



Oral History Interview of Lewis Finfer

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Interviewed by: Brynn Crockett, Suffolk University Student from History 364: Oral History

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Interview Summary

Lewis Finfer, a community organizer with neighborhood and citywide groups in the Boston area, discusses the impact of the 1974 Garrity decision, which resulted in some students being bused from one Boston neighborhood to another with the goal of creating racial balance in the Boston Public Schools. Topics covered include the racial and social climate in Boston at the time; reactions of the white and black communities to the decision; the condition of the Boston Public Schools then, now and in the future; and the political aspects and ramifications of the decision.

Subject Headlines

Boston Public Schools

Busing for school integration

Finfer, Lewis, 1950-

Morgan v. Hennigan (379 F. Supp. 410)

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This interview took place on March 21, 2005, at Mr. Finfer's office at
1773 Dorchester Avenue, Dorchester, Mass.

Interview Transcript

BRYNN CROCKETT: I'm Brynn Crockett and I'm interviewing Lewis Finfer, and it's March 21, 2005. Can you please state your name?

LEWIS FINFER: Lewis Finfer.

CROCKETT: Thank you, and when were you born?

FINFER: September 19, 1950.

CROCKETT: And where were you born?

FINFER: Brooklyn, New York.

CROCKETT: Where did you go to school?

FINFER: College?

CROCKETT: Yeah.

FINFER: I went to Harvard College up here.

CROCKETT: Okay, and did you stay here in the area after college?

FINFER: Mm-hmm.

CROCKETT: Okay, and where were the places you lived?

FINFER: I've lived in Dorchester since 19—I lived in Cambridge from '68 to '71. I've lived in Dorchester since 1971, except in 1978 to 80, I lived in Somerville when I was working for a community organization there, but otherwise prior to that and since 1980 I've lived in Dorchester the whole time.

CROCKETT: Do you remember where you were at the time of the 1974 Garrity decision?¹

FINFER: I was working in Dorchester for a community organization, Dorchester Community Action Council, but, I mean, I don't remember the specific day. I remember obviously reading in the papers and hearing it on the radio.

CROCKETT: Okay, and how did you react to the decision?

FINFER: I think it was a momentous thing. There had been some articles obviously saying that this was pending and could go in lots of different directions, but I knew it was going to have a big change on life because it was going to probably result in a lot of specific changes and assignment patterns and also a possibility of court ordered busing.

CROCKETT: Okay. How did the Garrity decision affect your community work?

FINFER: Well, that's a big question. I think the other thing I would say is that prior to the Garrity decision, there had been, I think about two years before, there was a housing project that was then called Columbia Point, which is now called Harbor Point, that was mostly occupied by black tenants and it bordered on what's called Carson Beach, which is a beach that begins sort of

¹ The Garrity decision refers to the June 21, 1974, opinion filed by Judge W. Arthur Garrity in the case of Tallulah Morgan et al. v. James Hennigan et al. (379 F. Supp. 410). Judge Garrity ruled that the Boston School Committee had "intentionally brought about and maintained racial segregation" in the Boston Public Schools. When the school committee did not submit a workable desegregation plan as the opinion had required, the court established a plan that called for some students to be bused from their own neighborhoods to attend schools in other neighborhoods, with the goal of creating racial balance in the Boston Public Schools. (See <http://www.lib.umb.edu/archives/garrity2.html> for more information)

at the beginning of South Boston, and there had been an incident there. It had been sort of considered South Boston's turf, but it was a public beach and it was right next to the housing projects on one side, so there had been an incident where a black family had been harassed when they were using the beach, and people had decided to do a support demonstration about their right to use the beach. I went to it at the time, working as a community organizer, and being sympathetic to the issue, and it turned into a huge fracas. There were a couple hundred people from South Boston, mostly teenagers and young adults separated by a hundred police and there were rocks being thrown over the police, so it sort of reminded me of pictures you had seen in the South about desegregating public facilities.

So I had that memory and then I think what was most—I guess what I learned a lot during this period is just sort of the intermix of race and class, that some ways the desegregation case was much about race and about racial patterns and how school districts were set and about conflict over the court decision. I think what I learned from living here and talking to people and members of organizations was in a sense, a lot of the working class whites were resentful of a court decision that only affected Boston residents; it didn't affect the suburbs. The judge [W. Arthur Garrity], symbolically, was from Wellesley, a very wealthy suburb, and the *Boston Globe*, which editorialized for this, even though their news coverage was very reasonably balanced, the editor at the time was a suburban resident, and the stereotype was that most of the *Globe* officials and editors and so forth were from the suburbs. So in a sense, people felt like they were being asked to do something that suburban residents weren't being asked to do.

Part of that was other legal decisions that had been made, especially in a case called *Milliken*² which is in Detroit, ordered that remedies to desegregation could only be done within specific municipalities affected and not on the metropolitan basis, and that was decided I think just after Garrity's decision, so I think that affected the remedies he could have offered. Some legal people feel he could have offered—involved suburbs, which wouldn't have been more popular, but would've been more fair. There are also certainly perspectives that if they had ordered maybe

² *Milliken v. Bradley* (418 U.S. 717) was argued on February 27, 1974, and decided on July 25, 1974. The United States Supreme Court ruled that school desegregation plans could only involve multiple school districts if there was evidence of segregation in all of those districts. This meant that suburban school districts were not required to participate in urban desegregation programs, unless there was blatant segregation in those suburban schools.

one grade at a time or a certain number of grades at a time, rather than desegregating the whole system—the first year they paired South Boston and Roxbury, and the next year they sort of desegregated the whole system. If they had desegregated a certain number of grades at a time, again nothing would have been popular with some people, but the biggest physical confrontations happened in the high schools, so there were all those kinds of things that had an impact on this.

On the other hand, African Americans had real grievances; they legally showed that they were discriminated against in terms of patterns of—that they had to walk further and go on more buses than whites did, and their schools were probably worse. I mean, all the public schools were not great. So there were all those kinds of things that were going on, that it basically taught me a lot about—that this was a lot about class and opportunities that people had by social and economic class as well as about opportunities and rights people had based on race. So that's some background, but that's sort of how I see some of the events that happened.

CROCKETT: Thank you. As a community leader, did you feel that it was necessary to take a stand on the issue?

FINFER: I was director of a group that was a group that had a significant number of African Americans and a significant number of whites, so there was division about this issue, and it made it difficult to make a decision on this issue because it was so difficult, so we didn't take a position on it. We worked on a lot of other community improvement issues and probably were one of the few large-scale integrated organizations in the city at that time, but we only worked on other issues like crime prevention, and dealing with housing deterioration, and red lining, and banking investment issues, and discrimination and assessing, and a lot of other community issues. Probably if we had more wisdom and ability, maybe we could have done about this, but it was a time where our membership was divided, so it wasn't so easy to just pose, "We support this," or something. But perhaps in hindsight, we could have tried to taken it up more rather than feeling it go wild, and there wasn't something we could specifically do other than bring people together around other issues, and that wasn't insignificant given the times, but I always think in retrospect, maybe we could have done more.

Another practical impact—for about two years it was very difficult to schedule meetings. There was a period where people felt it was unsafe on each side to go into certain areas. Dorchester is an area of 125,000 people, so it's a big section, so for a time there was only one place—the Grover Cleveland Middle School in Fields Corner was sort of considered neutral and both whites and blacks were willing to go to it. But almost every other meeting site, including ones that were as close as four blocks from that site, were considered unsafe to some degree by whites or blacks. So it had an impact in that where you scheduled meetings, or sometimes you sort of had to have a meeting in a particular neighborhood because that's where the issue was most felt and so forth, but then you knew you were going to get less—some whites or blacks who were part of the organization wouldn't go there because they didn't feel safe. So that was one of the practical problems.

There was such a period, I remember, every time there was an incident or crime in the paper, people would look to see was the person who did the crime white or black, and did they do it to white or black, and would there be retaliation because of that. There were some instances—retaliation on both sides, so it was that kind of a time.

CROCKETT: How did the Garrity decision affect you personally?

FINFER: I think it's mostly in all these ways I said—I think it most challenged me to look hard at the class issues involved, and as I said, that in some ways there was a lot about race, and it was remembered as a case about racial discrimination, desegregation, which it very much is. But it also brings to mind all of these class issues that are very much not spoken about in American life, but very big and in some ways people can sometimes avoid them if they can afford to move to the suburbs or afford to send their kids to parochial school, then they can kind of remove themselves in part from some of these issues, but a lot of people can't. So that's what I think was key, how I remember the decision and what it meant to me.

CROCKETT: Okay. You had mentioned before there was a lot of articles about violence. Did you yourself witness any violence or ever feel threatened from your community organization?

FINFER: I don't know if I would—I certainly saw the buses going around under police protection. I don't remember if I saw a specific act of violence. I had been a victim of street crime a number of different times over a period of time, so I've seen that, and know some of the fears involved in that and walking in certain areas and how people are looked—what happens. And there was a period—I still sort of feel it today—there are certain predominantly white sections where you wouldn't see a person of color, and sometimes today when I see a person of color walking around, like Neponset Avenue, [in] Dorchester, I still do a slight double take because there was a period where that wouldn't happen because it wasn't safe in the same way. Even Castle Island, [in] South Boston, which is an area people love to go to walk because of the walkway around there, there was a period where very few people of color would go there because of some incidents, and now it's sort of back to normal.

CROCKETT: Okay. How were people close to you affected by the Garrity decision?

FINFER: I think people felt strongly in both ways. The whites felt those resentments that I talked about, “Why do our children have to get bussed and why can't we go to a neighboring school, and why do kids in suburban areas get to go to neighboring schools? Why is it wrong somehow—why are we racist because we want our kids to go to neighboring schools?” I think the African Americans mostly were, “We want better education for our kids.” I'm not sure if they were hugely for busing. I think they were more for the perk basis, “If we want better education and busing can give us a better education, we're for it, but if there were other improvements that could be made to schools in our own areas, we'd be for that too.”

So I think there were sort of different shades of opinion about it in the black community, because there's always better education for their kids, which in some cases they felt could be obtained through integration and in some cases they felt there was a question of resources and resource allocation. So there were different kinds of feelings about it, and chips that people have on their shoulders, like, “Why are we getting targeted? If we're black why are we getting targeted just because we're going to this neighborhood or because our kids are going to these schools?” And whites also feeling like that somehow they'll be a victim if they go in the wrong place at the

wrong time.

CROCKETT: You mentioned a little bit about the media before. Do you think they played an accurate portrayal of the situations that you saw or that you heard about?

FINFER: Yeah, I think there was a lot of good reporting and attention to the issue. Probably to a degree, some number of reporters come from more middle class backgrounds or suburban backgrounds, so it was harder for them to understand, in some ways, the grays of the situation. It's not just so black and white, as the saying goes, and obviously it's a strange metaphor, because this is a lot about blacks and whites too, but there are a lot of grays in this situation. I think some reporters get it, got it, and editors got that, and some didn't. Maybe they may have had a judgment one way or the other, and so that affected what they were doing. I think it really varied.

But I think what was interesting was Tom Winship was the editor of the *Boston Globe* during this period, and there was an interview with him a few years before he died, which was in the midnineties, where he said in retrospect, maybe they should have perhaps not completely been for a full desegregation of the system all at once, maybe there was a need for more gradual desegregation, and that he thought in retrospect maybe that they should have looked at some of the grays of that situation, and it wasn't just an all or nothing, one side was all right and one side was all wrong. I thought that was pretty admirable that he was willing to say that, "Even though I thought, overall, what we did was right, and I'd relive it, but maybe we made some mistakes too, and should have heard and listened to some things and seen some of the grays and nuances." So I thought that was significant that someone who played such a significant role in media coverage was able to look at that in that kind of a way. It doesn't change what happened, but some people never look back at what they did and acknowledge that they still felt they were mostly correct but they might have made some mistakes. So I thought that was significant.

I thought there were a lot of accurate portrayals that certain reporters and columnists did, but some people missed things—because it was such a highly charged thing, some people took a stand on one side or the other and sort of wrote through that reflection rather than sort of steer

out and consider the things that don't match that set of things you've come to, so I think it was a mixed picture of how fair and effective the media was.

CROCKETT: Okay. I understand that you have school age children now. Where do they go to school?

FINFER: I have a daughter who goes to high school in Boston, the Boston Latin School, and a son who goes to what's called the Neighborhood House Charter School. It's a charter school that's in Dorchester, a few blocks from here.

CROCKETT: Okay. Did the Garrity decision or the busing that's going on now affect where you chose to send your children to school?

FINFER: It affected us because both my children—my daughter went to—she was affected by the racial assignment because there were still racial assignment codes when she went to school. She's seventeen, so when she went to school there was still assignment codes. The city is divided into three zones, so you can apply to schools in that zone, and then the assignments were still based on balancing race, so she was affected in terms of what choices she had to go to school and certain schools she couldn't get into because it related to racial balancing. What happened is a certain number of schools would have better reputations. Everyone could apply but who got in was governed by racial balance, so often times those schools have waiting lists.

CROCKETT: Busing is still in place today as you were just saying, yet Boston has the majority of minority in the city, if that makes sense, compared to the white students. What are your thoughts on the current situation? Do you think it's good that we still have it in place?

FINFER: Have what in place?

CROCKETT: The school choice that you were just talking about.

FINFER: Yeah, I think to some degree. I mean on the one hand the system is predominantly people of color and the school system is probably 80 percent and if you don't count the exam schools, then it's probably 85 percent or something so it's predominantly children of color but the student assignment policy at least creates some—in a certain number of schools, some balance. And then there's certain neighborhoods like West Roxbury that are predominantly white, so that if you didn't have balance then you would have probably a few places in West Roxbury and ones a little bit of South Boston, a little bit of East Boston or some places like that you might have predominantly white schools or something, so I think the assignments give people some more choice and prevent some of those kinds of things. But the city itself is much more integrated, besides the numbers—I mean the city is about 51 percent children of color and in terms of residents, in terms of public school students, it's like I said, I think it's over 80 percent. But then the residential areas are much more integrated than they were in 1975, except for like I said, West Roxbury and Back Bay or something where people of color are living to a degree and all the other areas to some degree, which wasn't true in 1975.

CROCKETT: Where do you see the future of Boston Public Schools?

FINFER: I think it has now really the same issues as every urban school system. It's a combination of on the one hand, there's not enough money to provide all the kinds of support and class sizes and media work and work to work with kids who are doing well or doing okay. There's all those kinds of challenges related to funding, challenges that relates—funding that relates to teacher training and support.

Then there are all those issues that some kids come from homes where there are a lot of difficulties happening, so at points it can be hard for them to focus in school if their home life is not in good shape, which it is for a percentage of students. I think the school system has all those challenges, which are true in most cities, and then there's a question of leadership, like the effort to break up high schools into smaller high schools is a good thing so kids aren't lost, but it's also taken a long time to do that, and it's still not fully implemented.

Then all the questions of accountability—what’s a fair amount of accountability for teachers and parents and principals and administrators is not really defined as easy for sort of anyone sitting in any of those categories to some degree say, the problem is the teachers, the problem is the administrators, the problem is the parents. There’s not enough accountability or a shared sense of what the accountability should be in all those sectors. So that’s the challenge here as it is in most urban public school systems.

Then you have this problem that a large number of voters don’t send their kids to public schools. So a significant number of voters either don’t have children or have some children in parochial or private schools so that the sort of basic support for public education is not strong enough at times.

Then you have a significant number of children of color, you know, three or four thousand, in what’s called the Metco program,³ which is a good opportunity for them but, in a sense, then it takes those parents, who are pretty motivated parents usually to sign their kids up for that support, but then in a sense it takes them out of the politics of the Boston school system because it’s not going to be that huge of a priority to them because their kids are somewhere else. So you’re taking several thousand pretty motivated parents of color who take themselves out of the politics as a major issue to themselves. So those are the problems built into that. With the charter schools, it’s sort of a similar thing. It can be a good opportunity for some kids because in some cases the class is a little smaller or the school organizes the resources, so it may be a good alternative for some kids, but again, it takes those parents out of, in some degree, politically caring as much about what goes on in the Boston Public Schools. So those are all realities that affect the politics that support the public education.

CROCKETT: Okay. Is there anything else you’d like to comment about that I missed that you feel is essential for our audience to know?

³ The Metco Program is a grant program funded by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It is a voluntary program intended to expand educational opportunities and reduce racial imbalance, by permitting students in certain cities to attend public schools in other communities that have agreed to participate. (Taken from the Massachusetts Department of Education website.)

FINFER: I think the way it comes down in history, it illustrates sort of the divergence of how people see the history. That if you're talking to someone who is a white, working class person, who grew up in Boston, who is say, over forty, they call it busing—what happened, they call it busing, or “the busing.” And if you talk to someone who's African American, who's that age, or someone who is a very liberal white, they would call it desegregation. So you still have this divergence of looking at this same event. One set of people calling it desegregation, another set of people calling it busing illustrates this sort of divide based on viewpoint politics, race, class and so forth. So that's the reality, but it's sort of poignant irony that that divergence is still there and in a sense aimed at how people apply it to their history.

I think there's also a lot to be written about how this affected the kids who were in the system at this point in some of the schools where there were a lot of incidents, how it affected them and their experience in the schools as well as how they view people of other races. I think there's a whole group of thousands of them, then-students and children who are now adults, but were also shaped from these events. There were some positives from just having to meet and know people of other backgrounds and also sort of consider the politics in something like this and obviously there are lots of negatives for what went on and more chips on their shoulders, still. So I think that's a very important part of it.

I think the other thing I didn't mention earlier is I went to—there were large anti-busing organizations that had different names. ROAR was one of the groups, Restore Our Alienated Rights, which was mostly out of South Boston but also was in other neighborhoods. Powder Keg was a group in Charlestown, and there was another one in Hyde Park, and I went to one of the Dorchester meetings just to see what people were saying. I could feel—just remember feeling how much anger and powerlessness and wanting to act that people were feeling about the court decision.

It also made me try to understand the racism, and what element of racism is here of people you don't know. It could be that people haven't drawn the line, that they aren't willing to learn and know something and what element is hatred. Sometimes the word, I think, is very broad and it lumps the two together when the large majority of people who have fears are still approachable

or could be approachable and you could connect to them. There is, I would say, a small minority, which is not insignificant because what they might do, who have hatred, and you usually can't change that, but I also think the term is—sometimes one word is not helpful in that kind of way because it's a broad brush, but it doesn't mean that if you have fears you don't have things you've got to deal with or certainly instill your behavior and decisions towards each other, so it's not something to take lightly. But it's still a broad brush of a term to some degree. So those are some of the things I remember.

CROCKETT: Looking back, how do you feel now about the busing, or desegregation?

FINFER: In what sense? How do I feel now?

CROCKETT: Retrospectively.

FINFER: I think retrospectively, the negatives are the divisions that people had then and carried with them over the years, and probably the positives, some of them were the reorganization of the school system and its modernization in some of them—the creation of more opportunities. The court ordered a number of corporations and universities to get more involved with schools, so some of the resources and time with that has helped.

I think there's another element to busing that's very important politically. The Democratic Party, which used to control Congress for most of the time from 1932 to 1992 and controlled the presidency the majority of the years from that period mostly broke apart around issues of race which was reflected a lot in school desegregation around the country as well as issues around Vietnam War and cultural issues, so in some ways we haven't recovered from the divisions, which busing and desegregation is one of those divisions. People's resentment towards the government making these decisions based on this criteria ended up reflecting in their politics, such that you had a number of Democrats who became Republicans or vote Republican because of that. So what people call "the Reagan Democrats" who are really working class people who voted Democrat most of the time but then started to vote for Republicans over some of these, what people sometimes call social or cultural issues, which were back then around race relations

and perceptions of which side we stood on certain issues, militancy and so forth, and then today the same kind of battle continues but it also includes social issues like gay rights and abortion and so forth. But the loss of power in the Democratic Party and the liberal vision and the role the government can play positively and all that kind of stuff—a lot of that decline goes back to the divisions that were engendered through busing and desegregation.

It's one of those things, on the one hand, schools' discrimination—there was certain action that probably needed to be taken, but there was also—some of the action wasn't constructive or thoughtful enough so you had a lot of reactions. Like I said, if there had been a gradual implementation to the desegregation order, there might have been other kinds of reactions or lessons that other people had. So we live also with those divisions people carry with them—are not only the rules of the school system now, but in same ways the whole politics of the whole United States in terms of the country being more conservative, quote-unquote, and the Republicans holding complete power on the national level come back in part to the kind of divisions like this that happened in Boston and that similarly happened in a number of other communities around the country.

CROCKETT: Thank you very much for your time.

FINFER: Sure. Would it help? (papers rustling) I wrote an article about some of this last year; would it help to give you a copy of that for your background? [attachment A]

CROCKETT: Oh sure, that'd be great.

OH-050 Attachments

Attachment A

June 23, 2004, *Boston Globe* op-ed article, "Boston and Busing, 30 Years Later," by Lewis Finfer