

Interviewee: Beverly Keeling  
Interviewer: Arlene Ollie  
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

Today is October 19, 2006. We are located at the Gainsboro Library.

AO: How are you today?

BK: Fine. Very well.

AO: Would you tell me when and where you were born?

BK: I was born in Roanoke, Virginia, October 6, 1945.

AO: How long have you lived in the Gainsboro area?

BK: I've lived in the Gainsboro area 17 years.

AO: What streets have you lived on?

BK: I've lived on Harrison Avenue for 17 years.

AO: Tell me about your parents and your brothers and sisters.

BK: I have 1 sister, 2 older brothers, my mother and father.

AO: Are you the youngest?

BK: No. I'm not the youngest.

AO: Who's the youngest?

BK: My sister's the youngest.

AO: Did you have any extended family living nearby?

BK: Yes. We had aunts, uncles, cousins living in the immediate area. Same street, different house.

AO: Would you describe your house for us. For instance, was it brick? Did you have a garden? Was it an apartment?

BK: Our house was a 6 room, wood frame. We had a flower garden. Most people on the other side of the street had fish ponds. So we had a flower garden as opposed to a fish pond because our side had less sunlight.

AO: What kind of activities did you participate in?

BK: Growing up in Harrison, I participated in Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, Catholic Youth Organizations. School activities – Choir, private piano. Those were the basic activities.

AO: What kind of work did your family do?

BK: My father worked at the American Viscose. My mother worked at the First National Bank.

AO: For the sake of the interview, would you tell us what American Viscose was?

BK: The American Viscose was the silk mill.

AO: What kind of work have you done throughout your life?

BK: I was a teacher from the time I graduated from college until the time I retired.

AO: Would you talk about your school life. For instance, where did you attend school? Did you walk? Were you ever allowed to stay home from school?

BK: I attended 6 years at Harrison School, 2 years at Booker T. Washington Junior High School, 4 years at Addison High School. We walked to school everyday and we walked home. We could not stay at home, we had to go to school.

AO: You already stated that you completed college and your teaching. Where did you go to college?

BK: I first went to Bluefield State. I got a Bachelor's there. I next went to Radford and I got a Master's in Music there. Next, I went to Hollins University and I got a Master's there. I went to the University of Virginia for 2 years and I got my cags (??).

AO: Describe your home life. For instance, did you gather around the radio in the evening? Do you remember when you got a telephone or refrigerator, along those lines?

BK: I can always remember a telephone. I can remember listening to the radio, listening to stories on

the radio and listening to music on the radio. I remember when my father purchased a TV.

AO: And when was that?

BK: Oh, that was in the '50s and I remember they were very expensive because he put the price on the TV so we could see it and remind us of it.

AO: Did you sit on the porch in the evening?

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BK: Every afternoon everybody sat on the porch.

AO: Did you have chores to do around the house or neighborhood?

BK: Everybody had chores to do around the house and around the neighborhood. You had to help out relatives and other people in the neighborhood.

AO: What were the family stories that were passed down from one generation to another? For instance, did your family have stories about memories of the Civil War or about slavery? Did they have a kind of family recipe that's been passed through generations?

BK: My great-grandparents were excellent cooks and it was passed down to their children and it stopped with me. I didn't – I watched them so much that I could make the things myself but after going to high school, going to college, not having any contact, I forgot it all.

AO: They weren't written?

BK: No. We didn't write anything. They told you how to do it and that's how it was done. They didn't measure things. They knew exactly how much went in there. My grandmother talked about slavery when I was maybe in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade because I didn't know what it was. And my teacher asked me to ask my parents about slavery and I asked my grandmother. She told me about slavery.

AO: Do you remember any particular incidents or descriptions that she gave you?

BK: Her life was quite different. Her mother's life was different. After the Emancipation Proclamation, her mother owned property. It was passed down through the generations. Their life in slavery was not – They didn't experience a harsh life as slaves.

AO: Were they enslaved in Roanoke?

BK: No. Franklin County.

AO: Did you, a spouse, sibling or children serve in the military? If yes, what wars?

BK: No, I did not.

AO: What businesses or shops did your family frequent?

BK: In the Gainsboro area?

AO: Mm mm.

BK: Martin's Fish Market every Friday. There were many neighborhood stores. We frequented those. Downtown, there was an A&P store and fresh foods available at the market.

AO: What is your fondest childhood memory? For example, a favorite holiday event, family vacation or favorite gift you received?

BK: As children growing up, as neighborhood children, we had to entertain ourselves. So we made drums. We made drum major hats. We had our own band.

AO: What are your memories of the Gainsboro Library and Mrs. Virginia Y. Lee?

BK: I had to come to the library to do a report and the library, of course, had the materials and the encyclopedias. I remember Mrs. Lee as being very stern, very strict. The library was a very quiet place. There was no talking in the library. I remember her being very strict.

AO: Describe any cultural events that happened in Gainsboro. For example, do you remember entertainers that came to the Dumas? Do you remember any performances? How many people attended? What time of year it was and where they were held? And if they were entertainers, where did they stay?

BK: The entertainers who came to Roanoke during my childhood stayed at my uncle's motel in Salem.

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AO: What was the name of that?

BK: The name of it was the Pine Oak Inn or they stayed at the Carvin Tourist Home.

AO: Where was that located?

BK: That was located on Gilmer Avenue across from the Lawson Building. And, of course, the Dumas Hotel. When the Dumas could not accommodate all of them, they would send them to Carvin's Home and when he was full, he would refer them to Salem at the Pine Oak Inn.

AO: Do you remember any specific performances or entertainer that you've remember throughout the years?

BK: I remember Mahalia Jackson coming to Roanoke to give a concert. The concert was in the Crossroads Shopping Mall. I think there were over 1,000 people in attendance.

AO: Do you remember what year about?

BK: Late 1950s or early '60s.

AO: Who were some of the strong community leaders and what role did they play?

BK: There were many leaders in the neighborhood and great role models in the school, of course, teachers. There was a Black Businessmen's Association. They had an essay contest every year in the junior high schools and I tried for 3 years but I never won it but I was always fond of them.

AO: That was the Businessmen's Association?

BK: The Black Businessmen's Association.

AO: Who were your role models?

BK: My parents first. Community-wise, Dr. Burton, Mr. Abraham Smith, the late Miss Alta Lee (??) Thompson. (unintelligible)

AO: How has Gainsboro changed over the years?

BK: The neighborhood has changed over the years basically because most of the people who lived in the neighborhood are now deceased and the families have moved into other sections or other cities and states as the case may be. But, during my childhood, the families lived in the same block or the same area and they did not move. I have relatives now who live in the same house they occupied since 1899.

AO: That's great. Here in Roanoke?

BK: Yes.

AO: That's fantastic. Maybe I can get them down for an interview. How was your life affected by segregation and the Civil Rights Movement?

BK: As a child, I wasn't aware of segregation. I knew that white kids went to one school and we went to another but I didn't know why. I noticed that black people went to the First Baptist Church and all but 2 black people went to St. Andrew's. As a child, I never could understand why all blacks went to one church and all whites went to another.

AO: Did the Civil Rights Movement have any major effect?

BK: The Civil Rights Movement was viewed by TV – Roanoke did not experience as much as a demonstration and so forth. That happened in other cities. We sort of watched it from TV or picked up the newspaper. We were aware of what was going on but it didn't happen here.

AO: Do you have any memories about urban renewal? Or did it affect your life?

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BK: Urban renewal did more than moving houses, it moved families. It scattered them everywhere. Growing up in my area, most families lived in the neighborhood or very close, 2 or 3 streets over. They weren't scattered like they are now.

AO: I know this but I'm gonna ask you this question anyway, do you remember the closing of the silk mills?

BK: Yes.

AO: Do you have an opinion or idea of the effect it had on your community?

BK: Everybody that I knew worked at the silk mill. My father, all of his brothers, my grandfather, all

of his brothers. I had one uncle that worked at N&W. He was the exception. But every uncle, every relative worked at the silk mill.

AO: It did have an effect on your family.

BK: Yes.

AO: How did they deal with it?

BK: My father took a lot of pride working at the silk mill and he took pride in his work. After that silk mill closed, I noticed a change in him. Some of my uncles went to Los Angeles, California. Some aunts went to Connecticut. Some went to Detroit in order to work and send money back here. The silk mill had a drastic effect on many people.

AO: What did your father do there?

BK: I never knew exactly what he did. He did something with cleaning the machines or checking the maintenance of the machines. But he always said that the silk mill closed because they were not willing to change. Materials changed from silk to other things but the silk mill didn't make that change to other things. They closed.

AO: They didn't make the product that they were used to making like synthetics.

BK: Yes.

AO: What jobs were available for African-Americans?

BK: After American Viscose closed?

AO: Well, I'm gonna say before and after that you were aware of in your community.

BK: Jobs available to blacks?

AO: Mm mm.

BK: If they were fortunate enough to go to college, teachers, doctors, lawyers. Most black women did domestic work and the men did any kind of job they could find and I do mean any.

AO: Did the people within the Gainsboro Community own their own businesses?

BK: Oh yes. There were many businesses in the Gainsboro area, many.

AO: Is there anything else that we didn't cover that you would like to share with us?

BK: No. That's quite comprehensive.

AO: Thank you so much for your participation.

BK: Thank you.

AO: And I really appreciate your time and I hope that you'll come back and listen to yourself.

BK: Thank you.