

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

African American Migration to Youngstown, 1940-1965

Personal Experience

O.H. 1915

MARY ABRON

Interviewed

by

Michael Beverly

on

September 8, 1998

B: This is an interview with Mary Abron for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on African American Migration to Youngstown, 1940-1965, by Michael Beverly, on September 8, 1998, at 522 Falls Avenue.

What year were you born?

A: I was born September 28, 1931.

B: And your place of birth?

A: Greensboro, Alabama.

B: Can you give me the birthplace of your parents, where they were born?

A: They were born in Greensboro, too.

B: Why did you come to Youngstown?

A: Well, opportunity, wanting to get out of the country and come to the city.

B: Did you live any other places before you came to Youngstown, any other towns or cities?

A: No. I spent some time in Birmingham, Alabama with relatives.

B: When you were growing up, did your mother work outside the home? Did she have any jobs?

A: We were on a farm, and we all worked.

B: So the children and everybody worked?

A: Yes, everybody worked.

B: How did you hear about Youngstown?

A: My aunt lived here and she came home for the summer and I came back with her, after I got out of high school.

B: Okay. What was your first adult occupation when you grew up? Do you remember your first one?

A: After coming to Youngstown, I worked at the Working Men's Overall Factory on Madison Avenue.

B: The place that you worked at, was it mixed? Were there white and black?

A: Yes.

B: Were you treated okay?

A: Yes, real good.

B: Really? They treated you fairly.

A: Yes.

B: Did your job have a union or anything?

A: No, not back then.

B: How was it when you came to Youngstown? What kind of place did you live in? You lived with your aunt?

A: I lived with my aunt at 737 Shehy Street.

B: So it was a house?

A: Yes, right off of Wilson Avenue. Across from the Ritz Bar. We was right across from the Ritz Bar.

B: What year did you come here?

A: I came to Youngstown in 1951.

B: You know, there were some controversies in Youngstown during the 1950's. I do not know if you remember. There were controversies dealing with the swimming pools and all that. There was talk that blacks could not go to some of the swimming pools. Do you remember that?

A: I do not remember that. I am not a swimmer, [laughter] so I do not remember that.

B: How about the police? Did you trust them during this time?

A: Well, yes, because I never had a run-in, you know, with them. I never had any reason to call the police or nothing back in those days.

B: So they seemed to be okay?

A: It seemed to be okay, as far as I knew.

B: How about the mayor of the city? Did you like him?

A: Well, my aunt Eliza worked for the mayor. The mayor was Charles Henderson, and my aunt Eliza worked for him, and we were interacting with that family.

B: When you came to Youngstown, was there a good support system to help you get adjusted to Youngstown? Did the church help you, or any other relatives beside your aunt, help you get adjusted to Youngstown.

A: Not really. Just my aunt and my cousins, mostly, helped me get adjusted. And I did join Mt. Zion Baptist. I had friends, I met friends there.

B: So it kind of helped you out?

A: Right.

B: How about your job? Your co-workers, did they help you?

A: Yes.

B: Was it a big adjustment when you came here?

A: It was.

B: It was a lot different?

A: It was a lot different than Alabama. A lot of things that I saw was first with me. For one thing, after I got here, my cousin was not going to church. So, I decided I would sleep on Sunday's, too. [laughter] But that did not work for me. I had to get up and get back out again, you know. It was a lot of things that I saw different in the way it was done in the South than was done here. The first thing that really got my attention, I went to a wake with my aunt, and when I got there, you know, people was hugging. And then after they left, they turned the music on and started drinking. In Alabama, when they had one, they would bring the body to the house and they would have prayer services. Now, that was kind of strange to me. I called my mother and I told her after the wake, after they finish crying, then they have a party.

B: Yeah, I guess that is the way to say it. [laughter]

A: Yes.

B: So you come from a religious background?

A: Yes, I did.

B: Your parents were really in to church?

A: Yes.

B: How about the differences, as far as the way white people treated you in Youngstown? In the South they talk about segregation and all that. Was it better when you came here, as far as that was concerned?

A: Well, yes, in the places you could go and everything. Now, in Alabama, where we lived out, it was a neighborhood where there was black and white. And we interacted with each other. I never had any trouble with them because, these people, they treated us just like we was one of them. What they had, they would share with my family. What we had, we shared with them. So, really, when people would be talking about the trouble they had, you know, down there, I had to sit and look. Up to the day those people that was there, the ones that are living, it is the same way. When they hear we are in town, they come to see us.

B: Really?

A: Yes.

B: So it was different for you, then?

A: It was different for me in that way. We were out in the country, you know. My grandmother and my grandfather had a big fruit orchard and we had one of the wells that run all the time, the bored wells. Well, these people would come and get water from our well, and Big Mama would give them fruit, and then the meat and things. They had a cow ranch. They would bring it to our house, after that. So, really, I did not run into any of that.

B: So how about when you came to Youngstown? Did you feel like white people would share with you here?

A: Well, I did not run into that like that. But the ones that my aunt had, the friends, they treated me just like they were treating them. And that is why, when people are talking about it like that, I just never had that problem.

B: As far as racism was concerned in Greensboro.

A: Right.

B: You had your children here?

- A: Yes. I had three of them here, three of them there, because at first, when I would get pregnant, I would go home because I wanted to be by my mother when I got ready to have the child.
- B: I understand.
- A: So, finally, I outgrew it, you know, and then I started staying on here. But she would come here, or one of my sisters would come here, you know, after the others was born, the last three was born.
- B: So, when you had your kids here in Youngstown, were the hospital rooms segregated? Did you have black roommates or white roommates?
- A: Well, it was segregated. I had black and white roommates when my children were born.
- B: Oh, you did have both?
- A: Right. They were born in St. Elizabeth's Hospital.
- B: How were the doctors? How did they treat you?
- A: Well, they treated me nice. My doctor was Nathan Blinkey, and he treated me nice.
- B: Did you ever find that your kids had problems or anything here in Youngstown, as far as in school and all that?
- A: No, just the problems children have, the little devilish problems. But so far than that, I worked with them in the schools and everything, and I never had any problems with them. You know, back in those days, it was not all of that. You know, you better not touch my child and you better not this. You know, I worked with the teachers and Mr. Casoulus. They went to Rayen. All of them graduated from Rayen except the youngest, Sylvia. He saw me so often he would ask me, "Miss Brown, why are you coming up here so often? The parents we need to see, we do not see." I was always there with the children.
- B: Were any of the jobs hazardous, were any of them dangerous?
- A: I was working on a shirt factory and you could get burned if you do not work fast enough.
- B: Were you treated fairly, were you treated equally?
- A: I think so.

B: Did you live near your job?

A: No, I lived on Shehy. I used to go to work on the bus. I lived on the East Side when I was working there.

B: When you came to Youngstown, did you think that the people were more tolerant, less tolerant or the same as the people in Greensboro?

A: I would say about the same. When I was in Greensboro, I did not have to go out and try to get help for myself because I was still a minor. I was under my mother. When I got out of high school, that was when I came here. So in the business world, I did not have to interact for myself. So I cannot say how that was in Alabama. But after I got here and I worked there for a couple of years and then I got married. I started having children then, and then I was at home from then on.

B: Were you denied access to any public facility here because of your race or your color when you came here?

A: No.

B: You could go anywhere you wanted to go?

A: Anywhere I wanted to go. I did not go too much. I was always a homebody. It was not too much going that I did, but the places that I did go, I was treated nice when I went in them.

B: During this time, I know the civil rights movement was going on. In the 1950's and the 1960's, you were going to Mount Zion. Was the church involved here in Youngstown in civil rights for the blacks in Youngstown, were they active then?

A: Well, I do not know anything about that. I did not see anything they were doing but talking. That was all I saw. As close as I got to it, all that I saw and knew about it was from the television.

B: Just seeing, like, Martin Luther King?

A: Right.

B: So they never really had him come here?

A: No, he never was here. But, now, Reverend Simon of New Bethel, he went and he was marching. I do not know no other preacher from here that did take part except Lonny Simon. That was the only one.

- B: During this time, did you feel that you could live anywhere you wanted to in Youngstown, as long as you had the money to buy the house? Or were there some places that blacks really did not live or were not accepted?
- A: Now that is something else I am going to have to say, that we never bought a home when I was with my first husband. We was around in apartments and around with relatives. So we never ran into that either.
- B: What kind of apartments did you live in, you and your husband?
- A: Well, I lived with my aunts and then we rented on Hawn Street. We had an apartment in a private home. And then, in 1960, we moved in Westlake Terrace on Griffith street.
- B: Yeah, my parents lived there.
- A: And I was there for fourteen and a half years.
- B: Yeah, my parents lived there, around 1960, I believe.
- A: I was right behind Covington School, in apartment 187.
- B: Were the whites living there in Westlake during that time?
- A: Well, there were not any around me. But before I moved out, my next-door neighbor was white.
- B: Oh, really?
- A: Yes.
- B: Okay, so there were some.
- A: Right. And we got along good. Even the children today, if they see me, they holler, "Here come Mama!" because what I had, I shared with her. And what she had, she shared with me.
- B: So it really was not too hard getting adjusted to Youngstown?
- A: No, it was not.
- B: I have heard some people say they were upset about when they first came here. They just missed home.
- A: I did miss home.

B: Did you?

A: Yes, I did. I did miss home. One time I went back, but I just stayed a couple of months, and then I came back. But I did miss home at first, because I was from a big family and had never been away before.

B: How many were there in your family?

A: Fourteen.

B: And your mother and father?

A: Yes.

B: Wow. [laughter]

A: And now it is 13 still living. Only one has passed.

B: Do you think you raised your standard of living by coming here to Youngstown?

A: I think so.

B: Overall, do you think you did the right thing by coming here?

A: Yes, I do. I think I did the right thing about coming here. Like you said, integration down there took place in the schools and everything after I was here, so my children did have a chance to be in the integrated schools and everything. When I was there, Hale County Training School was black. And the white school was down on the other end of town. So we did not have any interaction there, other than when we had a football game. Hale County did not have a field and the white school did, so that is where our football games were played.

B: Would you play against each other?

A: Well, whoever they was going to play, you know, like different teams was coming from Marion, Uniontown, different places, and we always had to play them at the white school because we did not have a field.

B: Did the black schools play the white schools in football?

A: Not then.

B: Oh, they just played black against another black school.

A: Yes.

B: Okay. How about other blacks in Youngstown? How did they treat you when you came here? Did they treat you like an outsider because you were from the south?

A: You mean here?

B: Yeah, here in Youngstown. Did the blacks treat you okay?

A: Yes, they treated me okay.

B: They were kind of nice?

A: Yes.

B: So you do believe, even after all this time, it was the right thing by coming here?

A: Yes, I do.

B: Okay, I thank you for your time.

End of Interview