The University of Baltimore is launching a two-year investigation called "Baltimore'68: Riots and Rebirth," a project centered around the events that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and their effects on the development of our city. UB administration and faculty members in the law school and in the undergraduate departments of history and community studies are planning a series of projects and events to commemorate the 40th anniversary of this pivotal event. We are currently working with the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History, The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Maryland Public Television and the Enoch Pratt Free Libraries to pursue funding for projects that may include conferences, a website and a library traveling exhibit.

Your potential participation in an oral history project would contribute to the very foundation of this project – the memories of Baltimoreans who lived through the riots and saw the changes that came about in response to them. Your life story can fill in the limited knowledge we learn from newspaper accounts and the television footage.

If you choose to participate in the project you would be interviewed by students from the University of Baltimore. They will ask you questions, but your memories will determine the direction of the interviews.

If you agree to serve as an oral history informant in this project, you will meet with a team of undergraduate students. The students will take a still photograph of you. In addition, if you have a photo of yourself in or around 1968, we would greatly appreciate it if we could borrow it, scan it, and return it. We would reserve the rights to reproduce those photos and use them on the website, conferences, exhibit or publications.

The students may conduct the interviews at a location of your choice, or you may meet them at the University of Baltimore Langsdale Library for your interviews. During the interviews, your recollections will be recorded in two forms: audio and video. The students will be responsible for operating the equipment. You can expect the interviews to last for a minimum of 30 minutes each.

Sometimes talking about events that occurred decades ago will unearth forgotten memories. Undoubtedly, some of those remembrances will be negative. We greatly appreciate your willingness to take the risk of exploring a potentially painful past so that your life experiences will be recorded.

After the interviews the students will transcribe your oral history. They will provide you with a copy of the transcription for your review before the transcription is published. The transcription, video and audio records will be archived in the Langsdale Library Special Collections and will be accessible to the public. Your name will be attached to these documents. The University of Baltimore may use your image and/or your words in any future documentaries, exhibits, conferences or publications. Participants in the oral history project agree to waive their confidentiality.

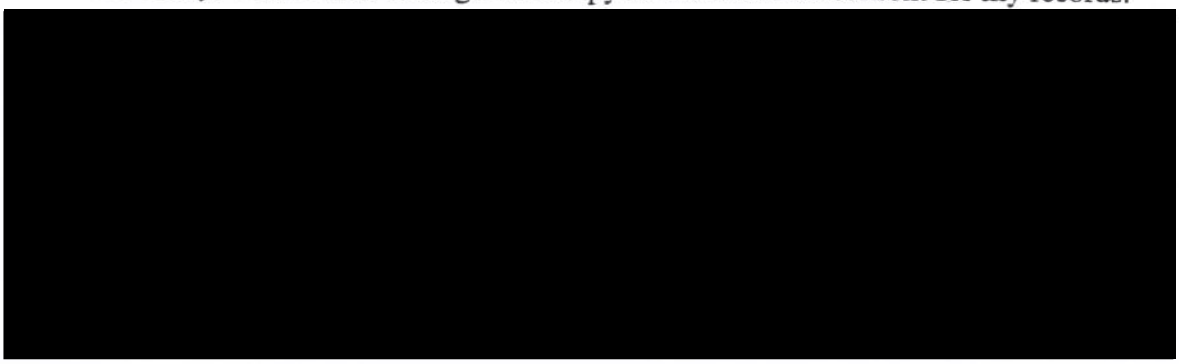
If at any time you are uncomfortable with participation in the study, you are free to drop out. Participation is strictly voluntary. While your participation is requested and highly valued, you are free to decide whether or not to continue participation at all times. You may decline to have your name published with your reminiscences

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me at 410-837-5296. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth M. Nix, Ph.D.
Visiting Assistant Professor
History and Community Studies
The University of Baltimore

I have read and understand the information provided above, and consent to participate in the study. I have also been given a copy of the informed consent for my records.



Interview with Bill Costello
May 7, 2008; Towson, MD
Interviewer: John J. Schwallenberg
Transcriber: John J. Schwallenberg

Schwallenberg: This is part of the Baltimore '68 Riots Oral History Project. My name is John Schwallenberg. I'm at Airway Circle Apartment 2B, Towson, Maryland. For the record, could you state your full name?

Costello: My full name is William C. Costello; but people call me Bill and some other things.

Schwallenberg: What was your situation in 1968? How old were you? Where did you live? Went to work, went to school, did your shopping things of that nature?

Costello: In '68 I was 34 and I had a wife and two children. We lived in Towson and in the early sixties I was a journalist. I worked for *Life* magazine in New York. I never turned in or threw away my *Life* magazine press pass. And it had my picture on it and it was pretty impressive looking. Having been a journalist, I switched to advertising and when the civil unrest occurred, I was working for the National Brewing Company—the makers of National Bo. And we lived in Towson, and of course King was slain and it really upset the black community, which was understandable. And a lot of them took to the streets. And I read about it for two days in the *Sun* and watched it on television. And my journalistic instincts were overcoming me and I said to my wife, "I'm going down there." And she said to me, "You're crazy!" I said, "I know I'm crazy; but I'm going down there." She said, "You'll never get down there, they're blocking people off." I said, "I think I can do it."

And I had a… I drove a '59 VW Convertible in those days. So it was already nine years old. It was a great car though, and it was yellow with a black top. After dinner I got in my VW and I had my *Life* magazine press pass at the ready. And I drove down. And I was driving down St. Paul Street and at 25th Street there were like three police cars across the street and they were holding up their hands. And they were sending people

either way on 25th Street. You couldn't get downtown. And when I finally got up to them I went, "Press!" And the cop took it [the press pass]out of my hands and he looked at it and said, "Alright Mr. Costello. Go ahead." And so I got through. There wasn't really a lot happening right downtown. So I went west. I went out Lombard Street. And when I got, I don't know exactly how far I got, I got past Lafayette Avenue; I can't remember how far I got; but then I could see some smoke and some fire. And I was traveling real slow and I saw some folks on the street and I got to a main drag. I think it might have been Fulton Avenue; I'm not really sure today. I used to know. There were some fires and I stopped… Except for hearing sirens and seeing some police cars there was no traffic, cause they weren't letting anybody through.

So it was me and my little VW. And I stopped the car and there was a guy, a black man, and he was in a phone booth making a phone call. All of a sudden there was a store to the left, and I think it was Fulton Avenue, and a window was gone and a guy came jumping out of the window; another African-American man came jumping out of the window and he had men's clothes on hangers over both shoulders. And he started running up the street with these clothes. And as he was running, this is just bizarre, as he was running up the street, the guy who was on the phone, got off the phone and opened the door and started to come out of the phone booth and the guy carrying the clothes ran into him. And the clothes went! And they got up and they were having a fistfight. And I thought: My God, this is insane! I mean, I wish I had a camera or something, or there was you know, a T.V. crew here or something. This is nuts! One guy's looting, the other guy's making a phone call and they bump and they start fighting… I drove around for a little bit, I didn't see, there weren't many people out, I didn't see any other looters at the time. The fires were pretty much under control when I was there. In fact, a couple of fireman yelled at me, "What are you doing here? What are you doing here? Get out of here!" And then I went home. I was satisfied. I saw some of it and then I went home. That was my experience during the civil unrest of the late sixties.

Schwallenberg: So that was the only looting or rioting that you saw?

Costello: Saw some smoldering fires and the one looter and the guy he got in a fight with.

Schwallenberg: You didn't see big crowds or anything like that?

Costello: Didn't see anything. No. I think it probably… it was a couple days after it had all started that I went down there. I think, maybe most of the worst of it was over. Like I said, there was some smoldering fires. There were some fire engines on the street. After I drove around and I saw some of it and I saw the two guys who got in the fight, which was insane: I had seen enough. I went home, I was satisfied. And I got home and my wife said, "You are crazy! You know that? You are nuts!" I said, "I know I'm crazy; I know that."

Schwallenberg: Did you see the National Guard or regular army down there at all?

Costello: Not after they stopped me. There were some Guard guys at 25th[Street] and St. Paul [Street] with the cops, there were some National Guards. But I didn't see any others.

Schwallenberg: Did you feel scared at all during that time?

Costello: No.

Schwallenberg: How do you remember hearing about the riots? Was it on the television or radio?

Costello: And the newspaper. I took, you know, I was a subscriber to both the *Morning* [*Sun]* and *Evening [Sun]*… There was an *Evening Su*n in those days. I was a subscriber to both of them. And yeah I watched it on the news. I watched the news every night on Channel 13. Yeah.

Schwallenberg: How do you think the coverage was? Was it sensationalized like a lot of the news today?

Costello: No, I think it was more matter of fact back in those days. I think the journalists were… I mean the people I worked with at the newspaper and at *Life Magazine*, they didn't, they weren't into sensationalizing anything. In fact, our editors would have sat on us if we tried to do that. It's just really changed. The whole journalistic system has changed. I mean, no matter what the government honchos tell them, they don't even question them any more. They just report it and a lot of it is not true; which is unfortunate for the American public. But we were…I mean, you know when I got into journalism, I was only out of college about a year and a half when I got my first job in journalism. And I mean, you better just have your facts right. And even at *Life* they had what they called researchers and you wrote your story and then it was given to a researcher and they had to call all the people you quoted, I mean, even if it was at three o'clock in the morning, and make sure that everything you quoted was correct. So you know there were… Telling the truth, and as they say, "Telling it like it was," that was preeminent in those days. I mean if we didn't do that, we would've been fired.

Schwallenberg: You said you watched [News Channel] 13 and they were pretty, from what you could tell, how were they?

Costello: Matter of fact: Here's what's happening, here's where it's happening.

Schwallenberg: Did they have Jerry Turner yet?

Costello: Yeah, he was on forever.

Schwallenberg: Oh, okay.

Costello: Yeah and he was good! Jerry Turner and a black man named Al.

Schwallenberg: Al Sanders.

Costello: Yeah, right!

Schwallenberg: Was he on that early? Do you remember if they had a black guy?

Costello: I'm not that sure. I can't attest to the fact that he was on then.

Schwallenberg: When you worked for *Life* were there a lot of black folks working there at that time?

Costello: No. There were some. In fact the guy who was in the next cubicle to me was black.

Schwallenberg: Did you have a lot of interactions with black people back in the sixties?

Costello: Well, you mean socially?

Schwallenberg: Socially and at work. I know you said there were a couple guys at work.

Costello: I played baseball and we played against black teams we had good relations with them. And I was a jazz freak, and most of the great jazz players were black. And I would go to clubs in New York, and when they took a break, I would horn in and sit down with them and buy them a drink, pick their brains and things like that. But socially, when I was growing up, there was very little contact between blacks and whites, very little contact.

My parents were both artistic people, my mother taught at Peabody. She was a Conservatory trained musician. My father was an actor. And they were both very bohemian people. And, neither one of them… I was raised great because I never heard… in my home, I never heard black people put down, ever. My mother and father

just weren't built that way. So I grew up without really seeing a lot of color. I mean I had friends who were prejudiced; there's no question about that. There were kids in the neighborhood who used the N-word all the time and all that. But no, I was very lucky. I had a great childhood. We didn't have any money, which was okay because nobody in the neighborhood did. We didn't know that there were rich people. I mean there weren't any around us. And so I feel very privileged that I grew up in the home I did because I never heard anybody put down because of their religion, the color of their skin or any of that nonsense, which I really do consider nonsense.

Schwallenberg: I know you said you had grown up in Hamilton. Prior to the interview you had said you went to Catholic school. Were the Catholic schools segregated too? Do you know?

Costello: Well, I don't know whether if an African-American kid had tried to get in, I don't know whether they'd been allowed in or not. I can't answer that. But there weren't any, there weren't any in the neighborhood. We had two black men that lived in Hamilton and they were the custodians of St. Dominic's Church, and they lived in an apartment above the priest's garage. There was a four-car garage and it had an apartment up there. And Russell and Lawrence, I can still remember their names, I can see their faces if I close my eyes. Russell and Lawrence were African-American men who lived above the garage and were the custodians. They were the only two black people we ever saw in Hamilton, ever.

Schwallenberg: Can you describe what you think the racial mood between blacks and whites was in 1968?

Costello: Well I, well I can tell you this: that because of Dr. King, and probably Malcolm X, there was hope, tremendous hope among the black population, that things were going to be getting better for them. Because they could see some change and I mean we could all see some change. So I… I used to go when…Now this was around the same time because I used to go down to Pennsylvania Avenue because they had two

clubs down there that had jazz: The Tijuana and the Comedy Club and they were both on West Pennsylvania Avenue; they were both in the heart of the Black Ghetto. And I used to go down there because I wanted to hear the music. And I was treated perfectly, I mean: "Good evening sir, do you want to sit at the bar or at a table," you know: "How are you tonight," blah, blah… I mean, I never… I was in my twenties old enough to drink legally. And I was always treated gentlemanly. I mean I was treated well. I never, even if I had to park a block and a half away and walk up a side street, nobody ever said anything negative to me, ever. And I went down a bunch because I'm a music freak.

Schwallenberg: Was this during the segregation period or after it had been done away with that you were going down to the…?

Costello: Oh no I mean things were still segregated. Yeah, I mean things were still segregated. I don't know, I mean this was… I don't know were Poly and City and were the public schools segregated back in those days? Did the kids have to go to Dunbar and Douglass?

Schwallenberg: Well technically that ended in 1954. They started the…

Costello: Right, exactly that's right. That's right, yeah, yeah. Exactly

Schwallenberg: But they… the housing and things and the bars and all were up until the early sixties at least.

Costello: Yeah…I mean, I didn't move out of Hamilton until I got married. That was 58 and there still weren't any black people. It was a blue-collar neighborhood. It wasn't rich guys. There were no Cadillacs or Mercedes Benz in Hamilton.

Schwallenberg: Did you have any inkling when King got shot? Did you think something big might happened?

Costello: I was heartbroken because I was kind of rooting for him. I didn't know any civil unrest would break out. But I was upset that he was murdered just like I was upset that the Kennedys were murdered. I mean all those three guys were just trying to do the right thing.

Schwallenberg: Now you said you lived in Towson in '68. You lived in Towson?

Costello: Yeah.

Schwallenberg: Did people after the riots say: Well I'm not going downtown anymore?

Costello: I never heard anybody say that. No I mean first of all you couldn't keep women from going downtown because that was the shopping area.

Schwallenberg: Right, right…

Costello: I mean, you know, that's a major thing with women. No, I never heard, I mean we went downtown. The [Inner] Harbor wasn't there yet. But we went down to watch sports.

I mean, I played unlimited baseball until I was thirty years old. And we played in Druid Hill Park against black teams all the time and got along great with them. I mean, we had fun with them. There was no animosity. There was no… I can remember we had a pitcher who had a terrible temper and we were playing a team called the West Baltimore Eagles and we had been playing them for three or four years, we knew 'em. And they had a second baseman who was about five foot five and he faced the pitcher when he hit and he choked up and he punched the ball. And he had three hits off… We had a hell of a pitcher, he came out of the Cleveland Indians chain; we had pros going up and coming down. And he was taunting our pitcher and the pitcher… I didn't hear exactly what he said but he called him an N-word and he said, "Get back in the batters box and I'm going to put the ball in your ear." And the first base coach of the team, who was a great guy, who was an older guy, who was probably in his late forties he started for

the mound. And I got between them. He said, “Costello, I got no problem with you; I like you,” he said, “but he’s out of line.” I said, “He’s out of line,” I said, “He is out of line,” I said, “I don’t disagree with that, but if you’d do me a favor.” He said, “What?” I said, “Go back into the coach’s box and I’ll go handle him.” He said, “I hope you do cause, if you don’t, I’m gonna go handle him.” I said, “Okay.” And I went out, and I and I knew this guy real well, this pitcher. And I said, “I’m going home.” He went, “What! We’re in the middle of a game here. You can’t go home!” I said, “I gotta go home,” I said, “Do you know what you just did?” And you know, he was so…such a competitor that he really…He knew…he literally wasn’t keenly aware of what he had done. He just went off.

And he said, “Gosh you can’t leave. Leave, we’re in the middle of a game here. We need you.” I said, “No I’m not playing; I’m quitting. In fact, I’m quitting; I’m off the team. This is it.” He went, “You’re crazy you can’t do that.” And I said, “Yes I can because you’re out of line,” I said, “I won’t leave if you walk in there and apologize.” He said, Really?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Okay.” And he went in and put his arm around the guy who was hitting again and he apologized and he came back. And I went back and that first base coach said, “Costello, you’re alright.”

Schwallenberg: So did the riots change your life at all?

Costello: No. Not a bit.

Schwallenberg: How do you think Baltimore changed after that?

Costello: I think that the white population of Baltimore… I think those who were sleeping through, you know the era, I think that it woke them up and alerted them to the fact that the African-American community wanted its rightful place in America as citizens. And it probably helped integration. But it didn’t change my life at all.

Schwallenberg: Can you think of anything that was done by the city or the state to try to heal the city after the riots? Can you think of anything?

Costello: No I can't, except for the fact that maybe, just by not keeping it in the top of your mind it just kind of evaporated. And people went on with their lives and hopefully, and I don't know this to be a fact, but hopefully, you know, people who, blacks and whites who shared neighborhoods and there was that at the time, began to get along better. Hopefully, I mean I don't know. I didn't live there, so I can't attest to the fact that it did. But I would hope that it opened the white public's eyes to the fact that blacks were looking to make their place as American citizens, which they deserved. I mean come on! I mean they were born here too. Now I mean their people came from Africa, mine came from Ireland. My great-great grandfather came over here in 1848 on a boat from Ireland, running away from the Potato Famine. And so, they are American citizens and they should have the same rights that we have.

Schwallenberg: Can you think of anything I haven't brought up that you think might be pertinent toward this project?

Costello: No. I was kind of intrigued that you people would ask me to comment on it because of my experience of seeing the two goofs getting in a fight. I mean it brought it back. I mean I had forgotten… it had almost gone from my mind when I first got notified that you people wanted some comments about experiences with the civil unrest.
But it just brought that back so vividly to me, sitting in my little Volkswagen convertible, watching these two guys one running with suits over his shoulders and another one getting out of, you know, getting out of the door of a telephone booth and bumping into each other and getting up swinging. I mean, it was crazy.

Schwallenberg: Did you see a lot of damage though?

Costello: No.

Schwallenberg: No?

Costello: I don't really think there was a lot of damage. I don't have a vivid recollection of the days immediately following the fires but I don't think there was a lot of damage. First of all, the fire department was there, they were ready and they knew it was coming. You know it happened in other cities. Like I said the streets going downtown, I'm sure from every direction were blocked off and they weren't letting people downtown. So I think that it was… I don't… How long did it last? It was—it only lasted three or four days, didn't it? Yeah and it was over. Right. Yeah.

Schwallenberg: Okay then. Thank you for your time.

Costello: Well thank you for coming out; I appreciate it.

Schwallenberg: No problem.