

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
AFRICAN MIGRATION TO YOUNGSTOWN, 1940-1965

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

O.H. 1923

MCCULLOUGH WILLIAMS JR.

Interviewed

By

Michael Beverly

On

April 27, 1999

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

AFRICAN AMERICAN MIGRATION TO YOUNGSTOWN, 1940-1965

INTERVIEWEE: MCCULLOUGH WILLIAMS JR.

INTERVIEWER: Michael Beverly

SUBJECT: African American Migration to Youngstown, 1940-1965

DATE: April 27, 1999

B: This is an interview for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program with McCullough Williams, Jr., regarding African American Migration to Youngstown, 1940-1965, by Michael Beverly. This interview is being done at his home on Belmont Avenue in Youngstown on April 27, 1999 at 3:00. Could you tell me a little bit about your background: your age, where you were born, etc?

W: I was born November 27, 1927 in Youngstown, Ohio.

B: Where were your parents born?

W: My mother was born in Shreveport, Louisiana and my father was born in Florence, South Carolina.

B: Do you know why they came to Youngstown?

W: Yes. My dad came here for employment. He came here from Coitsville, Pennsylvania where he was working in a mill. He heard they were employing people here in Youngstown.

B: So, he heard about it in Pennsylvania?

W: Yes.

B: Was there any other place he lived before Pennsylvania?

W: No, he went from Florence, South Carolina straight to Pennsylvania and then here to Youngstown.

B: How many brothers or sisters did you have?

W: I had two sisters, one was a year older and the other was a year younger.

B: Did you work outside the home while you were growing up?

W: I worked at my dad's parking lot when I was growing up. At thirteen, I had a full-time job parking cars. My mother died when we were young, so my dad raised us. My sisters remained in the home and were responsible for cleaning and cooking.

B: Before your mother passed away, did she work outside the home?

W: No. Those were the years when mothers were housewives.

B: You say your mother came here to go to school?

W: She came here to attend Youngstown College.

B: What was your first adult occupation?

W: My first adult occupation...when I was attending college I worked in Columbus, while at Ohio State University, as an assistant recreation director. When I moved to Cleveland to go to at Cleveland College of Monitory Science I worked at St. Luke's Hospital to assist Medical Interns to perform autopsies. I worked for the Cleveland Board of Education as a baseball director. After college, I came back to Youngstown. I needed employment so my dad asked me to join his business. At that time he had several parking lots. He gave me half interest in his business. I told him that I had no money, but he said that he was giving me half the business. He knew I was a competent person.

B: As a business, were you accepted by the white community?

W: Yeah, we were. We were in the downtown business district. Ninety-five percent of our customers were white.

B: What year did you graduate from college?

W: In 1950.

B: Did you have your Bachelors degree?

W: Yes

B: How did the blacks treat you? Was there any jealousy?

W: Yes, there was jealousy.

B: Did some people treat you with respect, though?

W: Oh, yeah. I started business early when I started the funeral business. I was twenty-four. I bought a building in 1951 and opened in January of 1952.

B: The places that you worked out, where they diverse ethnically?

W: There was no diversity in Columbus. I worked Tuesday, Thursday, evenings and Saturday mornings because the whites had Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings. There was no diversity at all.

B: Did you have a union?

W: Oh, no.

B: When you came back to Youngstown after college and had money did you feel that you could live anywhere you wanted?

W: That wasn't true. I couldn't buy a place, but when I did buy one on Belmont Avenue, blacks didn't live north of Madison Avenue.

B: You really couldn't live anywhere you wanted to then?

W: No.

B: Was the neighborhood that you were growing up in ethnically diverse?

W: No. Well, we probably had about 30 families in the neighborhood and four of those were white.

B: When you and your wife got married, where did you live?

W: We lived in an apartment. Then, after a few years with a few children we decided that we needed more room. We found out that there was discrimination everywhere. They wouldn't even sell us a house in certain areas. We ended up moving to Crandall Avenue.

B: Do you think that the reason you couldn't move to certain areas was because of the whites, or was it because the banks for city wouldn't let you?

W: I think it was a partnership between the realtors and the banks.

B: Do you remember when the blacks were coming in from the south?

W: No, not really because most of the people were coming in larger numbers came in a different period. The larger groups came in the late 1930's. The smaller groups came in the 1940's.

B: As far as the different facilities in Youngstown were you denied access because you were colored?

W: Oh, yes. We couldn't get good seats at the theatre. We sat in the balcony.

B: I heard that there was a big controversy over the swimming pools during the 40's and 50's. Was it as big of a thing as they say?

W: Oh, yes. That's true. All public and private swimming pools were off limits to the blacks in Youngstown. Idora Park had a swimming pool but we weren't permitted to swim there.

B: Did you have any other problems at Idora Park?

W: Yes, we could only attend, in the early years, when it was Kiddie's Day. There was a black day when we could use anything except the swimming pool.

B: Other than that the blacks weren't allowed to enter the park?

W: Right. Later on it changed. My children experienced the change.

B: When you say the "early years" what do you mean?

W: The 30's and 40's.

B: I heard that there was a separate YMCA for the blacks.

W: That's right. The West Federal Street YMCA was for the blacks. They wouldn't even house blacks in the Central Y.

B: How well did the hospitals treat you?

W: I remember St. Elizabeth's Hospital. They had a sign welcoming black patients.

B: Did the blacks have separate rooms from the white?

W: Oh, yes.

B: Weren't you elected for city councilman for like 30 years?

W: Yes. I was the first black democrat elected to office. I was the 3rd black man as a city councilman.

B: What got you into politics? What interested you?

W: I enjoyed it ever since junior high. I was active in civil rights. I met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Cleveland on August 8, 1956.

B: When you were on city council did you have any problems with your fellow coworkers?

W: No, I never had a problem. I had a good relationship with the other councilmen.

B: What do you feel were some of your greatest accomplishments as a city councilman?

W: I thought was getting the first black fireman hired. It was Jesse Carter.

B: What year was that?

W: 1960.

B: So, there were no black firemen until 1960?

W: Right.

B: How about black policemen?

W: We had black policemen. There's a history going back a number of years.

B: In general, were there many blacks that worked for the city?

W: Oh, no. The other thing we were able to accomplish was to get two black foremen for the street department.

B: They were the first?

W: Yes.

B: When was this?

W: 1959.

B: I heard that there were no black clerks in stores.

W: That's correct. There were none in the banks either.

B: Was Jesse Carter accepted?

W: In those years, people weren't even living in the same neighborhoods. And here you are, in a firehouse, where you have to eat, sleep, and shower in the same area. Jesse stayed there for thirty years until he retired.

B: Is he still alive?

W: Yes, I believe so.

B: Is he still here in Youngstown?

W: Yes.

B: During this period, did the mayor help you?

W: He was a great supporter.

B: After the early 60's did you start to see a lot more clerks?

W: It was a gradual process. It took a little time.

B: Later on, you became the president of the board of education?

W: Yes.

B: When did you first become part of the board of education?

W: I became a member in 1970 and then president in 1972.

B: During the 40's and 50's there was talk about police brutality, did you ever experience such a thing?

W: Oh, no. I never did experience police brutality.

B: When you were a councilman were there any complaints about police brutality?

W: No, not really. The only complaints were about smart remarks by the police.

B: During this period were there many singers that came to Youngstown?

W: Oh, yes. My dad belonged to a club that brought many outstanding bands to the area. There was a lot of entertainment.

B: So, there was a great nightlife around here then?

W: Yes, there was.

B: Did the great Gospel singers come around, too?

W: That wasn't as big of a deal.

B: There were a lot of jazz bands that came around then?

W: Yes.

B: How long were you a council member?

W: I served two terms. I didn't care for it much. I resigned from the position.

B: How do you feel that Youngstown has helped your family? Are you glad that your mother and father raised you here?

W: I have enjoyed growing up and living in Youngstown. I made a living in Youngstown. I would have made a living anywhere I went. I may have had it easier somewhere else but who knows.

B: Was it a good place to raise your children?

W: Yes. My kids didn't have to go through what I went through. My kids had it much easier.

B: Were there a lot of blacks in the sanitation department?

W: That was basically the only job available. Back then they had to carry the garbage cans from the back yards because you didn't put them at the curb like we do now.

B: So, Youngstown really was a nice place to live?

W: I think so. I enjoyed growing up here. I enjoyed sports, church, my neighbors, my friends, and my family.

B: Did you have good relationships with other black businesses like the different funeral home owners?

W: Yes, I had good relations with other business people. That wasn't difficult.

B: You all had to work together sometimes?

W: Yes, that's the only way to be when you're in business. We were competitive yet sociable.

B: I would like to thank you for your time and for participating in this interview.

W: You're welcome.

End of Interview.