

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

African American Migration to Youngstown Ohio 1940-1965

Personal Experiences

O.H. 1954

Frankie Halfacre

Interviewed

On

July 6, 2001

By

Michael Beverly

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AFRICAN AMERICAN MIGRATION TO YOUNGSTOWN OHIO 1940-1965
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INTERVIEWEE: FRANKIE HALFACRE

INTERVIEWER: Michael Beverly

SUBJECT: African American Migration to Youngstown Ohio 1940-1965

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B: This is an interview with Frankie Halfacre for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on black migration to Youngstown Ohio in downtown Youngstown on July 6, 2001. Mr. Halfacre thank you for your time. What is your place of birth?

H: I was born here in Youngstown on 516 Hayman Street.

B: Were your parents born here?

H: My mother was yes. My father was from Danville Illinois.

B: Do you know why your father came to this area?

H: No.

B: How long did your mother's family live here?

H: They were one of the first African American families to move into Youngstown.

B: What was your mother's maiden name?

H: Stewart. If you know that name you'd know that they've built a lot of buildings around here.

B: William Stewart?

H: William Stewart was my uncle.

B: They've been here since what the 1860's?

H: Yes, easily.

B: Did your mom work outside of the home when you were growing up?

H: Yes, sometimes. She mostly did beautician work inside the home.

B: What did your dad do?

H: He was killed just before I was born.

B: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

H: I had a brother. He was living outside of Dayton he died a few years ago.

B: I'm sorry to hear that. When you were growing up did you work outside the home?

H: Yes I worked in the park department, I did a lot of different jobs.

B: How did you make it? It sounded like it was tough for your mom?

H: It was back in the day and single mothers didn't have it as hard as they do now.

B: Were your grandparents around at the time?

H: My grandmother was.

B: What was your first adult occupation?

H: I worked for the park department as a caretaker. I did that after I got out of the service.

B: Can you tell me what year you were born?

H: 1936.

B: I don't know if you remember this but I heard that during the 1940's that there were a lot of

H: I was one of the forefronts of that. I was the first African American locker boy that went to Lincoln Park other than Chase Pool???

B: Were blacks allowed to swim in those pools?

H: We could swim in those pools but they made it known that we weren't welcomed there.

B: Do you remember when this practice came to an end and they became more comfortable with us swimming in the pools?

H: I guess when the whites moved out.

B: How about in Idora Park?

H: Idora Park was actually worse. I remember it differently than a lot of people. They had a nice swimming pool and when blacks were finally allowed to swim there they covered it up and made it a kiddy land with cars and stuff.

B: How about the movie theatres?

H: We had to sit upstairs. Today's Youngstown was yesterday's Mississippi.

B: It was that bad then?

H: It's that bad now.

B: It was segregated then?

H: Yes, in fact, to bring you up to date we had a cave in on our street not too long ago due to the water. The water department couldn't fix it so they had to contract it out and I think there was one black person employed by the contractor. The contractors right now are getting ready to resurface the streets here and I'm wondering how many blacks are going to be working.

B: So it's going on even now.

H: Yes. I see it more now than I did then. I really didn't understand it then.

B: Did you experience a lot of racism growing up?

H: We experienced it.

B: Were you and your mother able to live wherever you wanted in the city?

H: No, in fact if you're familiar with Youngstown the West Lake Terrace was south and north of Madison Avenue. South of Madison was all black, north of Madison was all white and if you crossed the street you had to fight. Lexington Settlement was on the north side of the projects so we had many battles going back and forth to the settlement with the white kids and even their parents.

B: Is that where you grew up on West Lake?

H: No I didn't grow up there but I lived near there so I could walk there.

B: I've heard about the monkey's nest, was that where it was located in West Lake?

H: Riverbed was the location of monkey's nest. The reason they used to call it the monkey's nest is because when the circus used to come they didn't put the monkeys on the train because they would act up and all the other animals would act up. So when they got to Youngstown somebody would have some monkeys and they'd have them in the circus. So one day when they were taking the monkeys back to their cage the cage fell and the monkeys got up in the trees and that's how it got its name. I always thought it had racist ties but a very good friend of mine, Dr. Yozwiak told me that that's how it happened.

B: Did you ever visit Monkey's Nest?

H: Yes I used to carry papers over there. I loved it there it was nice.

B: Was it all African Americans living there or were there other groups there?

- H: There were other groups there but pretty soon African Americans sort of took over there. The people that lived there were very friendly.
- B: But you didn't feel that you could live anywhere you wanted in the city?
- H: No.
- B: Do you know if the real estate people were involved in that or the banks or was it just everyone?
- H: I'd say it was mostly the banks. They wouldn't loan you any money. In fact we even had trouble getting money from the banks when we got our radio station. We had to go to Marion Ohio to get the money.
- B: How long ago was that?
- H: About eight or nine years ago?
- B: So it's still happening?
- H: Yes.
- B: As a teenager or in your twenties did you ever have any problems with the law as far as picking on you?
- H: No. The only time I really felt that they were sort of picking on us is when we went to Stambaugh Auditorium to see a magician. One of the white boys who went to school with a buddy let us in the side door. So we sat upstairs and we were talking to this white girl and this rent a cop grabbed us behind our belts when we were in the crowd and said come on boys let's go.
- B: What high school did you go to?
- H: I went to Rayen.
- B: Did you have any problems with your teachers or anything?

H: You'll hear me talking sometimes about Booker Newbury. Booker Newbury's father and I were singing acapella. At the time it was hard to get into the acapella because Rayen was mostly a white school. It was always white people that they put up in front of the choir.

B: How about your fellow students?

H: At the proms that we had they played polka music. More over when they were integrating the pools guys that we'd run track with would hop out of the pool when we jumped in.

B: So they were friendly with you on the track but not in the swimming pool.

H: This was the north side pool.

B: This was in the fifties?

H: Yes.

B: How about playing sports did you run across any problems?

H: Very much so at Rayen before Ralph Robinet came. He was the kind of coach that if you could do the job you had the job. Before that it didn't matter how great you were they'd put you on the bench. I went out for quarter back and I was playing second string quarter back when the first string quarter back got hurt. I said to myself I know I'm going to play now. This was during practice in August. Come time for the game the first string played and I didn't so I told the coach forget it you can have my equipment. In fact he was the player that I taught how to play!

B: Did the same thing happen on the track?

H: No on the track there was no comparison they had to pick the winner.
Unfortunately one time I remember that Dicky Atkinson was running the 440 and he won and they turned around and said he didn't win the second place guy won and the guy that came in second wasn't a person of color.

B: Did they say why he won?

H: They didn't have to say why.

B: Have you heard of Mystic Nights Proms for African Americans? This was maybe in the 1940's or before.

H: Yes.

B: Do you know of any organizations that were in place that helped African Americans?

H: Yes there was Clarence King, he brought in dances. At the time we couldn't go to the white dances.

B: So this was at the New Elm Ballroom? Was it mostly entertainment and dancing?

H: Yes then Reed's Arena came along.

B: Did musical groups during that time go to the New Elm Ballroom?

H: All the groups went to the ballroom

B: The famous groups went?

H: Yes.

B: Who are your role models?

H: I got into broadcasting while I was in the service recuperating in the hospital. While there a young man by the name of Johnny Peterson from Philadelphia had a radio show and we got to talking and I fell in love with it. It took me thirteen

years after I got out of the service to get a job in radio. What happened was I ran into a man that had a station up in Conneaut Ohio by the name of Mr. Skully. He asked me one night what I was doing. I said nothing now. He said why not. I said you know why. He said forget that you have a job starting Monday. So he'd either take me up or I'd drive up to Conneaut to work and I'd work all night and then come back home.

B: Did you try to get a radio job here in Youngstown?

H: Yes I tried all the stations.

B: None of them were hiring?

H: One of them told me that I needed experience. Then when I got the experience he told me that I was too experienced.

B: So when did you get your first job as a DJ in Youngstown?

H: It was at WNIO Niles.

B: Was that recently?

H: That was in the sixties.

B: Did you have any resentment from other DJ's? Did you have any problems?

H: One problem that I had at that station was that I bought my own time about an hour a week. After only two months I was up to four and a half hours a day. The biggest problem I had there was playing James Brown's I'm Black and Proud. Everyday I came in it would be broken in half and set right on my desk so I couldn't miss it. Fortunately I was getting the records so I could do it. After that I said forget it and I quit.

B: Did you think it was the station owner that was doing it?

H: It was someone at the station that was doing it I don't know who it was.

B: Were there any other records that they broke?

H: No.

B: Were there any other black DJ's at the time?

H: No I was the only one. Jim Mosely started BBC, he was there helping me and he'd do the jazz show. I had the late Paul Henderson on air and they told me not to say that Paul Henderson was on the air but I'd have him on anyway.

B: So you were the first then?

H: No I wasn't the first. Bill Clark was on WFAR in Farrell and Charles Pleasant was on there too. Plus there was a Chuck Copreta on at WFMJ fifteen minutes a day.

B: Were these the people you were listening to growing up? Did you look to them as role models?

H: Yes. Sort of, I liked it more when I went up to Cleveland and Pittsburgh. I got a different feel versus that in Youngstown.

B: Was this always your dream to own your own radio station?

H: I tell people that it's been my dream but it was Bob Douglas and Percy Squire that had the vision. They're both attorneys that fought a case against the state of Ohio over the way the district was set up so you could never get a black representative from this area and they won. One of the things that they found was that there was no black radio station in this area so they applied and called me in.

B: Do you know what the case was called?

H: Ezil Armour vs. Ohio

B: Did this happen recently?

H: Yes this was just before the station came on the air. It was Ezil Armour against the state of Ohio.

B: I'd like to go back to your neighborhood growing up. Was it ethnically diverse?

H: There were some white people in the neighborhood yes.

B: How did you feel about the area? Did you feel that it helped you as far as education?

H: Fortunately I went to Rayen High School and Rayen was really something. You didn't have to take a test to get into college when you graduated from Rayen. I was fortunate to have one of the toughest teacher's there Mrs. Parm. She was my favorite teacher. One thing that she said that I always remembered is it's better to be thought ignorant and remain silent then to open your mouth and remove all doubt.

B: What did she teach?

H: English.

B: Can you compare the racial climate of today versus the forties and fifties?

H: Like I said back then you knew it was there but it didn't really bother you because when you're young you're having so much fun that you don't realize stuff like that. Today I see a lot of prejudice in this town.

B: Politically? With businesses and such?

H: All of that.

B: Do you think it's worse today?

H: I'd say it's worse.

B: Do you think we just don't see it or do you think it occurs openly?

H: Today's Youngstown is yesterday's Mississippi.

B: How about at the University? Have you ever had to deal with it there?

H: There has been some racism there. Fortunately since the induction of Dr. Sweet, the new provost, and Mrs. Ackerson things are changing, hopefully for the best.

B: Do you know anything about the migrants that came to Youngstown?

H: One of the things that I found out from Percy Squire was that when the mill struck it brought black employment up. They could only stay certain places though.

B: This is during the forties and fifties?

H: Yes.

B: The people that you knew that came up from the south were they different in any kind of way?

H: I look at the people from the south as being different in that they are more aggressive and they believe in ownership. A lot of the young people today for instance Jesse Hardin who owns a bus company is originally from Mississippi. Here up north we wait on people to give us something. In the south they had to get their own so they got their own.

B: So you believe we as a community have to go after what we want?

H: Yes.

B: Were you involved in the civil rights struggle in anyway?

H: Yes

B: How so?

H: Just very involved.

B: How about the churches during that time were they involved in the civil rights movement?

H: Some of them were.

B: Did you go to any other churches growing up?

H: Yes I did.

B: So in your opinion do you think that things have changed for the better or is it the same?

H: I think it's worse but I don't think it's worse because of us. I think it's worse because the people on top are seeing a growing Hispanic and African American culture and they think they're losing their hold and they're not about to give it up.

B: Thank you for your time.

H: Thank you.