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**UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

ORAL HISTORY DEED OF GIFT

The University of Baltimore's Oral History Collection is comprised of taped interviews of people giving first-hand accounts of some aspect of Baltimore history which might otherwise go unrecorded.

You have been asked to give an interview. A tape recording of your interview will be made. The tapes, along with an abstract of their content and, in some cases, a verbatim transcript, will be deposited in the University of Baltimore Archives, 1420 Maryland Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21201. These materials will be made available for research by qualified scholars, for educational use, for scholarly publications, and other related purposes.

I, SIDNEY SAKOLS, have read the above and, in view of the historical value of this information, agree to the recording of my voice and my stories. I grant the University of Baltimore the full use of this information in all media known and unknown. I grant and assign all my rights pertaining to this information to the University of Baltimore.

Signed: Sidney Sakols

Name (print) SIDNEY SAKOLS

Address 815 DRUID PARK LK DRIVE

Telephone 410-523-2688

Date 12/7/97 Interviewer _____

<u>INFORMATION SHEET</u>	
INTERVIEWER:	
PROJECT:	East Baltimore Oral History
DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW:	1997.12.07
PLACE(S) OF INTERVIEW:	

<u>INFORMANT'S BIOGRAPHICAL DATA</u>	
NAME:	Sidney Sakols
ADDRESS:	815 Druid Park Lake Dr.
TODAY'S DATE:	1997.12.07
PHONE NUMBER:	523-2688
DATE OF BIRTH:	1916.11.23
PLACE OF BIRTH:	144 N. Broadway, Baltimore

MEMBERSHIPS: (POLITICAL, PROFESSIONAL, SOCIAL, HOBBY, ETC.) LIST		YEARS:
Cassica Lodge, Masonic		

SCHOOLING AND/OR OTHER TRAINING: LIST		YEARS:
School 61		
City College		
University of Baltimore (1 yr.)		
Peabody Conservatory (5 yrs.)		

OCCUPATIONS: (EMPLOYMENT, VOLUNTEER OR MILITARY SERVICE) LIST		YEARS:
Property Manager		
Composer		

PARENTS	
MOTHER'S NAME:	Hanna Levin
DATE OF BIRTH:	03.15
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Lithuania
FATHER'S NAME:	Samuel
DATE OF BIRTH:	
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Poland

Today is December 7, 1997. The time is about 10:30 in the morning. My name is Anita Chavis and I'm a student at the University of Baltimore, attending a seminar in public history. The major assignment for this course is to conduct an oral history of someone with a connection to East Baltimore. The interview is taking place with Sidney Sakols in his home, located at 815 Druid Park Lake Drive.

Anita

Chavis: Good morning. What is your full name?

Sidney

Sakols: Sidney Sakols, S-I-D-N-E-Y-S-A-K-O-L-S.

AC: And Mr. Sakols when and where were you born?

SS: I was born in Baltimore, 144 North Broadway, November 23, 1916.

AC: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

SS: Jacob Sakols is my brother; Blanche Sakols is my sister and Dorothy Sakols is my sister, and both have been, are married and have different names.

AC: Okay. What is your earliest memory of East Baltimore?

SS: Well, I have been in East Baltimore practically all my life because the properties that we manage in East Baltimore are, um, some we own and a lots of them we don't.

AC: Okay. What grade schools did you attend?

SS: Down here on North, let me see, it's School 61, Linden Avenue and Brookfield, somewhere around there.

AC: And high school?

SS: Baltimore City College.

AC: And college?

SS: University of Baltimore, one year.

AC: Do you remember hearing your parents describe their lives? For example, can you tell me anything relative to your parents life in East Baltimore?

SS: Well, my father was the president of then Eden Street Synagogue and I don't recall how long he was president, but we moved up to Druid Park Lake Drive so then we didn't go to Eden Street Synagogue.

AC: How old were you when you moved to Druid Park Lake Drive?

SS: I was about eight years old.

AC: Okay. Did you ever serve in the military?

SS: Yeah. 1941, I think it was May. I think it was four and one-half years, of which I served nine months in Honolulu.

AC: Can you describe the experience?

SS: It wasn't pleasant. I wasn't interested in the work I was doing. And to me it was a waste of time.

AC: Do you want to elaborate any more? How so?

SS: Well, I didn't do anything productive or constructive. was just there as a person and worked in the office.

AC: Okay. Could you describe your religious beliefs?

SS: I'm Orthodox but I have been recently in Conservative and then, well, you can put Conservative.

AC: Okay. Did you ever marry?

SS: No.

AC: What was your first job?

SS: My first job is where I'm working in real estate. I collected rents and worked with people doing repairs to the property.

AC: How did you decide on that career?

SS: I was just there. I fell in on it, that's all.

AC: Your parents business?

SS: Yeah.

AC: Did you make enough money to live comfortably?

SS: I didn't make a lot of money, just enough to get through. It wasn't a rich business.

AC: How long did you have to work each day at your job?

SS: Oh, we worked until we finished. It's hard to say.

AC: Was it a typical eight hour day?

SS: Some was more than eight hours but we had to manage the properties, collect the rents and do the repairs. That's the whole sum and substance of this business.

AC: Did you contract out the repairs or did your business do them themselves?

SS: Some were contracted out and some we did with the help that we had. You see, then the rents on the houses were anywhere from \$3.50 a week to about today \$350 a month.

AC: Well, when you say \$3.50 a week, can you recall about what period of time that was?

SS: Oh, that was in the 30's and, uh, the 20's and the 30's. Because I went into the Army in 1940.

AC: What were the hardest choices you ever had to make?

SS: I actually don't know what were the hardest choices I had to make.

AC: Can you tell me how many properties you own in East Baltimore?

SS: Well, the whole, let me see, maybe thirty or twenty-five thereabouts.

AC: Twenty-five? How did you acquire those properties?

SS: Well, we used to manage property that belonged to Building Associations and we acquired some there and then auction sales we acquired some. So then we accumulated the properties that we have now.

AC: What effect did war time migration have on neighborhood demographics in East Baltimore?

SS: Oh, they shoved a lot of people in apartments. And after the war they had to dissolve; get them out of there because there's too many in a house. They didn't care during the war time how many people lived in apartments, you see. So, it's a situation that we were confronted with. East Baltimore wasn't as it is today. East Baltimore was safe. Today it's not. And Hopkins Hospital comes along and acquires all the property down there and lets it stay for a long period of time; does nothing with it. And then they come along and utilize it but when they're going to handle it I don't know. But they bought our office at 939 North Broadway and we're trying to find a place to move and we can't find a place to move.

AC: Who lived in the houses back in the 20's and 30's? Who was primarily the residents or what type of people lived in those houses back then?

SS: They were working people. They worked for iron and steel company, Bethlehem Steel, and a few other known companies at that time. That's all I know of where they worked. Some were

carpenters and some were plumbers and they worked when they were able to, who hired them.

AC: In my studies, I had understood that originally the neighborhood was of Bohemian descent. Do you recall, were your dealings with people?

SS: The Bohemian descent was up in the

AC: I'm thinking around the St. Wenceslaus neighborhood, around Ashland Avenue.

SS: That's correct. Around there and down to Baltimore Street.

AC: Do you recall when the neighborhood became primarily African American?

SS: It's always been black down there.

AC: From what you recall?

SS: Yeah and this African American is, in my opinion, a misnomer because if you're born in the United States you're a United States citizen and the people from Africa are Africans. Because you're black doesn't make you an African, see. I can't seem to get the people here to understand my thinking.

AC: Okay. I have read that in the 1940's and 50's that real estate agents often attached covenants to property deeds prohibiting white property owners from selling or renting to black people.

SS: I don't know anything about it.

AC: Okay. I was about to ask you if you knew if that occurred in East Baltimore and what was the resulting impact of these decisions. Okay.

AC: Can you recall or describe any discrimination as it related to inferior public services, such as trash collection or street lighting or road repairs that occurred in East Baltimore? Again, because it was a black neighborhood were the people discriminated against in terms of those services, in your opinion?

SS: No.

AC: Okay. Did property transactions that you were involved in primarily involve men or women?

SS: Mostly men. Buying property we dealt with men. We bought nothing from women because there weren't any women involved in it.

AC: Was there room for negotiations when you were selling properties, or even when you're talking about rent, like the price of the rent based on the condition of the property? I mean, how did that process work?

SS: Well, we counted to \$250 and based on their income, depending on their income, what we rented to them. They have to have at least 25% of their monthly income for rent. If they have less than that, depending on how much less than that, do we, are we inclined to rent it to them. Now, if they get \$400 a week they can pay \$400 a month or less and whatever they get per week they can pay that per month. But if they go less than \$50 of what they owe in a week, you can't rent it to them because of the expenses they incur are too high for them to pay.

AC: What affect did the construction of public housing have on your properties in East Baltimore?

SS: It drew the people away from renting and this was crippling the rental business. In fact, now in East Baltimore they built this tremendous area, Colvin Street down to the post office.

AC: It's called Pleasant View Gardens.

SS: Was it Lafayette?

AC: It was originally Lafayette Courts.

SS: And this was ruination because they should never have done what they spent for. See, they don't care. The politicians they absolutely don't care. What is it to them? Trying to get something done constructively and you can't get it done. Like the speeding up here on Lake Drive. I got a letter a year ago saying they were going to curtail it. They didn't do anything about it. And it's just one of these things. The politicians, the Mayor, he should never been Mayor because he's causing the City to fall. As long as he's been Mayor every year it falls down more.

AC: Are you familiar with the 1951 pilot program that took place in East Baltimore?

SS: To fix the properties up?

AC: Uh huh.

SS: Yeah.

AC: Can you describe the impact this had on your business?

SS: Well, now the inspector's going around and some houses they don't bother and some they do bother, even though they're equal. Now, we have a place on 1742 Ashland Avenue, it's vacant, and 1740 it's been

open, and the front door open, for many months. I call up. They can't do a thing about it. It's just one example of the entire picture.

AC: Well, but back in 1951 there was this program where and was this effort to come in and use the efforts of a lot of different City agencies to revitalize the neighborhood.

SS: Yeah, but look what they did up in Harlan Park. They spent millions of dollars and you go up there now and you see how it fell down.

AC: And I'm not so sure that this program was successful or not successful. I'm

SS: It wasn't successful.

AC: Not. Not in your opinion.

SS: No.

AC: Well, was it a financial burden on your business? Was the impact that you had to go in and spend a lot of money fixing up the houses?

SS: Yes, we had to spend a lot of money fixing up the houses and you have to be careful who you rent to.

AC: Did the tenants of your properties take care of them?

SS: Some did and some didn't.

AC: What happened when people didn't take care of them?

SS: We have to go in there and fix it.

AC: Did you ever have to evict people?

SS: Oh, yeah.

AC: Based on?

SS: Not paying the rent.

AC: Can you describe your relationship with the Department of Housing?

SS: Some I get along with and some are very difficult. You got, well, some of these people work with me and some don't.

AC: Well, what is their role? What do they, I mean what is your involvement with them? Is it strictly inspection?

SS: Inspection, yeah. Well, I have a piece of property on 1616 Ashland Avenue and the councilman in that area he came to Zoning with the people who objected to us moving in there. And Zoning disapproved our moving into the first floor because the people lied. They said we were going to bring a lot of labor, material and so forth in there. But the zoning people believed Councilman Young and he

was, he's not good as far as I'm concerned, my personal opinion, because he had to look at the picture and not look at the neighborhood; because he says "these are my constituents, see, and I have to go along with my constituents – you don't go along with my constituents – you don't go along." You see yourself what has to be done, you don't believe people, you see yourself. So we're having a hard time finding a place to move. The woman who works on my books, she's eighty years old and she wants to be near the subway and if she doesn't get near the subway then she's gonna leave. Where are you gonna get another bookkeeper? It's a problem. And they're supposed to find me a place. They want so much money. They want \$10 a square foot. Now \$10 a square foot is prohibitive. We can't. We don't make that money to give them \$10 a square foot.

AC: So, are they trying to relocate you back into the East Baltimore neighborhood?

SS: That's what I'm trying to do. And there's a place on Ashland, 1714 Ashland Avenue, that's vacant, vandalized, it's on the corner and it's near the subway, walking distance. But I can't find the owner.

AC: Now, will they pay for the repairs to the building, the City?

SS: Yeah. A certain amount, see. But that would be enough to be able to move in even if we leave the second and third floors unattended.

AC: Well, what happens to your properties when they become vacant?

SS: Oh, we try to keep them from being vandalized. The City comes along sometimes and boards them up and sends a bill for \$300 or \$400. It's ridiculous. And then they went and they boarded up one of the houses on Broadway and didn't do the third floor. Up the third floor they broke in and they did me damage. See, the Mayor is only interested in himself. He's got somebody twenty-four hours vigilance on his property, you see. The City gave him last year \$1,800,000. This year they gave him \$2,800,000 and there was no increase in police. This was for policemen and they didn't increase it. Now, I don't want to start haggling with the Mayor because he's a very difficult person. He's not a business man. He's a scholar and that's the way it should be in a school, not run a City. So, the black people are against him. The only people for him are the people who got jobs in the City. And if they had Mary Pat Clark in there, she's a person I could talk to, you see, explain and tell her what sort of problem. You can't talk to him.

AC: Have you tried to talk to the Mayor?

SS: Oh, yeah. You can't talk to him.

AC: Have you tried to talk to Dan Henson?

SS: That is an impossibility. I see him sometimes in the shopping center section and I try to talk to him. He always gives some phony answers; "call me up, come over, make an appointment." The hell with him, he's nothing in my book. That was a mistake to put there.

AC: Well, if he says to you that he will make an appointment and it is important for you to talk to him you should try to do that because you might be able to get to him.

SS: I tried many times. I can't get to him.

AC: Okay. What were your experiences with the Housing Courts? Back in, I was reading in this.

SS: I was in Housing Court once and I don't know what happened. That was some years ago. They, the Inspector, said if I don't get this property in East Baltimore fixed up, no, up here on Brooks Lane, he was going to take me to Housing Court. On Chauncey Avenue, you see. Now, I called Mr. Janczak, who is in charge of that, and he said get it done as fast as you can. I got an ad in the paper this weekend for a carpenter.

AC: Where's this property?

SS: Here on Brookfield.

AC: In this neighborhood?

SS: And I put an ad in the paper and you get these carpenters and they want \$15 and \$16 an hour. Now, how can you pay a man that much money and stay alive? You can't. That's a corporation, I mean big business that pays that. Small business, like we are, we can't pay them. They don't know it.

AC: I don't know if you are familiar with HEPCAC but it is, this Baltimore neighborhood is an empowerment zone, the East Baltimore neighborhood. There's an organization for, I'm trying to find the name of it here, Historic East Baltimore. . .

SS: Eric Johnson and Scott. . . What was his name? Spencer.

AC: Well, the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition is a non-profit community-based partnership that is composed. of communities, City, State institutions and businesses to help revitalize this East Baltimore neighborhood. I'm interested in

knowing, I mean, what are your plans for your houses in East Baltimore? Have you talked with them about what your future. . .

SS: See, they were supposed to buy some properties from us. The Middle East organization, except they don't have the money. Eric Johnson and Scott Spencer, they have the money. What can I do? I talked to Scott Spencer and I talked to Eric Johnson and get nothing.

AC: Who are these people? Eric Johnson?

SS: They're in charge of this historic site. They're next door to the Northeastern Plumbing Supply, in that building there.

AC: Do you recall substance abuse as a social problem in East Baltimore?

SS: Say that again.

AC: Substance abuse. Drugs.

SS: Oh it's terrible. It's so bad down there that they went into 20th Street and Greenmount Avenue and spent a lot of time there. It didn't do any good. When the police left they went back to drugs.

AC: How about in the past? Was it a problem in the past too?

SS: Not in the '50's.

AC: No?

SS: The '40's, no. The only thing you knew was Park Avenue and Mulberry Street where they had these Chinese clubs down there. They would smoke the reefers and stuff like that. But that was told, see. Even here, up the street, I go on the back porch and I see those little vials where the carpet is, you see. And it's a problem.

AC: Can you tell me about the Lombard Street shopping district?

SS: You get good chicken down there. That's about all.

AC: Did you and your family shop there? I mean, routinely?

SS: Years ago. Maybe sixty or seventy years ago. But it turned out bad.

AC: But when you were a young child would your parents drive to Lombard Street and do most of their shopping there then?

SS: No. We had around here. We had an A&P and if they wanted chicken or something they'd go somewhere where there's kosher chicken.

AC: Have you lived most of your life as an adult here?

SS: Yeah.

AC: You've lived here your whole life, haven't you? Except you moved here when you were eight years old. Why are you still living here today?

SS: Well, I was determined not to let them move me out of here, the colored people and such. I don't know. I just felt like staying here, that's all. I didn't feel like picking up and moving out to another place. And then I had the properties here. I had to protect them. That's about what it was. My sister was married. She lived on the second floor and the children up there. And then the children moved out. They were grown and moved out and she moved to 40th Street, a high-rise there. I mean, 4000 Charles Street, Highfield House. And the children and the grandchildren. The children, the son is in Massachusetts and the daughter is in California. The grandchildren are in different places.

AC: Could you put your finger on exactly how many properties you own? I mean, is that a statistic that. . .

SS: Around 40.

AC: That's all? Just, I mean, in Baltimore City? Forty? Did you own more than that at one time? What was the most houses that you ever owned at one time?

SS: Fifty.

AC: I heard you owned a lot more than that. But anyway, okay.

AC: If you could change something about yourself what wouldL it be?

SS: At this age? At eighty-one I can't change anything.

AC: But if you could, is there anything you would change?

SS: I don't know of anything I'd change.

AC: Okay. You mentioned earlier to me about some organizations and groups that you belonged to. Could you kind of revisit them for me?

SS: Well, the Masonic Order and I've been there over fifty years a member. Let's see.

AC: Can you recall any or could you share with me any experiences
(Side 1 of tape ends here)

SS: I ran for State Senate. I ran for House of Delegates. I didn't win any of them. Jack Pollack, he was the big man up here and I didn't go along with him so, therefore, I didn't do anything in politics. So, had I gone with him I might have had certain political jobs. That's about the only thing I had in politics.

AC: Well, how about dealing with government as it related to your properties? Mayor's back in 1940, '50s, '60s – did you deal with them regularly as a property owner in Baltimore City?

SS: I can't recall. I can't recall.

AC: Okay. Do you have a favorite story about East Baltimore?

SS: Do I have a what?

AC: A favorite story.

SS: The story is that it wasn't run right and if they had cleaned up the decayed areas, decaying areas, instead of going through the Inner Harbor and let the balance of the City fall apart. It was a mistake. Everybody was out for the buck and where they could get federal funds they did what they could to get the federal funds at any cost. And I think that's why Baltimore is falling. Because they had no business putting these subways in. They should have had the high-rise rails and people wouldn't have to walk or go to the subway to go up town or wherever. So, it was a big, big mistake. In Chicago they have overhead rails. That's about it.

AC: Okay. Mr. Sakols, is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

SS: About what?

AC: Anything. Well, since we're trying to focus on East Baltimore is there anything else about East Baltimore that you'd like to share with me?

SS: You see, a year ago I sent a letter to the official people who run the traffic and stuff and also the Police Department. And they did nothing about foot patrolmen. But yet they want these cars to reel the sound up and down the streets. You know, they speed and so. That's no good. You have to have foot patrolmen. Foot patrolmen can control the City. What it is people don't want to stop an automobile and talk to the driver with a policeman because somebody could be watching and they have an idea if something happened, they have an idea who did it. You can't do that. You have to have foot patrolmen and the foot patrolmen you can go outside, talk to them while they're walking and neighborhoods could be saved. They don't do it.

AC: Well, let me ask you this. When you, in your properties if people have complaints about maintenance or problems, how long does it take for you to typically respond to those kinds of concerns?

SS: Depending on what kind of help I got. I have 1611 and 1613 Biddle Street, they pressed on those properties and a lot of other properties that I have; I'm being pressed up here on 947 Brooks Lane, the back fire escape; and 901 Chauncey Avenue, the front porches; and 2437 Callow, the front porches.

AC: How do people respond when they don't get the kind of maintenance they think they should? I mean, do they get angry and irate?

SS: They move out.

AC: Oh, they do?

SS: You show the place to people,"yeah, I'm gonna take it," they never come back.

AC: I know that lead paint in East Baltimore is a problem sometimes. Has it had an affect on any of your properties?

SS: Yeah, I can't rent it to children.

AC: Yeah, because it's a serious problem, I know. I know in Public Housing we have spent millions of dollars in trying to abate the lead.

SS: It's the parents fault. Parents don't keep the house clean. And the kids pick up off the floor, pick it up outside. If you got lead in your house they'll say it came from there.

AC: Right. I mean, you can get it from any place, I know. Okay. Well. .

SS: I don't know if you got anything there, but. .

AC: I think we have some good stuff. I'm going to turn the tape recorder off but what is going to happen is we're gonna need to do a follow-up. Just about thirty minutes. Would that be all right?

SS: What is a follow-up?

AC: I mean, I'm gonna go back, I'm gonna listen to the tape, I'm gonna see if any other kinds of issues come up. And, I mean, this is part of my assignment. We're almost there. We're almost done now. So, between now and next week if I could spend just maybe another thirty minutes with you down at your office or whatever, where we could just talk a little bit more. Just to see if some other questions come to mind.

SS: And, uh, what about the people that you've spoken to already?

AC: Well, the tape is still running. I just want you to know that 'cause I said I was going to turn it off. But, other people that I've spoken with?

SS: Yeah.

AC: Well, I haven't. You're my sole interviewee. I'm just.

SS: Oh. I thought. .

AC: There's a class of students and they all have different people to do. So, there's a number of different people. Efram Potts, for example.

SS: I thought you spoke to Efram Potts.

AC: Well, I spoke to him only because he's almost a part of our class. A member of our class. He comes to each and every one of our classes. But, there's another lady in our class who's interviewing him.

SS: What is the class about?

AC: Well, the class is about, well, first of all we're learning how to do an oral history. What we're doing right now. And then we're studying about the East Baltimore neighborhoods and how they've changed over the years.

SS: If you had got somebody in there instead of Mayor Schmoke you would have had a different Baltimore today. You would have had a different Baltimore.

AC: Okay.

(End of tape)