

THE MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Education Department

OH 9940

Beverly Dorsey

Interviewed by Epiphany Butler

Doris M. Johnson Project:
My Neighborhood: A Social and Cultural History of Northeast Baltimore

Doris M. Johnson Project
Interviewee: Beverly Dorsey Interviewer:
Epiphany Butler
Date: March 13, 2005
Place: Maryland Historical Society

I: My name is Epiphany Butler. I am a student at School 426. As part of the History Channel *Save Our History Grant Program*, our school will be conducting oral histories of men and women from the northeast Baltimore neighborhoods so that we can learn more about the community in which we live and go to school. This interview is being recorded on Sunday, March 13, 2005. I will be interviewing Beverly Ann Dorsey at 8100 Corn Dr. This interview began at 4:50 pm. We will be discussing neighborhood life, education, worship, and work.

I: When and where were you born?

A: I was born in the 2700 block of Greenmount Ave., Baltimore, MD

I: What is your full name?

A: Beverly Ann Dorsey.

I: Did you ever have any favorite nursery rhymes or bedtime stories?

A: No I don't.

I: What were your favorite games and toys?

A: Baseball, football, volleyball, swimming and I guess that was about it.

I: Toys?

A: Toys—dolls, mostly dolls, trains.

I: Which school did you attend and what grades?

A: I went to Barclay Elementary from first to sixth grade. I went to Roland Park Middle School for seventh and eighth grade, and I went to [inaudible] Vocational Technical High school for ninth, tenth, and part of the eleventh grade

I: What was school like for you?

A: Social, very social where you went to meet your friends and all that.

I: How did you get to school?

A: Walked for Barclay Elementary [and] took the bus for middle school and high school

I: Did you like school? Why or why not?

A: I liked school at times; sometimes I didn't. The older I got the less I liked it.

I: Were you given any special awards for your studies or school activities?

A: No.

I: How many years of school did you complete?

A: Ten.

I: Did you get a college degree? If so, what school of study?

A: No

I: What did you usually wear to school?

A: We wore skirts, blouses, dresses. We weren't allowed to wear slacks or shorts.

I: Were there any "fads" during your youth that you remember vividly?

A: Bell-bottom pants and platform shoes. Long, straight hair [and] a lot of makeup.

I: What was your religion growing up? What church, if any, did you attend?

A: Episcopalian and I went to St. John's Episcopal Church on Greenmount Ave.

I: Did you participate in any special activities at church?

A: [I] sang in the choir until I was sixteen.

I: How old were you when you first started dating? When was your first date and where was your first date?

A: My first date I was fifteen years old and there was a boy named David Neal Hilton, which I later married and I went to the Boulevard movie.

I: What events had the most effect on your life?

A: The Vietnam War and the riots.

I: Did your family do anything to help the community?

A: My mother did a lot of things with the church. Bake sales, anything to do with the church. My father just worked all the time.

I: Were there any special events happening in your community that you remember?

A: No.

I: How is the neighborhood different from when you were growing up?

A: The neighborhood [has] changed. It's not as clean. There's not as many things going on for the children or for the even adults now. There used to be you could go to the stadium, go to ball games, go to football games, there was an ice skating rink in the wintertime. There was always church that you always go to. Saturdays were mostly spent at the movies—Waverly Movie, which is not there anymore. Used to be an Arundel Ice Cream place on 32nd and Greenmount—I think it was 31st or 32nd and Greenmount. We used to go there after school. We would go to Reed's drug store because it had like a fountain place in there. Most of the times we spent close to home.

I: What did you do close to home?

A: All of your friends lived in the neighborhood. So you would just go over to the school playground and play over there, or play baseball, basketball, hang out just close to home. We all stayed close to home.

I: Were there any wars going on at the time?

A: [The] Vietnam War.

I: How did it affect you?

A: Didn't affect me so much. It affected a lot of my friends because a lot of them were drafted.

I: How did the war affect your friends?

A: Well, they were taking young boys that were not trained to be in the war and most of them were facing some kind of criminal charges and they were sending them off to war because I guess they didn't have enough people to go to war, so when the boys went to court, the judges would say to them either go to the service or go to jail. The boys went in the service. There were a lot of boys killed there; I watched a lot of parents grieve because they were sending boys into war that weren't trained to go into war. Like now, they're trained to go to war, but in a draft they're not trained. They're just taken, they're given minimal training, weeks of training, and sent right into war. That's wrong. That's wrong to do that. And they were taking them off the streets. It seemed like they were there one day and they were gone the next. It seemed like spaceships were coming to get them or something. You know like they were taking them right off the street. They were there one day and the next day they were gone. And that's what the draft did. I don't—I don't go along with the draft. I don't think they should do a draft. They should find other alternatives besides killing people that are not qualified to be in the war.

I: Any of your family or loved ones drafted into the war?

A: Um—my nephew wasn't drafted; he joined the war, but he was killed in Vietnam. My sister's son was killed there and it had a very bad, very bad effect on the family, because everybody was against the war. I'm not so sure I even understand it today. Except that I know that the draft was wrong. I believe it was wrong. I don't understand wars; I'm not a politician and I know

that the draft is wrong because it takes people that are not qualified to do that kind of job.

I: You mentioned riots earlier in the interview, how did the riots affect you? Why were there riots?

A: There were riots because when I was growing up, including me, white people were very, very prejudiced. I can't speak for the black people, because I didn't know any back then—and [the riots] started down 25th Street burning and rioting and it scared everyone in the neighborhood, it scared everyone. There was a lot of violence. I can remember men in our neighborhood and even men in our family loading guns and keeping loaded guns in the house, so that if the riots went up to our neighborhood, which we expected them to do, that they were going to shoot them. There was a curfew at dark; nobody could be out on the street after dark. A lot of people were hurt; a lot of people were hurt.

I: Why were most of the riots caused?

A: Because of prejudice: whites prejudiced against the blacks. Again, I can't speak for the blacks because I didn't know any at that time. I'm sure they hated us just because we were white. It was a terrible, terrible, ignorant time.

I: Did the riots affect you or your family?

A: I think that it mostly affected us because at that point—then they were changing the school systems and of course the blacks were coming into the school systems and the white children, even myself, were not used to that because we were brought up prejudiced. And I think that was the most terrible time for the blacks and the whites because I think there was so much hatred, because of the way our generation was brought up. Our parents were very, very prejudiced, black and white.

I: Were you really against the way they were acting?

A: The way who was acting?

I: The blacks and the whites?

A: I didn't really understand it except there was hatred. I was just afraid.

I: You remember having any family members or loved ones hurt in the riots?

A: No the riots didn't come up to 30th street where we lived then. They pretty much stayed down around 25th street. The National Guard came in and they contained the riots down to 25th street.

I: So, who most influenced you the most?

A: I guess Kennedy did. I guess he did because it affected all of us because he was here and discrimination and this hatred, segregation—he was against all that and wanted it to stop. And of course people would say prejudice, even today it's taken this long to get this far, and it still exists. And that's sad.

I: How did you feel when he was assassinated?

A: We were scared. We were scared because we thought that when he was assassinated it may have had something to do with going to war again, going into another war, we thought when he was killed the other countries would attack us.

I: So what you're saying is that you believed Kennedy was so strong that when he was assassinated the country's enemies would come and hit since he's gone?

A: Yes

I: What made you feel that way?

A: Because he was such a strong president and we believed he was the president that was trying to stop all the wars. Even though there was a Vietnam War, I believe he was a president that didn't want wars. And when he was killed, we thought right away that these presidents that came after him would take us into war.

I: As you see it, what was the biggest problem that faced our nation when you were a child?

A: Wars, atomic wars. We thought that the nations would get atomic wars and blow each other up. In school we had all kinds of drills that if they dropped atomic bombs we would all be killed. They made us do drills like get underneath the desk, go to shelters. War was always talked about and it was always thought about. We always believed that that would kill us all and it would annihilate the nations with these atomic bombs that they were building would kill us all.

I: How did these drills that you had in school affect you?

A: We were scared to death. We were children; we were scared. We thought we'd be blown up all the time.

I: Did they have any drills for you at home?

A: No, but it was talked about at home all the time, anything happened to get home quick. We knew just to be aware of what was going on around you. If you heard anything like bombs being dropped or something like that to go home quick.

I: How did these world problems affect the elder in your family?

A: We were scared of them and they were scared. And we were scared for them. Because as children we knew that they couldn't run as fast or get anywhere and they would be killed. But then we all believed we were going to be killed at that time.

I: When did the community in Barclay, in which you lived, change?

A: I guess the good things changed after the riots. People—the hatred started to change. The schools started to change. There were more jobs because of the war.

I: Did you feel after the riots ended, that the blacks and whites had a better communication, or that they had a better relationship?

A: It took a very long time. It took a very long time. I think that I really didn't start to see it until I went to high school and that was four or five years later, where you could actually stand and talk together and not be criticized for it. I guess socialized more, because you weren't allowed to do that before the riots. If white people were caught talking to blacks they used terrible, terrible names for them, and taunted them. And you were just outcast for it.

I: What were some of the names, some of their ways of taunting you if you were caught talking to a black person?

A: They would have called you bad names. Well at that time, they called black people niggers, and called [them] nigger-lovers; it was horrible, just horrible, you just couldn't do it. Everybody was just so hateful and just-ignorance, they didn't understand.

I: Did you ever put yourself in the category of these-were you ever-?

A: Was I prejudice?

I: Yeah.

A: Yes, I was raised very prejudiced and as I got older, and that's the way the riots changed things. As I got older and started to go to school with black people and learned about the ways and learned that they were real nice people and stuff like that that changed the way we thought about them, but we didn't know that before then, because we never talked to black people, we never lived with black people. They were where they were supposed to be and we were where we were supposed to be.

I: Do you ever recall ever having a black friend?

A: Yes. Yes, I had several black friends, but I didn't let my family know it. My mother was very prejudiced and my father was very prejudiced.

I: Are you still prejudiced today?

A: No.

I: What changed you?

A: I guess living, having black friends, having [inaudible] in my family. I guess getting to know that that's not what black people are all about. Not all that hatred. Although, I still see even today that there are black people prejudiced against white people, just as white people who are prejudiced against black people. It still exists.

I: Did your mother, father, sister, brother ever catch you socializing with a black person?

A: Yes. I brought a black girlfriend home from school one time and my father started ranting and raving telling me about you can't bring black people here. The neighbors won't understand. They belong where they belong and you belong where you belong. He was very prejudiced; he was brought up very prejudice.

I: How did that hurt you and your friend when that happened?

A: It hurt us very bad because we knew that what they were saying wasn't true. But as children, we listened to our parents. That's where things have changed today; no matter what our parents said, we listened.

I: Did your friend put you in responsibility for your father's actions?

A: No. She knew that the prejudice was there, because her father would have reacted the same way had she brought me home.

I: How do you feel nowadays when you see black and white kids now socializing or you see people trying to change the discrimination and segregation?

A: I'm happy to see that that's happened. I think that the younger people are trying to use what our parents did to make a lot of excuses why they do the things they do today. In other words they say people are still prejudice, but nothing like it was, and they can't understand that because they didn't live in

that time. And the younger people, white and black, today use it for the reasons they do things. Why they do things against blacks or why they do things against whites. And that has nothing to do with their time now. They're just using because they just want to do things and they know it's not right and they just use it as an excuse. How could they possibly know how we felt? They didn't live in that time. We lived in that time. And if your generation would just let that go—I know it was a horrible thing, it was a horrible thing for all of us, the blacks have to understand that the whites were also scared and hurt as well as the black people were, we were discriminated against as much as the blacks were. Through hatred, they hated us, but that was our parents and the people before us. That's not this generation here. And I think when you tell older black people and older white people to let the prejudice go, the young people will let it go, too.

I: So are you happy to see how the neighborhood has turned out?

A: Yeah, except that there's so many drugs and violence and I think the violence comes mostly from the drugs. The drugs are a cause of the violence. If they do something about the drug situation, I think that the violence, while it will never stop, it will certainly slow it down.

I: Is there anything that's bad about the community as it is today?

A: There should be more jobs. When I was a teenager there was always jobs for the teens. I don't see so many teenagers working now. I think that there should be more jobs made for the young people so that they don't have so much time on the streets. Young people go so far away from their homes now. We never went far away from our home. We all stayed close to home.

I: Do you still have a friend from during the riot time that you still speak to, that's from the riots (inaudible).

A: No, I don't. We all kind of went our different ways. A lot of my friends died in Vietnam and a lot of them died from drugs, a lot of drugs, not as much as now, but there was a lot of drug then, too. And a lot of them are dead from that. Most of the other people I grew up with are living in other states.

I: Do you have any Black or African American friends today?

A: Yes, quite a few.

I: Do you go back into the community today?

A: Well, I am so pleased that my granddaughters now live in Waverly. They're being raised in the same neighborhood, actually about 3 blocks, away from where I was raised. It just pleases me to go over there, because I just pick them up all the time, it pleases me to go over there and they are raised in the area where I was raised.

I: Are you happy to see your old neighborhood when you go back or it's nice to be back but I don't want to be back?

A: It's not that I don't want to be back, it's just that it's changed so much, as I mentioned earlier, it's not as clean as it used to be. It used to be a very close-knit community: you lived there, your uncles lived there, your sisters stayed in the neighborhood. It's more like the families were all there. It was nice when everything was in the community. You went shopping in the community. You went to dinner in the community. You went to the movies; everything you did was in your community. Everybody knew you. We couldn't get in too much trouble when we were kids because everyone knew us. We knew the police officers, there was always foot patrol. Our families knew them as well as you knew your next-door neighbor.

Everybody was poor. There wasn't any rich people that lived in Waverly. There were middle class people with poor people. We didn't have a car and didn't bother us because most people didn't have a car, so why should it bother us? We didn't

even know it, that it was not good to not have a car. We didn't have phones because most people didn't have phones. We were all shopping at the same stores, so it wasn't a clothing issue. Waverly was a very, very beautiful neighborhood. It was kept well; people had a lot of pride. That is not there anymore; you can see in the neighborhood. Wyman Park was a wonderful, wonderful place to go when we were kids. It's changed. When I go over there anymore, you don't see the kids out on the street playing like they used to: The parents sitting outside and watching the kids. It just doesn't feel very happy around there. It feels dangerous. I don't know if that's because of my age. It just feels like there's danger there now, instead of love and family and all that. So people are scared of violence. It wasn't violent like it is now.

I: If it was like it was when you were a child, the community lifestyle, would you still live there?

A: Oh, yes. I love that area. It's beautiful. [I] loved the Trees. Wyman Park and University Parkway. It's just a beautiful area. Greenmount Ave. used to be beautiful, it was well kept. Now it looks like people don't care. The junk stores and it's just the buildings are just decaying. It was just so beautiful and it's not anymore.

I: Does that make you feel sad in anyway?

A: Yes, it does. I'm disappointed in the people who live there. I don't know if it's because another generation lives there, if it's different because of the violence, or the drugs or what. It's just not a happy place anymore. The place doesn't look or feel the same way.

I: Are you scared every time you go around there?

A: I would be scared there at night. I would be afraid to be on Greenmount Ave. after dark.

I: Do you think that the people living in the neighborhood could fix it or make it as it was when you were a child?

A: I think that what needs to happen is that people, families, need to become more committed to each other like we were when I was growing up and I was living in Waverly. The family was everything. You respected your mother and father. That's gone. It's not only gone in the Waverly community, but in every community. Respect for the law is gone, not only in Waverly but in all communities. I think that the problems need to be fixed at home first. I don't know how that's going to happen. It's different times now, but all communities can fix what's broke. It needs to have good leadership, good people to do that, people need to get back into the churches, we need to get back into community things, church activities. They need to have money to fix up the properties so that it doesn't look so bad. They need to have people get pride back in the community, because it was a good community and it can be a good community now.

I: What are some ways that would help the communities?

A: I don't know. There needs to be more organizations, more community organizations, more politicians caring about the community. Our politicians always cared; we always depend on the politicians, on the councilmen, on stepping up to the problems going on in the community. Churches were always a big part of the community. St. John's Church, St. Phillip and James—Of course, when they took the stadium out that took away from a lot of the community because that is a big part of the community. When you take a big part of a community like Memorial Stadium, you take a lot of history and a lot of togetherness, because families would go, the movies, where families would go. When you take stuff like that away it hurts the community.

I: Is there anything you'd like to say before this interview is over?

A: The only thing I have to say is that I had a very, very good childhood. [My] mother and father in the home. Waverly was a good community. My granddaughters are living there now and I hope for their sake that it changes because if it doesn't change, they will also leave the community that I loved and the community that they're living in now.

I: This interview is over at 6:05 pm.