

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

African American Migration to Youngstown, 1940-1965

Personal Experience

O H 1908

ERSKINE CRENSHAW

Interviewed

by

Michael Beverly

on

June 11, 1998

B This is an interview with Erskine Crenshaw for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on African-American Migration to Youngstown, by Michael Beverly, on June 11, 1998, at Mr Crenshaw's home, at 12 45 p m

Okay We are going to get started with the interview I just want to ask your age and when you were born

C 69 Born July 27, 1928

B. Where were you born at?

C Youngstown, Ohio 525 Haymen Street, Youngstown, Ohio North side of town

B What did your parents do for a living?

C My dad was a worker at, from my remembrance, Republic Rubber Works My mother was a domestic

B. She did not work outside the home then

C. [Yes]

B Okay You are retired now.

C I am retired now I retired from Standard Oil Company in 1987

B. Were your parents born here also?

C No My parents come from Alabama My mother is from Greensboro, Alabama, and my father is from Greenville, Alabama They met in Youngstown

B Really?

C They met here They did not come here together They met here

B. We have something in common My father is from Greensboro, Alabama My father was born there, too, Greensboro, Alabama My father was born down there Do you have any idea how your parents heard about Youngstown?

C No, I do not know how they came to come here. I know my dad, he probably come because of relatives My mother now, I do not know how she come here because there is no relatives of hers in Youngstown

- B. Really? Do you know if they lived in any other place before they came to Youngstown?
- C. Well, the other place I know my mother lived at was in Birmingham, Alabama. But my dad, I never heard of any other place than Youngstown.
- B. You say you were born in 1928, right?
- C. 1928.
- B. Okay. While growing up, did you or your brothers and sisters work outside the home?
- C. I do not have any brothers or sisters by my father. My father died in 1937, and I have a sister that was born in 1939. So, none but myself to my parents.
- B. Okay.
- C. I worked outside the home doing a lot of odds and ends as a child. Weeding people's gardens and cleaning wallpaper and washing a few windows, running errands for people. Back in those days a lot of people did not have electricity in their home, and I would go get kerosene for them and the newspaper. That was my little outside. Also, we were eating at about 5:30. [Laughter] That was after my dad died. So, my dad died in 1937. That was in the late 1930's and early 1940's. Then I started going out in town to different warehouses to try to get jobs when I was a bit younger. In fact, I had a job on the railroad when I was fourteen years old. They did not know how old I was because the war was going on, and I put my age up.
- B. Okay. So this was during World War II?
- C. During World War II, I worked on the railroad for about two months until they found out that I was not old enough to work. Then, they discharged me.
- B. What was your first adult occupation when you turned eighteen?
- C. My first adult occupation, I used to work in a warehouse, produce house. It was called Rosenblum Brothers. They handled produce and beer and wine. That is what I worked at until I went to Youngstown Sheet and Tube in 1948. I worked at Youngstown Sheet and Tube from 1948 until, I believe it was 1952 when I first left. I think it was 1952. No, [in] 1963, I left the mill because they started to shut down. I worked at the blast furnace department, and they shut the blast furnace part down. A lot of men went to dumping mills, which I did not like dumping mills. So, I left there and went to work for Coca-Cola and Standard Oil Company. I

worked two jobs at that time

B While growing up, was it just you and your sister and your mother?

C. Me and my sister and mother

B Okay

C She had her fellow, the one that my sister was by Her dad They never married.

B How long did you go to school?

C. I left school in the ninth grade, the last half of ninth grade, due to a skin condition I had at that time I was kind of ashamed going to school It was different working, though People did not look at you like you was in school [Laughter]

B Okay You said you worked at Youngstown Sheet and Tube Was it diverse? Were there a lot of different people, like blacks and whites?

C In Youngstown Sheet and Tube, they had a lot of different skills in there They had what you call ladle liners They had keepers which was on the furnace that steel out the furnace and iron it They had stove keepers. They had larry car operators They had tractor operators They had car dumpers which dumped the ore into the yard Different styles Tract operators and second helpers and first helpers I come up to leving in the mill I went in as a lever, and I worked up to a tract operator Then, I was also a ladle liner, craneman, car dumper. I worked at all capacities in the mill when I was there.

B Advancement was possible for blacks?

C It was possible for blacks When I was in the mill, as far as a black could get was to be a keeper on the furnace

B That is the highest?

C That was the highest a black could go at that time After I left the mill, a black could go a little higher

B This was during the 1950's

C Yeah During the late 1950's and early 1960's

- B: Did most blacks typically work the unskilled jobs?
- C: Skill was advanced in that time as numbers. Graphs thirteen, twelve, ten, and all those different classes, number classes. A keeper, he was a pretty good class. He was about thirteen. The first helper was down around eleven. A second helper was around ten. Operators was down between eight and ten. Tract operators and cranemen, that was their classes, eight to ten, because at that time, your wages was cheap. \$2.47 an hour was top money for a lot of jobs. \$2.47 was my pay as a tract operator. Also, I found out that most bus drivers in this town, Youngstown municipalities, [got] \$2.47 an hour for the bus drivers, which was considered a pretty unique job because only white folks could have that job at that time. No blacks were driving buses. The only blacks that worked for the bus company were washers and sweepers.
- B: Janitorial people.
- C: [Laughter] That was his jobs out there.
- B: In the skilled jobs, what kind of money would they make then? Would there be \$3.00 an hour or \$4.00?
- C: Well, probably your highest was probably \$3.00 an hour. Then, I went to work for Sohio. I cannot remember the exact amount of money I made an hour, but I went from \$6,800 a year to \$11,000 a year in my capacity there.
- B: That was not bad.
- C: That was a nice raise. That shows, therefore then, that there was not too many blacks that worked service stations. That was a white person's job, too. So, I just went in on the beginning of the skills of working service stations. I worked up to be a manager which [paid] about \$35,000 a year, which is not bad.
- B: That is not bad right now. While you were there at the steel mill, was the union sensitive to blacks' needs?
- C: It helped the blacks because, in fact, in the blast furnace when I worked there, we had a black shop steward named Fred Dillard. At the drop of a hat, if things went bad for a black person, he would shut the mill down.
- B: Really?
- C: I did not really mean shut the mill down. I mean disconnecting all the pipes in the furnace and everything, and that just put it on bank until things was settled.

The Wildcat Era they called it. A lot of wildcat strikes back in those days.

B: Really? There were a lot of strikes. Wow. In the steel mill, did blacks usually associate with blacks and whites with whites?

C: I will tell you. We worked with each other. We talked to each other. The only thing we did not do, some whites, the lower job whites, they had restrooms and locker area with the blacks. But the ones that was like electricians and mill rights, you know they had different positions. The mill rights had their locker room. Electricians had their locker room. The tool repairman, he was like a blacksmith. He had his own locker room area. Mostly blacks had to change their clothes in the same place. We would all use the same restroom at that time in the mill.

B: Were you involved in the union in any kind of way?

C: I was a member of the union. I never was involved in it. I was just a member, just only as a member.

B: Was your job safe? Was the job safe that you worked?

C: It was safe to some degree. Everybody worked in the same capacity. There were no different capacities. Well, they had areas marked out in the mill where you were supposed to wear your hard hat at. They had signs posted all over the mill for your safety. If there was any accident, you almost caused your own accident maybe because you were ignorant to the fact of reading or something in that order. Anyone that could read and knew what he was doing never had any accidents in the mill. No fatalities. The only fatality they ever had in the mill where I was working at was somebody went in there at night through the fence and was stealing copper. One of the turniforms, as they called them then, come up and caught all them and beat them to death. That was a misdemeanor there. It was no everyday accident that you see people just actually getting killed like that. Some of the jobs in these plants today would be more unsafe, I think, than the steel mills were.

B: Do you feel that you were treated the same as white people?

C: I feel that I was treated real good in the mill. I look back at the time, I consider myself a pretty good job because I had opportunity to go on my job and sit down and read novels and operate and everything else. I never was just a stoned out laborer. Even though I did not graduate from school, I still had a pretty good job.

B: Right. While you were growing up and when you got married and all that, did

you live in an ethnically diverse neighborhood? Were there whites and blacks?

C. When I first got married, I lived out on North Bedlum down there at the church, and they had the plant across the street from there. Well, it was mostly all black neighborhood. Anything past Belmont Avenue, which is over in this direction here towards the university, was mostly white. Black people lived on the other side of Belmont Avenue in that area.

B. Okay. Did you live in a house then?

C. I lived in a house down there.

B. Okay. So, you lived in a house pretty much ever since you were little.

C. Ever since I have been here.

B. Okay. When you were growing up, did your parents or yourself live near your job?

C. Like I said, we lived on Hayman Street, and my dad's job was on Albert Street. What is that plant out there now? That is where Republic Rubber was located, right there in that area. He even had a car at that time, too. [laughter]

B. I wanted to talk a little bit about the migrants. Do you remember anybody during this period who came from the south and may have worked with you in the steel mill?

C. Some young fellows come up from the south and went to the mill. They come from mostly Alabama, a few from West Virginia and Virginia. They come up here and they worked in the steel mills. Some come from coal fields and some come from the farms.

B. What were they like?

C. They were intelligent and knowledgeable doing their job. They come here and they were not dummies. They understood the facts of life. They did not come here with their yes and no, sir, and this and that. Some of them were well bred.

B. Did any of them live in the neighborhood that you lived in?

C. At that time, a lot of them lived in the vicinity of the steel mill, which is called Briar Hill. A lot of them lived up in Briar Hill, which was close to where they worked at.

- B Did you feel that you had to help them in any kind of way?
- C No. Everyone, when you first go into the steel mill, you have got to have somebody to show you what your job is and how to do it. You know. Other than that, you did not have to baby them, just show them where you shovel at and where to mix the clay at and how to get to the different areas, how to clean tracts and different things. It was, more or less, a labor job that they come in on. After years advancement, those were not labor jobs. You could advance to the furnace laborers.
- B So they did seem as intelligent as anybody else.
- C. Yeah. Just as intelligent as anyone else. They did not come here illiterate like you will see back in the earlier decades, probably. I heard talk of how they come here in the early 1920's and late 1910's.
- B They seemed kind of backward.
- C. They seemed backward. They worked in coal mines, which is a hard job, but it is a skillful job in a way because everybody cannot mine coal.
- B I believe that.
- C. Everybody cannot farm.
- B Right. The ones who came during the 1940's and 1950's seemed pretty intelligent?
- C They seemed pretty intelligent.
- B They were dressed okay?
- C They dressed in their style. A lot of people that first come from the south, they liked blue jeans, which was cheap then. Blue jeans was much cheaper than they are today. Blue jeans today are almost considered silk. [Laughter] Back in those days you could buy a pair of blue jeans for \$1.25. You could not touch no clothes today for \$1.25.
- B. Right. During that time, did you feel that you could live anywhere in Youngstown if you wanted to and if you had the money?
- C Well, we knew our areas.

- B. Okay
- C. You did not see too many people trying to move out of an area. In the later years, people started making a little more money in the later 1950's and the early 1960's. After General Motors came in in the late 1960's, they made more money, and then they started block busting. People would go. This area here opened up early over the hill. From Belmont to Wick Avenue opened up for us earlier than any other part. Right up on the hill past Norwood and up in Delaware, that area was considered the white area. We went to school up in those areas, but we could not live up there.
- B. Even if you had the money, you could not go there?
- C. At that time, you could not live up there until they started block busting. Then a few started moving up in that general area. Then that is when the general area started moving out. So, the white neighborhood moved out to Austintown and Boardman and some in Liberty. That was restricted to us at that time.
- B. At this time, did you feel that you could go to any place that you wanted to go in Youngstown, like theaters?
- C. Well, we were always allowed to go to the movies and different places, but it was just where we were allowed to sit at. We had to sit upstairs.
- B. On the balcony?
- C. On the balcony.
- B. Blacks could not sit downstairs?
- C. Only one show in town that the blacks sat downstairs, and that was the Warner Theater.
- B. Okay. You could sit downstairs at the Warner.
- C. You could sit downstairs at the Warner.
- B. Did blacks go to certain theaters?
- C. They went to all the theaters.
- B. All the theaters.

- C: There was a selection of theaters. We all went to all of them. Where the best movie was being shown, that is where we went to. Was not no segregation in the movies mostly, just the balcony. And I think the balcony was a good seat because they are not going to throw nothing down on you. [Laughter]
- B: You are right about that. That is a good point. I did not think about that.
- C: If you are sitting down on the first floor, anything could happen to you sitting down there.
- B: How about hospitals or doctors? Did you feel discriminated against?
- C: Hospitals, I was born at home. I was not even born at a hospital. My kids were born at a hospital. It was pretty good. In fact, my doctors were white doctors mostly. I was born by a black doctor, but my kids, two of them were by black doctors, the last ones by white doctors in different hospitals from the South side to North side Hospital.
- B: How many kids do you have?
- C: Five.
- B: You have five. Okay. [Telephone rings and tape stops] During the 1940's and 1950's, I heard that there was a big controversy over the swimming pools that blacks were not allowed to use.
- C: Yeah. That was a big controversy years ago. They had pools on the North side, which was called the North Side Pool, which was segregated. They had a pool out in Idora Park which they covered over when the blacks started going out there to swim. They made a children's land out of it and covered the pool over. They built a pool down in the projects up there. Chase Pool they called it then, for the blacks. They had a pool out there which was called Nigger Park Pool, which was down from the white pool. The water run out of the white pool down through the black pool. [Laughter] Those pools, the blacks went and struck against them. They started to picket the pools and get some altercations and different things. Eventually, they let the blacks come into the North side pool, and Chase Pool, at that time, was almost shut down because the blacks started going to different pools. They would not go to Chase Pool, which was black.
- B: Was that over in Briar Hill?
- C: It was over there when you go in the projects now the area of the projects that is past Ward Street going toward Briar Hill. That is where Chase Pool was at.

- B Okay It is not there anymore?
- C It is still there, but they just do not use it.
- B Because blacks started using all the other pools?
- C Using other pools just like Lincoln Park The pool that was down for the blacks was closed off Then they had a pool up further I do not even know if that is still open or not I guess they just do not swim in it They had a pool on the South side Blacks started swimming up there, March Pool It was just at that time the altercations mostly stemmed on the North Side Pool
- B Most of the fights were over at North Side
- C At North side up there by the Todd Cemetery right across
- B: Yeah How about Idora Park?
- C Idora Park, they had a pool out there in which the whites swam in It was really beautiful It had sand around, a nice diving board and all When the blacks got to go in there and the black pool started to go under the Idora Park Pool, that is when they buried it
- B Okay
- C They called a guy, Gilmartin, Concrete Eddy He is the one that closed their pool out and made children land out of that end
- B Did you have any problems going to Idora Park?
- C We could go to Idora Park, but we just could not go swim
- B. Okay You could go [Laughter] There was no swimming allowed, though
- C No swimming You could go to Idora Park, but swimming was out
- B. For the migrants who came here during this time, was the church and different organizations involved in helping them to get settled here?
- C I will tell you Most of the migrants that I understand that come here, it was not the church that brought them here It was the steel mills that brought them in here Steel mills sent for a lot of them In fact, they sent over in India They got Indians to come here Puerto Ricans, they got them in here. Steel mills sent for

them, and they gave them housing

B They helped get them settled

C They settled them down, the housing and everything. When they brought them in here, they had houses for them. The blacks that come from the south, they had to, more or less, rely upon their own housing. They did not settle right off

B They relied on relatives or something?

C Relatives and friends or just the general idea of coming into town and living at the YMCA and different places until they got settled. Then they sent for their family.

B How about places like the Monkey's Nest?

C That was down to Lorrie and Rayen Avenue, down in that area, which was down near the steel mills. It was mostly black, but they had some white. Macy's lived in that area. They got along good over there.

B Really?

C Only thing we had altercations with the Monkey's Nest was because of the young people from the North side and the people from Monkey's Nest. We could not go over there. [Laughter]

B Really? They would not let you?

C The blacks would not let the blacks come over there because they did not want them bothering girls over there. [Laughter] Just like the Sharon Line. The North side could not go to the Sharon Line. That was too far. That was just for the teenagers, though, mostly. It was not the grown people doing it, just teenagers.

B Generally, then, on the East side, blacks mostly lived on the Sharon Line?

C Blacks lived on the Sharon Line. Blacks lived on the certain sections of the East side. Monkey's Nest was, like I say, a melting pot like over there. All different races over there.

B Did many blacks live on the South side or the West side?

C: Yeah. They lived on the South side. I cannot figure out how they were on the South side because I do have a cousin that lived up as far as Kenmore. That

was between Hillman and Glenwood. I think Warren Avenue was about as high as they could go up on the South side, at that time. You could go through there. You had to go through those areas to go to Idora Park. There was no trouble going through those areas because there was no race riots in those areas until later years.

B. How about the police? Did you feel protected? Did you think the police was your friend?

C. I felt more friendship with the police in those years than I do now.

B. Really?

C. Because a lot of times those policemen in those years were neighborhood people. They did not come from outlying areas to police your area, and they do not even know anything about you.

B. They lived there with you.

C. They lived there with us. On occasion, they would arrest you. But everybody respected the police in those days. You speak to them. They cruised the neighborhood, just constantly cruising through, and you wave at them. They wave back at you and might even stop and talk to you. If you wave at a policeman now, he will think you are doing something. [Laughter] That is a big difference in the policemen in the early days and the policemen today.

B. Did you feel like the mayor and the city council were for blacks?

C. We had some black councilmen in the years back from our neighborhood. As long as we stayed in our neighborhood, we had no altercations. In fact, growing up, that is when started to see the different things happening in this town. As I got older, this town changed. That is when the people started being more rowdy with each other and having riots and different things.

B. During the 1960's?

C. In the 1960's.

B. Do you think your mother and father did the right thing by coming to Youngstown?

C. I think they did right. I have been here 69 years, and it is still fruitful to me. I love Youngstown. I left this town for maybe four or five months at a time, but I

always end up back here in Youngstown.

B So, overall, you think they did do well

C They did good I had relatives that come here after them that have thrived pretty well They did good in this town

B. You all lived through to 1965 and all that.

C After the steel mills started to shut down, like right now, a lot of the blacks that did come back during those early years, they started to go back to the southern states where they come from

B But it was the right thing for your family

C It was a good thing for my family to come because none of my family ever went back down after they come here

B Generally, you felt accepted by all blacks and whites that was here?

C Black and white, I felt accepted by them. I never had no real bad altercations, just one time as a kid I was up at Evans Field, which I was by myself Evans Field was a playground It filled up by black and white, but mostly white lived in that area There was a white boy He jumped at me and picked on me I could run pretty fast [Laughter]

B That is good I am glad to hear that

C I was not scared to go up there. As I got there, these two bullies was up there That is all Otherwise, it was okay

B Really no problems there

C No problems I just had to go at a time when no blacks was up there I was by myself and the two white boys [Laughter] I got there a little bit too early, I think

B Okay Well, that is it I want to thank you for your time.

C Glad to help you, sir Back in those days, it was just tit for tat

B. Okay Thanks

End of Interview