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Rita Wicko-Nelson
(Agent of Receiving Organization)

Ruby B. Reeler
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July 16, 1997
(Date)

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS WITH
MRS. RUBY B. REELER**

July 14 and 16, 1997

Harpers Ferry, West Virginia

Interviewers: Rita Wicks-Nelson, Ph.D. and Ancella Radford Bickley, Ed.D.

Transcriptionist: Gina Kehali Kates

RW-N: It's July 14th, 1997. We're in the home of Mrs. Ruby Reeler. We're in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. Ancella and I, Rita Wicks-Nelson, are doing the interview. When we do this interview, we will-, we're not asking you to do this in a chronology. You can skip all over the place and tell us what you think is most important in your life. We have certain kinds of things, information that we want, and we'll...if we don't get to it naturally, you know, we'll ask plenty of questions along the way. By the way, you can always say that you'd rather not answer a certain kind of question. You should feel free to do that, all right. Uh, we also find that it's probably easier for people to begin at the beginning. But again, you don't have to stay in, in track. But you might begin at the beginning by stating your full name, where you were born, and your birth date, and then we'll go from there. Okay?

RR: Okay. My name is uh, Ruby B. Reeler. I was born November 28th, 1929.

AB: Uh, what was your maiden name, Mrs. Reeler?

RR: Brown.

AB: Is that—the B is for..?

RR: Yeah, my B is for Brown. (AB: uh-huh) I didn't like my middle initial, so I kept the name Brown. Of course, I can give you my middle name. It's Cecilia. (AB: Cecilia) Cecilia. (AB: That's pretty) And I, I don't like that.

AB: So what about your parents, Mrs. Reeler? Were they, you were born here in Harpers Ferry?

RR: No, I was born in a little town called ^kCabletown, maybe you've heard of ^kCabletown. (AB: No) It's down in the boondocks, I guess you'd call it.

AB: In West Virginia?

RR: In West Virginia.

RW-N: Which boondocks? [laughter]

AB: Near, near where?

RR: Well, it's...I-, near the Shenandoah River. I was born down in ^kabletown.

AB: And were your parents natives of ^kabletown?

RR: Uh...let's see, no, my mother was...she came from Washington. And, of course, my dad lived here in uh, the state of West Virginia all his life.

RW-N: In this area? In this general area?

RR: In this area. His, his father was a farmer, so, of course, he was on the farm. And uh, he quit school when he was about, in the second grade. You know, at that time, they didn't have to go to school, and parents took them out to work on the farm. And so my daddy never got a formal education. So I'm sure now, that's why he pushed, pushed his kids as far as they could go. Of course, I was the only one in my family that graduated from, from college. Everybody graduated from high school, he saw to that. But uh, I went on to college. I didn't wanna go to college at first. I wanted to go into the WACS. And my dad said, "No way."

AB: Why did you want to go into the WACS?

RR: Well, I had a student that went to school, and she came back in her uniform. That uniform attracted me. And I thought—her name was Madeline Ross. And she's from Charles Town. She walked into school one day, after she'd been away, and came in her uniform. That was neat. Oh, I was going into the WACS.

AB: That was when you were in high school?

RR: That's when I was in high school. And my dad said, "No, I don't want you in the WACS. I don't want you to go there." So, he uh, I went to my mother and told her. I said, "Mom, daddy

won't let me go in the WACS." He said, "No daughter of mine is going in the service." And I said, "Well, what am I gonna do?" He said, "You're going to college. It's not that far." But, you know, I felt that Daddy never had the money. But you know, he went to the loan companies and borrowed money all through that time that I went to school. It wasn't that much at that time; the money, money didn't amount to much. But he borrowed money and he'd pay it back, and he'd borrow and pay it back, until I got through school, graduated in '52 from Storer College.

RW-N: Tell us a little bit more about your father. Uh, you said he came from this area. (RR: Yes) Do you know any-, can you tell us anything about your grandparents? As far back as you know, had the family been here? That's as far back as you know?

RR: Uh, my grandmother's name was Betty Brown, and my grandfather really came from Warrenton, Virginia. (RW-N: uh-huh) So, we never, we never went over there. We never got to meet any of his side of the family. I don't remember meeting anybody from Warrenton, Virginia. And uh, he married my grandmother, Betty Brown. Of course, my dad named my sister after his mother, which didn't please my mother too much. But anyway, [chuckle] uh, there were four of us, four children, in our family, two boys and two girls. And uh,

RW-N: Did we get your father's name?

RR: Robert C. Brown. His name was Cecil.

AB: That's why your name's [overlapping voices-inaudible]

RR: That's where my mom got my name, Cecilia, I guess. His name was Robert Cecil Brown.

RW-N: Now, did you say...I think I'm a little bit confused. Was his mother also a Brown before she married?

RR: No.

RW-N: I've gotten confused here a little bit.

RR: She married a Brown. (RW-N: She married a Brown, yes, okay) Uh...I don't know what Grandmom's name was. (RW-N: Okay) That was on my dad's side. On my mother's side, her mother lived in Washington. And she was a Walker. And uh, she came up here and married John T. Walker.

AB: So your, your mother's father's name was John T. Walker?

RR: Yes. My brother's named after him, you saw, you know, we did the old thing, I guess, my mother sort of named people after ones in the family.

RW-N: What did your mother's family do? Your father's family were farmers. What did your mother's family do?

RR: Uh...my grandfather worked on a farm. Now, my great-grandmother was, yeah, I'll go back to that. My great-grandmother was a slave. And she worked for the uh, she worked for the Davenports...Henry Davenport's father. I don't know what his name was.

RW-N: And that's in this area?

RR: That's in this area, yes.

RW-N: And are we talking about your mother's family now?

RR: My mother's family. (RW-N: Yes) I'm talking about my mother's—I hate to jump around like this.

AB: No, no, that's fine.

RW-N: No, no, I think I just confused it. You're not doing anything wrong. [chuckles]

RR: And uh, I know my great-grandmother was a slave.

AB: Now, let me, let me see if I get this. Your great-grandmother on your mother's side (RR:

on my mother's side) was a slave. (RR: Yes) But then somehow, the family found its way to DC?

RR: Yes, John Walker went to DC, he lived in DC. And uh, my grandmother married him...in DC. My mother was from Washington, sure, she's told me that many times. She would name some street in Washington, T Street in Washington. I think she...they lived on T Street, because my mother used to tell me that.

RW-N: And do you know anything about your mother's father?

RR: No, I don't know...I don't remember Granny. He died when I was quite young, I think. I don't remember too much about him. Except when my mother was sick one time, he came down to uh, to the house, to the farm—we lived on a farm in ^KCabeltown. And my grandfather came down there, and came up the steps, and I remember he climbed up the steps and looking at me and says, "I'm gonna get you," you know, he was that kind of a person. Very quiet, he was always a very quiet person. But uh, he died, I don't know what happened to him or anything.

RW-N: So you didn't see many of your grandparents, (RR: No) in general, as a child?

RR: No, no, I didn't. I can't remember. I remember going down on the farm, where my dad's parents lived. And he'd taken us out on a-, he was taking us out on a wagon. I remember we used to get in it and let our feet hang down in straw. And then, I remember him coming down and thrashing you know, the straw or something. And we'd go down to the place called a straw rig. We called it a straw rig at that time. And he would say, "Get away from that straw rig." And then the people would come in, and everybody would be helping, you know, at butchering time and things like that.

AB: When you say people, were those black people?

RR: Uh, well, they were-, I think they were black and white. They came in to help. When

butchering time came around, you know, everybody crowded around the pots and watched things cook, and got the uh, the meat, cut the meat up and all that kind of thing. And we used to always stay home at butchering time. And we'd be away probably, but we enjoyed that...your know, the farm life.

AB: Now, what did you say your mother's name was?

RR: Flora. Flora Louise. Flora Louise Brown. Well, she was Flora Louise Walker.

RW-N: Do you know her birth date?

RR: Let's see, Momma's birthday is May 12th. She was born May 12th. Let's see, she was 88 when she died...(RW-N: Would you know what year that was?) She died in 19...92. (AB: So, she was 80 what?) She was 88. She was born May 12th.

RW-N: And your dad? Do you know...?

RR: My dad died in 1989. He was 80-, he was 84. (RW-N: At the time, un-huh) Yeah, he was 84. He was 84 in February; he died in March, March 18th.

RW-N: So, you grew up on a farm.

RR: I sort of grew up on a farm until I—we moved to town when I was 11 years old. You know, I always used to reach up-, we didn't have electric lights. And I remember coming to town. And my grandmother always had lamps, too, at the house. When we moved into a house that had electricity, I used to reach up and pull the string and I'd wonder, what makes that light come on? [RW-N:chuckling] And I'd pull the string, the same string, and the light would go off. And I never could understand that. But we didn't have, we had outdoor toilets at that time. And uh, we moved to town.

AB: How old were you when you all moved to town?

RR: I was around 12 years old.

AB: Why did you move?

RR: Well, we left the farm. The people on the farm, I think they got rid of it. And we uh, we moved into the great lights in Charles Town.

AB: Mmm-hmm. So, your father rented the farm? Or . . .

RR: Well, they-, he was a farm hand. He lived in a farmhouse. They, you know, they gave us a house for us, they gave us a house to live in, you know. And uh, he worked on the farm. He worked for the people that owned the farm.

RW-N: So, you did not work on the farm, right?

RR: No, I didn't work on a farm. But I caught myself helping my dad in the garden or out in the field. (RW-N: yes, mm-hmm) I can remember my mother, when it was time for Daddy to come in out of the field, my mother would hang a white sheet out the window, telling him it was lunch time. Because he didn't have a watch. Of course, he'd be out there on the tractor and he'd see that sheet hanging out, he knew it was time to come in for lunch.

RW-N: So, your mother worked in the home?

RR: Yes, she was a homemaker.

RW-N: Did she earn any money, uh, in addition to working in the home?

RR: Well, she, she was a great cook. And she would go down sometimes and help the lady of the house, they call it, you know. And she, she worked in, she worked for her sometimes. But I don't think there was any monetary compensation or anything that came in through-, came to her. The thing, my mother worked, she was a very hard worker and she was, she cooked. My mother was a great cook, one of the greatest cooks around here, I'd say. And uh, when we moved to

town, she worked in uh, she worked in people's kitchens, and took care of older ladies that would have people in, you know, for lunch, and that kind of thing.

AB: When you were still in ^kCabletown, uh, you started school out there?

RR: Yeah, I caught the bus out there to grade school. (AB: Where was that?) Eagle Avenue....

AB: Oh, you came in to Charles Town?

RR: I came into Charles Town, had to pass what you call the white schools to get to the black school.

AB: About how far was that, Mrs. Reeler?

RR: Oh, that was about uh, six or eight miles, we came to Charles Town. And uh, the bus driver that I [inaudible] is still living. I mean, I used to get on the bus; his name is Leo Harris. And he used to drive the bus to bring us to town...uh, from the farm. And I can remember my mother walking through the orchard with uh, with me and my lunch box—she always packed a lunch—and there was a gate, we had to get over a gate. She wouldn't open the gate, she'd let me climb over the gate, and that's as far as she'd go. And then she'd watch me as I went to the road. And there was a lady that lived across the street where the bus stop was. And she would let me come in her house when it was cold mornings and wait for the bus.

AB: Were you the oldest child, youngest child?

RR: I was the oldest.

AB: You were the oldest. (RR: I was the oldest) So, you were the only one going to school at that time? Your brothers-

RR: Yes, my brothers and sisters weren't, I don't remember them being born yet. And I was so happy when I did have a brother. And my mother had a son, my oldest brother. I was so happy

then, that she had the child, because I was the only child then.

RW-N: How many years are there between you and your brother?

RR: Uhh, my brother's what?...sixty-, he's sixty-two. He's sixty-two now, so, so I'm sixty-seven. Bout, about five years apart, I guess.

AB: Does your brother live here in Harpers Ferry?

RR: No, he lives in Baltimore. He lives in Baltimore. They all went to the city, all but me. I kind of stuck around here. That's why I was here taking care of my mom and dad.

RW-N: How many other brothers and sisters do you have?

RR: I have...four, there were four of us. I have one sister, and two brothers.

RW-N: So, first came your brother after five years, and then, another sister and brother?

RR: And then...and then my other--my sister came, and then my baby brother. He's the baby, of course, John.

AB: So, then the, when you moved to Charles Town, you were still the only child in the family? The others hadn't come yet?

RR: Well, I had a brother, yeah, we were all, I think we...

RW-N: They just weren't going to school then.

RR: They just weren't going to school then.

AB: But everybody was born, so the whole family came to Charles Town to live.

RR: Came to Charles Town. Yes.

AB: And what kind of work did your father find once he came here?

RR: Well, he worked at the racetrack, he worked at People's Supply, a coal company, he hauled coal on a truck. And I remember him shoveling, and comin' home and being so tired at night.

Back-breaking work, you know, hauling coal. But then, something happened...I don't know what happened.... Then he went to Baltimore to work at the racetrack in Baltimore. Of course, he didn't write, he couldn't write very well. Now, we were talking about that the other day, how he would send my mother money home from the track. And he'd just put it in a letter, put the address on there, and send it in a letter. He never went to get a money order or anything.

RW-N: Now, when you talk about the racetrack in Baltimore, you're talking about...?

RR: Yes, I'm talking about-, I guess it was Pimlico. I guess it was Pimlico. Yes. Uh, Harry M. Stevens, I think he was the man that ran the track for awhile.

RW-N: And here, of course, when he worked at the racetrack, he was working at Charles Town.

RR: And here at the racetrack, he worked at Charles Town. He also worked at the Charles Town Grain and Feed, a place called the Charles Town Grain and Feed. And then. . .

RW-N: So, he had a variety of positions? (RR: Of jobs, yes.) It sounds like he was employed a lot, (RR: Yes) pretty steadily, (RR: Yes, he was) although he moved around at different jobs?

RR: Yes. He even, he worked, he worked, [inaudible] got him a nice job at the Millvill Quarry.

RW-N: Millvill?

RR: Quarry, yes.

RW-N: Is that M-i-l-v-i-l-l?

RR: M-i-l-l-v-i-l-l. V-i-l.

RW-N: And where is that?

RR: Well, let's see. That's about uh-, my son works there now, too, come to think of it. That's about uh, five miles from here.

RW-N: And what do they quarry there?

RR: Well, they have uh, rocks, stone, and so forth, that they get out of the ground, dig out of the ground. Yeah.

AB: And in the meantime, your mother was cooking for special parties or helping out people who were having company or so.

RR: She was called kitchen help, I guess you'd call it. Cause she started working just domestic work, (AB: uh-huh) and uh tried to keep the family going.

AB: Mm-hmm. So, her, whatever she earned, went back into helping to support (RR: Helping support the family) the family. Mmm-hmm.

RR: Yes, yes. And I can remember her leaving her job, coming home at night when she'd get paid, and she didn't get that much money. But we'd go and meet her, to help to carry the groceries home, because we didn't have a car. And you used to have to go down and meet her...she'd say, "Meet me at county building," and we'd all be down at the county building waiting for Momma to come. And then, we'd go down to the American Store, that's where Momma shopped. And so she kind of ran a little bill there with the guy that she knew. And we'd go to the American Store on Saturday night and get, and get the food and help her carry it home, because we lived quite a ways from town. Well, it wasn't quite a ways, but we thought it was a long way, because we had to carry those big bags and things.

RW-N: When you talk about town, you're talking about Harpers Ferry?

RR: No, I'm talking about Charles Town.

RW-N: I'm sorry, yes, you're talking about Charles Town, yes.

AB: Were you-, the house that you lived in there, was that rental property?

RR: Yes, uh, rented from a lady named Mrs. Craven, Surell Craven. She owned the house, and

we had to pay her the rent. And, of course, her son was mayor here of Harpers Ferry. He lives right across the street from Thelma in that uh [inaudible] house across the street; that's Ms. Craven's son. She was my first grade teacher. So. . . ["Thelma" refers to an acquaintance, who also participated in this project.]

AB: Uh, now, this was at Eagle Avenue that you were going to school? (RR: Yes) Now, was that, what was, was that the name of the Eagle Avenue school?

RR: Yes, Eagle Avenue School.

AB: And what grades were taught there?

RR: Uh, I believe...first to twelve.

AB: First to twelve.

RR: First to twelve, yeah. And then, uh, when integration came, I think they...how was that? They had a high school, that was a high school, because I graduated from Eagle Avenue school. Uh...Mr. E.M. Dandridge, I know you've heard of him.

AB: I remember, I knew Mr. Dandridge.

RW-N: Who is this? Dan...

AB: D-a-n-d-r-i-d-g-e, Mr. Dandridge. E.M. Dandridge.

RR: Yes, yes.

RW-N: What year did you graduate high school?

RR: In 1948.

AB: Now, where does Page-Jackson come in?

RR: Well, uh...you know, I can't remember...just where Page-Jackson fell in there. But my brother went to Page-Jackson.

AB: That was a different school.

RR: That was a different, that was a different school. He didn't graduate from Eagle Avenue. I graduated from Eagle Avenue. But then, Page-Jackson came along. And that was the, that was the high school—they changed that. Because Eagle Avenue burned down. It caught fire and burned. And then, they named it after Mr. Jackson and Mr. Page.

AB: So, when Eagle Avenue school burned, they rebuilt?

RR: They rebuilt. And...

AB: A new school?

RR: And , another school. And it was called Page-Jackson High School.

AB: Now, where did the youngsters from one through, I guess, six, go after Page-Jackson was opened? [interruption to answer phone]

AB: You were telling us about uh, the school. Now, it's my understanding that the Eagle Avenue school was one through twelve? (RR: Yes) And then when it burned, they rebuilt uh, a new school building that they named Page-Jackson? (RR: Yes) And what grades went to Page-Jackson?

RR: Uh...Page-Jackson was the high school, so, it must have been....must have been nine to twelve, I guess. (AB: Nine to twelve?) Yeah, but I don't know...I can't. . . I don't know where the smaller kids went, one to eight. Where did they go?

AB: It, it surprises me uh, I did-, how big was the population up here to support a separate high school? I mean, were there many kids in that school?

RR: Ah, there were quite a few kids in there. My brother Bob went, and uh, I think, John, my brother John, went. Uh...

AB: Were there many kids brought in from surrounding communities, as you were from ^k Cabletown, or did most of the kids originate right here in Charles Town?

RR: Kearneysville, yes, Kearneysville, they went from Kearneysville and they came in from, uh, Shepherdstown.

RW-N: So, we're talking about black schools, (RR: black schools) and black children in the surrounding towns were bussed in (RR: Yes, they were bussed in) to the all black school.

RR: ...to the all black school, yes, they were bussed in to the all black school, yes.

Oh, boy, I'm...talking about the all black school and the all white school, I'm telling you.

RW-N: What? Tell us.

RR: Quite a, it was quite an experience. I'm talking about when we went into the integrated, uh, schools and how, how it was. I was just talking the other day about how when we integrated, and I uh, I taught...see, this was Grandview school up here, this little school up here on the hill was a black school. That's where I first started teaching. I taught there thirteen years.

RW-N: Now, you started teaching in 1952?

RR: 1952 . Uh-huh, I got a job in September. Graduated in '52, June of '52, and September came around, I got a school.

RW-N: And that's Grandview, did you say?

RR: Grandview, G-r-a-n-d-v-i-e-w.

RW-N: And what grades was that school?

RR: That was from one to eight. There were two grades in a room. And...

RW-N: And this was an all black school?

RR: All black school.

AB: Could we go back for a moment? You graduated from Eagle Avenue High School? (RR:

Yes) How many people were in your graduating class?

RR: About twelve. (AB: About twelve) Just about twelve.

AB: How many were in the whole school?

RR: Ms. Bickley, I don't know. There were quite a few, but I, I can't give you an exact number of how many were in the whole school.

AB: Did you have full graduation activities, with baccalaureate and robes and...?

RR: Yes, yes, we had white robes. We wore the white robes, and the fellows wore the dark blue robes. And we had, of course, our caps and our tassels. And we thought we were really great people. I don't have my graduation picture at all. My aunt came up one day and just took it back with her to Baltimore. And I never did get my graduation picture. I mean, I got it, but she took it off my Mother's stand. So I don't have a graduating picture. But I know there were twelve, there were twelve people.

AB: And did you have a prom?

RR: Yes, we had a prom.

AB: Tell me about that.

RR: [chuckles] Well, of course—I and two other girls went, we went alone. Of course, I was, I was still awkward. But anyway, I didn't have a date.

RW-N: That was acceptable, though.

RR: Yeah, my dad...my dad wasn't too keen on me going out with anybody, you know. Back in those days, he'd say, "Well..." I mean, I remember getting my gown and everything. And I think my cousin and I and another girl, Louise Camill, I think, went to the prom alone. And, of course,

me being nervous and everything, and my dad being nervous and everything, it wasn't what I thought it should have been.

RW-N: Are you telling us you had a miserable time? [laughter]

RR: [laughing] Well, I spilled punch on my gown, somebody spilled punch on my gown. I can remember that. And, of course, it was grape.

AB: Was that in the gym at your school?

RR: Well, we, we didn't have a gym at our school; at Eagle Avenue there was no gym. Uh, we had it in the home economics room. Because that was, sort of the largest room in the school, where they had the cooking and everything. [inaudible]

RW-N: So did you have any sports at all?

RR: We had basketball. I played on the basketball team. And we practiced in the shop with Mr. Flemings. You remember Q. D. Flemings?

AB: No, I didn't know him.

RR: Well, he was a shop teacher. He, he taught the girls basketball, how to play basketball. And we had to go to his shop. And he had baskets set up in the shop, and, and teach us how to play. And then when it came time for us to play basketball, the-, they would turn it over to the, let us go to the white gym and play.

RW-N: So you played at the white schools? (RR: At the white) Did you play white teams?

RR: No, no, there were black teams that played [inaudible] and surrounding areas that came to play. But they would let us use the gym for that. But nothing else. Sometimes we'd go down there, we could go down and practice. Mr. Flemings would go and ask if we could practice in the gym, and we practiced there.

RW-N: And were you a pretty good basketball player?

RR: I think I was pretty good. [chuckling]

RW-N: I'm asking you because you just said you were awkward, and so I'm trying to figure—

RR: I was awkward [inaudible]. I was really shy when I went to the prom. I'd say I was shy and I was backward. I should have said backward, you know. I didn't want to talk to the boys.

(RW-N: mm-hmm, mm-hmm) That kind of [inaudible]. . . .

AB: Could you dance?

RR: Not very well. I still can't. [chuckling]

AB: Did they have a boy's basketball team, too?

RR: Yes, they had a boy's basketball team...

RW-N: And they practiced the same place, in the shop and...?

RR: They practiced the same way, yes, in the shop.

AB: So you all played basketball, you didn't come down as far as Charleston?

RR: No, no, we didn't play in Charleston. We just played around, the surrounding...

AB: Did you play any Virginia teams around, like Winchester? Did you play a Winchester team?

RR: No, we didn't play Winchester.

AB: All in West Virginia.

RR: We played in West Virginia, yeah. We played uh, Shepherdstown. I think we played Martinsburg a couple of times, mm-hmm, Fairville, little towns around, but a . . .

RW-N: Can you tell us about other activities in your high school? Like about music? Did you have any bands or choruses?

RR: Yes, we had bands, we had operettas in our school then. A matter of fact, I remember us

getting ready for operettas, cause we always would get out of class. And Ms. Yvonne Snowden, she was a Snowden, and she would get the operetta together, and she'd call us all out of class. And we'd go in paper dresses and, you know, the crepe paper they'd make things out of. You remember that; I know you remember that.

RW-N: Would you spell her name for us? S-n-o-w-...

RR: ...d-e-n, Snowden. Yeah.

RW-N: Uh-huh. And you, did you, um, were you a singer? Did you play any musical instrument?

RR: Well, I used to sing in the chorus. (RW-N: uh-huh) And we would come to Storer College sometimes and give a little recital. When we were in high school. And, of course, the young men at Storer College used to laugh at us a lot, you know. We thought we were doing a wonderful job, and those college boys would make fun of us. And I remember Russell Roper was one. You know Russell Roper? Have you heard of Russell Roper?

AB: No.

RR: Well, my husband was down here, too, at that time, at college. And uh, we'd come down and give our little recital. And then we'd have a Maypole, it was time for Maypole time. We'd wrap the Maypole and all. We had, we had great fun. We thought we were doing a wonderful job. Beautiful job. But they didn't think so. Those college kids tore us up. [laughing]

RW-N: How about academics at your high school? What kinds of subjects did you take?

RR: Uh, just general subjects, I think. Math...

AB: Did you have science? (RR: Science) Did you have a science lab?

RR: Sort of. It wasn't, it wasn't up to date. But Mr. Dandridge taught us science.

RW-N: How about mathematics?

RR: Uh, the principal, Mr. Stewart, math was okay. That wasn't one of my favorite subjects.

RW-N: It was not?

RR: No, it was not.

RW-N: What was your favorite subject?

RR: I liked English. Uh...spelling. And Miss Johnson, Goldie Johnson, I don't know if you remember Miss Johnson? Goldie Johnson?

AB: That name sounds familiar to me.

RR: She was my favorite uh, favorite English teacher. She was here last year. She came by to see me. Came in the back door. She'd walked down to Storer. . . she's eighty-some years old. And she'd walked down to the Park Service; she cut across here, stopped in here, came in my back door. And I was so happy to see her. She was one of my favorite teachers.

RW-N: What was there that-, what, what about her made her your favorite teacher?

RR: Well, she's, she was just down-to-earth; you could go to her with anything. If you had a problem, you felt you had a little problem or something, you could go and talk to Miss Johnson.

RW-N: And you did that sometimes?

RR: And I did that sometimes, you know. I'd go and talk to Miss Johnson. She was almost like a mother, you know, she'd sit down and she'd listen. And then she'd give her advice. And say, "Well, everything's gonna be okay," or something like that. Especially if my mom and dad had little squabbles or something. And sometimes it would kind of upset me. Of course, I didn't know that they were really having squabbles, like I do now. [chuckles] So it kind of upset me, and I'd go to her, go to Miss Johnson and confide in her.

AB: When, when you were in, in high school, uh, did you have dates that came home? Uh, did fellows come to your house and visit you?

RR: Well, I had one fellow in high school. Of course, poor person's dead now, but yes. Uh, his name was Austin Clinton. I think I mentioned him down to the Park Service. [Probably refers to the public exhibit at the National Park in Harpers Ferry] Uh...he would come to see me. He was in high school. Of course, he had been in the service. And my father—when they got out of service, you know, they could [inaudible] money to go to school. The government paid them so much. And my father always thought he was a little bit too old. But he would come down to the house once in awhile and visit me. And uh, we would go to the movies, but my brothers would always accompany me. My dad would always scra^p up enough money so that they could go to the movies, too. So, I never went to the movies by myself. I was kind of sheltered, you know. And uh, I remember Austin bought my brother a BB gun. And uh, [chuckles] my dad said, “Well, why is he buying you a BB gun?” And I said, “I don't know.” But he liked John. John was my youngest brother. That was who was on the phone calling me just now. We were very close. And Austin bought, bought John a BB gun. And the only thing would make me angry, would be when I would leave the movie, and my brothers would run home. Now, I wasn't going to ask Austin to run. We had to walk to the movies. And, of course, they would get home before I would get home. And my dad would always be out on the back porch, watching me come up the road to see how long it would take me to get home. You see? And I would spot that white shirt—he wore a white undershirt, you know, one of those little narrow things. And I'd spot that. And he'd have on his uh, stocking cap. And he'd be out on the back porch. I'd say, “Austin, there's Daddy standing on the back porch.” And my brothers would be in the house and they'd

be tickled to death. I mean, they'd go in the house and be sitting down when I got home. And Daddy would say, "Well, where's Ruby?" And I'd say, "Here I am." Sometimes I'd walk in and he'd be sitting there looking and, "Well, where's Ruby?" "Well, here I am here."

RW-N: And you were in high school at this time?

RR: I was in high school! (RW-N: mm-hmm)

AB: So your father was fairly stern with you?

RR: My father was very strict, very strict and, and uh, I can remember one night giving Austin a little kiss by a telephone pole, which wasn't too far from my house. And my dad didn't tell me that he had seen me until I came home from lunch, from school. Because we lived fairly close to the Eagle Avenue school. My daddy came home, I came home for lunch, and my dad said, "I see you've learned how to kiss." Oh, my heart sank! [chuckle] I was going back to school, on my way back to school. So, you can imagine that evening, I thought, "Well, I'll go home this evening, he's really gonna lay it on." And I was going out the back door and I can still remember that. And I said, uh, I didn't say anything. I just ran on out the back door and went on to school. And, of course, I told my mom. And she said, "Well, you know your dad's always watching. [chuckle] Your dad's always looking." Oh, that was the worst moment in my life.

AB: But were there any repercussions? Did he really do anything, other than just say that?

RR: No. No, he didn't, he really didn't do anything. He did enough. When he did that, he did enough. He let me know that, he was there and he was watching, you know.

AB: Was your relationship with your parents a happy, good loving one?

RR: Yes, yes, we had a good loving relationship, I'll say that.

AB: Were they affectionate in terms of touching and kissing and hugging and that kind of thing?

RR: Well, my mom was. My dad kind of, he kind of stayed off. He didn't do a lot of touching or hugging or anything.

AB: You mentioned squabbling a few minutes ago. Was there much of that, that went on within the home?

RR: Well, at the time, it was a money problem with them, you know. Uh...my dad didn't have much money, and, and my mother, like I said, she was a domestic, and it was mostly him having to borrow money, even when I was going to school, to send me to school. Well, then, he would say Mom would buy some unnecessary, unnecessary things. And I think that's why she became such a good cook, because, you know, she learned how to save. She could take nothing and make something out of it, you know. We might go home for lunch, or on Saturdays we may have maybe beans or something. But at night, we might have those same navy beans, but she would add corn bread, or she would add some kind of dessert or something like that. And those big, red onions, ohh. [Ancella chuckling] My daddy liked red onions and beans, you know, and Momma would cook those sometimes.

AB: Could we go back, then, to...you graduated from high school. In your high school, you said you had science, but you didn't have a science lab with lots of equipment?

RR: No, no, we didn't.

AB: You didn't have—what about gym? Did you have gym classes? Physical education?

RR: Physical education in the shop, yes.

AB: In the shop, but you had a regular physical ed class?

RR: Yeah, regular physical ed class.

AB: And what about a foreign language? Did you have a foreign language?

RR: Uh, no, didn't have foreign language in high school. I took French down here at college, but they didn't have a foreign language in high school, not even Latin. I mean, we didn't have that, in the high school.

AB: How many teachers were in that school? Do you remember?

RR: In the high school or (AB: in the high school) or just the grade school part? Oh, let's see, we had a home ec teacher, Mrs. Lewis, English teacher, Mrs. Johnson, science teacher, Mr. Dandridge, shop teacher or PE teacher [inaudible]; uhm...I guess I'll say, and then we had the music teacher, Mrs. Snowden.

AB: So, it sounds like there were maybe five or six.

RR: Five or six.

AB: And were the high school kids on one floor or on one side of the building, or anything like that? Were they separated from the smaller children in any way in that building?

RR: Uh, yeah, they built a, built a section for the high school kids, yes, they did. They had the smaller kids in one section and the, and the larger kids in another section.

AB: So, you graduated in May. Where was your graduation service actually held? Did you have an auditorium?

RR: At the auditorium, (AB: In the school?) in the school, yes, that's where we had it.

AB: Uh-huh. Did that auditorium double as a classroom, or was it just an auditorium?

RR: Uh, sometimes they'd hold class, social studies classes, sometimes. And we had a social studies teacher, Mr. King, George King. And sometimes they'd hold classes in the uh, in the auditorium.

AB: So you graduated in May, and that Fall you enrolled at Storer? (RR: At Storer College, yes)

Who helped you fill out the papers and all of that, to go to college? Or did you do that by yourself?

RR: Well, I, I don't think we had too many papers to fill out at the time, to go to Storer College, to order to go to Storer. I don't think we had too many papers to fill out. And I don't remember who helped me do that.

RW-N: You don't remember anyone from your high school encouraging you to go to Storer?

RR: Well, Miss Johnson thought I should go to Storer. At that time, she lived here, she lived in Harpers Ferry. And she, she sort of said, "Well, you know, you ought to do what your dad wants, you ought to try to go to school, you know, go on to school and try to make it."

RW-N: So, you discussed that with her, that your father wanted you to do that?

RR: Yes, yes, she knew that. Yeah.

AB: Did you, during your high school or college years, work yourself?

RR: I worked in the kitchen for some lady that was, that would come and pick me up from college, when I was going to college. Uh, her husband ran the drug store in Charles Town, Jerry White. And I worked for three dollars and fifty cents a week. But I went on, I think the days were Monday; well, I went after school on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and on Tuesday and Thursday—those were my lighter days in school—she would come down to the college and pick me up.

AB: But you did not work while you were in high school?

RR: Yeah, I worked while I was in high school, too, after school, in the evening, I'd go to the same lady and work, too. I worked. . .

RW-N: And was this a white family?

RR: Yes, it was a white family.

AB: What about the other children in the family? Did they work also?

RR: Oh, yeah. They got out and made their money. We used to-, well, we wanted to have money for....[machine beeping]...we wanted to have money for going to the movies and all. And I think that time, movies were twelve cents, you could go in the movies for twelve cents, thirteen cents.

RW-N: And you could keep your money?

RR: And you could hold your money. (RW-N: uh-huh)

AB: When you worked, I mean, your family didn't require that a part of what you earned be turned over to help with family finances?

RR: No, no, cause I had to, well, I had to, I paid my way. I rode on a bus. It was twenty-five cents down and twenty-five cents back, that was fifty cents. Uh, some mornings, going to college, I would catch the bus there, which I had to wait in a colored section of the bus station. They had a colored and white section of the bus station. My daddy would be going to Charles Town Grain and Feed, and in the mornings, when it was dark, like in the winter time, I would walk down with him as he went to work, and he'd leave me off at the bus station. And uh, it was twenty-five cents one way.

RW-N: And you paid for that?

RR: And I paid for that out of my, what I made working for this lady.

RW-N: When you were a child, did you have chores in the house?

RR: Oh, yeah, we had chores, sure, we had chores!

RW-N: What kind of things did you have to do?

RR: Scrubbing the floors and washing the dishes and making our beds and that kind of thing.

Yes, indeed, we had chores. We better get out there and do something! I'll tell you....

AB: Let's go back a moment, Mrs. Reeler. You talked about going to the movie, was that a segregated movie?

RR: Yes, it was.

AB: Where did you uh, sit?

RR: Sit up in the balcony. Go on Saturdays, see Johnny Mack Brown and Charles Starrit and Roy Rogers. Who else was my favorite? Uh...Green Hornet was, a, they had serial, you know, serials there. And we'd go to the movie to see Green Hornet and Spy Smasher.

RW-N: Did you go quite a bit? Did you go quite a bit?

RR: We went every Saturday. We went every Saturday.

RW-N: How did you feel about sitting in the balcony?

RR: Felt terrible. And we, matter of fact, we'd go up there and sit in the balcony. And we'd go in the movies and pay our money, we went on one side, the whites went on the other. And I always wondered, too, why their tickets would pop up. They'd tear our tickets off and give 'em to us, while their tickets would pop up. I guess they stepped on something, you know how the tickets come up.

AB: Why do you think it was like that?

RR: Their side was larger than ours; I don't know. They didn't want the blacks to associate or sit with 'em, or something.

AB: Now you also mentioned that there were separate waiting rooms at the bus station (RR: Yes) What other-, how, how was the general race relationship when you were growing up in, in

Charles Town?

RR: Well, we played with-, we always played with the whites if we wanted to go up on the playground and play.

RW-N: This is a public playground?

RR: No, it was the school playground. (RW-N: school, uh-huh) Yeah. When I was living on the corner of Lawrence Street, we first moved to town, we'd go there to play with the, play with the kids.

RW-N: Now, this was a white school?

RR: White school, yes.

RW-N: So you went on the playground and played.

RR: Playground and played, yes, but we couldn't go to school together.

RW-N: Did you actually play together, or was it groups of-, that the black children would play here and the white children...(RR: We would play together.) You played together.

RR: We would play together. And then we separated, you know, like to do everything else.

RW-N: And when you played together, did that go fairly well? Did you get along fairly well?

RR: Sometimes, sometimes. Then you'd break up, you'd have little fights, you'd break up. You'd end up people calling names and you'd run home. And then we'd get together again and play again.

RW-N: Were some of those names racial names?

RR: Yes.

RW-N: Do you remember any of them?

RR: I just...[chuckles]

END OF TAPE 1 - SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 1 - SIDE 2

RW-N: ...let her off the hook, unless she says she won't answer. [laughter]

AB: We were asking you if you remembered any of the racial names? I suppose the N word was one of those that uh... [the "N word" refers to the word "nigger"]

RR: Oh, the N word's always in there. That, what I-, I gave an interview uh, a couple of weeks ago, and I said, that, that came up on the playground at our school, since I taught, I've been out of school now for eight years. And they used to get out on the playground where I taught in an integrated situation, and they'd use the N word. And so, I can remember going in school that day, after we came off the playground and writing every word that I could think of that was derogatory.

RW-N: Can you tell us some of those? [overlapping voices-inaudible]

RR: I wrote every word that I, I myself had ever heard of.

RW-N: That was derogatory? (RR: Yes) Toward...?

RR: Toward everybody. Everybody was calling each other...

AB: Blacks and whites?

RR: Blacks and whites were calling each other names, you know. And I..

RW-N: What, what was...?

RR: And I got so sick of hearing that. Until I just went in and just had a lesson on that. That was in last, this past week's paper. I gave an interview with somebody and...

AB: Do you have a copy of that paper that we could see, before we leave?

RR: I gave it to...but I can get a copy. I suppose they still have copies out on the (AB: I'd like to

see it). Yeah, it was a nice, it was a nice article. The lady that did this was, she did a really good job. And I've had Miss Tolbert call me yesterday morning. And she said, "Ruby, I enjoyed that article in the paper." But that was one of my best lessons. And uh, Linda Ragel, who's on town council now, I had her son at that time, and she's, she's commented about what a good lesson that was.

RW-N: So, you put all these names...

RR: I put all these names on the board...

RW-N: And discussed it with your class.

RR: Ohhhh...

AB: Does that mean you had words like "spook" and. . .

RR: "Wop," "Japs," "Nigger," uh "Honky," uh, what do you call 'em? "Spics" or something like that. I wrote that on the board. Every-, I had a whole list of names. And I even asked the kids, I said "Now, give me some other names that you've heard." I even came up with that. And they gave me some names that were-, you know, they were kind of shy. Uh, "I heard my mother say so and so, you know. I heard my grandmother say so and so." And I'd say, some of the words I couldn't even spell, I said...my goodness, these kids are coming up with something that it really turned my [inaudible].

RW-N: And after you generated those names on the board, then, how did you turn the discussion?

RR: They just looked at it. Some of them went home and told their parents, "Miss Reeler said some bad words today."

RW-N: So, you didn't say much about it after that? You just demonstrated all of these bad

words people called each other.

RR: I said, yes, I said, you know, you call people by their names. And you won't get in trouble.

Don't call people out of their names. I said, everybody here has a name.

RW-N: And what grade level was this (RR: second grade) that you were teaching?

RR: Second grade.

AB: Could we go back, Mrs. Reeler, to your growing up and dealing with race. Were there ever discussions of race in your home, with your brothers and sisters, and your mother and father...uh, about it?

RR: Yes, uh, I, I started at a young age. My mother worked, like I said, in the kitchen. And uh, I would go to pick her up when I got my first car. Uh, I'd pick her up from her job. And sometimes I'd go up there and I'd see her-, the lady would have my mother out in the yard, uh, raking the yard and pulling the weeds around her flowers. And uh, one evening I got so angry, I got out of the car, and I said, "Mom, you going home." I was, had gotten my first job, and I thought I had quite a bit of money. I didn't when I was teaching school, you know. And the lady came out, Mrs. Rause, Mary Rause, and she said that I had gotten uppity. She said, "Well, you've gotten uppity since you went to school." And I said, "I don't want my mother out here on this yard." I said, "You hired her to cook and come up here to take care of your friends when they come to dinner. And I drive by here and I see her out weeding the flower bed." And I said, "That's a man's job." And I said, "Mom, get in the car." And, of course, Mom was embarrassed. And uh, Mrs. Rause said, "Well, you go do what your daughter says, you go ahead, if you wanna go. You go ahead." And Mom got in the car and went home. But then I got a tongue lashing after I got home. And uh, so, the lady came back after Mom about two or three weeks, and asked

her could she come back. And she wouldn't let her go out in the yard any more. So, my mom would be out there with a bushel basket, pulling these weeds out of this lady's yard.

RW-N: And did you consider that work too hard for her?

RR: Well, she shouldn't have been doing that! She wasn't hired to do that, you know. And it just made me angry when I went up there to see her. Cause Mom would say—uh, somebody had reported that my mother was out there. One of my friends went by one evening going to her job, and she said, "I seen your mother out there pulling weeds in Mrs. Rause's yard."

RW-N: So you thought-, you felt she was taking advantage of your mother.

RR: Yeah, she was taking advantage of my mother.

RW-N: When your mother gave you the tongue lashing, what did she say to you?

RR: She said I was meddling. I was meddling in her business. (AB: chuckle) And she said, uh, you know, "That's my job and I have to do that." I said, "No, you don't have to do that." And she said uh, "Well, you're so smart," she told me, she turned on me, she said, "You don't have to be so smart," she said. "I've been doing this for a long time." And I said, "You don't have to do that." And I was, I was really angry about that, you know. But uh, my brothers would go out and play, and they'd come back and say they had a little fight or squabble downtown on the street, by people pushing them off the street, or saying nasty things to 'em when they went by. So, uh, I tried to teach my children to treat everybody like they wanted to be treated.

AB: When your brothers would come home and, and tell stories like that, what was your parents' reaction?

RR: Well, Daddy never wanted any trouble. See, he felt that uh, well, you all just play. You got enough room in the yard to play. Just, just come on home and stay out of trouble. Don't get in

trouble. See, trouble was kind of my middle name, really. I've been in trouble down here in Harpers Ferry since I've been on council. [chuckles] Been in trouble down here. Because I speak my mind now. I didn't use to. But...

RW-N: You didn't used to.

RR: I didn't use to. I used to be kind of shy. I wouldn't say anything. But...

RW-N: Let me, let me try to get this organized better in my mind. It seems to me, from what you've said, that fairly-, you were fairly young when you began to be aware of the inequality between blacks and whites. (RR: Yes) You were fairly young when that happened. Uh, certainly by the time you were a young woman, you were speaking out. You spoke out for your mother, for example. (RR: Yeah). Do you remember other times back in high school? I, I believe you when you say you were shy, but what you're also telling me is that you became a woman who would speak out more, at least about this issue. Do you remember how young you were when you were beginning to speak out about this issue?

RR: I don't remember. I remember Alvin and I talking about different things that were going on, and we felt-, and we were working, we were in uh, high school.

AB: Now when you say, "Alvin," you're speaking of Alvin Tolbert (RR: Alvin Tolbert, yes, Alvin Tolbert and I used to talk.) James A. Tolbert^{Tolbert} who was. . .

RR: James Tolbert. We talked about it. We worked for the drug store. (RW-N: Who is a friend?) Who, who is a friend of mine now. (RW-N: yes) But uh, I have, well, I have newspaper articles in there about me speaking out when I was even teaching school. But Alvin and I used to talk about it when we were in high school, how uh, Mr. White, Jerry White, the drugstore man, that he worked in, used to tell Alvin he couldn't go to the front of the store and put ice in where

they served the drinks, you know, at the drugstore. He'd go up and put ice, try to put ice in the freezer. And he told him he didn't want him to go up there any more to do that; that wasn't for him to be up front of the store.

AB: Why is that? Because he didn't want people to see him?

RR: He didn't want people to see Alvin. And we, we talked about that. And then I remember the lady that I worked for, used to buy Lady Borden's ice cream. You remember Lady Borden's ice cream? And uh, I would want to stop and get maybe a pint for Mom, take it home once in awhile. And you know they wouldn't, they wouldn't sell the Lady Borden's ice cream to me. The corner drugstore, and that's the truth. The lady that, that I worked for would bring it home. And I'd see it in her freezer. And I'd go right to that drugstore and say, "I'd like a pint of Lady Borden's," or something in the drugstore. "We don't have any." That was among some of the best ice cream you could buy.

RW-N: Why do you think that was happening?

RR: I don't know! I remember going to the drug store with my dad one time. And was well aware of what was going on. I wasn't aware, I wasn't aware of what was going on. I went in-, he went to get some medicine. I went in with him. And one time I was swinging around his leg, then I saw this row of stools, where people would go up to the lunch counter. I went over and sat on the stool, and this lady came up to me with a very angry look on her face; now, Daddy never knew this. But she said, "That's not for you. Get on off that stool." You know how kids do. And I looked at her like, "What am I doing wrong?" You know, maybe I strayed away from my dad, and I never told him. But I was frightened.

AB: How old were you?

RR: Oh, I was, I was young. I was young enough to swing around, I was, must have been about eight or nine years old.

AB: Was that your first brush with segregation?

RR: Well, I would, I would say that, that hurt me. At that time, I didn't know why. (RW-N: You didn't know why) See, I had no idea that at that time that, you know, you couldn't go over and sit on a stool. I didn't know you couldn't go over and sit on a stool. That turned me off from the five-and-ten. You know, you couldn't go in there and sit up at the lunch counter. And I, to this day, they have a lunch counter in the same old five-and-ten, that I used to go past, and go in the store and look at the earrings and things like that. But I won't go in. Same thing with the Central Restaurant, new Central Restaurant. Any time you wanted to go downtown and wanted a hamburger or something, you had to go in the back door to the kitchen. And uh, and get this hamburger, or whatever you wanted, in the kitchen. And I won't go in that, I won't go in that restaurant. And I know I can go in now. I mean, it doesn't...but I just won't go in.

AB: Were there any black restaurants, barber shops, beauty shops, uh, anything like that here in this area?

RR: Well, there was uh...a black lady that had a barber shop, Annabelle Mosely, had a, had a barber shop; her father had a barber shop. And she ran a beauty shop for ladies. And, of course, all the white beauty shops, anything, were on the main street, of course. And uh, well, we had a black barber who wouldn't cut, uh, uh, I mean, yeah, a black barber who wouldn't cut black people's hair. He cut all the white people's hair.

AB: There was, was there a restaurant, a black restaurant, cafe, of any kind? Beer garden?

RR: Yeah, they had uh, Payne's Beer Garden up there on the side street, coming in to Charles

Town. That was a Payne's uh, Miss Devinia Payne, she ran a beer garden. And everybody would go there...to the beer garden. But uh, they had little side places you could go, but nothing on the main street.

RW-N: Now, the black people who opened up businesses for white people, how were they seen in the black community?

RR: Well, I didn't hear too many people say anything about it. They knew they couldn't go get their hair cut there. (RW-N: Mmm-hmm) Well, we had a barber shop right down here in Harpers Ferry. We did that for a long time, until the law came, that you had to, you know, you had to accommodate people. But uh, Mr. Goins had a barber shop right down here in Harpers Ferry. And he wouldn't cut, he wouldn't cut black people's hair. And then they passed this law, I guess, and he started doing that.

AB: What kind of social life was available to black people who lived in this area? Your parents, for example. I mean, how did they relax or so?

RR: They made their own, they made their own social life. I mean, they would go out to the Elk's Club, and, or they would have the parties at the Elk's Club, and, and that kind of thing. But uh, there wasn't too much social life. Daddy had a, they had little clubs together. My daddy belonged to a club called the Eureka Club. And uh, they went to each other's, to each other's homes.

AB: What about lodge? Were either of your parents in a lodge?

RR: Yeah, they had, they had a lodge, they had a lodge, the Masonics.

AB: Was your dad a Mason?

RR: Yes, he was a Mason.

AB: And was your mother with Eastern Star?

RR: Eastern Star, yes, she was an Eastern Star. I was Eastern Star one time, but I got, I got out of it. I didn't, I didn't keep going. And I just kind of fell out of it. It was all right, I guess, but uh, I did all right, I went to other things.

RW-N: What role did the church play in your life, when you were a child? Did your family go to church?

RR: Oh, yes, you had to go to church. You walked to church every Sunday, rain or shine.

(RW-N: What church was that?) And we had...St. Phillip's Episcopal Church. And we had church services twice: we had 'em in the morning and at night. (RW-N: And you went both times?) And we went both times, sang in the choir, and everything. Well, Dad made us go to church, really.

AB: So you were a life-long Episcopalian?

RR: Yes, I joined church when I was about 12, I guess, 12 years old.

RW-N: So, did you go, when you lived in Cabletown, do you remember whether you went?

RR: No, because we lived on a farm. It was hard for us to get transportation into town. So, I didn't go, I didn't attend church that much in town.

AB: Were your parents confirmed at St. Phillip's, or when, when did they [inaudible].

RR: Well, my dad—I went in church first. Because I went to Sunday School. I lived right across the street from the church. And uh, Reverend Gordon, who came in here...I don't know where he was from, but I enjoyed that. And I went to Sunday School; Ms. Ollie Tolbert taught Sunday School. And I went over there for Sunday School. And I stayed there, well, I'm still there, I'm still at St. Phillip's Church. But uh, I got so that I had a class. Ms. Ollie gave me a class. I was

big time. Then I was a teacher at Sunday School. And the children would come, and I would, she had little tables set up in the parish hall. And we each [inaudible] every Sunday morning. That was a ritual. We had to go. I mean, we didn't think anything of it at that time, you know. My dad said, "You have to go to church," and we went. That was it.

AB: So, your parents, then, came to the church after ...

RR: Yeah, my daddy joined, and then my mother was a Baptist. And then after the family joined, when everybody was confirmed, my mother decided that she was gonna join us. So, she joined us. But toward the end, my mother went back to the Bapt-, I mean, she didn't join. I mean, she didn't...I don't think she really left the Baptist church. But the whole family, our family, went to the Episcopal church. And so she joined with my dad. But uh, toward the end of her life, she would always say, "Take me to my church. Take me to my church." So, I took her; I'd leave our church in the morning, because we had early service. And I'd take her down to the Baptist church.

AB: What about your brothers and sister? Now, do they continue their association with the Episcopal church?

RR: No, they're, see, they're all away. No, my sister, no, she's down at Zion, some place [inaudible]. But uh, and my two brothers are away. They, they don't attend church like they should. They come home on Homecoming, or, uh, special, something special the church is having. AB: Do your children, uh, your son, does he go to St. Phillip's?

RR: Yeah, my children all belong to St. Phillip's. Yeah. They all joined. I saw that they were confirmed. When it was time, they, they joined church. They don't always, they don't attend regularly. But they do go. That's where their church is.

AB: So, that was an important influence, then, in your life?

RR: Oh, yes.

AB: When you, let's go back to Storer College. In the fall, you went, after you graduated from high school, you enrolled at Storer College. What was your first day like there, when you, when you went to Storer?

RR: [sigh] Well, I was apprehensive. A little bit afraid, "Am I gonna make it? Make it here?" And, and we had teachers that cared, then, you know? Teachers would come up...it was so that we knew, the teachers knew you by name there. And uh, of course, Mr. Lewis, George Lewis, was a friend of my dad's. And so, I'd go struttin' across the campus, and one day Mr. Lewis beckoned for me. He was standing up on Abney Hall. He beckoned me and said he wanted to see me. I went to see what he wanted. He said, "If you don't buckle down and do more than I'm seeing that you're doing...walking across campus...you don't have time to walk across campus at this time. You should be studying." He said, "If you don't do more than you're doing, something's gonna happen." And I thought, "Well he's gonna tell Dad." [chuckles] And uh, it was that kind of thing. I mean, he, he was really, he was really a good friend. So I, I kind of buckled down. He said they had a meeting where they were talking about the students in danger. I was one of the students in danger.

AB: Now, what did "in danger" mean?

RR: Well, in danger meant that, you know, you would, you would either be put out or you would uh, some how, they would call you into the Dean's office or something and talk to you, and tell you that you, you just weren't doing what you should do, and something was gonna happen. There were all consequences that were coming along.

AB: Now, why is it that you weren't studying? Were you just having a good time?

RR: I was having a good time and had met some friends. And I thought everything was just peaches and cream, I guess. And, you know, you don't apply yourself. Just like in high school, if I had known what I know now, I would have done better in high school. But I guess I did all right. But I could have done better, I'm sure. And see when I went to college, it was almost the same thing. I just thought, well, just a little studying, I can get by. Just so I get by, so what? But uh, I found out that that wasn't the case.

AB: So, that was kind of a wake-up call for you?

RR: It was a wake-up call for me. And I'm so glad that it did happen.

RW-N: Why do you think that your father—and your mother, I guess—wanted you to go to college? Or was that mostly your father?

RR: That was mostly my father.

RW-N: Why do you think. . .

RR: Well, my mother, my mother attended Storer.

RW-N: Your mother attended Storer?

RR: My mother attended Storer.

RW-N: So we've established that your father dropped out of school at the second (RR: At the second grade, yeah) grade. But that was not true for your mother?

RR: My mother attended Storer. Her mother saw that she went to school. But it wasn't Storer College then, it was a normal school, of course, at that time.

RW-N: What was the name of it at that time? Do you remember?

RR: Well, she called it Storer College. But uh, (AB: It was always Storer College) it was always

Storer College.

RW-N: Yes, okay, but it was a normal school. (RR: Yes) How many years did she go, do you know?

RR: Well, I guess-, how many years would she go there?

AB: Well, did she go there...? See, it also had a high school component. Because there was no, in the early days, there was no high school in this area. Might she have gone there to, to high school as well as to college?

RR: She might have, Ms. Bickley, I don't know. She might have gone to high school. My mother taught school. Of course, at that time, you could teach school and go to school with two years or three. She taught school in Bakerton, West Virginia...for a number of years.

AB: Would you spell that word, please?

RR: B-a-k-e-r-t-o-n, Bakerton.

AB: And she taught before she was married?

RR: Yeah, she taught school before she was married. (AB: She probably then had finished, uh, at least a [inaudible] than normal.) Because she told me, she say, (RW-N: Sounds like it) "Well, Ruby, you, you all aren't gettin' the things that we got, when we went to, when we went to Storer College." She said, "They had Latin when I went." Well, we didn't have Latin when I went. But they had French and, and I guess they had Spanish. But she would tell me some of the things. She said, "You all aren't get-, you all aren't gettin' the things going to college that I got when I was in high school."

RW-N: So your mother had lived in Washington, D.C. (RR: Yes) But had moved over here and then went on to Storer. (RR: Went on to Storer College) And then became a teacher.

RR: Yes.

RW-N: At least for a few years?

RR: A few years, yeah. She became a teacher.

AB: Why did she not continue as a teacher?

RR: Well, I guess she met my dad. I suppose that was it. I suppose that's what happened.

Because she uh, she would tell me. And she would do a lot of quoting to me, uh, poems and things that she had learned in college. And, and, I'd say, "Well, we didn't have to learn that."

Uh...what was this...there was one thing..."Lady of the Lake." My mother would say-, tell me things about "Lady of the Lake." I don't remember that. I said, "Lady of the Lake?" She said, "Well, we had that when I was going to school. You all didn't have that?" "No, we didn't have that."

RW-N: Now when you, when you were younger, before you went to Storer yourself, were you aware that your mother had gone to Storer? (RR: Yes) And she would talk about it then?

RR: Yes, she would talk about it then. (RW-N: But somehow or other...) And she'd say, she'd say, "I'm a smart woman." My mother would always say that. She'd say, "Got to get your education," she said, "I'm a smart woman." And my, my brothers say right now, "You know what Mommy used to say. She was a smart woman." I'd say, "Yeah, right." [chuckles] But uh....

RW-N: You didn't believe it?

RR: Yeah, I kind of believed it, but Mom would say that so often. You know, she would say that, "I'm a smart woman." Anything that, uh, we would say or do, and she'd say, she'd correct us and she'd say, "Because I'm a smart woman." You know, that kind of thing. (AB: Mmm-hmm) She would laugh about it. But I think she really meant it. [chuckle]

RW-N: Well, did she uh...it doesn't sound though that she actively encouraged you to go to Storer. When you tell us the story, you say it was [inaudible] your dad who said....

RR: Well, she kind of, she kind of, she did sort of encourage. Daddy just didn't want me to go into...not that he was worried about Storer, or involved in Storer or anything. But he just didn't want me to go in the service. My mother attended Storer, so, naturally, she wanted me to go. She wanted me to go. She would have dinner ready some nights, on Tuesday or Thursday nights, I think. That was when I would catch the bus home. And sometimes, if Miss White didn't pick me up and I had to stay late or something, my mother would always have dinner in the oven. Everybody had finished dinner, but she'd always have my dinner in the oven, plate covered over with a pie plate. And it'd always be warm. I remember coming home nights, some winter nights, when I couldn't catch the bus, only at 7 o'clock at night. And I'd walk from the bus station, and I'd be thinking, "What's Momma gonna have for dinner tonight?" She'd always have it covered up in the oven. Warm, fuzzy thoughts of Mom, you know...things that happened.

RW-N: Since we had gone back to talking about your parents-, we're kind of switching back and forth here, too, I know. Can you...can you tell us, uh, when you think about your mother, what are the things that stand out about her, that are really very positive to you? The warm, fuzziness-- she sounded like she was a very (RR: Yeah, she, she...) dependable mother. She always had that plate in the oven.

RR: Yeah, she had the plate in the oven. And we'd go sled riding...on the hill at night, sometimes when it was snowing. And we'd go home and Mom would always have hot chocolate or cocoa, or something. And she'd have, she'd make homemade doughnuts. And we'd go in the house and have that smell in the house. And the dinners, the Christmas dinners, or at Easter time, everybody

got together at my house, all the family would come together. And we could always depend on Mom for having a good meal for us. I mean, even after I've been here, grown up, Mom would always have a turkey. Of course, I'd go up and help her in the morning. She'd say, "You all have to come and help." And I'd go up and help her. But we could always remember then, having a good meal. Even when we, even when we were in the country. And we thought we didn't have much. Mom would always make the table so pretty. And even though the lamps would be burning, and that kind of thing, but she always had a good, good, warm meal for us.

RW-N: What are some of the things that, if you would dare to say it, [chuckle] you thought could be improved about your mother? Either that you felt when you were younger, or as you look back now?

RR: Well, she could have kind of stood up to Dad more. She, she loved my dad, I'm sure. She wouldn't let anybody say anything about him. She would always take up for him. If somebody would say something out of the way, she would always take up for him. But if she could. . .uh, gotten him to. . .see, I don't think he really understood, uh, some of the things Momma said. I think he kind of resented Momma even going to school, having gone to school, and knew a little bit more than he did. I think he kind of resented that at times. And she'd say, "Well, I'm a smart woman." And he would kind of get, you know, he'd get...(RW-N: Mmm-hmm) ...rigid. You know, we could tell that. [chuckle] He said, "Flo, why do you always say that?" She said, "Because I am," and it was that kind of thing, you know.

RW-N: But in a way, you still think she didn't stand up as much as what she might have?

RR: Well, I...I, that, that's just (RW-N: That, that's just your feeling, yes) my feeling, yes. Now, the others may feel differently.