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### Interview with Mrs. Alberta Nelson

Monroe Fordham

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The following is a biographical interview with Mrs. Alberta Nelson. The interviewer is Monroe Fordham.

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INTERVIEWER: You can just start with where you were born. This will be sort of a biographical sketch, and we will fill in as we go along.

MRS. NELSON: I was born in a little town in Illinois about 200 miles from Chicago. The town was called Jacksonville, Illinois. I lived with my Grandmother. I was born August 7, 1891. Today is my birthday, and I'm 82 years old. I went to school in this little town. The population was about 18,000. The schools were mixed. There weren't many Colored people there as in a great many instances I'd be in two or three grades before I'd be with any Colored children at all. I'd be the only Colored child in the class.

INTERVIEWER: What were your parents occupations in this town?

MRS. NELSON: My father was a farmer. My Grandmother worked in a private family. I lived with her with these wealthy people. I stayed with her when she was employed by them, and I went to school. All through my early life my Grandmother would talk to me about \_\_\_\_\_ University. She would say, "Alberta, I want you to go to school, then I want you to go to \_\_\_\_\_ University, and I want you to be a teacher." She kept that before me all my life. When I graduated from high school there, she sent me to \_\_\_\_\_.

INTERVIEWER: How did you go? On the train?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, I went on the train to \_\_\_\_\_, Ohio, then the school had a bus that met the train and took me out to \_\_\_\_\_.

INTERVIEWER: Had you written earlier to tell them you were coming?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, I had registered before I went. I finished high school at home. Then my Grandmother said I had to go to \_\_\_\_\_.

INTERVIEWER: Did any of your teachers ever encourage you to be a teacher?

MRS. NELSON: No, I had all White teachers. I never had a Colored teacher till I went to \_\_\_\_\_. They didn't give me much encouragement. They were nice to me. I enjoyed my school life. I don't think there was much prejudice. There were so few of us in school.

INTERVIEWER: Did anyone ever discourage you from wanting to be a teacher?

MRS. NELSON: No, no one. I went four years to high school in Jacksonville.

INTERVIEWER: Once you got to \_\_\_\_\_, how did you finance your education?

MRS. NELSON: My Grandmother, till she passed. She passed after I was there a year. Then my father. Then the wealthy people for whom my Grandmother worked helped.

INTERVIEWER: So, you were in the position where you had someone at home to help you financially.

MRS. NELSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have to work while you were at \_\_\_\_\_?

MRS. NELSON: No, I didn't work at all. Well, one year I worked part of that year. I worked in the President's home, for a few months. That was right after my Grandmother passed.

INTERVIEWER: Was Dr. Nelson at \_\_\_\_\_ when you got there?

MRS. NELSON: Yes. He said he rode out on the same bus as me, but I didn't remember it. When I went there, I was enrolled in the junior teachers training class. Junior year. So, I was there just two years and graduated. After I was there two years, well, before I graduated, I was appointed to teach in East St. Louis, Illinois. I taught there nine years. While I was there, there was a race riot. It was terrible. I had children in my class that had stayed out in the fields all night during that riot. I was scared myself.

INTERVIEWER: What do you recall as a major cause of the riot? Why do you think it happened?

MRS. NELSON: The Colored people were getting jobs in the packing house. That was the principle job of Colored people, getting jobs in the meat packing business. It seemed like they were taking jobs that the White people really wanted. That was the main cause of the riot.

INTERVIEWER: Was there much in the papers about it do you recall?

MRS. NELSON: Oh, yes. There was a great deal in the St. Louis Dispatch. We were right across the river from St. Louis, Missouri. East St. Louis is in Illinois. The papers played it up a great deal. One day, I didn't know the riot had struck, and I had gone over to St. Louis after school to do some shopping. Coming back a policeman pushed me, and he wanted to know why I was over there. He didn't do any damage to me, but he was insulting. He told me to get on back to Illinois. I didn't like that very well. I didn't suffer any trouble or any inconvenience. I could look out my bedroom and look downtown and see the fire starting. Our people downtown were burned out of their homes by the block. It was a terrible tragedy.

INTERVIEWER: Who was setting the fires?

MRS. NELSON: Whites.

INTERVIEWER: Was it like the riots of 1968 where Blacks were burning and that sort of thing?

MRS. NELSON: No. The Colored people got the worse of the mess. Their homes were burned.

INTERVIEWER: The St. Louis riots were the ones where Blacks were being attacked then, is that right?

MRS. NELSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Who did the newspapers tend to put the blame on? You mentioned that there was quite a bit of press on it.

MRS. NELSON: The newspapers said it was a matter of hiring. They were hiring more Colored people than Whites at this meat packing place.

INTERVIEWER: Did you know many people that were employed over there?

MRS. NELSON: Yes. The people that I was boarding from. The man I was boarding from was locked up there several nights and couldn't even come home. He was employed there. It was a bad situation.

INTERVIEWER: Do you recall if many people were injured or killed?

MRS. NELSON: No. It was more property loss than anything.

INTERVIEWER: After the riots were over, what do you recall about race relations in St. Louis, in East St. Louis?

MRS. NELSON: In East St. Louis, the races were still apart. They didn't associate together. Even the teachers met at conferences, the White teachers weren't very pleasant and try to segregate us. But, we wouldn't stand for it. When we had lectures, they would want us to sit in a certain place, but we wouldn't submit to it.

INTERVIEWER: About what years were these?

MRS. NELSON: That I taught there? I taught there from 1911 to 1920.

INTERVIEWER: During the time that you taught there, did they have much in the way of teaching about Black history and that sort of thing?

MRS. NELSON: Not anything. I remember teaching in the lower grades, and I would tell the children about Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. I would tell the children I wanted them to go to school and that I wanted them to go to \_\_\_\_\_. I always stressed \_\_\_\_\_ to them. But, they didn't get any history in the schools. Even those in high school knew very little about history of their people.

INTERVIEWER: When did you hear about Carter Wilson? Did you know much about him during those years?

MRS. NELSON: I read the Crisis. I knew about him through that.

INTERVIEWER: What influence did his work have, do you think, in the public schools during those other years? Do you think he was able to get much change in the way of teaching Black history in the schools or do you think that came later?

MRS. NELSON: I think it came later.

INTERVIEWER: Was he widely known at that time?

MRS. NELSON: I don't think so. I don't even think many of the teachers knew about him.

INTERVIEWER: How did you learn about Frederick Douglass and all of the Blacks that you knew about?

MRS. NELSON: From the home. My parents had books about Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. When my people were very staunch A.M.E. church members, they had a large photograph of all of the bishops. My mother and Grandmother used to talk to me about these bishops, and about Bishop Payne. They'd always talk about \_\_\_\_\_, and the great bishops that were connected with \_\_\_\_\_.

INTERVIEWER: You probably learned alot when you went to \_\_\_\_\_ because the history of their church is tied up alot in that.

MRS. NELSON: Yes. That school was founded by the A.M.E. church.

INTERVIEWER: When did you meet Dr. Nelson?

MRS. NELSON: We were classmates. He was a junior when I arrived there. When I enrolled there, I was classified junior in teacher training. We had a class-move, and I think that is when I met him, in the class-move.

INTERVIEWER: When did you two decide that you were going to get married?

MRS. NELSON: No, I don't think he thought about that so much.

INTERVIEWER: Then you left \_\_\_\_\_, of course.

MRS. NELSON: Yes, we both graduated in the same class. I went to East St. Louis, and he went to Ann Arbor, Michigan.

INTERVIEWER: Did you corresponde very much?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, we corresponded the whole nine years.

INTERVIEWER: After he left Michigan and went to Boston, did you get married?

MRS. NELSON: We got married after he graduated from Boston.

INTERVIEWER: Then you decided to come to Buffalo?

MRS. NELSON: He graduated in 1918 from University of Boston but we didn't marry until 1920. I continued to teach, in East. St. Louis.

INTERVIEWER: When you came to Buffalo, did you intend to teach?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, I taught three years here.

INTERVIEWER: Did you decide that you wanted to stop or did you stop teaching because of the job situation here?

MRS. NELSON: No, I stopped because my health wasn't too good at that time. I had my housework and other things to do so I just faded out here. We took three foster children into our home and kept them for nine years. That kept me plenty busy. Then, I was organist for our church for a number of years. I was organist for Michigan Avenue Baptist Church for four years. I worked in church and Sunday School, so I was always busy.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the involvements that you can recall that you had with the community, say back in the '30s? In other words, what kind of activities were you involved in in the community?

MRS. NELSON: Aside from the church and Sunday School, I was involved in my husband's organization, the Cooperative. I was financial secretary. We organized in connection with that Cooperative a credit union. I was the treasurer of that credit union. That involved all the bookkeeping. That credit union was very successful. We didn't have a large number of members, but we made many loans, and we never lost one penny. We never had to pay for anyone. Everybody that took out loans paid us back, and we lent out thousands of dollars. I thought that was quite remarkable.

INTERVIEWER: What are some of the activities that you say were involved in with the church? In other words, as you think back, maybe some of the church's involvement with the community programs, and that sort of thing.

MRS. NELSON: I can't think of anything right now.

INTERVIEWER: In other words, was the church more than a religious institution? Was it social? Did they provide social activities of an adult type?

MRS. NELSON: Yes. They had dinners. Then every Sunday afternoon, they had what they called the Forum, at Bethel A.M.E. church. They would bring in outstanding characters from all over the United States to lecture.

INTERVIEWER: Was this every Sunday afternoon?

MRS. NELSON: That's right, every Sunday afternoon, they would have someone outstanding to lecture. They had Dr. Debois; they had many different ones.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that you were paired with George Scholar.

MRS. NELSON: He was interested in this Cooperative movement. We had him here to come and lecture a number of times. I corresponded with him some. He was always interesting.

INTERVIEWER: Do you still have those letters?

MRS. NELSON: I should have, but I would have to look and see. I will look and see.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of suggestions was he giving to you, or did he help you with the organization in any way?

MRS. NELSON: Yes. He encouraged people to join this Cooperative movement. He said Negroes should have their own business, and they should patronize their own business, they should make jobs for their own business. This Cooperative was a way for them to make jobs for themselves, for their own people.

INTERVIEWER: Was there much emphasis during this, what years, do you recall, was this?

MRS. NELSON: I think around '28, beginning around '28.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember much about Garvey?

MRS. NELSON: I would reach about him some. I never saw him, but I would read about him.

INTERVIEWER: Among the church people, do you think he was popular?

MRS. NELSON: No, I don't think that he was popular among the church people. The people that I knew any way.

INTERVIEWER: Who do you think among the church people that you associated with was the most popular among the three gentlemen we spoke about: Washington, Debois, and Garvey?

MRS. NELSON: Debois, I think. They liked him, I think, more than any.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that was so?

MRS. NELSON: He was very intelligent. I think the others were too, but somehow they liked Debois, I think.

INTERVIEWER: Were many people members of the N.A.A.C.P.?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, they had a very big N.A.A.C.P. here at one time.

INTERVIEWER: Were you ever a member of it, involved in it?

MRS. NELSON: We were members in it but never active in it.

INTERVIEWER: Who were some of the leading people in it, do you recall, that were in it in the early years in Buffalo?

MRS. NELSON: I don't know if I can think of any now.

INTERVIEWER: I mention it because of the involvement in this area of the organization and that it evolved out of this area.

MRS. NELSON: I think Mr. William Jackson at the YMCA. I think he was active in the N.A.A.C.P.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know if he is still in Buffalo?

MRS. NELSON: He is dead.

INTERVIEWER: Are any of his relatives here?

MRS. NELSON: No, not any. He has been dead for quite some time. But, the N.A.A.C.P. flourished under him. It never did so well after he left.

INTERVIEWER: What was his name again?

MRS. NELSON: William Jackson, William H. Jackson.

INTERVIEWER: What I'd like to do some time is to look at those papers because I'm sure their . . . .

MRS. NELSON: Well, I'll have to look for them because I'm sure we have some of them. My husband will have more than I do, but I think I have them upstairs in my bookcase. It needs purusing. I don't know if I can do it or not.

INTERVIEWER: Can you think of anything else, since I have much of what happened after you came to Buffalo on the other tape. Anything, any other highlights that you can recall about your early years before you came to Buffalo? Anything that stands out in your mind when you are reminiscing.

MRS. NELSON: No, I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER: Well, if you do think of anything, you be sure to let me know.

MRS. NELSON: Yes, I will.

This interview was conducted on June 21, 1973, with Mrs. Alberta Nelson. The interviewer is Monroe Fordham.

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to start out by asking when did you come to Buffalo and what brought you to Buffalo?

MRS. NELSON: Well, we came to Buffalo on June 28, 1920. I had just finished teaching school in St. Louis. I taught school there nine years. My husband had been going to, we weren't married then, but when school was out on Friday in East St. Louis, I went to Chicago, and I met my husband there for the first time. Then we came out to Buffalo because my husband had been going to school at the University of Boston, and in the summers, he had been running on the boats out from here, not from Buffalo. He had been living here in the summer, so we were married in Chicago.

INTERVIEWER: Did you know anyone here prior to your coming here?

MRS. NELSON: No. I didn't know anyone at the time, but later I did run into several schoolmates here. There were Fred and James Dell. Then there was another girl. Her name was Myrtle Shotwell. I later ran into her, but when I came, I didn't think I knew anyone.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned you were a school teacher in St. Louis before you came here. Now, when you came here, did you make any efforts to get into the public school system?

MRS. NELSON: Yes. I put in applications, and I substituted here for three years.

INTERVIEWER: Did you try to get on as a regular teacher?

MRS. NELSON: No, I didn't try. I just substituted for three years.

INTERVIEWER: What was the school system like for Black teachers at the time? Could they get jobs pretty easy?

MRS. NELSON: No, it wasn't too easy. I think when I came here there were only about two Colored teachers in the whole system. One was Miss Jacobs, and the other was, I've forgotten what her name was. But, I don't know the two.

INTERVIEWER: How large was the system? Do you recall in terms of numbers about how many schools did they have? Alot of them?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, there were quite a number. They didn't have many Colored in any of the schools. In some of the schools there weren't any at all. Most of the Colored children were down in schools down on Clinton Street. I've forgotten the number of that school.

INTERVIEWER: Did the two Colored teachers teach in Colored schools?

MRS. NELSON: The schools they were in had more Colored. I don't think there were Colored children in more than two schools at that time.

INTERVIEWER: When you got your teaching assignments to substitute, did they assign you basically to the two Colored schools or did they assign you . . .

MRS. NELSON: Yes. I taught mostly in School 32. I think it was the only school I substituted in.

INTERVIEWER: Were there many Black teachers applying to teach in the schools or were they just not hiring them? Why were there only two?

MRS. NELSON: I don't think they were applying for positions. Now, about 1925, a few more Colored applied. They received permanent appointment.

INTERVIEWER: So, you think that there was a small number because there was a scarce number applying?

MRS. NELSON: I think so. I think that was the real cause of there not being any more.

INTERVIEWER: If you wanted to, could you have gotten on as a permanent teacher?

MRS. NELSON: I think if I had persisted I could have.

INTERVIEWER: When you first came here, where did you live?

MRS. NELSON: I lived down on 194 Clinton Street.

INTERVIEWER: How did you happen to find that place?

MRS. NELSON: My husband had been living there before I came. We stayed there after I came. We stayed there just about two months, and then we moved to 126 Reilly Street. In November, we moved here where we are now.

INTERVIEWER: Was that November of 1920?

MRS. NELSON: Yes '20. And there were no Colored people near us out here.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any problems finding a house?

MRS. NELSON: No. In fact, we were sought after. I had my piano moved here. There was a White man who did hauling. He saw this piano, and he wanted to move it for us. We said that we were just renting at that time, but we would let him haul it and put it in the place we were living. In the course of our transaction, he said to us, "I know of a house that you could get. It would be just right for you two." That was in September. We said that we were just married, and we didn't want to bother about a house. Later, we became dissatisfied with where we were living on Reilly Street. My husband said, "Let's look up that man about that house." So, we looked him up, and he said, "Oh, I'll take you out there to see it." And, he brought us out here, and I liked this house. I liked it very much. There were White people living in it at the time. The house was just four years old then. I liked this house from the outside. The White people were living in it so I didn't insist on

coming in. We talked to the owner, and we finally agreed to take this house. So, we moved here in November of 1920.

INTERVIEWER: What was the price of houses in this area at that time?

MRS. NELSON: They were much lower than they are now. For \$500 down payment, you could get a nice house. I don't think this was but \$300 down.

INTERVIEWER: How were the neighbors when you moved in since you were the only Blacks?

MRS. NELSON: The neighbors were lovely. There weren't any houses around this house. The first house was about half way down the block. There was a family down there that was just lovely to us. There were others; a house second from the corner. The people in that house were kind of shy. They weren't ugly, but they were kind of shy. After we stayed the year, they became very friendly. There was a family down the street that was particularly nice. They would help us in every way they could. I guess that quieted the fears with others.

INTERVIEWER: What was your dwelling like over on Reilly? What kind of place was that?

MRS. NELSON: We lived in a two-family house with Colored people. It was a nice house. We had six rooms. The people were very disagreeable. We didn't enjoy being there at all.

INTERVIEWER: Do you mean the people living in the other part of the house?

MRS. NELSON: They were the owners; upper class.

INTERVIEWER: Was that mostly a Colored neighborhood?

MRS. NELSON: No. There weren't Colored people down there either.

INTERVIEWER: Where did most of the Blacks live in Buffalo at that time? Were they scattered throughout?

MRS. NELSON: No. They were just around Clinton mostly. I think there were a few families out on Lorrell Street. They had been there for some time. "Old Buffalonians" they would call themselves. These people that called themselves "Old Buffalonians" were not friendly to the newcomers at all.

INTERVIEWER: Do you mean the old Blacks?

MRS. NELSON: The old Blacks. They weren't friendly to the new ones coming in.

INTERVIEWER: When you speak of the "Old Buffalonians," they were people that had been here for how long?

MRS. NELSON: Centuries! They had been here for ages.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think they were here before the Civil War?

MRS. NELSON: Well, some of them perhaps could have been.

INTERVIEWER: I mean their families.

MRS. NELSON: Yes, their families. But, they were hostile to new people coming in.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that was so?

MRS. NELSON: Well, they said it was going to make it harder for them. They thought they would have harder times and no livelihood. They made all kinds of silly reasons why they were unfriendly to the newcomers. They really did have a hostility against newcomers.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you feel this hostility? Was it in church, or where did you come in contact with the old people? How did they express this hostility to you?

MRS. NELSON: If we happen to come in contact with them socially and get into a conversation, they would remind you that you were a newcomer, and that they had been here for a long time. They thought that newcomers coming in were going to make it harder for them. Some hardships were then in getting work.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of occupations were the old timers in?

MRS. NELSON: They were just working in private families. Driving their buggies and things. There weren't many automobiles.

INTERVIEWER: So they figured that you would take those jobs away from them.

MRS. NELSON: Yes, they did. They didn't like it. They said we were coming here, and the White people would be less friendly to them because there was so many of us coming in.

INTERVIEWER: What were most of the younger or the new people, what kind of jobs were they doing? Do you think they were better prepared for jobs or do you think there wasn't much difference in terms of that?

MRS. NELSON: I think the newcomers were better prepared for jobs. I think that is where the resentment came in. The newcomers were better prepared for jobs, and they were more ambitious than those that had been here. There was a fear that the newcomers would uproot them.

INTERVIEWER: How would you generally characterize the Black community in Buffalo when you came in the '20s? What overall characterization would you give to them?

MRS. NELSON: They weren't progressive. I don't believe three Colored families owned their homes when we came here, but the new ones that came in commenced buying homes. The old ones were jealous about that. When the new ones started buying homes, they would always have something to say about it. We bargained

to buy this home in the fall, and they would say, "Why don't you wait until the spring. Prices will be lower." We didn't pay attention to those families. We did what we wanted to do.

INTERVIEWER: That is an interesting discussion about the differences in the new and the older people. When you came in contact with these individuals in church, did they tend to hold the high positions in the churches, in the Black churches?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, they held the high positions. But, they needed help. I remember I came to Bethel Church, and it was located on what they call Vine Alley. Six months after I was here, they needed an organist. The minister happened to have been a schoolmate of ours at \_\_\_\_\_, and he knew that I played. He came right after me. The organist that they had had was an Old Buffalonian. She became ill and gave up. When she gave up, the minister came and asked me to play. Although she was sick, she had her misgivings about someone else playing. People would go to see her, and she would send word back of what songs we should sing, that we should sing the same ones. Of course, I wasn't going to follow her footsteps particularly. I wanted to try some new songs. When she got word that I was trying new songs my way, she didn't like it, but it didn't bother me any. I went right on playing for the church.

INTERVIEWER: How long were you in Buffalo before you associated with Bethel?

MRS. NELSON: The first Sunday I was here, I went to Bethel Church.

INTERVIEWER: Had you been active and associated with the church back in St. Louis?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, I've been active in the church all my life. So, just as soon as I came here, I became affiliated with the church.

INTERVIEWER: When you came, what were some of the large Black churches in terms of membership?

MRS. NELSON: Shilo Baptist Church. When I came here, it was located on South Division.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the other churches you recall?

MRS. NELSON: There was St. Luke, but it was on Michigan Avenue in a little store front.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any other A.M.E. churches?

MRS. NELSON: No, Bethel was the only A.M.E. church.

INTERVIEWER: Is that why you decided to join Bethel?

MRS. NELSON: Yes because I had always been A.M.E.

INTERVIEWER: What was Bethel like for you in the '20s when you came?

MRS. NELSON: Well, it had people that boasted that they were "Old Buffalonians." They liked to tell you that. They thought that the new people in the church wanted to take all the best places in the church. I never paid any attention to them. But, they didn't have new homes or anything.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think they were not progressive, as you say? Why do you think they were that way?

MRS. NELSON: They didn't have any stimulus. The new ones were the ones that began having things. It was the new ones that started buying homes. Of course, the old ones were jealous because they saw the new ones become progressive. As I said before, they feared the newcomers because they going to surpass them.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that their fears were justified? Do you think they were justified in believing the way they did, or do you think they should have taken a different position? What are your feelings about that?

MRS. NELSON: I thought it was very narrow of them. I thought they should have joined in with these newcomers and encourage them. They could have been help to each other.

INTERVIEWER: Did the coming of the newcomers have any effect, did the old ones start buying homes after the new ones started?

MRS. NELSON: No, I never saw any advance that they made, only criticism.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any special events and activities in the early church, things that the early church was involved in? How would you characterize the activities and the involvement of the early church? What was it like in terms of what was the church doing in the community? What were some of the goals and objectives that the church was working for in those days, during the '20s and '30s?

MRS. NELSON: I think the church was worrying to get different and better buildings. Bethel moved from Vine Alley to Eagle Street. Reverend Durham, he was one of the ministers that I found here, was with A.M.E. Zion Church. They were in a little place up on Michigan Avenue. Reverend Durham worked hard and built the church on Eagle Street. The churches were trying to work hard and improve their situation.

INTERVIEWER: Why did they move from the old location?

MRS. NELSON: Bethel moved because, well, I do believe the city was going to open up William Street and take in Vine Alley. That's what they did. Vine Alley became just a continuation of William Street.

INTERVIEWER: Who were some of the leading members that you recall in those days in the church in the early '20s?

MRS. NELSON: There was a Mr. & Mrs. Lewis who had a son who was a doctor. He was the first Negro doctor in Buffalo.

INTERVIEWER: When I interview your husband, I'm going to deal specifically with the medical situation and doctors and their health. But, I want to get into all of that with him. Who were some of the other leading citizens in Buffalo in that church? Who were some of the people that you would categorize as the backbone of the church?

MRS. NELSON: The father of Dr. Lewis, Mr. & Mrs. Henry Lewis. There was a Mr. Rice who was on the Trustee Board. There was a man who was teaching in the Sunday School, but I can't think of his name. Wright, Mr. Wright, he was Superintendent of the Sunday School. There was a Mrs. Totten. She was very active in church life.

INTERVIEWER: Were most of the Old Buffalonians in Bethel, or were they in other churches as well?

MRS. NELSON: People said that all these other churches grew out of Bethel. Bethel was the first Colored church here. Bethel used to be called a Slave Station, Underground Railroad Station of Africa. An underground station for slaves that were escaping from the South to go over into Canada. Many of them stopped at Bethel Church on their way to Canada.

INTERVIEWER: So, most of the other churches resulted from people leaving Bethel?

MRS. NELSON: Yes. Most of the other churches came out of Bethel Church because it was the first one here.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think was the reason for the denominationalism among Blacks? Did they disagree with Church doctrine, or was it disagreement in personality? What was the reason for Blacks splendoring and starting other churches?

MRS. NELSON: I think the various denominations here was the result of people's training before they came here. They were in the various denominations in the South before they came to Buffalo.

INTERVIEWER: So, when they came to Buffalo they just associated with the Baptist or Methodist or whatever. Were there any other denominations of Black churches other than Baptist or Methodist?

MRS. NELSON: There were the Episcopal churches.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of people would you say joined Bethel? Was there any kind of class division in terms of the churches, or, in other words, did the so-called upperclass Blacks try to associate with a certain church, or were there upperclasses and other classes in all the churches?

MRS. NELSON: Well, the upperclass tried to maintain the Episcopal church. They called themselves upperclass, but they were no different from anyone else.



The Episcopalians called themselves better. Most of them called themselves "Old Buffalonians." But, they weren't in large numbers. Bethel had the largest congregation of all the other churches. There were four off-spring from Bethel.

INTERVIEWER: What was the name of the Episcopal Church? Was it all Black?

MRS. NELSON: St. Phillips. It was all Black and had a Black minister. When we came here they had a Black minister.

INTERVIEWER: When you first came to Bethel, I'm sure you were, as you are now, active in a lot of different auxiliaries and things of that sort, what were some of the auxiliaries and boards that you became active in? What were some of the things the board did?

MRS. NELSON: I was in the Sunday School. I taught Sunday School. I was in the Missionary Society. That's about all I was connected with in the church. I also played for the children's choir and the adult's choir.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have a lot of children in Sunday School at that time?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, they had quite a number of children in Sunday School. It was a good Sunday School. They always had about 100 to 150. That was very good for the number of Colored people that were here then. This was all in the '20s.

INTERVIEWER: As you think back, what do you think was the high point of your involvement, or the church activities during the 1920s and '30s? Is there any particular activity that stands out in your mind that you like to think about or reminisce about occasionally?

MRS. NELSON: Only my work in the Sunday School. I liked the work I did in the choir.

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to move now to a discussion of some particular periods in time that you recall and maybe some particular things about those periods that you recall. First of all, maybe we might mention the Depression. You were in Buffalo during the Depression. What was it like in Buffalo at that time during the Depression?

MRS. NELSON: Well, people just didn't have money. They had to go on Welfare for food, for clothing, even for housing. It was a desperate situation. They had to have food stamps to get food.

INTERVIEWER: Did people have gardens and things like that at that time?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, they tried to raise as much as they could, but they didn't have much ground, they didn't have much space for gardens so they planted what they could. But, if they could plant gardens, they did.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the Black community was hurt any worse, or how was the Black community affected by it in comparison to others?

MRS. NELSON: Our people have always been used to hardships and poverty. I think they accepted it well. They just took what came and made the most of it.

INTERVIEWER: When they were thrown out of work, what did people do to try to get money other than, you know, in Buffalo?

MRS. NELSON: They would apply for work every place they could.

INTERVIEWER: Did the church try to alleviate any of the problems the people had?

MRS. NELSON: There wasn't many things the church could do.

INTERVIEWER: Did the church have any problems meeting its responsibilities financially during that period?

MRS. NELSON: Bethel owned its church and grounds. It didn't have any heavy indebtedness.

INTERVIEWER: How does, during this period prior to say the Second World War, how did Blacks get along with other ethnic groups?

MRS. NELSON: There didn't seem to be much racial friction. I'd often made the statement that the race relations in Buffalo were better than any place I had ever been. There just didn't seem to be racial conflict.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think is the reason for the good racial climate?

MRS. NELSON: There was no competition for jobs. When Colored people were massed together, they had to push their way out into other neighborhoods and environments so there was very little racial conflict.

INTERVIEWER: Was there, during the Depression, plenty of work for everybody to do?

MRS. NELSON: No, there was a shortage of work. Colored people didn't have jobs, but a few were able to hold onto jobs. There weren't many openings though.

INTERVIEWER: Where could Blacks go usually and expect to get work?

MRS. NELSON: Well . . .

INTERVIEWER: Other than in private homes, the ones that worked in industries and that, where did most of them get jobs?

MRS. NELSON: Well, Bethlehem Steel employed a few. Then quite a number worked on the railroad, in different capacities.

INTERVIEWER: Where was it that they couldn't get any work? What were some of the least likely occupations that Blacks could get in? In other words, were some of the employers in Buffalo just outright prejudice moreso than others?

MRS. NELSON: I think they were. I can't recall just what establishments they were, but there were places where Negroes didn't need their pride because they wouldn't get any consideration. There were no such things as Colored clerks in stores, in banks, or anything like that.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any Blacks that could be called professional class in terms of morticians, etc.?

MRS. NELSON: There were two or three morticians. There were perhaps, in the '20s, about several Negro doctors, several Negro dentists.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say they were some of the leaders in the community? You don't recall any of their names, do you? During the '30s now, any of this period during the Second World War.

MRS. NELSON: My husband was a doctor then. There was Dr. Scruggs. There was a dentist by the name of Dr. Allen, he is dead now. There was a Dr. Gilbert who I think is still here. There was Dr. Herbie Jones. He became a eye specialist.

INTERVIEWER: Who were some of the leading Black spokesmen? People who would go to City Hall or people that would recognize themselves as political leaders although . . .

MRS. NELSON: There was Mr. Gerard Noewar. Reverend \_\_\_\_\_, but I can't recall the name of his Baptist church.

INTERVIEWER: Some of these came up after the '20s, is that right?

MRS. NELSON: Reverend \_\_\_\_\_ had the first Negro Baptist church. I guess his church was next to Bethel.

INTERVIEWER: What about the Urban League and the N.A.A.C.P., were they pretty active organizations?

MRS. NELSON: The Urban League came along in the '30s. The N.A.A.C.P., I think, came along in the '30s, early '30s.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think those organizations had much impact on . . . .

MRS. NELSON: Yes, I think they were very helpful. I think the Urban League and the N.A.A.C.P. did help to open doors for the Negroes that weren't open before. I think the Urban League helped them to get jobs in places where they didn't have jobs before.

INTERVIEWER: Then, do you associate that as a positive organization in terms of helping Blacks?

MRS. NELSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: After the Depression ended and the Second World War began, if you can recall much about that period, when did Blacks begin to move economically in Buffalo? In other words, looking back on that whole period, is there a period there that you think real progress began to take place in Buffalo's economics, housing, education?

MRS. NELSON: I think beginning in the mid-30s.

INTERVIEWER: Was that still during the Depression? Or was it as the Depression was wearing off?

MRS. NELSON: I think it was as the Depression was wearing off. They began to make a new.

INTERVIEWER: Did they begin to get better job opportunities?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, they did. I think that was because of the work of the N.A.A.C.P. and the Urban League.

INTERVIEWER: What about during the War itself? Were Blacks involved in activities like selling bonds and such?

MRS. NELSON: They participated. They began to move, they began to progress.

INTERVIEWER: Were they very active in efforts to help the War efforts? Did many of them join the Army and that kind of thing? Do you recall?

MRS. NELSON: I think many of them enlisted.

INTERVIEWER: One other question that I have; over the years, since you lived in Buffalo, speaking first about the church, what do you think some of the most significant changes are that have taken place in the church? How do you think the church has changed? Has it been for better? Quite often we sit down and talk about how things were and how they are now. As you think back, what are some of the changes that have transpired within the church? Was there more people, less people, more involvement in the community, or less involvement?

MRS. NELSON: I think more people attend church. I think the percentage is larger of people attending church. I think for that reason, the church has been responsible for many of the politicians getting positions. I think the church has put many of the politicians that have won out into these positions. I think these politicians have learned to rely on the church for their help.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any other events, as you think back in your mind, that you think might be useful to someone, say giving personal insights, into the period say prior to the Second World War? Can you think of any other items that stand out in your mind? Maybe things that you and your husband sit around and talk about.

MRS. NELSON: I think one great thing that occurred during the Depression was the growth of the YMCA. It was a beautiful building until lately. It came along in that period.

INTERVIEWER: You were talking about the YMCA as being a center of social activities for Blacks in Buffalo during the '30s. What are some of the activities that went on there?

MRS. NELSON: Mr. Jackson brought to the YMCA the most outstanding Negroes in America. He brought George Washington Carver there. He brought Mary McLeod Bethune. People just flocked there because they knew that whenever anything was given there, it was done with high class.

INTERVIEWER: Was it just mostly Blacks, or inter-racial, or what?

MRS. NELSON: He usually brought Blacks?

INTERVIEWER: So, you're talking about a social institution for Blacks.

MRS. NELSON: Yes, it was. People would go there for dinner on Sundays in large groups. Everything given there was of a high class nature for Blacks. It was the center of the social life.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any idea how the "Y" happen to come to Buffalo?

MRS. NELSON: I really think it was because the accommodations weren't so good for Blacks as at the other "Y".

INTERVIEWER: Did Blacks have trouble getting into social activities in the city at that time?

MRS. NELSON: They were not received with open arms at that time.

INTERVIEWER: In other words, could you go to eat at restaurants?

MRS. NELSON: Not all of them. They weren't welcomed in these places.

INTERVIEWER: But you knew the YMCA was for you.

MRS. NELSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have many Blacks employed there?

MRS. NELSON: They were all Blacks at the "Y".

INTERVIEWER: What are some of the facilities the "Y" had?

MRS. NELSON: They had swimming, basketball, baseball teams. I don't think . . .

INTERVIEWER: Did they have a motel or hotel in the "Y"?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, they had sleeping accommodations, and couples or singles could go there and stay. It was a good environment.

INTERVIEWER: Where was it located at that time?

MRS. NELSON: Just where it is now, Michigan near Sycamore.

INTERVIEWER: Did many Blacks live in that neighborhood?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, they did.

INTERVIEWER: Was the man that directed it a Black man?

MRS. NELSON: Yes, William Jackson.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember his background? Was he a member of the "Y" or did he come to the "Y"?

MRS. NELSON: He came here because of the "Y". The "Y" was built under his supervision. They just had a little store front before that which they worked out of. Then they built this beautiful building.

INTERVIEWER: Were many Blacks in business during that time?

MRS. NELSON: No, not at that time, not many. I think there were one or two grocery stores. There was one grocery store on Michigan Avenue runned by Mr. and Mrs. Malone. At that time, that is the only one I can recall.

INTERVIEWER: Were most of the businesses owned by Whites?

MRS. NELSON: Yes. With the exception of one or two saloons.

INTERVIEWER: Is there any other thing that stands out in your mind other than the "Y" as milestones or things that stand out in your mind as being very significant?

MRS. NELSON: There was an organization that was funded by my husband that was called the Cooperative. It had a membership. Everything connected with this had to do with cooperation. It was built on the idea of cooperation. The slogan was "All for one, and one for all." The members of the Cooperative pooled their money, and they built a business. They had a grocery store. The dividends from the grocery store came back to the members in proportion to the amount they traded in the store. They had quite a successful store.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any of the old records or anything left over from that like records or letters? I'll get into that with your husband about how and why he decided to found that.

MRS. NELSON: Yes, he can tell you more about it than I can.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any other items that stand out in your mind? Things like milestones, things that you think highlight the history of the Blacks, things that you think should be mentioned in any study or the history of local Blacks. Maybe contributions that people made or things that people did that have long been forgotten now.

MRS. NELSON: I don't recall anything right now.

INTERVIEWER: How about in terms of organizations. Any newspapers that Blacks . . .

MRS. NELSON: There were two newspapers. One was the Criterion. Its celebrating its 50th year now. During that time, there came a paper called the Star. The Criterion was founded by a Frank Meriweather; the father of the present editor. The Star was founded by A. J. Smithermon. He was a printer. Those two papers were quite prominent and widely read.

INTERVIEWER: Was there much involvement in the radio?

MRS. NELSON: No, not by Blacks.

INTERVIEWER: Well, those are some things that will be very helpful to me. If you can think of any other events that you may want to talk to me about, go ahead and talk about it.

MRS. NELSON: There was never anything said complimentary about our race when I was in public school. When we had geography, it would show pictures of Black people with their wooly heads and tell about them being slaves, but nothing ever complimentary was said.

INTERVIEWER: Did both of you go to \_\_\_\_\_?

MRS. NELSON: Yes. I went to public school in Jacksonville, Illinois, and I graduated from the high school in Jacksonville. Then I went to \_\_\_\_\_ and graduated from there. He and I were classmates there.