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Spring 4-6-1973

Oral History Interview: Mildred Brown Gallion

Mildred Brown Gallion

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Sutphin: Mrs. Gallion, are you a native of West Virginia?

Gallion: Oh yes. I was born on Lewis Street here in Charleston, West Virginia.

Sutphin: I notice that you have been a nurse practically half of your life. I wish you would tell us when you first became interested in nursing. What was it about nursing that appealed to you?

Gallion: Oh, I believe I was born to be a nurse because I can recall, and my sister collaborates it, that when we were children and someone in the house was hurt or sick, I was the one who volunteered to stay home with that sick person when they couldn't go with the family on an outing. When I got to the sixth grade, the nurse in school system asked us about our intentions for our life work. I think then that I knew I wanted to be a nurse and she encouraged me in it after I said how many things I like to do. I liked always to be helping people.

Sutphin: You mean the sight of blood never frightened you at all?

Gallion: Never has. It was the thing we laughed about when I finally did go into training for nursing--that the doctors fainted and were pale in the face more often than the nurses.

Sutphin: Well, tell me. Did you get your early training here or did you have to go out of the state?

Gallion: I went through the public schools of Charleston--old Boyd School and old Garnet High and then had to go...

Sutphin: When you say "Boyd and Garnet High..." then you are a Negro.

Gallion: Oh, yes. I should have begun by saying I am a Negro.

Sutphin: It's hard to tell by looking at you.

Gallion: Well, the thing that I remember best about home life is that we sat listening to Grandmother tell about refugging over the mountains from Virginia into West Virginia as a girl with some Union soldiers with her mother at the end of the Civil War. We would have her tell it over and over.

Sutphin: That is very interesting.

Gallion: Now. That says I am a Negro.

Sutphin: You say that you attended Boyd and Garnet?

- Gallion: Now--I have called it "Boyd," but it was always Garnett in my day. I finished high school in January of 1925 so I went to the old Garnet High building, not the new one. My memories are all of Jacob Street.
- Sutphin: Did they have nursing courses in your school then?
- Gallion: No, they only had a little about hygiene and good health practices when you took home economics as a seventh - grade subject. When you began to take cooking and nursing and that part of the school curriculum, then you began to know something about health and good health practices. But nursing as such, we had a nurse but I don't remember learning about home nursing. The introduction to home nursing was in the last year of high school when we talked about intentions or vocations. The school nurse, Mrs. Jeanette Mosby Flipping, had asked were there any who intended to enter schools of nursing, so it was from her that I got information as to where to apply, what materials to send, what I might anticipate or receive or learn.
- Sutphin: You say, "Were to send for information..." I understand that there has always been a school of nursing here in Charleston. Did you not ever look into the possibility of attending here?
- Gallion: Because of this knowledge that those who wanted to enter the higher schools of learning in our state were denied that privilege and had to apply for assistance to go to schools that equaled those available, I never applied. Charleston General Hospital was there and they had a school of nursing, but being black--oh, we called it "Negro!" then--being a Negro, I knew I would be rejected and I never intended to submit myself to any rejections if I could avoid them.
- Sutphin: Look. I know that today we have nurses' aides. Do you imply--do you really mean to say that you could not even have been a nurses' aid in Charleston?
- Gallion: My advice was to apply to Freedman , to Provident, to Lincoln, to Harlem and so I did. I wouldn't apply to Virginia because I never intended to go any further South than South Charleston.
- Sutphin: (Laughter) And you were accepted?
- Gallion: I was accepted after I had gone to New York to live, and had visited Harlem and Lincoln. I had decided that I needed to go to work rather than enter training because of the cost. Then when I was accepted we got up the money somehow from relatives and I was accepted at both Harlem and Freedman's and Provident, but being in New York, I entered Harlem.
- Sutphin: It certainly must have been a very rich, rewarding experience.

Gallion: My aunt had asked me to come to New York after finishing high school so that I might enter college and become a teacher. She was a teacher and she wanted some of us to at least follow in her steps. In order to get away from West Virginia at that period, I consented with no true intention of ever being anything except a nurse. And, it's ironic that I've been teaching ever since I have been a nurse. However, in the situation at Harlem, it was very rewarding in that we found there various opportunities had been less than mine here in West Virginia though we considered this one of the depressed states. I found that I had been--had not been submitted to some of the things that they had undergone because I had never worked "in service" as such, but many of them had, and were entering training to escape the situation of degrading work for a lifetime. They wanted something different from what their mothers described or had been subjected to. My aunt had determined that we would not have to work in a kitchen--that we would earn a living without depending on a husband, and so it was her intention to have me in New York where I could find my way into a vocation that would be rewarding. She achieved her purpose for I finished at Harlem, was graduated, went to work in the operating room for a few months and then succumbed to the inroads of romance and marriage. (Laughter)

Sutphin: Well, it is romance that led you back to West Virginia, having completed your studies?

Gallion: That's just why I said it. My full intention was to do visiting nursing in New York City. I'd had a little of that experience with the Henry Street Nursing Settlement and I intended to stay, but when I married, my husband said, "I have a job, I am the head of this house. Here in West Virginia is where we're going to live," and I resisted for a few months but I finally gave up and came back to Charleston, West Virginia. That's when I found out that West Virginia is a part of Virginia in the sense of division. They were black and they were white on every side. There was a strict division so that when I applied to Charleston Hospital for work as a nurse, they took my name and said they would call me. In other words, the old "Don't call me; I'll call you." So the first work I did here in West Virginia was private duty nursing. The Negro doctors employed me and a few of the obstetricians and gynecologists who had colored women as their patients. I did private duty for several years. Then, the nurse who had so much encouraged my intentions to be a nurse asked if I would like to go with her on her job as

school nurse for the Negro schools of Kanawha County. I would like to do it so I visited with her for a few times to the varied schools; then she asked me to work for her while she went to see about her sick mother. It was my job. She never came back.

Sutphin: Well, I know that when I was in elementary school, some of the bright spots of my school life were seeing the school nurse, you, and a Mrs. Preston coming to us. It was actually the first time that I had ever had a nurse to even put her hands on me, and you reminded me of an angel in your beautiful white uniform. Can you tell us something of your impressions of children during that day? Did you find many diseases or illnesses or many children neglected?

Gallion: Now--that's one of the difficulties about nursing. School nursing to me seemed not to be nursing; it seemed to be investigating, inspecting, and reporting. As such, we found some indication of disease to refer to family doctors. Some deformities that had gone unnoticed or uncared for in school children we took to various clinics in Chelyan for the Cabin Creek area and to the Charleston Health Department for the rest of the county, so that many orthopedic deformities were found and corrected by school nurses' observations, and by referring those children to our medical directors who determined whether or not we were right in our findings. Also, we could have children who had difficulty getting x-rays or the tuberculin test or dental work brought into Charleston by our own efforts--by going for them and delivering them home. We could do many things as Negro nurses taking care of Negro children, because they were unavailable in the area in which they live. And when I say "Kanawha County," I mean widespread. We were on the road much more than we were in the schools.

Sutphin: Can you tell me something about some of the towns which you might have visited. I'm sure you didn't just cover Charleston.

Gallion: Charleston had several schools which we usually visited more often than the outlying districts. But at the beginning of the school term, we went as far as Carbon in Cabin Creek; Cannelton in Cabin Creek; Union, which is near Montgomery, and then on the other side: Burnwell, Hansford, Whitaker, in Cabin Creek.

Sutphin: Did you ever go out Sissonville Road?

Gallion: Yes, Yes.

Sutphin: In that area...

Gallion: Yes, Yes. There was a one-room school at Tupper-Creek. We went out Sissonville Road and left the road at the point where the creek has a small wooden bridge across, and we went into the area, past a big white school, so that in that time the very children who played together the whole summer long were separated at the time school began and the colored children went to a small one-room school in the near-by farm land where the white children were picked up and taken to a school out on the highway much better equipped, a much better building, much better service as to materials and it was one of the things that I spoke of at the meetings of our staff. I don't see why they could play together, sleep together, eat together, and then be so divided as to academic training. I said this once to a doctor who was my family practitioner--a white doctor. He was so shocked that he had no answer when he asked me, "What do you think about the school system? You worked in it." I said, "It's the worse damn fool thing I ever came up against because the children knew each other, the parents knew each other, and then strictly a division was kept between them when actually they were friends."

Sutphin: Well, Mrs. Gallion, the schools were divided, but did you find that the equipment, supplies which you as a nurse had to work with were adequate?

Gallion: Never! NEVER! That's one of the things my co-worker frequently told me--"You're going to be fired." Every time the director asked at a staff meeting does anyone have anything to say, I popped up to say, "If, as the record shows, we (Negroes) have more of disease in our Negro population than the whites have, why do you only set up the x-ray machine once a year in one place when the schools are so far apart that there is no possibility of the children's getting to the x-ray machines?" Frequently she nudged me, "Don't say anything this time." But since I felt that way, I said it.

Sutphin: I know that you've always been very vocal and you've always managed to maintain the job as county nurse, so perhaps your being vocal paid off.

Gallion: I was doing the work as it was needed to be done--and extras. We worked on Saturdays, if the need arose, when the job was a five-day thing.

Sutphin: Were you paid extra?

Gallion: Oh, never. We couldn't even get gasoline mileage to cover all that county. We were given a raise every time somebody else got one as far as the school health service was concerned. Each of us got a ten-dollar raise when we, the colored dental hygienists and nurses were asking for gasoline. Everybody got a raise, which

wasn't to our liking because we were covering a wider area. Now. The answer was that you don't take care of as many children as the other nurse... each one has in her district. We considered this one of those situations which never is resolved. But it is resolved now with intergration. Districts--each nurse has a district.

Sutphin: With things as they were, I wonder why you continued to be a nurse, a public health nurse. Could you not have made much more and been more secure in your job with a chance for advancement had you gone back to the big city? What is there about Appalachia that made you stay here?

Gallion: It's home. My husband had a good job, what he considered a good job, and it was, to all intents and purposes because it served our needs. I was deeply in love and so I let him judge what it would be best for us to do and so we stayed in Appalachia. I kept saying to him (that) in New York we'd be making twice as much but he knew people who lived in New York and who never had anything left over. They made it but they also spent it; it slipped through their fingers. So he was constantly answering me with the facts as he knew them. It cost more to live in the city. I had not only worked as school nurse; I had worked in the institutions as well. When, eventually, I was asked to come and work at St. Francis by two Negro nurses we were employed there, (I was the third), that was a job worth having. The Sisters are lovable persons. They respect you. They are aware of your knowledge and they use it if you will permit it. They kept saying to me, "You must have something more than your R.N. You must have a degree." I kept saying, "No, I've only done a couple of summer's work toward a certificate in public health." Then they would say, "Why not go back and get the degree and work with us?" I was working with them as a staff nurse. That was all I needed for the moment, and I couldn't see the far view of going back to school to get a degree to become the head of something. To just work at bedside nursing was all I intended to do at that time. My experience, as you see, has not been extensive: seven years as a school nurse, then five years at St. Francis, then ten years at home after which I was told by my family physician to go to work, so I went to Charleston General for nearly a year. Things were changed. Quite different. All was equal, to all intents and purposes, black and white and everything, but there are still divisions. There will always be in this generation of people who consider themselves superior and who show you that. But there

are many who are lovable and willing to work with you, willing to help you, willing to have you feel the respect for yourself that an individual out to have in a situation of service to the general public. I enjoyed all of my work. I still call myself a nurse though I'm not working at it. I still will serve when the opportunity presents and my health is adequate to the task.

Sutphin: Mrs. Gallion, I certainly thank you for this interview. I must say that throughout the years you have been an inspiration to numerous boys and girls here in the county and it is an honor for you to share some of your experiences with me.

Gallion: It is one of my joys to have so many girls tell me the things I taught them in home nursing were of service in their situations. It is a great joy.

Sutphin: Thank you so much.