumford	Legislator for Fair Employment, Fair Housing, and Public Health, 1973
Lionel Wilson	Legal Practice and Political Leadership, in process.

PREFACE

In America education has long been an important avenue of opportunity. From our earliest years young people and their families have looked to the nation's colleges and universities to provide the knowledge and experience that will enable the new generation to take its place in the world of work and government and creative activity. In turn, one measure of the quality of American universities and colleges is the breadth and diversity of their students, including how well they reflect the mix of social, racial, and economic background that make up the communities from which they come and in which they will take part as graduates.

On the West Coast, the University of California at Berkeley has from its beginnings in the 1860s welcomed the sons and daughters of small farmers and shopkeepers, railroad workers and laborers, as well as the children of lawyers and doctors and corporate executives, from many ethnic and racial groups. About 1915, as far as we know, the first black students enrolled at Berkekey, pioneers of yet another group of Americans eager to seek the best in higher education and to broaden their participation in the life of Claifornia and the nation.

Those first black students to come to Cal were indeed on their own, with few fellow black students and no special programs or black faculty to guide them or to serve as role models. During the Great Depression of the 1930s a few more came, maybe a hundred at a time in all. The education benefits of the G.I. Bill for men and women who did military service during World War II opened the doors to many more black students to attend Cal in the late 1940s and early 1950s. A census taken in 1966 counted 226 black students, 1.02 percent of all the students at Berkeley. By the fall of 1988, there were 1,944 black graduate and undergraduate students, 6.1 percent of the student body. With changing population and immigration patterns in recent years, as well as active campus recruiting programs, for the first time there is not a single majority ethnic group in the entire undergraduate student body at Berkeley.

Looking back from the 1980s, those early trailblazers are very special. Though few in number, a large percentage of them have gone on to distinguished careers. They have made significant contributions in economics, education, medicine, government, community service, and other fields. It is fitting that a record of their initiative and energy be preserved in their own accounts of their expectations of the University of California, their experiences as students there, and how these experiences shaped their later lives. Their stories are a rich part of the history of the University.

Since 1970, the University has sought to gather information on this remarkable group of students, as noted in the following list of oral histories. In 1983, the UC Black Alumni Club and University officials began planning an organized project to document the lives and accomplishments of its black graduates.

With their advice and assistance, and the support of other alumni and friends of the University, the Regional Oral History Office of The Bancroft Library is tape-recording and publishing interviews with representative black alumni who attended Cal between the years 1920 and 1956. As a group, these oral histories contain research data not previously available about black pioneers in higher education. As individuals, their stories offer inspiration to young people who may now be thinking of entering the University.

Gabrielle Morris, Program Director
University of California Black Alumni Project

Willa K. Baum, Division Head
Regional Oral History Office

November 1989
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

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INTRODUCTION

I have known Marvin Poston professionally for over thirty years, and as a close personal friend and associate for the past fifteen years. We represent two distinct streams of black Berkeley alumni, he the first wave of pre-World War II indigenous Bay Area black students, and I the post-World War II out-of-state veteran students, seeking a quality but affordable public university at which to complete graduate work. The former group, as this oral history will reveal, was a small, courageous group of pioneers. The latter group was much larger, but still small compared to the black enrollments of the seventies and eighties.

My first contacts with Marv came in the late fifties as my own career as an educational administrator began to unfold. At that same time, I was becoming involved in East Bay community and political affairs. Marv was by then already a successful practitioner in his field of optometry, and heavily involved in the community. As is the case with most successful, motivated black professionals, he was fully committed to the development of his career, but still found time to keep his black roots flourishing. About that time, he was beginning to extend his leadership and influence statewide, leading to his twelve years service on the State Board of Optometry, including serving as its first black president. He was also maintaining his ties to his alma mater and the School of Optometry which he cherished so much, despite some of the discouraging experiences he lived through on campus during the thirties.

During my tenure as president of Merritt Community College in Oakland in the late sixties, I worked with Marv as he helped us strengthen our optometric assistant program. After my move to the Berkeley campus as vice chancellor, I saw even more of Marv, and became aware of the depth of his involvement in the School of Optometry, particularly in the area of recruitment and outreach, and in serving as a role model and ambassador. His unique role as a leader in the state and national optometry organizations, and his highly visible, downtown Oakland, mainstream practice, made him the mentor of almost every young black optometry graduate at Berkeley during the sixties and seventies. During this period he was recognized as Optometrist of The Year by both the state and national organizations.

My relationship with Marvin really blossomed after 1975, when I recruited him to membership in the newly created University of California Black Alumni Club, and we worked together to strengthen and expand that vital new organization. About this time, our families became close social friends, a part of the same "older fitness group" of retired UC black

couples, as serious observers and critics of the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary educational systems of the East Bay. Since the move to his "Shangri La" in the Napa Valley, I have made many relaxing sojourns to his nest among the vines, that is, when we can catch him at home rather than travelling around the West in his mobile mansion.

It has been a thrill for me to have known and enjoyed such a renaissance man as Marvin Poston, a black pioneer at UC and in his profession, a consummate professional, an outstanding role model for minority youth, a community leader and statesman, and as a friend. Marv is the example of what access to public higher education can and should do to bring all of the people's children into the syatem, as independent, productive citizens.

Norvel L. Smith
Vice Chancellor, Student Affairs, retired
University of California, Berkeley

October 1988
Oakland, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Marvin Poston's oral history was one of the first recorded in a series to document the experiences of distinguished pioneer black students at the University of California. A 1939 graduate, Dr. Poston was the first black optometrist to receive his training at Berkeley. The second one was not enrolled until the late 1950s.

The following interview reflects a life of hard work, determination, accomplishment, and good humor. Like others documented in this series, he was encouraged by family and friends to complete his education, and throughout his career has helped young people get started in their professions, as well as working to improve services for minorities.

As a child, Dr. Poston lived in Canada, where there were few black people and he was not aware of racial discrimination. When his father became ill, the family moved to California and Marvin and his brothers worked to help their mother support the family.

When he got to the university in 1935, Marvin Poston liked what he saw in the optometry curriculum and signed up for the program. He describes the efforts of one professor to prevent the young black student from succeeding in his studies and also the intervention of university and NAACP officials who were helpful. During his student days, he worked at the Oakland Athletic Club, sold insurance for the Golden State Company, and even found time to play on the varsity hockey team.

Dr. Poston began his practice in downtown Oakland with the assistance of local Jewish businessmen and soon became active in the county optometry society. He undertook a personal campaign of visiting high schools to encourage other young blacks to follow him in the profession. Later, he began a visual screening program throughout the county and eventually California Vision Services, which worked closely with labor union members.

In the 1960s, Dr. Poston was appointed to the State Board of Optometry by Governor Edmund G. Brown, Sr. and reappointed by Governor Ronald Reagan. Questions frequently came to the board about getting started in the field. Remembering his own difficulties in learning the economics of practice, Dr. Poston soon set up a consulting service for young optrometrists and physicians.

At the time of the interviews, Dr. Poston was still busy with consulting, although no longer in active practice. Much of his time was being spent at his farm in Calistoga, where his new vineyard was about ready

for its first harvest. A tall, well-built person with a friendly smile, Dr. Poston responded thoughtfully to the interviewer's questions and occasionally included an anecdote that made his experiences very vivid.

Two conversations were recorded for the project, on December 3, 1984 and January 8, 1985 in Dr. Poston's office on Broadway in Oakland. The interview tapes were transcribed and the transcript lightly edited in the Regional Oral History Office, then sent to Dr. Poston for review. He made only a few minor revisions. In 1988-89 additional gifts from Ruth Teiser, Robert Beck, and Morley and Patricia Farquar were received and final processing of the manuscript was resumed.

The introduction to the volume is by Dr. Norvel Smith, a longtime friend of Dr. Poston's and a founder of the University of California Black Alumni Club.

Gabrielle Morris
Interviewer-Editor

June 1989
Regional Oral History Office
486 The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California 94720

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name MARVIN REGINALD POSTON

Date of birth 11/13/14 Birthplace ST LOUIS MO.

Father's full name WALKER PAUL POSTON

Occupation SCHOOL TEACHER Birthplace ST. LOUIS MO.

Mother's full name ~~WILETTA WALKER~~

Occupation HOUSEWIFE Birthplace ST. LOUIS, MO.

Your spouse ARLENE RANDOLPH POSTON

Your children MARLENE BELL

Where did you grow up? EDMONTON, ALBERTA CANADA & OAKLAND, CALIF.

Present community NAPA VALLEY

Education DOCTOR OF OPTOMETRY DEGREE FROM UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Occupation(s) RETIRED

Areas of expertise CONTACT LENSES & OCULAR PROTHESIS

Other interests or activities GRAPE GROWER, GOLF, & TOURING

Organizations in which you are active CALISTOGA COMMUNITY CHEST, ROTARY, AND CENTER FOR BLACK CHARITIES

I EARLY YEARS

[Interview 1: December 3, 1984]##

Growing Up in Edmonton, Canada

Morris: The article that I've been reading in the alumni magazine says that you grew up in Edmonton.*

Poston: Yes, I was born in St. Louis, Missouri. When I was one or two, my parents left Missouri and went up to Canada.

Morris: What was there about Canada? That was quite pioneering at that point, wasn't it?

Poston: Yes. I had an uncle who was in Canada before, who was up there already, my mother's brother. He encouraged all of his family, his brothers and sisters and their families, to come to Edmonton. He felt it was a better life, the same reason most people prefer to move to another place. Canadians were considerably less prejudiced. And so that's how we ended up in Canada.

Morris: What kind of a place was Edmonton? This was early in the--

Poston: It was relatively small, as I recall. It must have had a population in the neighborhood of about forty thousand people. I may be recalling it at a later date. It no doubt had less than that when we first went up there.

Morris: Was it a farming community?

##This symbol indicates that a tape or a segment of a tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes see page 80.

*See Appendix

Poston: No, Edmonton was the center, I guess, of farming and light industry at that time. They had coal mining up there. It was the last city before the great Northwest.

Morris: So it was kind of the center for that region?

Poston: Of all the Northwest, that whole section because the only other major town was Calgary. So Edmonton was the jumping off spot for the whole Northwest.

Morris: How far was Calgary?

Poston: Somewhere between two and three hundred miles from Edmonton.

Morris: So you really were in your own world in Edmonton.

Poston: Oh, yes.

Morris: What was your uncle doing?

Poston: My uncle was working on the railroad. And my father had a degree for school teaching. That was an oppportunity for him to carry on his career. So he did some school teaching.

Morris: In Edmonton was there any objection to having a black school teacher?

Poston: No; you know, Canada at that time didn't have many Americans. So there was total freedom from racial discrimination. I don't ever recall running across racial discrimination until I arrived in California. Well, I'll take that back. I had one incident when I was growing up. A family came from the States--I don't remember what part--and moved into the same neighborhood. And that's when I first recognized racial discrimination. They used to call us names and so forth. They finally got that straightened out. That was the only incident. We had participated in shows and went skating, swimming and to churches, and all those things. There wasn't any problem.

Morris: Were there brothers and sisters in your family?

Poston: I had two brothers. One older and one younger. And a mother and father. And then we had two aunts, the same family, and two uncles of my mother's family. There weren't many blacks in Canada, very few. That may have been one of the reasons why they didn't have discrimination, because there were so few blacks. Secondly, they all thrived economically very well in Canada. So there wasn't any poverty.

Morris: It was a prosperous area that you were in?

Poston: Yes.

Morris: And everybody could find work?

Poston: They could work, and they lived in comfortable homes and everybody grew gardens up there during those years.

Morris: The houses were on big enough plots of land so you could raise your own vegetables?

Poston: The plots of land were maybe a hundred and fifty [feet] by a hundred. And there were lots of vacant lots that you could grow vegetables. My father owned two lots. And on one he grew vegetables in the summer time. In the winter time he built an ice rink so we could skate.

Morris: He just put up a wall and flooded it?

Poston: All you had to do was collect ashes from your furnace and put it around the perimeter and pile up a little dirt, and for fifty cents or a dollar, the city would come and flood it for an ice rink for you. They would come out and give us the first flood. And of course, it would freeze overnight. You may have a few weeds. We used to go along and chop them off. He would just take a hose and flood it from the house, and it would be just like glass.

Morris: Did you and your brothers get to take care of it?

Poston: Oh, yes. We took care of it. All during the wintertime, we would scrape and water it. I guess my dad was there supervising us most of the time. And then we all skated and played ice hockey. And our friends came over and skated and played ice hockey. My mother used to skate. My dad wouldn't skate.

Morris: He would not skate?

Poston: He tried it once and went down.

Morris: That would injure your dignity.

Poston: I guess it did for him, for his children. Three boys skating, and his wife's skating and he got out and tried and couldn't do it.

Morris: Did any of you boys take up hockey seriously?

Poston: Yes, I played ice hockey for the University of California when I attended UC. I played quite a bit up there purely as recreation. Of course, the schools didn't have any teams there, especially the level that I was in school up there. And when I came down here

Poston: after I graduated from high school and went to Cal, the university had an ice hockey team at that time. I went out just to practice with them for the exercise and ended up on the team.

Morris: I can believe it, somebody who had been skating as a youngster.

Poston: The coach they had was a fellow named Schroeder. I'll never forget him.

Morris: Had he been a professional player?

Poston: I don't know. He was the coach of the team. He had a very strong accent. I think he may have been from Germany. I remember it very well. I saw it listed one day in the gym, ice hockey practice. I asked if I could come out and practice, and he said fine. After one day's practice he said, "I want you on the team."

Morris: That's a pretty rugged sport.

Poston: Well, it's a very active sport. I think they've made it a rugged sport now. But ice hockey as we played it was a fairly clean sport. Ice hockey does not have to be blood and guts. It can be a very clean sport. But I think Americans demand excitement, so they-- You can be a very dirty player in ice hockey. There's all kinds of ways you can be a very dirty player. But if you play ice hockey as it's supposed to be played, it's a fast, very vigorous, and very skillful game.

Morris: When you were a boy in Canada, was there a professional hockey league?

Poston: Oh, yes. The professional hockey league played every week during the winter months. They had a rink in Edmonton. They would let all the children in at halftime. We used to go over and see the rest of the game at halftime. That was the best part of the game.

Morris: And Edmonton had its own team?

Poston: Edmonton had its own team. Calgary had a team. There were teams from some of the western provinces.

Moving to Oakland, California

Morris: It must have been kind of a wrench to leave that kind of a very pleasant life in Edmonton.

ton: Yes, it was. But at that age it wasn't our choice. My father developed heart trouble. And the physicians in Edmonton told him it was too cold for his condition. So they recommended he live in California. And that's how we moved to California. He sold out everything he had, came down here, mainly because he had a classmate who was a minister here in California. That's why we settled here in Oakland. I think he came here to Oakland because of this contact here in Oakland--

ris: You thought of going on to Los Angeles?

ton: My parents came down first, when it was decided he should come to California. My mother and father made a trip to L.A. and Oakland. I think, I'm not sure of this, because of his contact with this minister who was well established here in California and of the same religious faith, that they decided to locate here in Oakland.

ris: Before we get past that, it would be nice to have your father's name and your mother's name.

ton: My father's name was Walker. Paul Walker Poston. My mother's name was Willetta.

ris: And your father had gone to school where for his teaching training?

ton: Lincoln University in Missouri. Mother only received a high school education.

ris: And who was this minister that had gone to Lincoln with him?

ton: A fellow named Prater. I don't recall his first name. We just called him Reverend Prater.

ris: And then you went to his church when you got down here.

ton: We went to church here, that was First AME Church in Oakland. As you know, their ministers move around, so after we had been here a while, he was shifted and other ministers came in. But that's the church I grew up in, yes.

ris: And the children were your friends, and the older people were your parents'?

ton: Yes, my parents went there. And the young people in the church, we got acquainted with. We were active in the youth groups, in the youth choir and that sort of thing.

ris: Did you sing in the choir?

ton: In the youth choir.

Morris: You didn't carry it on into--?

Poston: [laughs]

Morris: I think more kids should sing. If more kids sang in church choirs, I think they would enjoy music better.

Poston: Oh, I think so. And then following Prater there were some very interesting ministers. They had one named Scott who was a well educated man. And they had another one named Hill, who was a very well educated man. In fact he received a Ph.D. from Berkeley while he was here.

Morris: When would that be? While you were at Cal?

Poaton: No, I was in high school then. And he received his Ph.D. while I was in high school. And then I was active in the church under him after I had graduated from Cal. So he was here during that period. Most of the time, a minister's assignment is ten, twelve years. He received his Ph.D. maybe in the '30s.

Morris: In religious studies?

Poston: I really don't know. I remember when he received his Ph.D. He and his wife both went to Cal. I don't remember what degree she acquired.

Morris: Was she getting a graduate degree too?

Poston: I think so.

Morris: That's hard work, and running a parish.

Poaton: Back in those years when they were running the institution, they had several children. He's dead now. They shifted from here to several places. When he was in charge of the church in Washington, D.C., I visited him there, maybe ten years ago now. And he was having difficulty with vision. But he was very instrumental after I graduated in helping me move forward in the practice. I was very active in the church. He supported me.

Morris: When you were still a student, was he encouraging you to go on to college?

Poston: Oh, yes. I can remember once when the pressures were heavy. I was sitting down talking about my pressures, and he and his wife said, "Well, it matters not how long it takes you to acquire something. But the important thing is you have acquired it at the end." I stuck with it.

Morris: What was Oakland Tech like in the early thirties?

Poston: Well, Oakland Tech was one of those institutions that had very few blacks. They had a principal there named Welty. I'll never forget him. I was not an athletic student, per se. I tried out for football. They didn't have football in Canada, they had rugby. And after the first game, I quit football.

Morris: Rugby is pretty tough.

Poston: Yes, but it wasn't anything like the football they played here. It was two different games. So I quit.

Working at the Oakland Athletic Club

Poston: Of course, I worked nights too.

Morris: While you were going to Oakland Tech?

Poston: Oh, yes. When I was in ninth grade at Herbert Hoover--that's where I started out—I got a job at the Oakland Athletic Club that used to be in Oakland. I worked there from four o'clock in the afternoon until one o'clock at night. I did that from the ninth grade until my last year in college.

Morris: That's a heavy schedule. Did you have somebody, a family friend who worked there who helped you find the job?

Poston: My oldest brother acquired a job first. And then the fellow who was in charge of hiring had a very soft heart for school boys. And so he hired me. I was one of about five or six that he hired. He kind of sheltered them as long as they were trying to go to college or trying to make headway.

Morris: That's a nice man. You need a lot of strong young people to do the clean up and keep things going. Is that the kind of job it was?

Poston: I was a bellhop. The first part of the evenings were very heavy as far as work was concerned. After ten o'clock things quieted down. We could study in between calls. It was a good job. The hours were very difficult.

Morris: Was your father's heart trouble severe enough that he couldn't work after he came down to Oakland?

Poston: Oh, yes. He died after he had been here for eight or nine months.

II GOLDEN STATE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY

Lessons for Success in Business

Poston: He didn't last long. In fact I had already gotten a job, because he couldn't work. And my mother was trying to find work. She first started out, because she didn't have the training that he had, cleaning up houses behind contractors. That was very heavy. And then she decided to go into insurance sales. And she went to work for a black company named Golden State Life Insurance Company.

Morris: They go back that far?

Poston: Oh, yes. Golden State goes back to the early twenties.

Morris: I have always assumed that because it's name is Golden State, it started out here in California.

Poston: Yes, it did.

Morris: Was it Oakland people who started it?

Poston: One of them was from Oakland. A fellow named Houston was from Oakland. And there was another one. Two of them were from Oakland. The others were from Los Angeles.

Morris: Primarily serving the black community?

Poston: That's all they could serve. You remember those days were not the days that we have today.

So she sold for that company. And then in the summer months, later on, I started to sell for the company. I sold under her name. And eventually the company issued a license under my name. My youngest brother did the same thing. And he ended by getting a degree in actuarial science from Harvard, as a result of that exposaure. So it was a good thing for him and for me. It gave me extra money in the summer because I certainly didn't make much as a bellhop.

Morris: I can believe that. And insurance is something you can do on a part-time basis, too, in between things.

Poston: In fact, I tried to learn the business when I was still working at the athletic club, which employed a lot of blacks. The waiters were blacks. All the menial jobs were blacks, the waiters, the busboys, dishwashers, janitors, maids, were all black. And I used to insure them when they came on the job. And then on payday, which was the fifth and twentieth, my mother would come with enough money to cash checks. She couldn't cover the club, but I could go into their quarters and cash checks and collect premiums.

They used to give me a bad time. They would always say, "Here comes Marv, and he's going to take your money away from you." But it was a good experience for me.

Morris: Sure, in how to do business.

Poston: How to do business and how to relate to people.

Morris: Was this only life insurance?

Poston: Life and health and accident.

Morris: What did the health insurance--?

Poston: In those days generally you received a certain amount of monthly or weekly income in the event that you were sick in the hospital.

Morris: It wasn't like Blue Cross, that would pay the doctors.

Poston: No, it paid you directly. In those days they were small amounts. You would get thirty dollars a week, fifty dollars a week, or something like that if you became sick or had an accident.

Morris: More like workman's compensation.

Poston: Yes, that was a supplement for that. It really paid the individual. It did not pay the hospital, or the doctor. You were responsible for that. It just paid you if you were out of work due to sickness. You needed to be off work for seven days before they started paying you. And then they started paying you after the seventh day.

Morris: Enough to live on, or enough to help with the medical bills too?

Poston: Well, it varied depending on how much premium you paid. The lowest amount you could get would be thirty dollars a week. And it went up from there. If you had a better income and could afford to pay the the premium, you could get seventy-five dollars a week. That's an entirely different concept from what they have today.

Morris: Right. Was there beginning to be any concern for some kind of an insurance program that would pay for the doctors or the hospital?

Poston: Not at that time, that I was aware of. Of course, at that time the only thing that was available for blacks was what they called industrial insurance, really. Companies like Metropolitan, Pacific Mutual and Golden State, and Washington National, as I recall, were the main ones that were really after the black market. Washington National and Metropolitan all upgraded. In other words, if I was thirty years old and I took out a policy with Washington National, they would class me as a forty-year-old man. So I paid a higher premium. They also did that with life insurance.

Morris: Because they figured your life expectancy was not as great as the white man?

Poston: They figured the risk was greater. So Golden State came out with a policy that used national actuarial tables so that regardless of who they insured, the premium would be the same. But Washington National and Metropolitan, they would take that national actuarial table and if they insured blacks they would just boost that premium. Those were national actuarial figures, which were, I guess, done predominately on whites. They didn't have any criterion for that, because Golden State was able--

Experiences with Discrimination

Morris: Was there any evidence that black people had a poorer health record?

Poston: No. Golden State came in. And there were other black insurance companies in the East Coast that used the same national actuarial figures.

Morris: For a man of forty regardless of his background or race.

Poston: And they were able to survive. It was just another way to make more money from black people; from my viewpoint, they took advantage of the black market.

Morris: Was that why Golden State got started?

Poston: They did the same thing in life insurance, these companies. So Golden State used the national actuarial figures and insured blacks. Golden State is not the only one. There were Liberty Mutual and some other companies that were out in the East Coast that did the same thing and were able to survive. They didn't grow as fast, and they didn't get as big, because they had a limited market.

Poston: But they were able to meet their claims and survive. But Metropolitan, Washington National, Mutual were all exploiting the black market.

Morris: Were you able to convince all the people at the Oakland Athletic Club to buy insurance?

Poston: Well, we had most of them insured. If you appeal to the racial issue and you are there to service. There were maybe a few you couldn't. I know in the Oakland market, when I used to go out and sell, I would have this competition, and this basic psychology that existed, much more then than it is today, that because it's a white man's insurance it's better insurance.

Morris: Even though it cost more.

Poston: Even though it cost more. It still exists today to some extent among certain levels of blacks.

Morris: What kind of people are more likely to follow that kind of thinking?

Poston: Less educated. They've been taught, especially if they came out of the South, they were taught that the only person who could do something was the white man. And everything that he had, regardless of what it was, was better than what a black man could do. You still have that, but not nearly as bad as you had back in the thirties.

But it taught me something that I was able to use later. The one thing it taught me, when I graduated and I started to practice optometry, was that I wasn't going to cater to a limited market, that I was going to cater to the total market. So I opened an office right in the heart of town. I was the first black to have any kind of office in downtown Oakland.

Morris: You were wishing to serve both the white community and the black community and the Chinese or whoever needed eye care.

Poston: That's right. Money's green and it doesn't see color. [laughs]

Morris: Well, that takes quite a lot of courage, I would think.

Poston: There were several things that I think may have contributed to that. One, my parents, and having lived in Canada, not having been brainwashed as some blacks have been brainwashed in the United States. So I didn't, in early years, didn't feel the pressure of racial discrimination. So I would approach everything with an open mind and no fears. I think I've seen that all through my own life, that these things that come up, like when I decided to go into practice, I decided to go into downtown Oakland. And I set my goal to open an office in downtown Oakland. I didn't have any

Poston: money. But I knew I didn't want to set up in strictly a black community, because I would have this problem of trying to deal with a limited market. And that limited market was prejudiced.

Morris: You would cut yourself off from the rest of the market.

Poston: And so I acquired space in downtown Oakland. I did that when I first decided to buy a house. I decided I was going to buy where I wanted to buy. I didn't want to live in just a black community. So I went and bought a house in the East Oakland hills. And I bought it by looking at it at night time, and by double dealing. [laughs] I was just determined to do it my way. I think part of that is my early training and the kind of attitude that my parents set for us.

Morris: Is part of the reason that they moved to Canada that they were looking for an environment where they could be people first?

Poston: Yes, their color was second. They knew what the pressures were, and they didn't want their children to grow up under the same kind of pressures. So they left the U.S.

Morris: When the family first came to Oakland, were you old enough to be aware of whether there was any question about you didn't live in this part of town?

Poston: Oh, yes. It didn't take me long to learn that. I was thirteen. It didn't take me long to learn that the pressures were here. But I had already gone past the stage where you just accept it and walk away. I was now prepared to deal with it any way I could.

Morris: And go for your way of how things ought to be.

Poston: And I think I do. A lot of times I can remember when I first opened my office. There used to be a restaurant on Fourteenth Street called Ole's Waffle Shop. And I went in there to have breakfast. It was a very popular place. I asked for a waffle and scrambled eggs, and they salted my food down. So I refused to pay for it and I complained to Ole who was acting more as a host than anything else. And he didn't say a word. And I said, "Well, I'll be back." So I went back again. And they did it again. And I said, "Well, I'm not paying, but I will be back." And the third time I went back, they didn't salt my food down.

Morris: That would be when?

Poston: That was in '40.

Morris: Did you have other friends who were using the same approach in being persistent?

Poston: Not that I was aware of in downtown Oakland, because nobody was game enough to come down. I knew some fellows who came out of medical school. They went directly into the black community and practiced. Of course, their situation was different. I think psychologically they had to depend totally on the black community for the nature of their practice. They would have more difficulty drawing from the majority community.

III UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, 1935-1939

Parents' Encouragement; Brothers and Friends in College##

Morris: When you were in high school, was your mother encouraging you and your brothers to think about going on to college?

Poston: That started way before we got to high school. I can remember as long as I can go back, both my parents used to say, "You're going to college."

Morris: To all three of you?

Poston: To all three of us. You're going to college. You're going to college. I don't think we thought of any other direction we were going, but we knew that we had to prepare to go to college. This not only went on in high school, this went on before that. As the end result, my oldest brother became a veterinarian. And my younger brother, as I said, received his Ph.D. from Harvard. And I graduated from Cal in optometry. The groundwork had already been laid by the time we had reached high school.

Morris: Did your brother do the UC Davis veterinary school?

Poston: No. When he came out of high school, Davis didn't have a veterinary school. And so he tried to get in a couple of veterinary schools throughout the country. But they wouldn't accept blacks. He was accepted in Washington or Oregon. One of those schools up there accepted him. But when he got up there—I think it's in Washington—he couldn't eat in the cafeteria, or he couldn't eat in restaurants. So he used to eat with a professor and his wife. And both of those were diabetics.

Morris: So he ate very healthily.

Poston: Yes, but that wasn't the kind of food he was used to. So he decided then to try to find some other schools. So he wrote to the University of the Philippines. And they accepted him. Their school is accredited in the United States. So he went over there and went to school.

Morris: How had he decided that he wanted to be a veterinarian?

Poston: I don't know really because when we were younger, I was the animal lover. He wasn't. But after we became older, in some way the tables turned, and he went into veterinary medicine, and I think he was very happy.

Morris: Large animal, ranch kind of thing?

Poston: Small animals. After he came back from the Philippines, he went down to Tuskegee for a while. And then he came out to California and worked for the state or the federal government, inspecting large animals. I guess that's a state program, inspecting large animals, dairy. He did that until he could acquire a little money. And then he went into small-animal practice in Lafayette.

Morris: And the brother who did his Ph.D. at Harvard, is he in an academic field?

Poston: Well, he was. He's passed away. He had cancer. He graduated from Cal, and then he went on to the University of Michigan and received a master's degree and then ended up at Harvard with a Ph.D. in actuarial science.

Morris: Did he also sell insurance for Golden State?

Poston: Yes.

Morris: Did he make any significant changes in how people looked at the actuarial tables?

Poston: I don't know. He wrote several papers. He didn't last too long after he graduated from Harvard. He acquired cancer.

Morris: Young. That's a shame. Tell me the name of your brother who's a vet.

Poston: Walker.

Morris: Like your father.

Poston: And the other one was named Paul.

Morris: Did all three of you start at Cal?

Poston: No, just two of us started at Cal. The older brother went to St. Mary's.

Morris: In Moraga.

Poston: In Moraga. From there he went on to veterinarian school.

Morris: Why did he decide to go to St. Mary's instead of Cal? That was a Catholic School.

Poston: I think maybe he had some friends going out there, fellows that came out of high school. I think he followed some friends out there.

Morris: Were there other people in your church group, or your other social activities, that were coming to Cal then, in 1935?

Poston: They weren't all in the church group, but there were others that ended up at Cal I had met in the community. Any number of them. There was a fellow named Robert Lee, another one named Samantha Lee, another named Gertrude Heyns. There was another one named Ethel Morgan. These were all people that I had met in the community that went to Cal.

Morris: Did you sort of all socialize together at Cal? On a very limited basis.

School of Optometry; A Racist Professor

Poston: I started out as a math student at Cal. I was not an optometry student. One day I was thumbing through the catalog for an elective course in physiology or physics, one of the sciences, and I happened to hit optometry for some reason. And I started to read it. And they were all the courses that I enjoyed taking: physics, math. So I decided to go and talk to them at the school. I went up there, and there was a secretary. I think her name was Butler. And she said, "Let me send for your transcript." I wanted to know something about it. She said, "Well, let me send for your transcript."

So she sent for the transcript. And the next day I went back, she said, "Oh, you would make a wonderful optometric student." She was so enthusiastic about it that I signed up to transfer majors right then. I think at that time, they didn't have all the restrictions they have now.

Morris: Or prerequisites?

Poston: No, I had all the prerequisites, and I think that's about all they looked at. She was making the decision, she said. So I transferred into optometry.* Of course, after I got in, that's when all hell broke loose.

*From its beginning at UC Berkeley in 1923 until 1940, the program in optometry was a part of the physics department. In 1941, the School of Optometry was established.

Morris: It sounds like there was one professor who really was an obstruction.

Poston: Well, he spearheaded it. Mason. He was a very difficult professor, I think, for everybody.

Morris: He was difficult for everybody?

Poston: A lot of people. I think he had his prejudices. He was very hard on students, number one. I guess when he saw a black face, that stimulated him to be harder and be more difficult. He tried to get the rest of the college to go along with him.

[Interruption]

Poston: When he saw black he saw red. He did a lot of things. First of all, he became very hard on me in class. I don't know why he did it that way, but he allowed me to acquire good grades all semester. And then he failed me at final time.

Morris: That's really strange.

Poston: Yes. He had plenty of opportunity to work me over before that. So I didn't think that was fair. So I went to see Walter Gordon, and a fellow named George Johnson, who was on the campus.

Morris: Walter Gordon was then on the coaching staff?

Poston: No, Walter Gordon had been practicing law.

Morris: Johnson was his law partner, wasn't he?

Poston: No, Johnson was working for the State Board of Equalization, I think at that time, on campus. And then there was a Robert Stone, a professor on campus. I think his name was Robert.

Poston: I went to talk to him. My brother knew his son. His son's name was Robert. And my brother had talked to him about going to see Stone. So I went to see Stone. And then Stone and Johnson, Walt Gordon, talked to Harry Kingman.

Morris: Were you involved in Stiles Hall as an undergraduate?

Poston: My brother was. But I wasn't. I was working four to one o'clock at night. I didn't have much free time.

Support from Provost Monroe Deutsch and Others

Poston: Kingman and Walter Gordon made an appointment to see Monroe Deutsch, vice chancellor [the title then was provost]. And they took me with them. Deutsch wanted to see my notes, all the records I had kept. And he turned them over to people in the physics department. And they changed my grade. Of course, when that happened, I guess, it irritated Mason more.

But Dr. Deutsch did several things. One of them was, he brought another professor from--I think he came from Ohio State, a fellow named [Kenneth B.] Stoddard, and created a whole new class, and put other students in there with me, so that Mason would not have control any more.

Morris: In other words, he started another optometry training unit?

Poston: He started another class that was required in optometry. So I would not be in contact with Mason, and then took another course Mason gave and made it an elective course. If I took the course, I didn't have to take it for a grade and it would not have any bearing on what happened.

And then the next thing that happened was when we were ready to start our clinic work. I was assigned a place and was ready to go. And the first day I went for clinic, I found outside my -- The way they did it then was they had spots for students to sign up. And Mason had taken my spot for the semester and had put "reserved" on it so I wouldn't receive any students.

Morris: What did he mean by that?

Poston: Well, that space was reserved so nobody could sign.

Morris: If somebody wanted to come in for an eye exam it would look like you weren't available to do an exam?

Poston: That's right. It was reserved for somebody else.

And so I went to see Dr. Deutch again. The head of the department was a fellow named Dr. [Ralph S.] Minor. He was a very pleasant but very soft individual.

Morris: The man who Minor Hall was named after.

Poston: I don't think he was basically prejudiced. But I don't think he was a strongly motivated person to fight it. And he just let Mason take over. So then Dr. Deutsch came in again and made them remove all that. And then I could see patients after that. But Mason came up to me and told me he didn't want me to see any white women, or white students.

Morris: He was really direct about this?

Poston: Oh, yes. He made no bones about it. He told me he didn't think a black person could be an optometrist. He didn't make any bones about his position. He told me that if I were to have any patients, he wanted me to go out in the black community and try to solicit patients in the black community.

Morris: Were any black people coming to the clinic for eye exams?

Poston: Occasionally they would come in. But to go out to the community and try to get a commitment from community people to come in would be a very difficult thing. I was out working four to one o'clock at night. On Sundays I worked from seven to five.

Morris: Does the clinic primarily see members of the university?

Poston: At that time it was predominantly members of the university. Now they go outside to see all kinds of people. At that time the facilities they had, they were recruited mostly from the university. There weren't many blacks that showed up there. Occasionally one would show up because he worked for the university and he was going to get his services at less cost, so he would show up.

Morris: Did he review your clinical work?

Poston: Not Mason, no. All he did was try to stop me from seeing patients in the clinic. And when I went back to Dr. Deutsch, that was eliminated, and I guess they insisted that Dr. Minor take a position. Dr. Minor took a position. And from that point on I did not have much contact with Professor Mason.

Morris: Did that make you really angry?

Poston: Well, no. Yes, it made me angry. But I knew I had to control it because anything that I did would be an excuse. To give you an illustration, I had one fellow who was a clinician, whose name was Cole. And when I would bring a student to him to be checked behind me-- In those days we examined a student, we wrote up our findings and then a clinician would come and check the student.

Morris: That's exactly the way they still do it now.

Poston: When he would get some student in the clinic, then he would start talking about "niggers this and niggers that."

Morris: In the examining room?

Poston: In the examining room the student is behind the refracter, I'm sitting here beside him, and he would carry on this conversation. And I think what he was trying to do was to make me do something

Poston: that would justify throwing me out. But I kept my mouth closed, because I figured that's what he was trying to do. I remember one day, he said something and I made a remark, an off the cuff remark. "Maybe that existed where you came from," or something like that. And the student knew what was happening, a young man. And he burst out laughing. That embarrassed Cole.

Morris: This is the person being examined?

Poston: He burst out laughing. I guess he was saying, "Hurrah, hurrah for you!" Cole got very mad and wanted to know if I was trying to be smart and all kinds of things. And I said, "No, I was just responding to your question." But after that he never did it again.

There was another one named Player. And Player was a little different. His was more subtle. But after I graduated Player made a 90 degree turn around, was much more receptive. But he was very distant a lot more subtle in what he was trying to do. He wasn't near as vicious as Cole. It was so obvious, I was aware of what happened.

Fellow Students; State Board Exam

Morris: How many students were there in the optometry school at that point?

Poston: We started out with a class of around eighty.

Morris: Eighty. And it would be two years, three years?

Poston: Two years.

Morris: So, you're dealing with about a hundred and sixty fellow students at a time. Were there Asians?

Poston: Very few. There were a few Asians. Nothing like the number of Asians they have in today's class. The dominant group was Jewish.

They had difficulties after that. What Cal did was, because they had so many students coming in from New York, they started setting up a quota for out-of-state students. That reduced the number of Jewish students coming from the East Coast out here.

Morris: Did you ever talk to any of the Jewish students? Were they coming from New York to California--?

Poston: Actually, the people who were most receptive to me were Jewish students. I used to study with some of them. I think because they had suffered racial discrimination and pressures, or came out of

Poston: families who were suffering, they were very sympathetic to our positions. When I was in Mason's class, I had two or three Jewish friends. We discussed things that weren't quite clear to me. And they would ask Mason the question because Mason would not answer my question.

Morris: He wouldn't respond to you in class?

Poston: He totally ignored me.

Morris: You wonder how his colleagues in the department responded. They must have been aware of what was going on?

Poston: Oh, they were aware. I think there were one or two that may have been neutral. But they were not going to say anything. To show you how strong he felt he was, when I was ready to take the state boards (and they gave it at Cal), he walked in the room, started talking to the state board examiner and pointing to me like this. So you knew he was saying something about me. But there was a Jewish fellow on the state board named Dr. Holbrook. And I learned later that Dr. Holbrook had taken a position. If I fail, I fail; if I pass, I pass.

Morris: That seems like a logical position.

Poston: That was his position. And of course there was no hanky panky. I don't know about the other two. There was another fellow named Dr. Dean. And there was another from southern California named Dr. Goodman. These fellows were on the board. But I never did know about Dr. Dean's behind-the-scene position, but I did know about Dr. Holbrook's position.

Morris: Did he talk to you?

Poston: Afterwards. After I graduated, and became active in the community. Dr. Holbrook practiced in San Francisco. I went over to see him once or twice, I think because I was active in optometry and so was he. He sat down and told me what had happened. So that's how I know.

Morris: How about the other departments? You took other courses besides the physics and the optometry?

Poston: I never had any problems because I was a math major, and I took physics courses. I didn't have any problems. Just in optometry I had problems.

Morris: By then there were two black fraternities, and two sororities on campus. Did you participate?

Poston: No, I did not participate because I really didn't have time, working sixty hours a week and trying to go to school, I really didn't have time for much social activity. I played ice hockey. And the fellow that headed the bellhop department was very considerate, and he granted me time off for that.

Morris: To play hockey?

Poston: Yes. They practiced one or two nights a week. So he allowed me to come to work late and had someone cover for me. He was very considerate, because I didn't get out of lab until four o'clock. I was due at work at four o'clock. So what he would do is have somebody punch my time clock card, and then he would make some other bellhop work the extra half hour to cover for me until I arrived to work. He didn't only do that for me. He did that for college students. There were several others: a fellow named Eddy Alber, another fellow named Kermit Wilson, who also worked. They were all going to college.

Morris: Were they all coming to Cal or were some going to state?

Poston: Eddie Alber went to Cal. Kermit Wilson went to Cal. He's a dentist here in town. And some of them went to San Francisco State. But he was considerate of all the fellows who were ambitious about going to school. Then when it was finals time, he would grant time off to study for finals, and he would have other bellhops cover our time, because there were about eighteen or twenty bellhops there.

Morris: And not all of you were going to college?

Poston: Only about five or six of us were going to college.

Morris: Did some of the fellows who weren't going to college get a little edgy?

Poston: No, because they made extra money. And they received extra tips. He was good to them in other ways. He was a good gentle supervisor.

Morris: What's his name?

Poston: His name was Hamilton Bouldin.

Morris: He sounds like a remarkable fellow.

Poston: He was. He was very considerate of the college fellows.

VI A YOUNG MAN'S INTERESTS

Black Leaders in the 1930s

Morris: I have read that there was a group of older black men in Oakland who had an eye out for promising younger black men and looked out for them and saw to it that they got a job if they needed one to help them in school, and things like that. Were you aware of somebody keeping an eye on you?

Poston: No, I wasn't aware of anybody keeping an eye on me. I do remember that when I got ready to go into practice, there was a fellow named Berkovich who owned the building. And he called a black real-estate man who gave me an excellent recommendation. That's how I got the building. I went to Twelfth and Broadway, which was right in the center of town at that time.

Morris: Not too far from here.

Poston: I guess Walter Gordon, in essence, kept an eye on some students. He certainly was a direct influence in my coming out of school.

Morris: Do you remember when you first met Walter?

Poston: I don't remember when I first met him. But I think I met him because of my mother being in the life insurance business, possibly when I was in high school.

Morris: They did business together?

Poston: I think at one time he represented Golden State up here. He knew all of the top people at Golden State. I think it was because the community was so small, it didn't take long for people who were in the insurance business to meet the other leaders of the community. Reverend Hill was active in the community. So these people all knew each other.

Morris: We're talking now about 1935 or so. Was Walter Gordon then yet the president of the NAACP? [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]

Poston: I'm not sure what year he was president. But I can tell you that there was an NAACP youth group and either he was president, or maybe Dellums.

Morris: C. L. Dellums?

Poston: Yes. In that youth group was a fellow named Tom Berkley, who I think went to law school at Cal or Hastings. And Samantha Lee was there.

Morris: She's teaching? Do I know her at Berkeley High School?

Poston: That's right. I think Roy Nichols was involved.

Morris: Did he come from the East Bay?

Poston: No, Roy came from, I think, Philadelphia.

Morris: As a youngster?

Poston: Or Pittsburgh, to the Bay Area.

Morris: I knew him when he was minister at Downs.

Poston: He's back here, you know. He's retired back to the Bay Area.

Morris: He's a fine man.

Poston: I was just at his house last weekend. Roy and I have been very close. Tom Berkley and I have been very close. We have maintained a relationship. And it goes all the way back to the NAACP youth group.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Youth Group; Restaurant Sit-Ins##

Morris: When was the youth group started?

Poston: I'm not sure. I don't remember the dates. But it was active when I was on the campus.

Morris: Do you recall being part of the first group to be members?

Poston: I'm not sure. I don't think I can say that. I know I was part of it at one time. We used to meet. They had this chapter. We became a little radical so they took the charter away from us.

Morris: I'm surprised at that. Was this is high school?

Poston: This was on the Cal campus. We were all on the Cal campus. We had this youth group, and Tom Berkley was studying law. We had learned that the restaurants that refused blacks service could be sued and we could get money for it. So we started out with a group of white youths to go in restaurants and not get served. And then we would take them to court.

Morris: This is '36, '37?

Poston: Around '37, '38, around there. But anyway, we did that to a couple of restaurants. The power structure in Oakland called Walt, and Dellums said, "You better stop those young radicals." And so we had to stop.

Morris: The power structure in Oakland? You mean the Oakland Tribune?

Poston: At that time I don't know who the power structure was, who the people were that got to Walt and C. L. Dellums. But then they came to our meeting and told us we had to cool it for a while.

Morris: Did you win some of your suits?

Poston: Yes, we won a couple of them.

Morris: Was Tom Berkley already practicing?

Poston: No, we just went to court, you see, because it wasn't but about five hundred dollars. But we ended up collecting once or twice. I guess they saw some danger in what we were doing, from their viewpoint.

Morris: Walter Gordon was about fifteen or twenty years older. What was the link? Did he run some of the activities for this youth group?

Poston: We were an autonomous group. We had our charter and were supposed to follow the criteria of the NAACP. And they had youth groups at that time. I don't know what they have now; I'm not active in it now.

Morris: It's the first time I've heard of it. But that doesn't mean that--

Poston: Do you have Tom Berkley on your list to interview?

Morris: He's on my list. But my list is larger--

Poston: You might ask him about it.

Morris: I would like to. The NAACP, as you probably know, has a western regional archive. Eventually they would like to do a lot of interviewing with people who have been active in the NAACP and various interracial organizations. I don't know what the status is.*

Poston: Do you have Samantha Lee on your list too?

Morris: Yes.

Poston: Because I think she would be a good person.

After School Drama Group

Poston: You are going to talk to Ida Jackson, are you?

Morris: I talked to Ida Jackson Friday.

Poston: She was an influence in my life, too.

Morris: When did you first meet her?

Poston: I think I met her when I was maybe a high school student.

Morris: Was she teaching then?

Poston: She was teaching then. And she used to run drama classes for us, which was extracurricular. She was quite a motivating person. I have a very warm feeling for Ida.

Morris: I would imagine you would. I get some of the same kind of feeling from you, a really great determination to do things the way you think they ought to be done, which is a quality not many people have.

Poston: She did an excellent job. She used to run extra kind of drama and other things as an after-school activity, where I was involved.

Morris: At the churches?

Poston: Yes. Because she was teaching at some school on Peralta somewhere. She did this after school because that's where I became involved.

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*In 1987, Dr. Lawrence Crouchett was directing an East Bay Black History project in cooperation with the NAACP.

Morris: What kind of plays did you put on?

Poston: I don't remember. Small plays. I remember she used to do that. I used to go down to the place.

Morris: Christmas pageant kind of things?

Poston: Maybe. She's had a lot to contribute in the earlier days. She was way ahead of me. She must be--what? Eighty-five.

Morris: Not quite. She was born in 1902. I shouldn't say that. Us ladies don't like to-- [laughs]

Poston: I don't think Ida minds.

Morris: She was the class of 1923.

Poston: That would make her eighty-two, eighty-three. She must be close to that, because I'm getting up there.

She's a good person.

Morris: Is there anything more about the--? How long was this NAACP youth group active?

Poston: I don't know. I really don't know. I was in it for a short time. After I graduated, I was no longer, I guess, qualified to be a member of it.

Morris: It was primarily for students?

Poston: Yes. I just joined--

Morris: Was it primarily interested in that kind of civil action? Were there political--?

Poston: I think they kind of left us alone to run our own show, and maybe we did some social things. I think this idea of suing these restaurants and increasing our treasury was Tom Berkley's.

Morris: It sounds like a great way to build up a treasury. I will see if I can find an opportunity to ask him about it. I would be curious to ask him what he found in the legal codes.

Poston: Tom has a lot to be admired about.

Morris: Was D. G. Gibson around on your college scene?

Poston: Yes. But I was not active in any political activities. You know, I met D. G. Gibson when he was-- We were so far apart in age level. There wasn't much contact. Once in a while I would get involved after I graduated, sitting in on a political meeting. But I'm not a political animal.

About the State Board of Optometry; Professional Training

Poston: I'm just a little more a political animal now than I was then. But I stayed out of politics. When I was appointed to the [California State Optometry] board, I didn't have any knowledge of it. Nobody asked me anything. I had been very active in the local optometric society here. When I joined the optometric society, the first thing I did, I became better acquainted with a fellow who was an optometrist here named Hank Peterson. And we raised about twenty thousand dollars for public relations things for the local society.

Morris: Alameda County or Oakland?

Poston: The Alameda County society. And as a result I ended up becoming president of the local society. I instituted a lot of public relations. I invited school teachers to meet optometrists. I invited school nurses to meet. [laughs] I did a lot of things like that. And so they ended up giving me a couple of awards. The local society gave me an award; the state society gave me an award. I ended up becoming man of the year for the whole United States. That was quite an honor.

Morris: If you've got a little more time this morning, I would like to ask you a little bit about setting up the practice and what kinds of things--

[rest break]

Morris: You started school in January?

Poston: No, I just cut out one course, a course for my career, and I had to go make that extra four units. I was working, I couldn't take that course, so I had to make up that extra quarter. Some place along the line I didn't include it. I don't remember quite what it was now. With those long hours, it may have been a course that interfered with my working time. I couldn't take it because I worked seven days a week in those days.

Morris: You must have been ready for a vacation. Did you take time off in the summer or anything like that?

Poston: No, I couldn't afford to. My father was dead. And my mother ran her house like a co-op up until the time she died. We all worked. All the money went into one pot. And we took our basic living expenses out. And then the rest of it went for education. The kind of money we made, there was no money left at the end of the year.

Morris: In the '30s you weren't making very much an hour.

Poston: I'll take that back. When my mother was alive, we used to take a week or so, sometime during the summer, and go up in the mountains. We would camp out a week. We would do that, and fish and hike. But after she died, her income was cut out of the budget. And it was just the three of us to pool our income. And then when my brother went to the Philippines that left two of us to pool our income.

Morris: So your mother died when you were still getting your training?

Poston: Yes, while I was still in college. She died in 1937. We had been taught to pool expenses. So we just carried on the same kind of program, and shared. When my oldest brother went over to the Philippines, then there was just the two of us to carry that load. So we pooled our expenses, and were able to stay in our family home.

Brother's Forewarning of Pearl Harbor, 1940

Morris: Did this three-way cooperative put up the money for his transportation to get him to the Philippines?

Poston: No. He worked on a boat to go over. And then after he got there, he ran out of money. So my youngest brother and I would dip into our pot and send him some money to keep him going. That kind of kept him under way. He would write over and say, "I'm broke. I'm getting hungry." [laughs] So we would take some of our money and send it to him. That kept him going until he came back. He came back just before the war started in '41. He used to write beautiful letters about what was happening in the Philippines.

Morris: Could he tell that trouble was coming?

Poston: Oh, yes. He wrote back and talked about Japanese gunships and all that sort of thing. "We're going to be in a war. I don't know whether I'll be able to finish." He was writing these letters in '40. And then in the early part of '41, he was saying, "I'm praying I'll be able to finish the semester and complete my education." And then just as he completed the education, the army insisted that all students and army wives come back, and he came back.

Morris: The United States military people in the Philippines wanted all Americans back in this country?

Poston: All the students. They knew what was coming. That attack on Pearl Harbor was no surprise. They knew it was coming because he came back. They shipped him back because they knew war was coming. And he said, "We will be in war before the end of the year." That was what he was saying.

Morris: And he came back in the summer of '41.

Poston: He came back in July of '41. They brought him back.

Morris: On a military transport?

Poston: Military transport. And they gave him the job of taking care of the animals of military personnel.

V STARTING A PRACTICE

Basic Lessons in Economics

Morris: Did you have a chance to start your practice before being— Did you serve in the army in World War II?

Poston: No. When I graduated I went job hunting from, oh, maybe Santa Clara, San Jose, all up the Peninsula, San Francisco, Oakland, looking for a job. I at that point felt, I'm a graduate of optometry school, now I can get a job, a decent job. Because I've been bell-hopping all these years.

I wanted to practice optometry. So I went to optometrists looking for a job. They told you in school the first thing you should do is go work for somebody. So I figured I could work for somebody. I found that wasn't possible. I didn't have any money, because by this time I had quit the athletic club, because now I wanted to do something else. And my youngest brother—we had an agreement that when I graduated he would take over the insurance business, because we took over my mother's insurance business after she passed away. And we ran it together.

Morris: So you're staying in touch with all those clients.

Poston: That's right. We had three suits, and we looked very much alike.

Morris: And you were all the same size.

Poston: We were all the same size. He was an inch or so taller than I was. One of us would go sell insurance and the other one would maybe have to go collect the premiums. And so after we sold the insurance we would tell the party that, "Now, my brother comes to collect." I figured sooner or later they're going to pick up the differences. And so we would always tell them that maybe my brother would come and collect the next time because we took our school schedule and

Poston: my work schedule, and we worked it in between. And that way they would know. If I wore a brown suit, then he would wear that brown suit when he went out to collect.

Morris: I see, so they recognized you.

Poston: They wouldn't necessarily know which one was there. People would just think we were twins, we looked so much alike. I was a couple of years older.

The agreement was that when I finished school he would take over the insurance business because I was going out to practice optometry. And that's what happened. I didn't have an income.

But I decided after I couldn't get a job as an optometrist, I would go to San Francisco and apply to an employment agency. And I did. And I'll never forget—I sat in that employment agency and the fellow said, "Oh, you're just what the doctor ordered."

I didn't know enough about looking for a job, so I went to this employment agency. They advertised in the paper, employment agency. I went over to San Francisco. And I signed up for this employment agent. And this fellow was all enthusiastic and he had just the job for me. I had all my credentials with me. And so I went dressed up in the suit I had. I was sent out to look for a job. When I got there, there was a job to be a valet for a retired lawyer.

Morris: My goodness. They paid no attention to your professional training.

Poston: No attention to my professional training or academic training. I was broke, so I said, "Okay, I guess I'll have to crawl before I walk." So I took that job. The lawyer had had a stroke. And my job was to dress him, make beds, and then take him for a drive around San Francisco and entertain him until four o'clock or three o'clock. And then he would come back and take an afternoon's rest. And then I could clean up the dishes after dinner. He lived with his wife and daughter. And I would clean up the dishes and I was free to go. I decided I wasn't going to do that long.

Morris: That's a long day.

Poston: Yes. So then I went to San Francisco and talked to a representative of American Optical, a Jewish fellow. He said he would let me have some equipment and give me ninety days before I started to pay. I went to Gross Brothers furniture store, which is here in Oakland. They let me have some furniture, let me start paying in ninety days. I knew both of these people. One I knew from school. The other one I knew from working at the Athens Athletic Club. And then I went to see Mr. Berkovich, who was in the real estate business, and he said, "I'll let you have a place. Do you have any money?"

Poston: I said, "Yes, I do." I had a hundred dollars. And I gave him fifty of it, put the other fifty in the Bank of America. And I decided to open my doors. And I went to a printer, and he said, "Well, I'll do some printing for you. But you'll have to pay me in about sixty days."

And I said, "Okay, I will." I printed up a bunch of announcements. I took twenty-five dollars of the fifty dollars I had left and got some young people whom I knew, young ladies, to write notices and send them out by mail announcing I was in practice.

Morris: To people you were already acquainted with?

Poston: I had the insurance company's roster. So I used their roster, because in those days they had debits which were printed up. So I took the debits of several agents, and sent out announcements to these people. And then Reverend Hill, that I spoke of, announced at church and gave a very nice little speech about supporting me because I was a member of the church, and they should support their own and that sort of thing. That's how I got started.

Morris: There was no kind of assistance from the school of optometry in starting a practice?

Poston: No.

Morris: No referral for people who were looking for assistance or anything like that?

Poston: No referral. There was nothing. They didn't even teach you the economics of practice. So the first patient I had, one of the people that followed the announcements, broke her glasses.

She received an announcement that I was opening my practice. And she broke her glasses about the same time. And she brought them in—Mrs. Lewis--and said, "Can you fix my glasses? I have your announcement."

I said, "Yes, I can."

She said, "How much is it going to cost?"

And I said, "Three dollars and fifty cents." And when I received the bill from the lab it was seven dollars and some cents. My first lesson in economics was when I lost money. It didn't take me long to learn. Then I went out and talked to a couple of friends who had exposure.

Morris: Previous graduates? People you had known in school?

Poston: Yes. And talked to a fellow in San Francisco. I forget his name at the moment. And they began to educate me about the economics of optometry. And then there was a fellow named Irving Alquist with Smith's Clothing Store. First he came and offered to finance me for a certain percentage of what I did. And I said, "No, I want to be my own person." And so then he began to teach me some economics of business.

Morris: How had he come to take an interest in you?

Poston: He knew me from the club. There were any number of people who knew me from the club, knew I was going to school, and kind of followed me along. Judge Monroe Friedman was another one. He recently passed away. And these all became patients.

Morris: So all those years at the athletic club really paid off.

Poston: Some of those people became patients and followed me. Irving Alquist was helpful. Judge Monroe Friedman was helpful. Any number of them were helpful at that time. That's how I got started.

Optometry Society Membership Struggle

Poston: One other thing to show you what Mason did. After I started I tried to join the local society. When I put my application in, Mason appeared and acquired five people to vote against me. And so they wouldn't let me join the society.

Morris: It's that close to a professional society?

Poston: So then I went out and talked to Dr. Minor and talked to Dr. Stoddard, and talked to a couple of Jewish optometrists here in town. And at the next meeting they reopened and had arguments until eleven or twelve o'clock at night. And then I was voted in. So when I was voted in, Mason resigned. But then I decided I would go to every meeting so they would never bring it up again. [laughs] So I went to every society meeting for about seven or eight years. Never took an active part.

Morris: Just that you were there and were polite. What finally happened to Mr. Mason?

Poston: He died.

Morris: Was he from the South?

Poston: I tried to check on that, and the best I could find is that he had come from Massachusetts. That may not be fact. I don't know where he was from. But wherever he came from, he had a good training in racial prejudice.

Morris: It sounds almost as if he made a personal crusade.

Poston: He did. And I can understand that after Dr. Deutsch was brought into the picture that it became a personal crusade, because he had been defeated on his first round of the battle. So I recognized that--

Morris: He was going to continue to be bitter.

Poston: Oh, yes. I recognized that. He tried to do everything. I think, too, because I was the first black optometrist in the school, that I was upsetting the whole pattern.

An Opportunity for Young Black Men and Women

Morris: The status quo. I understand that it was not until 1963 that there was another black student.

Poston: That's right.

Morris: Did Professor Mason last that long?

Poston: No, I don't think he was there at that time. What I tried to do after I graduated, I recognized that there was going to be a problem, and that the doors would close behind me. So then I started a personal campaign of going to high schools and talking to counselors and talking to high school students to try to get some other blacks to follow me. I wasn't successful.

Morris: What appealed to you about optometry that made you willing to take on a personal crusade?

Poston: I enjoyed it. After I became an optometrist I enjoyed every aspect of it. And I didn't have any desire at that time to be a medical man. I didn't realize the advantages and disadvantages and all those things over other fields. I enjoyed optometry. I have never regretted this.

Morris: That's very satisfying.

Poston: It was a very satisfying thing for me. And I saw opportunity there that blacks were not exposed to. After I graduated, I found out that I was the first. Nobody else had a license. Nobody else had been to school. I recognized that here's a wide open field for blacks. And it still is.

Morris: This seems like a good place to stop for today. I'd like to come back another time and talk to you about some of those things that you've been doing to further the cause of young blacks, and also the cause of optometry.

Poston: I enjoyed, I guess, most of the things that I did, the things I enjoyed doing and felt the need to do.

Morris: You don't seem to have slowed down a bit. You continue to work seven days a week, seventeen hours.

Poston: I keep saying I'm going to slow down. My wife says, "You're not going to slow down, but you should." [laughs]

Morris: Do you commute to Calistoga every day?

Poston: Not yet. I bought land and built a house in Danville back in the '50s. And I have it up for sale. I'm going to meet somebody at two o'clock this afternoon who says he wants to buy it. And if I sell it then I won't commute.

Morris: Well, Danville is pretty rustic. How did you happen to go from Danville to Calistoga?

Poston: I think I've always liked open spaces. When I bought our first house, it was out in East Oakland, and nobody was living in East Oakland hills then. And I enjoyed that. And then I decided I wanted more space around me, so I went to Danville, and bought six and a half acres.

Morris: That's a good piece of land.

Poston: Yes. And then a few years ago, I recognized that Danville was going to grow and be like any other place, so I started looking around for some place that was close by that would have some acreage that wasn't too high. So we went up in Napa Valley and bought twelve acres up there.

Morris: That's beautiful.

Poston: I think I like to spend time outside.

Morris: Have you taken up gardening?

Poston: I did gardening in Danville. I always liked working around shrubbery and trees, and that sort of thing.

Encouragement from Jewish Optometrists and Others

[Interview 2: January 8, 1985]##

Morris: I went back over the notes of our first interview and I noticed that you got a lot of encouragement and help in college and getting started in business from the Oakland Athletic Club that you worked at.

Poston: There were some members of the club who were very supportive after I graduated from college. They didn't know the problems I was having in college. I think the support I got in college came basically from three people, Harry Kingman, Dr. Deutsch, and Walter Gordon. They were the initial support I received. And then after I had had a little confrontation, then I received some support from some of the students who were very helpful answering questions. I had questions and Mason wouldn't answer, they would get the question answered for me.

Morris: They would ask the same question of the professor?

Poston: Yes. There were some students who were very cooperative in that way. Then after I graduated there were several optometrists in the community who became aware of my problem. And when I applied for the association, I was voted out. I wasn't allowed to become a member of the association. And I went to talk to them. They led a fight. After them I talked to Dr. Stoddard, who was a professor at Cal at the School of Optometry. And I talked to Dr. Minor, who was the dean at that time. And they both showed up for another meeting, along with these others who disagreed with the philosophy of putting me out because I was black. And they held a meeting until one o'clock in the morning to change the thing around. And that's how I got into the association.

Morris: Who were the optometrists in the community?

Poston: Well, there was Dr. Katz, Dr. Herman Katz was one of them. One thing, the people who came to my support, practicing optometrists who came to my support, were mostly Jewish.

Morris: How had you gotten to know them?

Poston: When I graduated from school, I went around knocking on doors looking for a job. And it didn't take them long to get to know me, since I was the first black face that they had seen to get some identity. At that moment I was thinking about going to work and trying to survive.

Morris: Did any of the Jewish optometrists, had they had similar experiences of feeling excluded from the profession?

Poston: Not to my knowledge at Cal. Because they were in the class I was in. Fifteen or twenty Jewish fellows. So I don't think they felt any direct pressure. I think I was a kind of new thing on the scene.

Morris: I was thinking also about friends and neighbors, people in the black community who might have kept an eye on you and encouraged you as you were going on.

Poston: No one kept an eye on me while I was in school because I had very limited time. There was a minister here, the Reverend Daniel Hill, he and his wife. I think Daniel Hill received a Ph.D. from Cal. But he's deceased now. I was very active in the church. They used to give me a little moral support, pat me on the back, and say, "Keep struggling, Marvin." They used to use such phrases as "It matters not how long it takes you to acquire something. The main objective is that you acquire it at the end." It kind of kept me from-- Don't give up just because you've got a few obstacles.

They were the main support, plus Walter Gordon. I kept in contact with him. I knew him as a personal friend, he was also a friend of my mother's. I used to drop by and just stay in contact with him because I was grateful. When I needed him he came. So I stayed in contact with him for a long time.

Morris: Would he talk to somebody for you or just to go to--?

Poston: Yes, he did, when I was in the crisis stage. He's the one that went to Dr. Deutsch. And he talked on my behalf then. After that I really didn't need him to talk in my behalf, because when I had a problem I could go directly back to Dr. Deutsch and tell him my story, and he'd intercede in my behalf.

Morris: Was Walter Gordon president of the NAACP at that point?

Poston: Either he was or there was a Dellums.

Morris: C. L. Dellums? Yes.

Poston: One of the two was president at that time.

Morris: They sort of took turns being president?

Poston: I think so. They kind of ran the show back in the '30s. I was a young adult. I wasn't participating in the--

Morris: Did you stay active in the NAA at all?

Poston: I was active in the early stages with the adult group. Not real active. I was a member and participated in certain activities.

Morris: Did they have social activities as well as the organizing and political activity?

Poston: If they did, I was too busy working to take part.

Morris: Were there any white members in the '30s?

Poston: NAACP? A few.

VI ALAMEDA-CONTRA COSTA COUNTY OPTOMETRY SOCIETY, 1950-1960S

Visual Screening Project

Morris: Most of your activities in the '40s then involved either the optometry society or your own practice?

Poston: Well, no. After I joined the society, I was not active in the society. I would go to every meeting. And I went because I didn't want them to vote me out. [laughs] I didn't become active until the '50s. I just went to the meetings, sat down, listened to what transpired, went to the state meetings, occasionally to the national meetings. I didn't want to ruffle any feathers for a while. I had already accomplished what I wanted at that time.

But I was active in other activities. I was on the Children's Home Society board, and was active in the church. I participated in a lot of community activities; one was a prevention of juvenile deliquency committee.

Morris: That went on into the '50s and '60s.

Poston: Well, mostly that was in the late '40s. When I first started practicing, my main interest, I guess, was the practice. And the church. And then I began to expand and get appointed to other community boards after a few years.

Morris: How long did it take you before you felt comfortable that your practice was making a good living?

Poston: You mean before I started to get active in the society?

Morris: Yes.

Poston: Well, in the late '40s, early '50s. There was a fellow in the society named Dr. Henry Peterson. I think he graduated Cal, too. And Henry had a project that he wanted to develop. And I offered to

Poston: assist him. It was a public-relations project. And in order to do that we had to raise some funds. We set out a strategy and I became the treasurer, and he was the president of the project. And we raised the funds. And we created a public-relations program here in Alameda County and Contra Costa County. We had a trailer, and we did visual screening and we referred people. I think in one night, we raised about twelve thousand dollars. We raised a commitment for about twenty-one thousand dollars. And that was the first time anything like that had been done in the state.

Morris: How did you raise the twelve thousand dollars in one night? That's quite an accomplishment even today.

Poston: I had had exposure to how Baptist churches raise money. So I suggested to Hank that we use what I call the Baptist technique. And that was to get certain committed optometrists, who supported almost any project the organization wanted to carry out, to give a commitment of a hundred or two hundred dollars. And what they did was had a meeting. We invited every optometrist, whether an association member or not, because they would all gain from it. People were screened, needed eye care, they could get it done in the community.

And so they had this mass meeting. And a large group of optometrists showed up. And Hank gave his talk as to what the project was all about. And then I stood up and gave a talk to raise money for the project, told what the cost would be, and then I asked for donations. And I put my money down, and Hank put his money down. And two or three others--

Morris: Green money, not just say, "I'll give." Put the actual money down.

Poston: Green money and checks. We had about, maybe fifty or more people. You see, there was kind of a small board of directors. And we all put our money down. And then about fifteen, maybe eighteen more people, twenty, all committed to come forth with their checks. So they started coming forward and putting their checks down. When you start a movement like that, if you're just sitting there, you feel kind of guilty.

And you have them walk up to the front of the room and put their money down, pass their money around, and somebody recording what contribution they were making. So we had pledge cards signed too. It really was a psychological thing. And they benefitted from it, because we bought a truck and the trailer. We equipped the trailer and we hired the young students to do the screening. And we would park it like at Fourteenth and Broadway, or some place in Alameda, or some place in Hayward and just roam around the county.

Morris: Were you concerned that there were people with serious vision problems that were not getting any attention?

Poston: Oh, yes. I think there's always been a problem. I think statistics have shown that Americans, especially in the past, I don't think it's much better now, just take eyes for granted. And generally when they had vision problems, they generally couldn't read the paper, or something like that. And so this was a screening process to check for glaucoma and to see whether or not you had a refractive error. I would say a good percentage of Americans now don't get their eyes tested on a regular basis.

Morris: Yes, the eye test is the least--if you go for a general physical, they look in your eye and that's about it.

Resistance from the Medical Profession

Poston: They're looking for pathological symptoms. I think optometry came into being because medicine didn't bother much with the eyes.

Morris: And ophthalmology is not a very big practice within medicine?

Poston: Oh, it is a good discipline. It's been very popular in the last fifteen or twenty years. But optometrists came into the field and started filling a need. And I think that's why they survived. Their biggest problem as I've seen through the years has been medicine. Medicine has--organized medicine, not individual practitioners, but organized medicine has always been at work in the background. Not only against optometry. They fight dentists too. They fight psychologists. They fight podiatrists.

Morris: And osteopaths.

Poston: They fight them all. They consider themselves the kingpins. And they don't want anybody to trade on their territory. And I understand that. If I make a lot of money, I don't want anybody to take it away from me.

Morris: But if they aren't doing anything with it anyhow, you think they would--

Poston: Just like the dog in the manger. [laughs]

Morris: Is there a clear dividing line or is there a kind of fuzzy line between what an optometrist is comfortable doing and when he needs to refer to an ophthalmologist?

Poston: Oh, no, I think it's very clear. I think what's happened, ophthalmologists went into the field of optometry. They kind of overlapped into optometry for economic reasons. And then they saw the opportunity. That's after optometrists had already gotten into

Poston: the field. At one time they didn't touch refractive work and that sort of thing. And then later on when optometrists started making money and so forth, they started to move in because there just wasn't enough surgery for the ophthalmologists to do. And even today, I would say that you get 100 percent of the ophthalmologists, you would maybe find 90 percent of them use refractive work to survive. I think you'll find most of them do-- And then they'll hide it and say, "Well, we do it for other reasons." But the real reason they do it is economic. There just isn't enough surgery to keep all the ophthalmologists busy. There just isn't enough disease and surgery. So they overlap more into our field.

Morris: In doing these vision screening things and your other work, did you find that there were any special vision concerns for black people?

Poston: No, we didn't do it on ethnic groups at all. It was just done for the general public. And it was done more as an educational program. You stopped and had your vision screened. If we found something wrong, then we would talk to you about what was wrong, and that you should see a practitioner. We didn't say you had to see an optometrist, you had to see an eye practitioner. I guess medicine got some benefits from it. They probably fought it too.

Children's Vision Center

Poston: To give you an example as to how medicine operates, a few years ago a few of us got together, and we were going to put together what we called the Children's Vision Center. The young fellow who had the idea was named Dr. Leonard Purcell. He talked to another close friend of his by the name of Harvey Arnold. And then they talked to me about it. And the members said, "Fine, let's put a Children's Vision Center for those children who are not covered by various programs for eye care. I also at that time knew Norvel Smith. Do you know who he is?

Morris: Yes.

Poston: So we went out into the community and we persuaded an attorney to let us use the third floor of his building, which was vacant. Name was Bernstein. And then we went to the various optical companies and persuaded them to donate equipment to use. We went to banks and acquired desks and furniture. Went to the Carpenters' Union, and they came up and did the carpenters' work. The Electrical Union came up and did the electrical work. All this was donated. So we put the center together. Each one of us took a responsibility.

Poston: We got good support. We put it together and there came some problems. We even persuaded some of the optical companies to fill the prescriptions free of charge.

That was their contribution. They were prescription houses. The first group we went to were manufacturers of optometric equipment. And they gave us the equipment, enough for two examination rooms. And then these others were prescription houses and they gave us free lab services. There was good cooperation.

After we got it under way, Norvel Smith was head of a program here in Oakland. I chatted with Norvel several times.

Morris: Was that when he was on the Oakland Economic Development Commission?

Poston: Yes. And I chatted with Norvel several times and asked him for some money. So he said write a proposal, and we did. We prepared to present the proposal. Now, it had to be presented to community people. And we invited ophthalmologists to come in and participate, because we would need somebody to care for diseases. Well, as an organized group, they wouldn't come. But we did get one ophthalmologist to say that he would see these people.

In order to get this money, which was about nine or ten thousand dollars (we were asking for it to help us pay salaries for a secretary and that sort of thing), we went to the community meetings. I became a spokesman for the optometry group. But our only opposition was ophthalmology. There was a group of some six or eight ophthalmologists who showed up at the meeting to oppose giving the money for these children to get examined free. And of course, when you deal with community groups, they saw through what was happening, and they voted to give us the money. The ophthalmologists I think were really embarrassed at the time. [laughs]

I tell that story because that's the kind of opposition that optometry has had all through the years. I've seen it in the legislature. I've seen it in the community. Where something constructive was trying to be done, and because optometry had this better image or better status politically, they opposed it.

Morris: That seems sort of cutting off your nose to spite your face kind of thing.

Poston: Yes, but it's existed all through the years, and I don't suppose it will go away. We put the Children's Vision Center together and it was very effective for many years. And finally Larry and Harvey and I retired and turned it over to another board of directors.

California Vision Services

Morris: How does that relate to the California Vision Services that was mentioned in the article in the Cal Monthly?*

Poston: California Vision Services was an outgrowth of that public relations program. The same group who put that public relations program together were involved. This was also Dr. Henry Peterson's idea. Henry had a patient who was head of the Hod Carriers Union.

And they had talked about a prepaid care for the union members. And so Henry talked to the same group about changing this over to a prepaid program. So that's how California Vision Services got it's name, because the prepaid program was also the CVS, California Vision Service. It was the same name. And so we then started work together to put it together. There was a fellow that was on the board named Dr. Bernard Thal, who was a local graduate. Dr. Mort Sarver.

Morris: Dr. Bernard Thal?

Poston: Dr. Bernard Thal is his name.

Morris: The optometrist in Berkeley.

Poston: Yes. He was active in it. There were some others in the community also active. We then started to put California Vision Services together. We did it in Alameda County. And Dr. Sarver was our actuary. [laughs] We were all novices. I was the treasurer. I think later on I became the president.

Morris: I have you listed as president in 1963. But that was several years after it started.

Poston: Was I president of California Vision Services then, or was I president of the local society? I think I was president of the Alameda County Optometric Society in '63. I don't know.

Morris: It may have been the same time. Does your wife keep a list of when you've done all these things?

Poston: I don't remember.

Morris: Maybe one day we could look that up. You didn't go to Blue Cross or Blue Shield, or one of those organizations that was already doing--

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*See Appendix.

Poston: No, they were controlled by medicine. That's like sending a steer into the butcher shop. You could have been--

Morris: I figured it had grown out of your early experience with insurance, when your family had the insurance agency.

Poston: I worked with insurance. That was my concern. But this was something entirely different. As I say, what we did was wrote a two-year contract and hoped that we would come out all right. We arranged so that if we didn't, the optometrists would suffer the loss.

Morris: Your organization carried all the statistics and all the financing? You didn't work with any insurance people at all? That was really a great undertaking.

Poston: Oh, it was. It was quite a thing. We then acquired the Brickmasons, Plasterers, and a few others. And then we signed up the Masters, Mates and Pilots. And they wanted optometrists in Seattle, Los Angeles and San Diego.

Morris: Oh, sure. They do the whole West Coast.

Poston: And the East Coast. They wanted Boston.

Morris: More than you had in mind.

Poston: No, we had dreamed of it being something big. I don't think we really anticipated grabbing that kind of action. But we did. And then, of course, we realized that it was bigger than what just a local society could handle, because the first commitment was from Alameda and Contra Costa optometrists. And they wanted to underwrite this thing.

Morris: They would participate?

Poston: They would participate. If we had any losses, they would take a loss. We held back a certain amount of the fee.

Morris: As a fund to--?

Poston: A reserve fund. And if there were to be any losses, then we could pay it out of the reserve fund. People had to be taken care of.

Morris: Was it a fee for service kind of a thing?

Poston: No, it was strictly prepaid. The union paid so much per head into a fund. And we took all the risks.

Morris: And then you would--

Poston: They received one pair of glasses a year.

Morris: And one vision screening?

Poston: One visual examination, more complete than a vision screening. They had one visual examination a year, one complete set of glasses if they needed them, one complete frame.

Morris: That's not bad when you consider what a pair of glasses costs. And then the individual optometrist who was a member of the Alameda-Contra Costa society would then bill the vision service and be reimbursed.

Poston: It was quite a project. It's a big project now. After it became too large for us, we went to the state society. And the state [society] took it over. If you look at those figures, you'll see it's a hundred million-dollar organization.

Morris: That's what it is now? That's a sizable operation.

Poston: Oh, yes. And on top of that, as a result, this branched out into a number of other states. In order for you to get all of that information, you would have to talk to Mr. John O'Donnell.

Morris: He's the manager of the national program now?

Poston: He's the manager of California. The way it's set up, California does a certain amount of administrative work for other states. But each state is a separate entity.

Morris: By the time you put that together, was it fair to say that the state optometry society and the Alameda-Contra Costa society were very proud to have you as a member?

Poston: Oh, yes. After the initial friction, I didn't have any problem with the younger members. I think the only reason that I had a problem in the beginning was that my good friend Dr. Mason brought his cohorts together, and they had a little ruling that said if you had five members vote against you, you couldn't get in. That was struck down at that time. After that, I never had any friction. I just played a low key. And then I became active in the society. I became active in the public relations, California Vision Services. I became active in becoming a member of the board of directors of the society and later on became president.

VII PROFESSIONAL AND COMMUNITY CONCERNS

Recruiting Young Black People##

Morris: With your visibility and activity, why did it take twenty-three years before the second black optometrist graduated from UC?

Poston: I really don't know. When I first came out of school, I realized I had a problem; I also realized it was a racial problem. So I started going around to the high schools and the junior highs, and the junior colleges, trying to talk others into optometry. But I found either I was not very effective, or the exposure that optometrists had to blacks was so limited, that it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. I talked to school counselors. I talked to school teachers. I really didn't find anybody. I probably found one person in all those years--

Morris: Who was interested in optometry?

Poston: Yes. He happened to be a young fellow that I knew.

Morris: Here in Oakland?

Poston: Yes.

Morris: And did he go into the business too?

Poston: Yes. He's practicing. I just don't know why it took so long, except that when you always talk to them about-- When I was talking to young blacks about going into a profession, all of them are headed for law or medicine. Optometry did not have the exposure. And they just were not really aware of it. A few of them are aware of it today. And they have a little fear of the math and science.

Morris: It's no more math and science than would be in medical school.

Poston: A little more math maybe. There's a little more math. It's a little different. The physiological optics deals with math. But I just don't think that they've had the kind of exposure. Just one person going around by himself-- You could see maybe a couple of dozen physicians running around, and maybe thirty lawyers running around. There's so many that there's a chance for young blacks to see that there's lawyers making good money and physicians making good money. Young people are impressed by that. You look at it today.

I was out talking to Dean Jay Enoch a couple of months ago. He recruits minority students at Cal. He and I got together to see if we can't recruit some more blacks into optometry right now, because they just aren't coming.

Morris: I recently went over to the clinic myself to get some proper glasses. There were a number of Asian students.

Poston: They have no problem with Asians. You've have to recognize that in the program now you've have a lot of Asian females. You go to certain places in the city, and a lot of the professionals are female. They've had no problem with Asians. In fact the university says there's no problem with Asians. So it just carried over to the School of Optometry. But amongst blacks it's a different story.

Most of them do not set up as Asian practitioners. They do not depend on Asians for their existence.

Morris: They work out in the community.

Poston: In the general community. And so they are not looking at it because Asians wear glasses. They're looking at it from purely something maybe they would like to do, and the economics of it.

Community Activities Encourage Referrals

Morris: Did you find that in the beginning, most of your patients were black people?

Poston: No, because I had made up my mind. I had had this experience with the insurance company, which taught me a certain psychology. A certain number of blacks had a psychology regarding the insurance company: You have an insurance policy here, and you have another insurance policy here. And this insurance policy is issued by the black company. And this other is issued by the white company. This policy offers more benefits and it is cheaper. But they will still take the white man's policy.

Morris: They'll still take out the white man's policy?

Poston: This is fact. I have had that experience. I decided that when I was ready to open, I was going to open up for the general public. So I opened up at the corner of Twelfth and Broadway, so that I would have the exposure to everybody, because I had learned with that other experience that money doesn't have a color, and that if I wanted to be successful, I couldn't just depend on one ethnic group. I had to depend on everybody.

Morris: And most people just walked in off the street and said, "Doc, my eyes are doing funny things?"

Poston: No, I did limited public relations. I became active in the community, just kept going. I received referrals, one patient to the other. That's the way most optometrists survive. They receive limited walk-in traffic.

Morris: People send their friends and people you do business with.

Poston: Yes. I just made sure I was on the corner of Twelfth and Broadway, across from the Bank of America. [chuckles] I made contacts in the bank with some of them, people in the restaurants around there all knew me, and referred patients to me. And then when I became a member of the Children's Home Society board, and eventually juvenile deliquency, United Crusade, it just kept getting me more and more contacts that led to referrals.

Morris: The Children's Home Society and the United Way board, they were in the way of business development as well as--?

Poston: As well as community. I always said that if I served the community, they would come back to me. That was basically my philosophy. You don't just go out there and say come to me. If I get out there and do a good job, somebody will have some respect for what I do.

Discrimination at the Young Men's Christian Association

Morris: How did you happen to connect with Children's Home Society?

Poston: The first thing, I was appointed to the YMCA board of directors, Northwest YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], which was a black branch at that time. And it was not long before I became president of that branch. And then I was appointed to the Oakland branch YMCA. Of course, I was the only black on that board. And that exposed me to people who were on some of these other boards.

Morris: And they pick off a good worker.

Poston: That's exactly what they did. Even the YMCA wasn't clean in those days. I remember I used to go play handball with a classmate of mine. One day we went to the Y. He had forgotten his shoes, or something. We used to leave our offices--he was at Fourteenth and Broadway, and I was at Twelfth and Broadway. And we went to the Y. I walked in and prepared to sign up to play handball. And the fellow at the desk said, "Just a moment." And they called the night secretary. The night secretary took me in a small office which was all glass, about half the size of this room. It was at night time. Wintertime. He didn't turn on the light.

He said, "What are you here to do?"

I said, "I'm here to play handball."

He said, "Have you played handball here before?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "What is your name?"

I said, "Marvin Poston.

And he said, "Do you know Mr. Walter Gordon?"

I said, "Yes, I know Mr. Gordon."

He said, "What was your name again?"

I said, "Marvin Poston."

He said, "You've played handball here before?"

And I said, "Yes." I knew what he was getting ready to do, was to tell me I couldn't play. But somehow the name Poston rang a kind of a bell, because I had never seen him. Then he went in another office. There were two offices in this space. And it was glass. He picks up the telephone and he calls Fred Dyer, the executive secretary of the Y. And he said, "Fred, I have a"—he didn't call me a black then--"I got a colored fellow here. Says his name is Marvin Poston. He wants to play handball."

And Fred says, "Is that Dr. Marvin Poston?" [laughs] So he came back in the office and he said, "Are you Dr. Marvin Poston?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Well, come right on."

Poston: I said, "Should Dr. Marvin Poston make a difference? Why should a title make that much difference?"

To make a long story short, I went on to play handball that night. The next morning I called up the executive secretary at the North Oakland Branch. I said, "Josh, what's going on down at the Y downtown?"

And so he laid out the racial plan. I said, "Well, you tell them they are going to change that or they're not going to have Marvin Poston on the board." So I arrived at the next board meeting, the Y had a new regulation regarding discrimination. And they had been discriminating all the time. I said, "You mean to tell me that I'm on the board of directors of an organization that's discriminating against blacks? And I'm here working for everybody?"

Morris: Was the Northwest branch not a part of the Oakland YMCA?

Poston: It was a part. What they had was a branch in East Oakland, a branch in North Oakland, and the Central branch. But the North Oakland branch had very limited facilities. They had a basketball court. And the East Oakland branch had a little basketball court. If they wanted to swim and have gymnastics and that sort of thing, they had to go to the downtown branch. But downtown had a policy: they didn't let blacks in.

Morris: The kids from the North and West Oakland couldn't come down and use the pool?

Poston: No one did.

Morris: I see. And how late did this operate?

Poston: That must have been sometime in the '40s. Sometime in the '40s that I discovered that. I guess if this guy hadn't stopped me, I wouldn't have known the difference. Because I didn't know they were discriminating. I had no idea the Young Men's Christian Association was a discriminatory organization.

Morris: That's startling. Particularly when Harry Kingman was doing quite a lot of work to try and bring people together at the campus Y.

Poston: Here these guys had a whole different ball game.

Morris: When you raised a fuss at the board meeting, did that--?

Poston: I didn't have to raise a fuss. When I arrived at the board meeting, they had an executive committee meeting and the whole policy of the Y had been changed. No discrimination against anybody.

Morris: That meant that the branch Y's could use the facilities downtown all the time and everything?

Poston: On a regular basis like everybody else. Anybody could use it, as long as you were a member of the Y, you could go down there like anybody else. You didn't have to reserve three o'clock on Thursdays or something.

Morris: Did that work out well?

Poston: Oh, sure. It's still working. [laughs]

Oakland Community Chest

Morris: When did you go on the United Way? Was that about the same time, or was that a little later?

Poston: That was afterwards. I think as a result of being on the board of directors there, somebody-- It wasn't called the United Way then. They used to meet down here. It was a separate entity right here.

Morris: It was Community Chest.

Poston: That's what it was. They used to meet down here on Thirteenth Street. That's where they had the office.

Morris: Did you get involved in the fund-raising campaign for that?

Poston: No, I was on the executive committee. We didn't raise funds. We just talked policy.

Morris: And you didn't have to sit on the committees that decided whether this organization got so much money?

Poston: No, that was another committee.

Citizen's Schools Committee; Business Leaders

Morris: That always seemed to me like really hard work. And then at some point you were on the public advisory council for education for the Oakland schools. That was about '59 or '60, somewhere in there?

Poston: I've forgotten the years. But I was on that board. That was one of the best community projects I ever had an opportunity to serve on. It wasn't Edgar Kaiser...

Morris: Was it Henry Kaiser, Jr., doing his community service?

Poston: That's right. Don't ask me how I became appointed. Just one thing led to another. Somebody asked me would I serve. I used to be there at four o'clock in the afternoon, because I knew I had to leave the office and go to the Kaiser Building on the 28th floor.

Morris: Was that appointed by the board of education, or the mayor's office? Or was it more of a citizen's committee?

Poston: No, I think it was a citizen's committee. And they worked with Stanford Research Institute. Two or three different people from Stanford Research Institute, who did studies on education, would come and give reports. And this committee would make recommendations to the school board.

Morris: Was it a good committee because people worked hard, or the kind of people that were on it?

Poston: It was a good committee because the people who were there participated. I think out of it came some very enlightening information about education. It's too bad that sort of thing couldn't have been continued through the years. I don't think our school system would have been in quite the trouble if we had something like that today.

Morris: Like an outside group kind of keeping an eye and feeding in information?

Poston: And somebody doing research to show what has benefited this community, and several different kinds of techniques that had been used. This committee could be making recommendations. It's indirectly involved. It's not a watchdog. It could be an overseer.

Morris: An independent kind of a body.

Poston: Yes. I think the idea was good. I think it was Kaiser's idea. I don't know. At least he headed the committee. It met up in his office. I found it was valuable to listen to the various research being done about education, how it affected different groups, and the techniques used by different communities.

Morris: It was sort of at the beginning of the realization that there were a lot of black children in the Oakland schools, and that there were some differences there that needed some work.

Poston: I'm not so sure that they felt— I'm sure that that was one of the points, although we didn't discuss that too much. I remember, maybe there were only one or two blacks on that committee.

Morris: Lionel Wilson was on it. Anybody else that you remember?

Poston: There were two or three blacks on the committee, as I recall.

Morris: You met at the Kaiser Center in Mr. Kaiser's office.

Poston: One of the conference rooms. That's the first time I had seen big executive offices. The executive was up here and everybody else was down below.

Morris: You mean his desk is up at a different level?

Poston: Yes. That's the first I had ever seen that type of executive office.

I'd come out of there and I'd say to my wife, "You know, I wonder how those people work there in that environment, where you have all this plushness, and then have to go home to a small apartment."

Morris: A file clerk, or a phone person.

Poston: Or a receptionist. What was the psychological effect on that person?

Morris: I have wondered that, with all of the elegant buildings in San Francisco, and you know that most of the people live in very humble--

Poston: I used to wonder when they had them dressed well. Here at this board meeting there would be a bank of phones at every chair, and Kaiser, he's sitting up here at this long conference table.

Morris: Henry Kaiser Jr., isn't he the one that had a bad leg?

Poston: Yes, he was in a wheel chair.

Morris: Would that have had something to do with it?

Poston: I don't think so. His conference table itself wasn't any higher than the rest of them, except he was on a platform.

Morris: Was Bill Knowland a part of that committee too?

Poston: Yes, I think so. There were some very good people on that committee. That's one of the exciting committees that I enjoyed.

Morris: Did you come up with some recommendations that got into--?

Poston: That were implemented?

Morris: Yes.

Poston: I think some of the recommendations; I can't remember what they were now. It's too far back. But there were some good recommendations that came out of that.

Morris: Was it set up to run for two years, or was it supposed to be on-going?

Poston: I don't know. It just kind of disbanded. First, I think Kaiser's health went bad. And since he was the leadership, it might have just died with him.

Morris: That was about 1959 or '60, and then there was the big Ford Foundation project in Oakland.

Poston: I wasn't part of that.

Morris: Some people refer to Bill Knowland as a great man, and other people say that he and the Tribune really controlled Oakland. What was your view and experience?

Poston: Everything I know is hearsay, okay? I really don't think I was really qualified to say that Bill Knowland did this or did that. He was a very important man because he controlled the largest newspaper here. I used to hear discussions that there was a kind of underlying fight going on between the Knowlands and the Kaisers to take control of the city. Or there was something between the Knowlands and the Bechtels. I used to hear all that. I wasn't privileged to have all that kind of direct information. I really don't think I'm in a position to say he was a bad egg or he wasn't a bad egg.

Morris: It's interesting because there is the paper still, and it's gone through a number of changes. You no longer think of a newspaper running a town. But that was definitely--

Poston: That was the image, that he controlled the town and he controlled the politicians that were here. And maybe that was the way things were done in those days. I think things are done a little differently today. Newspapers have some power, as does radio. I think that the kind of power that they had before was--

VIII STATE BOARD OF OPTOMETRY, 1962-1970

Appointment by Governor Pat Brown; Travels with John K. Chappell

Morris: When did you go on the State Board of Optometry?

Poston: It was about--

Morris: Pat [Governor Edmund G.] Brown appointed you. So it must have been before 1966.

Poston: It must have been about 1962-63. I was there and then Pat reappointed me. When did he go out of office?

Morris: Ronald Reagan took office January 1967.

Poston: Then I was appointed by Pat Brown. Then Ronald Reagan reappointed me.

Morris: You served two terms or three?

Poston: I was in a third term and I resigned. That was quite an experience too. I wasn't even aware that my name was being considered. I had the privilege of travelling with this fellow, John K. Chappell. He used to be on the radio. Remember him?

Morris: I remember that.

Poston: Remember him?

Morris: Sure.

Poston: John K. called me his protocol secretary. I used to be his advance man.

Morris: How had you met Mr. Chappell?

Poston: I examined him.

Morris: Was he an Oakland man?

Poston: Yes.

Morris: I didn't know that.

Poston: He was in Oakland at that time. He was broadcasting. He used to broadcast from the newsreel theatre which was right down below my office.

Morris: For the network or for a local station?

Poston: For KABL radio. He was first broadcasting for KROW. I think he started with KLX, which was a Tribune station, and then he went to KROW. Then he went to KABL.

Morris: And then eventually he was a network—?

Poston: No, and then he retired after that.

Morris: I remember that marvelous deep, impressive voice.

Poston: Oh, yes. I used to travel with him. The year we went out to India, I think that's the year; when I came back to the office, there was this oath of office thing to sign, and letters of congratulations. I had been appointed to the State Board of Optometry. I tell you the interesting thing, I had met with the State Board almost six months before. I looked at those fellows, and I said, "I wouldn't sit in your shoes for anything in the world." [laughs] They didn't have control of anything. And they were the State Board of Optometry. They didn't have any control over anything.

Morris: What had you gone to meet with them about?

Poston: They had a meeting up at the university. We had some problems in this county, which the board was supposed to be solving.

Morris: You had licensing problems?

Poston: There were some violations of the laws. So they came. They met over at the university with a group from the society.

Morris: A regular meeting, or did they meet at Cal because there were some problems here?

Poston: There were some problems here. They used to schedule the meetings wherever they wanted. I don't know why. I guess because somebody had been writing letters. I was active in the society, so I went up to the meeting. I knew all the fellows on the board. I chatted with them. We began to ask some questions, what they were going to do

Poston: about this and that. And these board members were like toothpicks. They didn't know anything. When they finished with that meeting, I said, "Boy, I wouldn't be in your shoes for anything in the world."

When I got back from one of these trips-- We would be gone for six weeks. It was quite an experience. I met people all over the world. Paris, Tokyo, India.

Morris: Did Mr. Chappell organize a group and take them off to these marvelous places?

Poston: Yes, but you see, his main objective was to interview leaders of various countries and gather information. That was Chappell's main objective.

Morris: He would take a tape recorder with him?

Poston: Oh, yes. We had tape recorders. I would take notes. That picture was taken in India. We were taping there.

Morris: There you are in that photo with the flowers around your neck.

Poston: He would tape. And then he would return here and give a lecture. When he gave a lecture he had this information he had gotten from his interviews about India's position here, Japan's position here. Austria's position, France's thoughts.

Morris: I associated him with travel, but I didn't realize he was that much involved in finding out about people's ideas and concerns.

Poston: He took a group of people along, and they were his support group, basically, because he would expose them to these leaders. All of these leaders were trying to get their message across to America because they wanted America's blessings in a lot of cases.

When I came back from one of those trips, all this information was down there.

Turning the Board Around

Morris: Here was this letter saying, "You are hereby appointed to the--?"

Poston: I called up Paul Yarrow, who was executive secretary of the association, and I said, "You take my name off the list. I don't want anything to do with that board."

Poston: He said, "Marv, you can't do this now. Gosh, you'll embarass the whole association. We've had letters written to the governor by different legislators."

Morris: Nobody had mentioned it to you? None of the legislators had thought to get in touch with you?

Poston: I wasn't even in the country. They started all this, I guess, after I had left. Maybe right after I left. I don't know whether I was gone six weeks or eight weeks at that time. When I returned there were all these letters of congratulation. I said, "That board's a whipping boy. I don't intend to be a whipping boy for anybody."

Morris: So you did it.

Poston: But it was no longer a whipping boy. I removed everybody off of our back in a hurry.

Morris: Were you able to bring about some changes over the years in the board?

Poston: Oh, yes. They voted me in as president. You see the grey-haired fellow there in the second picture with the glasses?

Morris: Yes.

Poston: He wanted to be president of the board. And the rest of the board didn't want him. So they put me in as a replacement. I said, "I hope you know what you're doing, because I'm not going to be a whipping boy for anybody."

Morris: Was the feeling that the board was getting the short end of the stick from the legislature?

Poston: Sure. Everything.

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Poston: James [R] Patterson was the executive secretary of the board. But he ran the board. The board didn't know what was going on, and were just figureheads. He was the board. And when the board would get under pressure from the legislature, or get under pressure from other societies, why, they would be just like little boys being whipped. So I said, "I will not do that." So I started out on a campaign to--you know, "If you're going to put me here, you're going to have to support me." I stayed as president of that board for four years until I got tired of it. By that time I had it turned around.

Morris: Did you work with the same executive director, or did you convince him to retire?

Poston: We worked with him for a while, but then we convinced him to retire, and we acquired a new one, a fellow named Don Price, who turned out to be a very excellent man.

Morris: Did you ever meet Pat Brown?

Poston: Yes, I have my picture some place taken with Pat Brown.

Morris: When you got sworn in?

Poston When I was sworn in. I never will forget Pat Brown because after Pat Brown shook my hand, he asked me how many votes was I going to get him. [laughs]

Morris: That sounds like an electioneer.

Poston: I had not been active in politics. I'm non-political. That's the last thing I was thinking about, how many votes I was going to acquired and he says, "Now, how many votes is this going to get?"

After he appointed me, he wanted to know how many votes was this going to get him, whether I was going to be able to bring him some votes in the next election.

Morris: It sounds like your nomination to the board was proposed by people in the profession and that it worked through Pat Brown's appointment secretary rather than anything that the governor had made a conscious--

Poston: I think what the procedure is, most appointments are recommended by somebody. The association would make one or two recommendations, or some legislator can make a recommendation. And the governor's appointment secretary, depending on how many names are submitted, talks to them before the governor--

Morris: Or the board of optometry? You never made any recommendations while you were on the board?

Poston: No.

Little Faith in the Legislature

Morris: What legislative committees did you work with?

Poston: The only time I would get called by the legislators was when they were having a hearing on some bill that affected optometry, or affected the board. Then I would be called in to testify on behalf

Poston: of the legislation. That's the only time I went before committees. I was taken around Sacramento and introduced to a lot of legislators.

Morris: You all said "hello," and that was about the extent of it?

Poston: Yes, we went hello, we would come back and maybe we would take in lunch and the association would pick up the tab and that sort of thing. I must say that my exposure in Sacramento taught me that you don't have faith in our legislators.

Morris: Why is that?

Poston: That's one group of people I wouldn't trust. I guess there's some good ones. But I found very few of them that I would really trust. I think if the American public knew our legislators, as you get to know them around Sacramento--I don't think they have much integrity.

Morris: They would say one thing to you and then do another when the bill came up for a vote?

Poston: Yes, not only me; they did that to everybody. Or they would take one position, they would tell us one thing, and the next thing we knew, somebody said something to persuade them to go the other way. I would think that if you're going to deal with legislators, the first you should learn is that you shouldn't trust any of them.

Morris: That's discouraging.

Poston: You can always rationalize. I never will forget this one legislator. I've even forgotten the bill. But the association had me make a trip to Sacramento. They had a bill. They had one legislator who was going to present the bill. I think he was fairly influential in the legislature. And for some reason, somebody got to him. And he didn't show up to present the bill. And they went running around looking for him, and nobody knew where he was. He just went in hiding. And he had already agreed to present the bill.

I remember another meeting I had. That was my first meeting. And the executive secretary explained to me that this bill was going to pass out of the committee, that everything was cut and dried. All the legislators had been contacted, and the thing would be voted out. He just wanted me to see the process because I had never seen the process. So the chairman asked for a vote on the committee, and everybody on the committee said, "Aye," vote for it. And the chairman hit his gavel, "It fails for lack of support." I opened my big mouth and said, "What about all the yes votes?"

Morris: I should say so.

Poston: Paul said, "Shhh." He was very astute. He said, "I think I didn't get to the chairman." And somebody had gotten to the chairman. I'll never forget that.

Morris: I should say so. Did you talk to any local legislators? Did you know them better?

Poston: I knew some of them at that time.

Morris: Don Mulford and Byron Rumford?

Poston: Yes, Byron, of course, I knew quite well. I knew him on a personal basis. His secretary at that time also came from Edmonton, so I knew her very well.

Morris: Could you take a question like that to them and say, "What was going on in that committee?"

Poston: I could talk to Byron. I don't think I talked to Don in the same terms. But I could go to Byron and say, "What happened?" And he would explain to me the ins and outs of politics. It's just something I didn't understand, because I felt that these fellows all had high integrity.

East Bay Assemblyman Byron Rumford

Morris: What about somebody like Byron Rumford, who you knew on a personal basis? Did he have difficulty also upholding his ideals once he got in?

Poston: Oh, yes. He had a hard fight when the FEPC [Fair Employment Practices Commission] passed. You're going to interview him, I guess.

Morris: We have.* I know getting the FEPC bill passed [in 1959] took about five or six years.

Poston: I think that was his eventual downfall.

Morris: Getting the FEPC bill passed led to Byron's downfall?

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*See William Byron Rumford, Legislator for Fair Employment, Fair Housing, and Public Health, Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, 1973.

Poston: I think so.

Morris: Why would that be?

Poston: Well, I think he decided that the majority convicted him.

Morris: And they weren't ready for a Fair Employment Practices Commission yet?

Poston: I don't think they ever are ready. I don't think the majority of people are ever ready for any changes. Changes are forced on them. I mean, it doesn't have to be a marriage kind of relationship.

Morris: But the change having happened now sets up a--

Poston: New system, which affects them. This is just my own opinion. I think there were some people lying out there in the woods who never really forgave Byron for that. Something would come up eventually, but Byron was the target.

Morris: Whoever brings the change is going to be in trouble thereafter?

Poston: Yes.

Morris: And you think the Fair Employment Practices Bill caused him--?

Poston: The housing bill.

Morris: First there was fair employment and then he stayed in the assembly long enough to get the Fair Housing bill passed that bore his name. That was '64. And then he got defeated in '66, when he went from the assembly to the senate.

Poston: Tried to go from the assembly to the senate.

Morris: Yes. Would he have been defeated if he had run again for his assembly seat?

Poston: That's speculation. But I think the party that beat him out didn't have nearly the name identification that Byron had.

Morris: True, Lewis Sherman was not that well known.

Poston: So there had to be some other factor.

Morris: [sighs] It doesn't seem to have kept you from producing a lot of change in your field.

Poston: I wasn't fighting the same kind of thing. Most of mine was to just change things within a small circle. I didn't need anybody's vote on the outside. All I had to do was knock on a few heads as I kept on. This is an entirely different ball game.

Morris: True, but I have heard it said before that the person who brings change is not very welcome.

Poston: That's what I think is basically true. I'm sure that I've got some enemies in optometry. I'm sure that I'm not free of that. When I knocked over a few heads and kept moving forward, the kind of thing I was doing was bringing other people along with me, because optometry gained also.

Morris: For the profession as a whole.

Poston: It's a little different when you try to do something where the majority group are affected; it's a different ball game altogether.

Morris: That may be. What Byron was doing was primarily to seek to move ahead people in the black community.

Poston: And the Asian community and all the other minorities gained from that. But the people who were most opposed to what he was doing were the majority community.

Morris: Who saw no benefit to them in what was happening.

Poston: I think Bradley [Los Angeles Mayor Tom] lost this last race [for governor in 1982] because they interjected race. He was ahead up until they injected race into it, the moment they interjected race. And that's one thing I don't have much respect for [George] Deukmejian.

Morris: Bradley pretty much tried to run his campaign on how he would govern California.

Poston: And at the last minute, just three, four days before the election, a week before the election, Deukmejian's campaign chairman interjected race. But he didn't do it until the last minute. I think that's why Deukmejian is there.

Morris: That could be.

Poston: I think Deukmejian knew it, although he said he didn't know it. But I can't see that the candidate who's running, who has basic control of his campaign personnel, would not know what basic campaign strategy is about.

Morris: You would think that the candidate would know what his top managers were doing.

Poston: Sure. I don't believe it when a politician says, "I don't know what my secretary's going to do." It's that important.

Reappointment by Governor Ronald Reagan

Morris: When Ronald Reagan became governor, did he have any different relationship to the board of optometry than Pat Brown did?

Poston: When he became governor, I thought I was going to be moved out. I thought he would appoint his own people. My term was up and he would appoint his own people. But then he sent his representative, Mr. [Henry] Shine, to tell me he wanted me to stay.* So I said, "Okay, I'll stay." So then I was reappointed. But then when it came up for the third term, I was prepared to resign. After all, it would be eight years. The appointment was for four years. I thought that was long enough, because it takes you out of your office an awful lot of the time, and it's costly out of your pocketbook too.

At that time I was thinking about starting this consulting practice. I told him what I was doing would be in direct contact with optometrists. There might be a conflict of interest here. I'm on the board and I'm setting up an organization to help young people get started in practice. And they said, no, that would not be a conflict, they wanted me to stay. I said, "Okay, I'll stay if you give me the right to resign when I'm ready to." And so after two years more I resigned. They came and tried to talk me into staying. They wanted to give me another appointment. I said no way.

Morris: What else did they have in mind?

Poston: They just asked me would I take another appointment in another spot. I said no. These things are too costly. If you do a good job it takes a lot of time. You're going to the legislature, you go to board meetings. And they hadn't started to correct the exams by computer, so we used to do all that by hand.

Morris: The exams for optometry license?

Poston: We used to write the exams. We used to correct them by hand.

Morris: You on the board did them?

Poston: Yes. When you have one hundred and fifty, two hundred people, correcting all those papers...I used to sit down on Saturdays and Sundays, I was almost green in the eyes.

Morris: That's the worst part of being a teacher, I understand, is having to grade the papers and all that.

*As director of the state Department of Professional and Vocational Standards, Shine had administrative responsibility for the Board of Optometry.

IX PROFESSIONAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT

Morris: I was asking you how you decided to go into health management and this consulting. You were just thinking about starting it up while you were on the state board of optometry?

Poston: While I was on the board, one of the things that was happening was that in between exams, and after the exams some of the students--we monitored our own exams--and one of the questions that most of the students would come up and ask, "Do you know where I can get a job? Do you know how I can open a practice? Do you know the best place to practice?"

Morris: They weren't getting any of that in their training?

Poston: No. And so one fellow came up to me and said he was thinking about Monterey, and did I know where he could go to get some help. So I said, "I'll help you."

Morris: What appealed to you about this young student?

Poston: He was a very nice young man. He was asking for help, and I guess I had a soft moment. I didn't realize how much work it was. It had been several years since I started my practice.

Morris: --since you had done that.

Poston: So then I sat down and had some talks with him and said, "Well, before you go over there, we ought to get some information about the area, about the possibilities." So I wrote the chamber of commerce and called real estate people and did what limited research I knew how to do; better than just guessing. We sent him down to find locations, and then I went down and looked at the locations, decided on which one was the best location for the best price, had all the things that were there to offer.

And then, of course, I had to sit down and work out a budget. What it was going to cost him to open. I ended up making a list of all the optometric equipment, lab equipment, and inventory he

Poston: would need. And I worked out a budget. And then I decided to go over to the bank and see about financing. They would say, "Optometrists, this one sells glasses." They didn't know what optometrists did for a living.

Then what I did was say, "I don't want to talk to you." So I decided to go over to San Francisco. I found who was head of the loan department, Bank of America, for all their offices. And so I called the fellow and told him I would like to talk to him, and went over there to the twenty-seventh floor in the Bank of America Building, and told him what I was going to try to do.

He said, "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll set up one person for you." And he set it up in one branch. "I'll give him the go-ahead to give you the money."

Morris: To kind of underwrite you in your business of helping youngsters get started in business.

Poston: So he said that, "We'll advance the money to him, not to you."

Morris: Did you become the guarantee for the loan?

Poston: No, I was not a guarantee. All I did was supervise where he spent the money. He gave me the voucher. He had to sign the vouchers. I saw that the companies received the money.

Morris: Did you manage the money and actually write the checks?

Poston: I didn't write the checks. He wrote the checks. But he could not have the money from the bank to write the checks--

Morris: --until you countersigned the voucher?

Poston: That gave them some control so he couldn't misuse any of the money.

Morris: So that some youngster wouldn't go out and buy an expensive car rather than pay for his office equipment? Was that the kind of concern the bank had?

Poston: After all, they were taking a great risk. The only thing they could tie up was the equipment. Maybe the equipment was worth ten or fifteen thousand dollars in those times. And the other thirty thousand would be unattachable money. So they wanted some control, and just figured that with my experience I ought to be able to give him some guidance and control. That's all they figured. Because they checked my record out too.

Morris: Did you have to give them an account sheet of your assets?

Poston: I told them who I was. I had done business with the Bank of America, so they wouldn't have far to go to check me out. He didn't know them. I figured they would want a report on me and find out what I was all about. That was the first one. Then he told two or three others.

Then fellows started coming to me. That's when I decided that I couldn't do it for free, that I would have to charge for it. Then I started charging. Just like this fellow that called. I just got off the phone. I charge them eighty-five dollars an hour for my time.

Morris: That's a bargain when you think of the kind of consultant fees that go nowadays. And he was calling from outside of California?

Poston: No, no. He was calling from Monterey.

Morris: Is that the first man that you--?

Poston: Oh, no. This is another one. He wants to sell his practice. [laughs] He's really in Carmel.

Morris: You're a clearing house for people in the optometry field.

Poston: Yes.

Morris: You help them buy and sell practices?

Poston: What I will do is evaluate the practice rather than just let him set the fee. The other way to do it is just let him set a fee, and then you try to market him and sell it. I evaluate a practice, see what its payability is. And to see whether there's enough money coming out of that practice to meet the obligation to pay for it and still give a young fellow some living money. That way he gets a fair shake and the seller gets a fair shake. The seller, if he just picks a figure out of the sky, might not get his money.

Morris: It might not reflect the market.

Poston: And it may not be the payability of the practice. Or it might be underappraised. And if so, the seller doesn't get a fair price.

Morris: Is anybody else in the country doing this kind of specialized consulting?

Poston: Not that I know of. I don't go outside of California. I've received calls from various parts of the country. I just say no, I'm not going outside of California.

Morris: Sounds like a great franchise possibility here.

Poston: It would be, if I wanted to expand. But I'm not too young any more.

Morris: Have you stayed in touch with the School of Optometry at UC?

Poston: Oh, yes.

Morris: And worked as an advisor to them at all?

Poston: No, they do not prepare the student who is graduating. They specialize in academic training, but there are no economics courses for the students. When they graduate, they are on their own. I have worked basically by word of mouth. I don't do any marketing. I guess I should. But I got another phone call from someone up in Eureka. And I know what that is. She wants to take on a partner. She wants me to appraise her practice to know what she should charge a partner.

Morris: Has the school at Cal changed at all in how it recruits students and how it trains them?

Poston: I don't think they have to do much recruiting. I might be wrong, but I would assume that the school has more applicants than they can enroll. Their academic training is far superior to what I received, and the school has expanded.

Morris: Has the field of optometry expanded too?

Poston: Oh, yes. The field of optometry has expanded. A lot of additional training that I received was from postgraduate courses, or just from experience of seeing it in the office. These kids come out with more academic training than we acquired. I think schools, not only Berkeley, but every school I've seen, or students I've seen from various schools, none of them provide the students with the economics of the business side.

Morris: It may be a joke, but I've always heard that in medical school, medical economics is a very important subject. I don't know if they teach it, or if it's just--

Poston: It's an important subject, but they don't teach it. I've set up two or three physicians. I have set up a pediatrician, and ophthalmologist, gynecologists, a general practitioner. I've set up several physicians. And they don't have any greater sense of business.

Morris: Do they mostly just go and deal with suppliers of equipment and pharmaceuticals?

Poston: That's right. When you graduate, and you decide you want to go into practice,(this includes dentistry, optometry), you generally will try to find a landlord to rent you space. The dental houses, the optical houses, or the medical houses know who you are because

Poston: they make a point to know the students in the schools. And they will sell them all the equipment that they're goign to buy, that they can finance. And that's all they do. What we propose to do, we take the young men and women just out of school. First of all, we want to know where he or she's going, whether or not there's going to be a possibility for their success. Second, we will supervise or do part of his or her layout. We will expose them to the various types of furniture that's available for their reception room, carpets, we will do that. We will set up the filing system, the appointment system, the record collection system.

Morris: Very thorough.

Poston: That's what we try to do. And we do it on an hourly basis which is still very reasonable. I think the only reason I can do it that way is because I'm economically secure.

Morris: It sounds like it's almost a hobby.

Poston: Yes, it is. If I don't want to take it, I won't take it. One time a young fellow called me. Four years ago he called me and he wanted to buy a practice. I went, and the seller wanted an exorbitant figure. I went in and appraised the practice for him and I told him what it was worth. He finally bought it for that figure. He was able to live with that. He's done quite well. So he called me Saturday morning. I went to see him over in Santa Rosa. His landlord figured he had been there long enough and raised his rent from a thousand dollars up to fifteen hundred. A fifty percent increase.

Morris: In Santa Rosa, that's unusual.

Poston: Yes. And he was now thinking he should move. So he had looked at a couple of locations. We then went and looked at one of the locations he picked out and talked about the pros and cons of it, about the cost of it. And then the real-estate lady came back and tried to force him to take it. But I insisted that they give him a five-year lease. So they've given him a five-year lease, first right of refusal if he wants to buy it at some future date. He called me back yesterday, and he said something about they were going to accept his proposal. And he moved.

X WEST OAKLAND HEALTH GROUP

Federal Government Intervention

Morris: Were you using those same kinds of practical advice and experience as with the West Oakland Health Group?

Poston: That was different. The West Oakland Health Group, that was the federal government.

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Poston: I was just going to say that I was going to inject a couple of personal opinions here. Do you remember when the blacks were putting all the pressure on the federal government, and they were worried about burning the cities and all this sort of thing?

Morris: Yes.

Poston: Well, my own analysis is that the federal government decided that they would spend a little money in the black community. So they decided to set up projects throughout the country. There was a very active little lady here in Oakland who was pressuring them to put a health center in West Oakland. And they looked on this as a good project to quiet Oakland down. That's my analysis.

So they came in. And they sent people from Washington out here. They took somebody from the University of California to write a proposal for the money. They sent an organizer out here. We met right up here in my office upstairs to organize the health professionals so that they would come down and serve. They sent another organizer here to organize the community group and set up a board of directors. This is the federal government doing all this.

Morris: The federal government sent the organizers, with all the community groups that had been developed in Oakland in the last fifteen years?

Poston: They said there was no group in West Oakland who was pushing for a health center. There was one little woman who was the main factor behind it. I've forgotten her name. She was the power behind it. She acquired the ear of somebody in San Francisco.

Morris: At the regional HEW [U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare] or something like that?

Poston: Yes, and they decided to make this a project. So they sent these different organizers out here and these fellows had specific jobs to do. I just sat and watched. There was a physician who came out, he spent three or four days here, a week. He organized the health group. They needed a place to meet. So I gave them this site. They met out there; we pulled up some chairs to listen to them talk. And then they sent two or three different kind of organizers out here, different people. And then they funded it. When they got ready to fund it, they needed somebody to set up the eye clinic department.

Morris: Was it funded through the Oakland Economic Development Council?

Poston: No, through HEW.

Morris: A whole separate thing?

Setting Up the Eye Clinic

Poston: That's right. What they did was they asked me to set up the eye clinic, so I met with the architect, and I arranged for the purchase of all the equipment. I acquired the personnel for the clinic. But I had a lot of experience. And then they set up the board of directors to run the clinic. But the people they put on the board of directors--some of them didn't have fifth-grade education. And here they were running a million-dollar clinic. And they were having so many problems. Just so many problems. A couple of members on the board of directors figured they were pretty smart, so they wanted to hire a janitor service. So they set up a janitor service and they put them in there to keep the place clean, and paid them something like ninety-five thousand dollars a year.

Morris: That seems a lot for a janitor service.

Poston: They could have hired the janitor service for thirty-five, forty thousand dollars. They did a lot of things like that. But these people saw an opportunity. Some of them were smart enough where they saw a chance to make money. And some of them were just too ignorant to know what was happening. But the federal government was to

Poston: blame. You can't take somebody who can't manage fifty dollars a month or two hundred dollars and expect them to manage a million-dollar place.

Morris: The people that were put on the board-- There was no local organization to vote them in?

Poston: Yes, they created the community group to vote them in. They did that. The government did that. The people who were on the community group--none of them were educated.

Morris: They must have some political connections, not political in the party sense, but be well enough known in the community.

Poston: Well enough known in West Oakland. To me it was a complete-- They were all busy setting up this clinic. And they were all busy trying to find a little piece of money, and they were all hiring their relatives to work there. And these people were busy, they were no longer unhappy with the federal government. It's the same thing as when our government starts a war. They threw a couple of million dollars out there and they quieted a whole community down.

Morris: Is the clinic still operating?

Poston: Yes, it's been able to survive. They've worked through their problems and they've done very well.

Morris: Has the kind of person on the community board changed?

Poston: That's all changed. The directors changed. After it became such a fiasco, they got rid of the board of directors and straightened the whole thing out.

Morris: Who got rid of the board of directors?

Poston: The federal government. They had all the control. All they had to do was say, "No money."

Morris: What about the people on the board now?

Poston: I think it's well organized. I don't think they have near the problems they had. I think they went through those growing pains, and the government saw that wasn't going to work, and so now they changed the whole thing. I'll give you an illustration. I went to a board meeting. I used to go to the board meetings. There was so much accounting that was just bad accounting. And so the health group was insisting that they hire a CPA to do the accounting and run the business end of it. So the board was sitting there interviewing this CPA, and somebody asked what was he going to do. And the first thing he said, he was going to reconcile accounts

Poston: receivable and accounts payable. They didn't understand what he was talking about. And so somebody said to him, "We can't hire you. You don't talk our language."

Morris: That's been a problem with a lot of government programs. People don't talk the same language.

Poston: They were saying they had to say it to us a different way. I don't think he knew how to say it in a different way. They didn't understand what the word reconcile meant. He couldn't believe that you had somebody out there who didn't understand the simple word reconcile.

Morris: His basic word for his language.

Poston: That's all behind them now.

Morris: And it's working well?

Poston: I think it's working well.

XI CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Oakland Mayor Lionel Wilson

Morris: Have you had much contact with Lionel Wilson? When he was on the court, he worked with a lot of these kind of community projects.

Poston: My contact with Lionel goes back to the latter part of high school and college. We were active in the YMCA. After he was appointed to the bench, we only saw each other occasionally socially. And of course, since he went into politics, I supported him each time. I'm going to support him again.

Morris: Did you organize optometrists for Wilson or anything like that?

Poston: What I did was to get certain optometrists to send cards. My theory is that we can be most effective by sending notices to our patients. I had his campaign print up some cards recommending his election and then the optometrist signs it. I took them around to the various optometrists and had them sign it and send it out to their patients. I figure that's a very effective way.

Morris: Has his being in the mayor's office made a difference in how Oakland runs, or the kinds of things that--?

Poston: I think he's been a positive influence in Oakland. I feel Lionel's been a very positive influence.

Young Militants

Morris: One sort of last question: In the '60s we began to get some very outspoken young black students at Cal who have become very involved in some of the more militant political activities. What kind of contact did they have with you men of an older generation who also went to Cal and who also have a stake in how the community--?

Poston: Well, the more radical ones--there was, I guess, really a conflict because we didn't see it as they saw it, those that I had contact with. I remember when they came here to see me and they were telling me what they were going to do. I said, "No way can you do that." They were pretty militant. Some of those same ones have come around now and their attitude is different because they're older. But I think, like most young people, the militant young people see everything through rose-colored glasses.

Morris: They're reaching further than is practical to bring about change?

Poston: I think they can bring about change. But they see things in the idealistic way. You've got to recognize--at least I think that, while that's the ideal situation to attain, it is not always obtainable now.

Morris: Is it a matter that they wish to make a major change or that a new generation wants to be in control, to be in elective office, or to be running the country?

Poston: I think they want both. They want both. I think that's what any group— It just so happens that blacks led the revolution of this country, which is now being followed by females. I don't see any difference between the black revolution and the female revolution except that the black revolution opened the door for the female revolution.

Advice from State Administrator Henry Shine

Morris: I was noticing your photographs on your wall. There's a pretty blond woman. Was she the first woman on the board of optometry?

Poston: She was the first woman on the board of optometry.

Morris: What's her name?

Poston: I would have to look it up now. That goes way back.

Morris: Is that Pat Brown in that picture?

Poston: No, that's Pat Patterson, and then myself, I can't remember her name. And then the other fellow is Art Ens.

That's an optometrist from southern California. I have a picture some place of Pat Brown.

Morris: Is that a photo of Henry Shine?

Poston: Yes, that's Henry. He's a very dynamic person. I've often wondered what happened to him. Henry was quite dominating.

Morris: Some people have said he was kind of hard to deal with. He was outspoken.

Poston: I never found him hard. What I found in Shine was that he liked action. I think that's what Shine liked about me because after I became president of the board, I started a lot of action. Though Shine told me one thing that I started to do that later on I backed up on. He also took the activities of the Board of Optometry and put it up before the board of dentistry and the board of medicine. [chuckles]

Morris: The rest of them weren't that interested in working hard?

Poston: They weren't interested in creating all that commotion, creating all that activity. Shine said to me once, he said, "I see you would like to make optometry bigger and better."

And I said, "I certainly would."

He said, "You can make this board bigger if you make more activity. It will require more help."

Morris: Get a bigger budget?

Poston: Get a bigger budget.

Morris: That's a Reagan appointee talking?

Poston: Yes. So what did I do? You see, the budget for the Board of Optometry was separate; it didn't come out of the General Fund. The optometrists supported the Board of Optometry.

Morris: Through their licensing fees?

Poston: Yes. So I started a lot of activity and hired some secretaries. So we went from an executive secretary and one to maybe two secretaries and a half. And of course, after a while we started running out of money. So Shine came up and he said, "The budget committee says you fellows are running out of money."

I said, "Let's raise the fees."

He said, "Okay." So we raised the optometric fee and went right on spending money. The Board of Optometry was getting bigger and bigger. One day I said to myself, "What am I doing? Pretty soon I'm going to be off this board one of these days, and I'm going to be paying the higher fee that I created. We'll bring this thing to a halt." Then I started slowing down. [chuckles] Our own vested interest always comes into play.

Morris: I think you may be right. I wonder if some of it has to do with the kind of people we are. You must have a lot more energy than the average human being.

Poston: I don't know about that.

Morris: You seem to keep so many of these things going. A lot of people would be perfectly happy with one practice of optometry.

Poston: I guess I was never satisfied with sitting still all the time. That may be another reason why I started this Professional Health Management. When I first started it, it wasn't called Professional Health Management, it was Optometric Management.

I had a day off. I used to take Tuesdays off. But it wasn't enough, and I started consulting.

Morris: Then you took up ranching. Are you raising cattle up there in Sonoma County?

Poston: Just as a hobby. That's just a toy. We sold the cattle [in 1984] and we've planted cabernet sauvignon grapevines. They will produce our first harvest.

Morris: That's a nice kind of toy to have, too. I won't keep you from your public, and I do thank you.

[End of interview]

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TAPE GUIDE -- Marvin Poston

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I -- "Dr. Marvin R. Poston, Pioneering California Optometrist," Lawrence P. Crouchett, The Boule Journal, February 1980

APPENDIX II-- "Black Visionary," Louis B. Crouchett [sic], California Monthly, March-April 1982

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  A Link Between Hostages and Their Families

Dr. Marvin R. Poston,
Pioneering California Optometrist

An Interview by

Archon Lawrence P. Crouchett
Alpha Gamma Boulé
San Francisco Bay Area

Archon Marvin Poston of Alpha Gamma is perhaps the most prominent figure in the profession of optometry in California, enough to have national impact.

I got a revealing glimpse of his influence and value within that field when I talked with some optometrists who had dealt with him as a consultant and a practitioner. Mr. Don Price, executive director of the California State Board of Optometry, the profession's rule-making and licensing body, credits Archon Poston with giving the Board a clear definition of what it had to do at a difficult time. He was the conceiving and moving force behind much of the reform that body has made in the past decade. "Among things Poston will be remembered for was his push for opening up opportunities to practice for underrepresented groups. If you ask me if Poston is preeminent in the profession, I would say the impact of his gutty efforts is already visible throughout the practice and throughout the nation. To be sure, he was instrumental in having the Board accept passage of a national examination as one of the prerequisites to practice in the state. It's my understanding that the idea of a national examination had not been seriously considered until he raised his voice in strong favor of it. To be honest, Poston was the chief strategist in making it possible for foreign graduates to practice in the state. These, along with a few other achievements, could be considered the hallmark of his tenure on the Board."

Musing about Archon Poston's contributions recently, his associate, Dr. Will Kelly, who is presently on the State Board of Optometry, and who is representative of much professional opinion, notes admiringly: "I first heard of Dr. Poston when I arrived at the University of California many years ago. Everywhere I went, people kept asking me if I knew Dr. Poston. I finally arranged to visit him at his office. I remember him as a 'fresh breeze' on the Berkeley campus and how optometry students there looked forward to his visits. We were in no danger of having a boring time with him around. In addition, he was very concerned about us young optometry students. He gave us a good deal of inspiration and motivation. He encouraged us to develop our fullest potential. Now if any person has influenced my professional career, it is Dr. Poston. I am embarrassed to be too praiseful, but he unquestionably has been one of the great role models. To a large extent, he has made the path much easier for me and other black optometrists who will follow." Other practicing optometrists likewise respect and appreciate Poston's optometrical knowledge.

And then there is Marvin Poston himself. "As a young man, I was anxious to get ahead," he remembered, "but at one point, I was not sure I had taken the right path to the top. You see, back in the 1930's, the field of optometry was an elitist profession. Specifically, it was a profession of privileged whites; indeed, a case could be made that comparatively few young men chosen to pursue the field then were in the power elite of their communities." On top of everything else, maintaining a select corps of optometrists was more important than a Marvin Poston, a black, with ambitions in the profession. This was a daunting challenge as Poston himself admits. Now to put this in perspective, this elitist attitude was true throughout the country, not just in California. Before the 1950's, almost every college and university process of selection excluded ethnic minorities — particularly Blacks — from their professional schools.

Poston's subsequent pioneering professional achievements — the first black student admitted to the

study of optometry at the University of California, the first black American licensed to practice optometry not only in California but the Pacific Coast as well, the first black member of the California State Board of Optometry and its first black president, and the first black optometrist to receive the California State and National coveted awards, "Optometrist of the Year," both awarded in 1972 — and his successful meshing of a professional career with business ventures contain a rich slice of western Black Americana.

In view of this reputation, it is not altogether surprising that in 1972, the California Optometric Association from which he was once barred from membership singled him out for the California "Optometrist of the Year" award, and it, likewise, nominated him for recipient of the national "Optometrist of the Year" award in that same year. Both awards were based upon outstanding contributions to the community and profession.

Equally important, Poston pioneered preventive health care for the general public by helping organize *California Vision Services*, out of which came the *Vision Service Plan*, which provided prepaid vision care to more than 800,000 Californians. Subsequently, in 1963, he was honored by being elected president of *Vision Service Plan*.

In considering Poston's achievements, I asked him about his initiation into the field. He recalls his university days with his usual sedate mannerism. Because he graduated from Oakland Technical High School with excellent grades, he was admitted to the University of California at Berkeley, in 1935. "Going to Berkeley made it possible for me to live at home and keep my job, which was financially necessary at the time. I enrolled at the University as a mathematics and physics major, hoping to become a mathematics teacher. During my third year at Berkeley, I had some second thoughts and a change of mind. This was a period when the teaching profession in Oakland was virtually closed to blacks." Since Poston was already a registered student in the Physics Department and because his mathematics and physics courses were acceptable as preprofessional ones for optometry, he applied for admission into the program. At the time, optometry was also under the department of physics. A few weeks later he was informed that he had been accepted. I think I am not making too broad a statement when I say Poston's application somehow or other escaped the notice of some of the prejudiced professors, particularly one of them. Anyhow, he was selected for admission from a group of about forty-eight applicants.

"As fate would have it, I was immediately confronted with the fact that I was the first black student to enroll in the program of optometry. Now the striking thing was that a certain professor resented my presence in his optometry courses. Even though I did well academically in his classes, I received two 'F's' as final grades. And when it was my turn for clinical practice, he never assigned patients to me. And when I inquired, he told me I could not see white patients, that I would have to go into the black community and conscript black patients." It would become clear that the professor had truly racist feelings towards Poston, in Poston's words, "when I heard from a white student that he felt blacks should not be in optometry."

From his office in downtown Oakland, Poston casually recalled his battle to survive under the professor's siege. "The moment that the professor decided that I could not become an optometrist, I decided it was the thing I wanted to become more than anything else. I just had to graduate; I could not fail at that point. I decided then and there," he said, looking back, "I would not let him get away with his prejudiced behavior. One-by-one, I went to see two members of the optometry faculty who obviously did not share the professor's sentiment. Together with a local black attorney, Walter Gordan, Sr., Harry Kingman of the University YMCA, the two professors took me to see the then vice-president of the University, Dr. Monroe E. Deutsch, who later sided with me."

"Well, the vice-president discreetly summoned two professors from the physics department to look at my test papers and final exam papers for the courses I had allegedly failed. The professors graded the papers, and I came out with high 'B' marks," remembered Poston. "After this, I was no longer required to take classes with this professor." It was only by meeting and manfully facing the indignities of the professor that Poston was able to graduate. He received a bachelor of science degree in optometry in December, 1939. Dr. Poston interjects "it was not until twenty-three years later (1963) that the second black student was to graduate from the University's optometry program."

But the harassment did not stop with Poston's graduation. After that, he got another whiff of racism. "This same professor walked into the examination room while I was taking the exam. He pointed to me and tried to use his veto powers to keep me from passing the examination for the Board of Optometry. To be successful here meant he could keep me from receiving a license to practice. Fortunately, I passed the examination, he was overridden, and I was granted my license to practice." With borrowed monies, a few months later, Poston set up his first private practice office in Oakland.

I asked Poston if the professor ever softened his feelings toward him being in the profession. He recalled, but not in anger, the final indignity came when he applied for membership in the local optometric society, which was a prerequisite for membership in the state and national associations. The professor opposed his membership in the Alameda and Contra Costa Society.

Poston explained, "From the nine-member board of directors of the local society, that professor was able to muster five votes against me. My application was rejected. So I began to talk to a number of Oakland optometrists, where I was practicing, who were mem-

bers of the society. I also contacted those university professors who had supported me when I was a student. They attended the next meeting of the society to keep the issue of my acceptability alive. Finally, the pressure was so much in my favor that the professor was overridden, and I was admitted to membership. To keep them from voting me out, I attended every society meeting for the next ten years. Ever since, I have been a member of the society." Throughout the taped interview sessions, Poston seemed pretty cavalier about all this. But when I pressed him about his relations with the University since then, he made it clear that he was disappointed that he had never been invited there to lecture or participate on a panel in any of its programs. This came across with some heat. It appeared that I hit a sore spot.

An old acquaintance who attended Berkeley at the same time as Poston did, remembers that Poston laid out his optometric career with deliberate planning. "Marvin and I were considered very serious students during our days at the University. He worked hard and was a self-assertive, determined student. He was well-read and temperate in tone, but would never acquiesce to racism."

Archon Poston seems pleased that the progression of his life has taken him from the foregoing circumstances, and a few others, to his many professional successes. While his impressive work in practice management is little known by those outside the profession, whether they know it or not, prospective graduates of optometry programs have reason to be grateful to Marvin Poston. Until recently, they have had to rely on themselves alone to ferret out start-up financing, office space, furniture and office equipment in order to get started in private practice. Archon Poston changed all that. He established his *Professional Health Management and Planning Company.*

Archon Poston told me that he got into the business of practice management because no one else in optometry wanted to do it. He summed it up: "Back in 1963, when I was serving on the State Board of Optometry, we would meet in both the southern and northern parts of the state, near one of the two state schools of optometry. This proximity increased my accessibility to the students. Those who were headed for private practice frequently stopped me and inquired about the crucial elements for a successful practice. When I was elected to the presidency of the Board, I even became a bigger target for their inquiries."

"As I parried their inquiries, an idea went through my mind: why not formalize my availability to the graduates and imports from other states who had concerns about entering practice? This is when I gave some thought to the idea of starting a firm that could provide all the start-up consideration an optometrist needed. At the beginning I called the firm *Optometric Planning.* We operated at a rather humble level out of my Oakland office. It was a one-man operation with the primary objective of providing a much needed service, and the secondary object of making money," states Poston.

When asked for the scenario of his management help to clients, Archon Poston explains it this way. With his knowledge of the money market, he introduces the client to a willing lending bank. With no more collateral than the license to practice, and Archon Poston's special skills, he and the bank together develop a financing package that reflects the capital outlays for a complete office — furniture and equipment, rent payments, labor costs, employee benefits and many other start-up components. With the help of a CPA firm, they help to work out accounting bookkeeping procedures: financial restraints, interest rates, loan repayment schedule that is projected with the office cash flow, financial forecasting and the plethora of hidden costs. He interjects, "I will even go shopping for essential office equipment and waiting room furniture wherever I can find a bargain for my client." Through an attorney Poston even offers legal services to clients. Overall, the type of consultant services Poston now provides to aspiring optometrists was rarely available to older professionals. As it is, he and the firm are credited with helping to shape the future of many new optometrists. In truth, many have fared well in private practice and are enjoying substantial profits.

The value of his services apparently is being passed from mouth to mouth among new and practicing optometrists who want to get started in California or the West for that matter. He admits 99 percent of his clients are white. Is this a good sign of racial progress in the profession?

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Poston

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"No. It is a sign of the times; almost every student in optometry schools is white," Archon Poston notes.

In another interview session, we focused on Archon Poston's early life. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1914. He said he never knew his paternal grandparents personally. "I do know my father, Paul, was born in a small farming community called Farmington, Missouri, the youngest of fourteen children. Since he wanted to attend school, he ran away from home at a very early age and moved to St. Louis where he worked on many different menial-type jobs. Somehow, he ended up as a student at all-black Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. All the while he paid his way through college by working as a waiter and playing a trumpet in a local band. It was at Lincoln that he met my mother Willetta Walker, who too was a student there. She was from Troy, Missouri, a town that no longer exists."

Archon Poston noted: "In those days, a person could become qualified to teach after only two years of college which is what my father and mother did. After they finished their education at Lincoln, they got married and moved to St. Louis, where my mother's family had moved. Once there, my father taught school for a few years. Meanwhile, my mother's oldest brother, Ernest Walker, took a job as a waiter with a railroad line that ran from St. Louis to Chicago. In Chicago, he met a Scotsman named Dun Vegan, who owned a small rail passenger line that ran from Edmonton north to Athabaska. Located in the western plains of Canada, it catered mostly to fur trappers and miners. Well, Vegan invited Uncle Ernest to work for his line. So my uncle took a trip to Edmonton. As it turned out, he never returned to St. Louis. However, he did write, and invited the rest of the family to join him. Largely due to the urging of Uncle Ernest, my father decided to move the family — mother, older brother Walker, younger brother Paul, and me — along with other members of my mother's family to Edmonton. Alberta was considered the "most American" of the Canadian provinces, due to large numbers of settlers living there, then.

A brief historical sketch of immigration in the western plains region gives an idea of what Edmonton was like on the eve of the Postons' migration. To begin with, in the 1880's, the immediate Edmonton area had become a cattle-ranching and wheat-farming area. By the 1890's, the Canadian government had adopted a pro-immigration policy for the plains area. Seeing immigration as a means of obtaining settlers for the region, in 1910, the government turned to the United States for settlers. For two decades the Americans — black and white — arrived seeking land to farm.

In 1910, Edmonton had become the booming heart of a booming region. It was the point of departure for homesteaders seeking land farther west and to the north. With regards to blacks, before 1910, the migration of black Americans to the area was small compared to that of white American settlers. In that year, however, some 300 blacks moved to the region, largely from Oklahoma and Kansas, concentrating in the Pine Creek area (about one-hundred miles north of Edmonton) and the north shore of Chip Lake. Others settled near Wabumn Lake. Most were skilled in agriculture and took to growing wheat, barley and oats. In the off-season, some worked in the meat-packing plants in Edmonton. But during the first World War, the younger blacks left the farms to work in Edmonton. An agricultural recession in the early 1920's forced most of the blacks to leave the farming areas and move into Edmonton.

When the Postons settled in Edmonton in 1916, father Poston got a job as a teacher in the local public school system. Unfortunately after a couple of years at teaching, he became quite discontent with the low pay. So he took a job with a local railroad line as a waiter. Soon he became manager of the railroad commissary which was located in Edmonton.

I asked Archon Poston what his life was like in Edmonton. "At the time of our migration, Edmonton had amassed a population of some 30,000 people, including about a hundred black residents. In my childhood, the town was a pleasant place in which to grow up. Given the current rhetoric on unstable family structures the social tone in my home was what you might call college-educated, middle class. Maybe this is being naive, but I think we had the great advantage of growing up totally unaware of the racial prejudice around us. Our parents understandably sought to protect us from it. In doing so, they strengthened our self-esteem and obviously did contribute to each of us being quite comfortable and at ease with any group. This obviously gave us a different vantage point within our disconnected black community. Now this does not mean that others didn't resent us as blacks or that we were free from the subtleties of racism existing in Canada at that time. It's just that we were not aware of the ensuing racial animosities that eventually broke out in 1928, the year we left for Oakland. While we looked upon ourselves as British subjects, our parents never made an effort to Canadianize us. We remained Afro-American, and never thought otherwise."

As far as church attendance, the Poston family attended Shiloh Baptist Church, one of the two black-controlled churches in Edmonton. The other church was the First A.M.E. Church headed by a Reverend Slatter. Ironically, during Poston's stay in Edmonton, there was only one black-owned business in Edmonton, a barbershop which catered only to white customers.

As the interview escalated Archon Poston talked about why his family left Canada. "Well, as far as I know, we left solely because of my father's failing health. You see, he was for a considerable period of time sick from rheumatic fever. As a matter of fact, for several years he was bedridden. Anyhow, in 1928, when I was fourteen, he had a serious heart attack, and soon after, he called the family together and informed us that his doctor had advised him he could no longer work and that he should move to a warmer climate. So we moved to Oakland, California, where my father's former classmate was serving as pastor of the First A.M.E. Church."

When the Postons arrived in Oakland, the three boys enrolled in the local public schools. "I must say, I didn't have much time for extracurricular activities. As soon as school was over I had to get to work. Since my father was unable to work, my mother had to work, too. She first got a job cleaning newly-constructed houses, then she took a job as a door-to-door agent selling life and industrial insurance for Golden State Insurance Company." In little less than a year his father died, at the age of forty-seven. With the two oldest boys working and attending school, the family pooled its monies and survived, until the mother died in 1937, also at the age of forty-seven. It fell to the lot of the three brothers to carry on in the family home, pool their monies, and continue their education. Archon Poston sold newspapers and worked as a valet in a local athletic club.

Archon Poston credits his parents with fostering their high ideals and passionate devotion to college education and success. Paul, now deceased, received a doctorate in Business Administration at Harvard, and Walker graduated to become the first black practicing veterinarian in California. Walker presently operates two animal and pet hospitals in Northern California.

Archon Poston spoke of his mother with great pride and respect. "From early childhood, I admired her for her personal strength and her genius for success. When my father died, I learned to respect her more for her resistiveness to defeat. In a word, she was a remarkable woman." Walker, too, recalled her strong qualities. There is a photograph of her which shows a beautiful austere face. Looking at her photograph reveals her as a woman of overall grace. Her eyes seemed to radiate a passion for success.

"I remember my father as being a small-sized man who wanted to succeed at teaching, but low pay forced him to take up again in the very type of work he had tried to avoid. As his health failed, he tried very bravely to recoup it. And yet, in spite of poor health, he always reminded us to study hard and try to make a success of our lives." Archon Poston pulled another photo from the family album. It was a photo of his father who seemed to be about five feet nine in height, weighing about one hundred and sixty pounds. His stature was one of deep dignity and seriousness.

But to return to Archon Poston himself, in considering his achievements I asked him if his scholastic abilities were recognized by his high school teachers. "Well, I was invited to write a valedictorian speech for my graduating class. I guess I felt I would not be given the opportunity to present it, even if it were the best speech. But after much coaxing, I finally conceded to write one, but wasn't allowed to give it. I suspect this came about when the principal discovered I was a black student."

Back to the larger question, what about the scarcity of black optometrists?

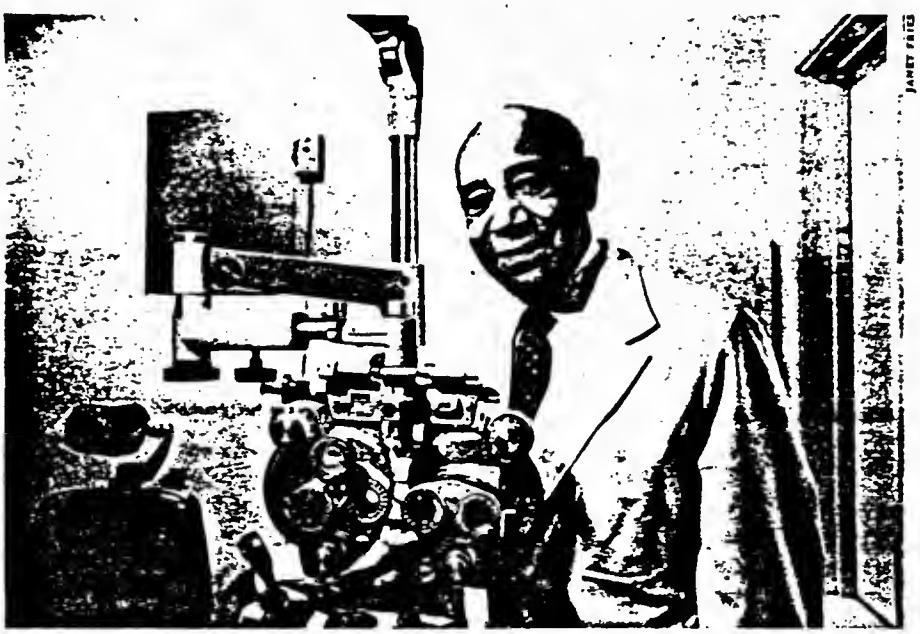
As Archon Poston sees it, optometry is not a high profile profession. Consequently, it has not had a lot of exposure among black students. "Without exaggerating, there has been a strong stress in our society as a whole to channel people in certain directions. Probably the single greatest factor is that the schools generally do not do an effective guidance job. Consequently many black students take courses that exempt them from becoming optometrists." Poston believes strongly that a fundamental change in the guidance goals the schools set for themselves is the best hope for improving the number of ethnic minorities going into the professions. In this way, black students will be given early help in career planning. He suggests one admonition: "Anyone wanting to become an optometrist must master mathematics, physics and chemistry." This is not to say that Poston has given up on increasing the number. He concedes some improvement in the number of blacks in the profession. As a matter of fact, he has had an influential hand in the current drive to increase the number in the profession. Until five years ago there were about ten or twelve black optometrists in California. In the past three years, the number has nearly doubled. Archon Poston feels that this is a cause for minor celebration. There is still much improvement to be made in the profession. A major celebration is still a few years away.

Archon Poston and his wife, Arlene, presently live in Danville, California, but are planning to build another home soon on their ranching acreage located in the famous wine-growing Napa Valley region. Here is where they say they hope to retire. It is conceivable that the Postons might take up another career. Why? Because during our last interview session, as we sipped cups of steaming coffee, I discovered they have another little interest. On their day off, if such a thing can ever be said, they spend much of their time overseeing a small herd of cattle on their acreage. Archon Poston chuckles that he enjoys herding the cattle himself. "In my earlier years in Edmonton, I spent most of the summer months on nearby farms, riding horses and helping to herd the cattle. In the early mornings, I used to sit and see the dawn coming up. To me, those days were fascinating and exciting when I think of them now. To a great extent, they were some of the happiest days in my life."

Wife Arlene is involved with the day-to-day handling of the private practice office and is totally immersed in the consultant firm's affairs. Among other things, she serves as both vice-president and secretary-treasurer of the firm. Archon Poston notes his wife is a major figure in the firm. He gives her credit for much of their business success.

The Postons have three children. Daughter Marlene is now an elementary school teacher in Davis, California; son Gene is a Lieutenant in the Berkeley Fire Department; and son Larry is a junior high school teacher and P.E. coach in Oakland. They have six grandchildren.

There have been many more pioneering professional achievements for Marvin Poston, such as helping organize the West Oakland Health Group, where he served as vice-president and chairman of the center's eye group. He organized the Children's Vision Center of the East Bay, vision screening programs for the East Bay Skills Center. Archon Poston has served as co-chairman of the Merritt College Optometric Assistants Advisory Committee and as a member of the Public Advisory Council on Education for the Oakland public schools. One could go on describing Dr. Poston's achievements, but perhaps this is enough to show his pre-eminence. However, there is one more achievement, he is in much demand as a "master of ceremonies" for professional meetings and social gatherings in the Northern California area.



BLACK VISIONARY

It took tenacity as well as drive for **Marvin Poston '39** to become one of the most prominent figures in the field of optometry in California. The first black student admitted to the study of optometry at Berkeley, Poston later became the first black American licensed to practice optometry on the West Coast. During his student days, Poston encountered some aspects of the racism that has been an obstacle to many minority students in the professions. Characteristically, he refused to let those attitudes remain obstacles and developed a response to them that served primarily to focus and concentrate his determination.

In his younger days Poston had been, for the most part, spared the toughening slap of racism. He was raised in a black community of about 100 people in Edmonton, Alberta, a city with a population of some 30,000 at the time. Of his upbringing there Poston recalls: "I think we had the great advantage of growing up totally unaware of the racial prejudice around us. Our parents understandably sought to protect us from it. In so doing, they strengthened our self-esteem and obviously did contribute to each of us being quite comfortable and at ease with any group. This obviously gave us a different vantage point within our disconnected black community. Now this does not mean that others did not resent us as blacks, or that we were free of the subtleties of racism in Canada at that time. It's just that we were not aware of the ensuing racial animosities that eventually broke out in 1928, the year we left for Oakland." (The family moved to the Bay Area because of Poston's father's ill health.)

After graduating from Oakland Technical High School, Poston was admitted to Berkeley in 1935. "Going to Berkeley made it possible for me to live at home and keep my job, which was financially necessary at the time I enrolled at the University as a mathematics and physics major, hoping to become a mathematics teacher." Poston began rethinking his decision during his third year, since, he recalls, "This was a period when the teaching profession in Oakland was virtually closed to blacks."

At that time, optometry was taught under the aegis of the Department of Physics at Berkeley. Since the courses he already had taken were acceptable as pre-professional work for optometry, Poston began considering that switch. "As a young man," he says, "I was anxious to get ahead, but at one point, I was not sure that I had taken the right path to the top. You see, back in the 1930s, the field of optometry was an elitist profession. Specifically, it was a profession of privileged whites."

Nonetheless, Poston decided to apply for the optometry program and was accepted a few weeks later. Opposition followed hard on the heels of acceptance. He soon encountered a professor who, he says, "resented my presence in his optometry courses." The professor gave him two "F's" in courses in which he was doing well academically and refused to assign white patients to him for his clinical work—encouraging Poston to go to Oakland to conscript his own patients from the black population there.

"The moment that professor decided that I could not become an optometrist," Poston recalls, "I decided that it was the thing I wanted to become more than anything else. I just had to graduate; I could not fail at that point. I decided then and there that I would not let him get away with his prejudiced behavior."

He turned to two other professors on the faculty. With additional help from black lawyer Walter Gordon Sr. '18, Harry Kingman of the University YMCA, and then-University Provost Monroe Deutsch, things were put right. The two professors re-graded Poston's exams and papers. He was given "high B" marks—and clearance from having to study with the antagonistic professor again.

Unfortunately, harrassment by the offending professor did not stop even with Poston's graduation. Poston says the professor "tried to use his veto powers to keep me from passing the examination for the Board of Optometry" and later tried to block his membership in the Alameda and Contra Costa optometric societies. It took another round of pressure applied on Poston's behalf to get him into the Oakland society, but, Poston says, "Finally the pressure was so much in my favor that the professor was overriden, and I was admitted. To keep them from voting me out, I attended every society meeting for the next ten years."

Don Price, executive director of the California State Board of Optometry, has saluted Poston for "the impact of his gutty efforts, already visible throughout the practice and throughout the nation. Among the things Poston will be remembered for is his push for opening up opportunities to practice for underrepresented groups." There is evident dismay in Poston's noting that it was not until 1963—23 years after his own graduation—that the second black student graduated from Berkeley in optometry. And although he also is aware that optometry students still are, as a rule, predominantly white, he is encouraged by the fact that in the last years the number of black optometrists in California has doubled. (Until five years ago, there were only a dozen black optometrists in the state.)

Poston thinks one reason that minorities are so little represented in his field has to do with the very nature of the profession. Since it is not among the "high-profile" professions, it has not had a lot of exposure to black students. A related problem he says, its that "the schools generally do not do an effective guidance job. Consequently, many black students take courses that exempt them from becoming optometrists." He hopes that black students soon will get early help in career planning, so they can arrange to study the mathematics, physics, and chemistry they will need to enter professional training.

Poston has been a pioneer in his profession in other ways as well. He spearheaded work in the imponant field of preventive health care for the general public by helping to organize Califomia Vision Services, out of which came the Vision Service Plan, which provides pre-paid vision care to more than 800,000 Californians. In 1963, he was honored with election to the presidency of Vision Service Plan.

He also has done impressive work in the area of practice management and has become the leading expert in the establishment of private practice. It started with Optometric Planning, a one-man firm he ran from his own office. Now called the Professional Health Management and Planning Company, the firm has become an invaluable service for professionals new to a variety of health fields.

Poston offers his clients sound advice on management matters ranging from tips on willing lenders (he has a keen knowledge of the money market) and the capital outlay package needed to begin a practice to leads on good office space and advice about staffing, labor costs, and accounting and bookkeeping procedures. He is a master at identifying—and accounting for—hidden costs in starting and maintaining a business. And, he adds, "I will even go shopping for essential office equipment and waiting room furniture whenever I can find a bargain for my client."

In sum, Poston's has been a varied and far-reaching career. He helped organize the West Oakland Health Group and served as the vice president and chairman of its eye group. He helped organize the Children's Vision Center of the East Bay and vision-screening programs for the East Bay Skills Center. He has served as co-chairman of the Merritt College Optometric Assistants Advisory Committee and also as a member of the Public Advisory Council on Education for the Oakland Public Schools.

With retirement soon another opportunity, Poston is considering yet another career: cattle ranching. He and his wife Arlene spend what free time they have on their ranching acreage in the Napa Valley, where they already have a small herd of cattle. Poston enjoys doing the herding himself and recalls: "In my earlier years in Edmonton, I spent most of the summer months on nearby farms, riding horses and helping to herd the cattle. In the early mornings, I used to sit and see the dawn coming. To me, those days were fascinating and exciting. To a great extent, they were some of the happiest days of my life."

And who knows? Perhaps some day there will be a service for the beginning cattle rancher.

—Louis B. Crouchett '55, M.A. '69, Ed.D. '72

This article is adapted from its original appearance in the *Boule Journal*.

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December 1988

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Professional Activities

Interviewer-editor, Regional Oral History Office, 1970-present. Specialist in state government history, local community and social concerns, focussed on key participants' perceptions of selected admininstrative, legislative, and political issues in California during administrations of Earl Warren, Goodwin Knight, Edmund G. Brown, Sr.

Project director, Ronald Reagan Gubernatorial Era Project (1979-), Bay Area Foundation History Projects (1974-1977, 1986-), Volunteer Leaders Series (1978-), Cutter Laboratories Project (1972-1974).

Panelist and consultant, Joint Center for Political Studies, Oral History Association, National Council on Public History, Society of American Archivists, local historical societies and museums; advisor, UC Graduate School of Education, California Heritage Quilt Project, California Heritage Task Force, others.

Prior Experience

Historian, U.S. Air Force, documentation of Berlin Air Force, other post-World War II issues. Research, writing, policy development on community issues for University of California, Bay Area Council of Social Planning, Berkeley Unified School District, others.

Education

Graduate of Connecticut College, New London, in economics; independent study in journalism, creative writing; additional study at Trinity College and Stanford University.