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Interview with Willie Mae Hart

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Portland State University
Black United Front Oral History Project

WMH: Willie Mae Hart, narrator

LD: Lisa Donnelly, interviewer

HB: Heather Burmeister, interviewer

Date: February 25, 2010

Transcribed by Lisa Donnelly and Heather Burmeister

Audited by Alecia Giombolini, March 2015

[The interview begins as Mrs. Hart is discussing pictures of her trip to China, where among other sights, she visited the Great Wall. She is pointing to a picture of herself with a young Chinese man and talking about the circumstances in which the picture was taken.]

WMH: ...up that wall, in China? This young man saw me that day and he said, "You're my mom."

[laughter] So I have some kids in China. I ain't never seen 'em before. And that boy saw me, we were out at the airport.

LD: Just at the airport? Is that in Beijing?

WMH: Yeah.

LD: This is Lisa Donnelly and

HB: Heather Burmeister.

LD: And we're participating in History 509; it's Black Studies, History Department cooperative class where we're doing civil rights history, Urban League and so on, here in Portland, Oregon. It's February 25, 2010. We are here today to interview Mrs. Willie Mae Hart. We're in the History Department Conference Room in Cramer Hall at Portland State University. So if you would state your name for the record?

WMH: Okay, my name is Willie Mae Hart. I should have said, "Young Hart." [laughter]

LD: Okay. We had a lot of questions that we were—you have such a fascinating life. But would you talk to us about Mississippi and about your family there and about growing up?

33 WMH: Well, sure. I grew up, I had a wonderful family. My great-grandmother lived while I was a kid.
34 And I, she died when I was in high school. And of course she and her friends—my grandmother had a
35 large house with a beautiful porch. And it extended around and they had benches on it with pillars in the
36 back because there were senior women that used to love to come and visit with Great-grandmother.
37 Whenever they were there talking about where they came from and their history, nosy me would always
38 get in there and get close to Great-grandma and listen. And then I would write some of things that they
39 said.

40 LD: Now who is 'no—who is the other person that you mentioned? No--?

41 WMH: My, I was the only child that would sit around the elderly people. There were five or six elderly
42 ladies that used to always come and Great—my Grandmother what was—we had a little grocery store and
43 on the weekends Grandfather always cooked barbecue and they would sell it. Then these ladies would
44 have their share of homemade ice cream 'cause Grandmother would do that.

45 LD: That's fun!

46 WMH: And so they enjoyed it. They would talk about where they were during slavery. Great-
47 grandmother, from what they talked about, she was the best among the person that owned them,
48 because—owned the plantation. When, as I said, when she had to leave the plantation and the soldiers
49 came back and they asked men to come and fight, they could be free. Great-grandmother said, she said,
50 “Well, we hope so because we been praying that God would come from heaven and free us.” I would
51 always laugh and say, “You wanted him to come out of the clouds down here?” It was always fun for me,
52 you know, to laugh? But she said, “Yes. But he didn't; he sent the soldiers.” They were white and some
53 was black that they picked up as they come along and said, "If you wanted to be free." All the men from
54 the plantation—that was the Reid Plantation in Mississippi, in Canton, Mississippi's where it was. They
55 left and so grandmother and Missy—who was the wife of the owner, her name was Caroline. They

56 spelled their name R-E-I-D. And of course, she and grandmother, great-grandmother not grandmother
57 because my grandmother wasn't born, she was born after slavery. They would sit on the porch and the
58 soldiers made a trip back. They wanted to see that every slave was off the plantation. She was in the
59 house and they didn't see her. So they were sitting on the porch, drinking lemonade. And of course, they
60 said she had to go. Well, she had never left, she had never been off that place. So Missy gave her a
61 buggy, a horse, and a mule. And gave her quilts, because I don't think they even had a blanket in those—
62 because she never said anything about blankets, she said, quilts. Gave her food, gave her money. So
63 naturally, being a kid, I'd grin and say, "How much money did she give you?" She'd say, "I don't know,
64 but it was money." I'm sure it was a lot of money because she had it later on.

65 And so soldiers put the horse, hooked it up with the buggy and showed her to join in. There were
66 blacks coming from the North, through the South, going over into Louisiana, and this is where they had
67 them to be safe because of the fighting, this was coming through the South. Of course, Great-Granny got
68 in there and Missy had given her dishes, plates, and tin cups, and money and food and quilts for the
69 babies, because she had one child. She went over, and the soldiers led her out on the road where the
70 others were coming down, and she joined them and went over from Mississippi into Louisiana. And that's
71 where she stayed until the Civil War was over. And then, the soldiers always told the men where they had
72 put their families, so they would come over there and find them and then bring them back into Vicksburg.
73 This is where Great-Grandma decided to stay in Vicksburg, she and her husband. They bought a hundred
74 acres. So Missy had to give 'em something. They couldn't tell—she could never tell how much. But
75 they bought a hundred acres. And they built a house.

76 LD: And is that the house you're talking about?

77 WMH: No.

78 LD: That was a different one?

79 WMH: That was a different one. Because this was when my grandmother was a baby, and grandmother
80 had about nine or ten kids. My grandmother was a baby. When she was grown she built a large one and
81 bought more property. She wasn't a Reid, my grandmother. Because Mr. Reid was injured in the Civil
82 War and died from that injury and so Great-Grandmother married again, and she married Mosely, so
83 that's why you'll see Mosely in here. I have both names. See? [indicates printed booklet she brought with
84 her.]

85 HB: And that's the book that you wrote about them?

86 WMH: Yes. I had to put that pitcher there. [Picture on front of the book is of a cut crystal pitcher.]

87 LD: Yeah. That's—the pitcher, she said, is from when her great-grandmother left, that's one of the ones
88 that they gave her. That's really neat. So, then, you were born in 1915?

89 WMH: Yes.

90 LD: And you grew there in Vicksburg with...?

91 WMH: Right.

92 LD: And you said you went to the Catholic school?

93 WMH: Yes, I never went to public school.

94 LD: Can you tell us about that?

95 WMH: Well, I just think—that's the only school I ever went to, and I enjoyed that. When I graduated
96 from there, I went to, they had a black college that started there. They wasn't Catholic, but I was so used
97 to the Cath—being a Protestant—I was a Protestant on Sunday, a Catholic five days. [laughter] I did not
98 finish college there. But then, my grandfather's, Mr. Johnson, he was my step-grandfather. My
99 grandfather died. His name was Louis Moore, my grandmother's first husband. See, Great-grandmother
100 had two husbands. Then, my grandmother had two. The first one died, and she married again. And he was

101 his father, they were, his father was a Indian. So he was mixed. He worked, and so they helped do more
102 things.

103 LD: So then how did you wind up in Chicago? You said you went to...?

104 WMH: Well, my godmother. See, when they christened children in Mississippi you always had a
105 godmothers and godfathers. When I finished school I went to Chicago, they wanted me up there to visit
106 and I wanted to be a doctor. They told me I was too young, 'cause I wasn't eighteen when I finished high
107 school. They said I was too young, I'd have to wait a year or so. And I got—was angry, and I went—my
108 grandmother said, "Come back home. We want you back here." Because they had the farm. They had 200
109 or more acres, farming. They would never let us pick their cotton because they said we didn't know what
110 we were doing. They always hired the pickers. [chuckles] It was really funny, because I wanted to snatch
111 those bulbs apart, you know, and that was the way, just go snatch them. And they said, "Nope." We had
112 enough that—they had a farm, one section of the farm area was for vegetables. The other sections was for
113 cotton. We could go out in the vegetables, but don't get by Grampa's cotton! Don't mess with his cotton.
114 Oh, gosh it was fun. But this is the way it was. And the vegetables they sold it mostly to the canneries.
115 They would sell to other people that would come and wanted some, but the bulk of it went to the
116 canneries. So they did well.

117 LD: Yeah, Sounds Like it.

118 WMH: And so then during Mardi Gras time, we'd got to New Orleans. We had relatives down there, so
119 they would take us on trips.

120 LD: Oh, that must be fun.

121 WMH: We had fun, yeah.

122 LD: Can you tell us about Mardi Gras? What it was like to go?

123 WMH: Well, yeah. They would have parades, and all these bands that they—all the bands with the—
124 would have on costumes and earrings and the men would have ropes of pearls—I should have brought
125 my, one of those necklace that—I didn't get it there, I got that one in Jerusalem, but it was made of wood,
126 and they used to have them, they said it was made of wood and it was from trees that grew from where
127 the cross was.

128 LD: Oh Okay.

129 WMH: It wasn't what they did with the other crook, they grew up in that area just like one grew—you
130 know, they'd tear that one down and another tree would grow up next to it and they left it.

131 But we would—could dance. And nobody would bother kids, not in those days, because I didn't
132 know, because when the music started I started dancing, too, and I just danced on, I guess I must—about
133 seven, eight blocks, and where they stopped for the dance, and this man, I'd never seen him before, he
134 took me back to my mother. [laughter] She said, "I wondered if I was gonna ever see you again." He
135 said, "Ma'am, I would not let nobody hurt this little girl."

136 HB: How old were you then?

137 WMH: Nine. Yeah. Well, our music was good, you know? All those horns blowing, and trumpets, and
138 what have you, and guitars and what have you, and what have you, and they all dressed, you know, put on
139 costumes. But I didn't have on a costume because getting down there, I was just glad to get there. And
140 there were some other kids, too, with me, and so we just danced.

141 LD: Oh, that's wonderful.

142 WMH: Yeah, I had fun. So every year, more or less, and if we messed up anytime between, before, you
143 know, Mardi Gras, we wouldn't get to go. So we had to be—our schooling had to say we our grades
144 were up, and we didn't mess up, we could go. [laughter]

145 LD: Oh, that's fantastic.

146 WMH: Yeah, so I enjoyed that.

147 LD: What other things do you remember growing up?

148 WMH: Oh, we had a lot of fun. Well, on our property we had lake water, we had a lake. I could not
149 swim, because I would get chilled all the time, but I could wade in it. We had a little boat and we could
150 play. But we had a lot of dances and what have you we could go to, and picnics. And then the thirtieth of
151 May was always a Memorial day because of the war, mm-huh, and we were always remember that—we
152 had a veteran's cemetery in Vicksburg, and we would all—they would always have barbecue and fish
153 fries and all around on the outside of it, but never inside. You'd go inside and put flowers, but then go
154 outside and eat, and then after that you'd go dancing. [chuckles]

155 LD: Was this all segregated?

156 WMH: I beg your pardon?

157 LD: Was it all segregated at that time in Mississippi?

158 WMH: It was segregated, yes! But the thing about it, just like when we went to school and rode the bus,
159 our streetcar, we were riding the streetcar for a while. Well, we had friends that looked like you, and we
160 couldn't sit beside them, we'd be in the back and they'd be in the front. We'd write notes that we had
161 something we wanted to tell them, and slip it under the seat and go.

162 Yeah, cause when I came out here and went back home, one white friend, been a friend of the
163 family, she told me her brother died. She said, "After you left Mississippi my brother said he didn't have
164 a friend." I said, "I wasn't his girlfriend!" And I said, "He died?" She said, "Yeah." Said he started
165 drinking. He said all his friends and he said, your cousin died and he started drinking and he had a heart
166 attack and died. And I said, "I wondered why he died." Yeah, well they owned a grocery store. We had a
167 small one compared to the one they had. And their name was Arenz, A-R-E-N-Z, and they were from
168 Germany. They were born—the children were born in Mississippi, but the parents came from Germany.

169 And when we'd go to the store we'd always yackity-yack at the store. Out in front, no. We'd send each
170 other—and I had some white girlfriends and they'd be so glad to see me, and so when I went back, about
171 five years ago, things had changed. And she said, one of them said, “Willie Mae?” And I looked around.
172 I said, “Oh, my god. Janice! I never dreamed I'd see you again.” She said, “Yeah--you know I...” I said,
173 “Where's your husband.” She said, “He's here.” Well, she married a doctor, and this doctor had said, he
174 told me “You go back and you could be that doctor now.” I said, “I don't want to be a doctor. I'm a
175 nurse.” Well, I had some training, because my grandfather's—well, he was my step-grandfather, Johnson,
176 Mr. Johnson, that was Grandmother's other husband, they, his nephew was a doctor. So after I could
177 not—they wouldn't accept me in Chicago I went back to Mississippi, he said, “I will train you.” And he
178 brought all of his books and I started reading 'em and remembered it, a lot. Then I received some nurse's
179 training by a white nurse that would tell me what to do. Well, you know, it's one of those things, I was
180 very fortunate. So the reason I'm out here, my friend, Laura, we were in school together, and she knew I
181 had all of this, and she was working for a family that she—they brought her from Louis—no, Arkansas.
182 She went over there and got this job, and their name was Hancock. And Mr. Hancock was down at Coos
183 Bay, but Laura wanted me. I had moved from Vicksburg to California because I said, “I have a baby”—I
184 married after they wouldn't let me get into training in Chicago, I married then. I had this baby boy, and I
185 said, “If it was a girl, I'll keep her in Mississippi. If it's a boy, I will not stay in Mississippi.” I told my
186 mother that, and she said, “Well, where you going?” I said, “I'm going to California;” ‘cause my father's
187 brother lived in Los Angeles, and my mother's brother, Fred, lived in Los Angeles.

188 So I went to Los Angeles. My mother said, “You can't take my first grandchild. I'll keep it, and
189 you have to come back and get it one day.” My husband was going to follow me, and his job said, “No.”
190 He was a mechanic. They were building this levee in New Orleans. He was helping to do that and he was
191 quite a talented man. His boss asked me could I let him stay, and he would see that I'd get my paycheck. I

192 said, “Well I’m gonna stay. I’m not gonna live in the South anymore because I have a son.” If I’d had a
193 daughter, I would stay.

194 LD: Why is that? I mean, why did you not want to raise a son there?

195 WMH: Because they would try to kill him. What happened, one of my mother’s cousins was killed
196 because he and a white young lady started yackity-yacking together, and a guy saw it and killed him.

197 LD: Oh no!

198 WMH: That’s why I said, “I will never raise a son in Mississippi.” Well, look at the color of all our
199 people. You know? The women could do what they wanted. But the men, they wanted to kill ‘em. That’s
200 what’s happening now. Because I received some material about all these hate groups in Oregon. And now
201 they want to come back. They’re still here, because they’re down towards the south there in Oregon.
202 Because I have some material that a doctor sent me. So I know that. But anyway, that’s why we—things
203 went the way it did in Mississippi.

204 LD: Well, then, how long did you stay in California?

205 WMH: Well, I didn’t stay there very long, because I was going to go to school there, and that’s what I
206 was going to say. Laura, this friend of mine, called Vicksburg, and I wasn’t nowhere around. She called
207 my grandmother to find out where was I, did I go back to Chicago and Grandmother told her, “No, she’s
208 in California.” She said, “Would you give me the phone number or the address?” My grandmother gave it
209 to her, and she called me and she says, “Will you come up here and see me? There’s something I wanted
210 you to look at.” And I says, “Where?” And she says, “Well, I have an apartment in Portland, but I live at
211 Coos Bay.” I said, “Where’s that?” [chuckles]

212 So, anyway, I came up, and this was this lady, the Hancocks, they wanted to go to Europe, and
213 they didn’t want their grandmother to be left alone, by themselves. So I said, “Oh,” and then another lady
214 that was their friend—they had gorgeous homes down in Coos Bay, and so she said, “Well, Laura is

215 doing okay, couldn't we have her? Have Willie Mae?" I said, "Well, I'm going back to California."
216 They said, "No, we don't you to go back because we want to go, too." Her grand-her husband's mother
217 had injured her hip. Well, I knew how to take care of that, you know, having been trained by my cousin,
218 my grandfather's nephew. Course he wasn't my biological cousin, but we always called him—and he
219 showed me how to—for while I was in Mississippi, what to do. So I stayed there and they flew out of
220 here to Germany, too, with the Hancocks on trips. They had to get back, because that's when World War
221 II started.

222 LD: Oh no.

223 WMH: They had to get out of there. But, anyway, I stayed there and took care of this lady and they paid
224 me well. We had a chauffeur, they had a housekeeper/maid to take it—but I says, No, I cook my own.
225 You know, I say "I like to cook my own self," and I cleaned my own room. I took care of her and took
226 her bath, and helped her, this grandmother. We had our pictures taken for a magazine, during that time.
227 Because she said, "Yes, we want our pictures made. Don't you?" I said, "Yeah," I says, "I'm your maid,
228 so I might as well." And she said, "No you're my nurse!" [laughter] Oh, gosh. The pictures came in this
229 magazine, which I lost it, the magazine, in travelling.

230 LD: It's called "Travelling"?_

231 WMH: Well, I lost a bag and it had a lot of things of mine. I loved to write, different things, where I was,
232 and I lost a lot of my history. But, anyway, I enjoyed the trip at Coos Bay.

233 LD: So then how long did you stay there?

234 WMH: I was there all about ten months.

235 LD: And then did you go back to Mississippi?

236 WMH: Nope. I—no, well, we—Laura and I, Laura had an apartment up here in Portland. She would
237 come up here and go to church. In Coos Bay they had no black churches. One Sunday, I decided, I said,
238 “Well I’m going to this white church. And they can kick me out, I don’t care.”

239 LD: Oh my gosh.

240 WMH: No, I said, “They could.” So I went, and I started to go to the Catholic church because I was used
241 to going to that during the week and Baptist on Sunday. So I went to this Baptist church down there. I
242 sat kind of in the back but I wasn’t by myself sitting there. An old-fashioned song come up, and I opened
243 my big mouth and started singing, and the people around me stopped. And when they stopped I said, “Oh,
244 they don’t want me,” and I stopped. The man looked around and the lady, his wife, too, she said, “Keep
245 on singing.” She says, “We don’t have a voice like yours.” [laughter] I was embarrassed, but I kept on
246 singing. They told me, “Come back anytime you want to.” So the doors opened, you know, and that what
247 I said, and the doors came open. But then we moved, Laura, we’d come up here to Portland, and go to
248 Mount Olivet, and then go back down to Coos Bay.

249 LD: During the week?

250 WMH: Uh huh. And that’s the first time I seen the ocean, all the way you know from Coos Bay out, and
251 then come across.

252 LD: Well, then how did you wind up in Portland? At the end, you moved up here?

253 WMH: Yeah, after some long while I got another job and then I decided I was going to stay in Portland,
254 and my husband was going to come. He had a massive heart attack. I went south and got my little boy,
255 and brought him up here. I was going because I knew he would find a job up here, the type of person,
256 mechanic, that he was. I rented an apartment. And he had a heart attack and then his boss called me and
257 said, “I hate to tell you, but your husband is dead.” So I took Maurice and we went back and buried him
258 and then I came back. After that, I used to take Maurice to the ball games, baseball, you know? And he

259 says, “Mommy! Everybody ‘round here’s got a daddy! Oh, Mommy!” I says, “Well, I’m your mommy.”

260 “Yeah, but I want a daddy!” And so I had to find him a daddy. [laughter]

261 In fact, I was teasing him this morning, he called me from Los Angeles to tell me about a friend
262 of his that just passed. And I says, “Oh.” He says, “And I hope I won’t follow him.” Because they were
263 good friends. I said, “Well, I hope not, too.” So I told him, I says, “Did you go to church?” And he said,
264 “Yes.” He sings, at church. It’s a white church, too. I was there for Thanksgiving. And so he says,
265 “Yeah.” They told me, he says, “You’ve got a singer.” I said, “Oh, thank you.” Maurice told them, he
266 said, “My mother used to sing.” I said, “Grandmother used to sing. Great-grandmother used to sing.
267 When Great-grandmother would sing with that soprano voice, the birds would sing with her. They’d
268 chirp-chirp-chirp. When she would stop, they would stop. Yeah, it was weird. She didn’t realize what
269 was happening. I said, “Great-Granny, the birds are singing.” I said, “You sing,” and I said, “Stop!
270 Stop!” So I start orchestrating everything, and they would stop when she’d stop. When she’d start singing
271 again, they would start. [laughter]

272 LD: It’s fun when we’re kids.

273 WMH: Yeah, it is, isn’t it? You can do some of the—because, do some of the darnedest things.

274 LD: Yeah, and get away with it.

275 WMH: I enjoyed it. Well, then, when I came up here I decided well, after I worked for the folks, for
276 those people down Coos Bay, and I said, well, I was going to get a job in nursing up on the Hill. So they
277 started a—Licensed Practical Nurses—That’s when they started. I said “I’ll be one of those because then
278 I can work with the people.” And I won’t have to—I don’t want to just pass medicine and do nothing and
279 tell you what to do, and I wanted to work with the people so I got in with that group after that.

280 But I worked in the shipyard, I was going to be a welder, and one guy looked at me, and he says,
281 “You know that would hurt your eyes,” and he says, “If I were you, I would never do it.” So I said,

282 “Well, okay, I’ll just work whatever they say.” And so I started at the office. And I says, “I’m not gonna
283 take no more welding.” I says, “So you can give me—I’ll sweep the floor. I’ll sweep the street, or
284 something.” And he says, “No, you’ll take the material down to the ships.” I said, “Okay.”

285 LD: So what do you mean, ‘material?’

286 WMH: Different things that they needed to work with. I was at Swan Island. And when I came here
287 Swan Island was an airport. And it turned into a shipyard. So I worked there.

288 LD: How long did you work there?

289 WMH: ‘till the war ended. And they were trying to keep me. And I said, “I’m tired.” I said, “The war is
290 over. And I’m over, too.” [chuckles] And so I stayed there as long as it, then that was over.

291 HB: Were you working when you heard that the war was over?

292 WMH: Yeah, I was working, and I had to tell them I want to get out of here, because I could get some of
293 my money back, you know what I mean? I could get—and then find another job. And so after that, that’s
294 what I did. Well, I married again. And of course, I—we went into business. Because I’d—we were
295 getting well-paid and I was well-paid working for this lady, when I was taking care of her grandmother.

296 When they had a dance—for them, not me, and they asked me if I would act as a checker. I said,
297 “What do you do?” They told me, “Check the coats and hats.” I said, “Oh, I seen that in the movie.” So
298 after having seen it in the movie, that’s how I knew how to do it. [laughs] So—you won’t believe it.
299 Those people, and everybody in there looked like you two. There’s nobody in there that looked like me
300 but me, and I had over a thousand dollars that they had given me in gifts.

301 LD: That night?

302 WMH: That night. I never did nothing but stand in that corner in a room like this, you know? And check
303 the hats and coats and what have you. And Mr. Hancock would say, “Willie Mae have a son, and Willie
304 Mae is just like a family, she did so-and-so for my mother, so-and-so and took care of her. And you guys

305 do—"Yeah, here!" [thumps table] "Fifty dollars." "Here's a hundred dollars." Well, they had, all
306 those guys—my grandmother, I went South after that, you know, and picked up my child. And my
307 grandmother said, "Where did you get that kind of money from? What did you do? What were you
308 doing?" 'Cause I said, "I was checking hats and coats and running my mouth. That's all." [chuckles]
309 And she says, "Are you sure?" I had a whole hundred dollar bills. [laughs] Oh, gosh. I said, "That's
310 all." Yeah, they were just a nice bunch of young people. They were—some of them was older than me,
311 and some was younger, and they were having a good time. They had a dance and I just stayed in my
312 position and took care of them, and as they, they decided to give—well, they were making all kinds of
313 money with, you know lumber was king at that time.

314 LD: Oh, that's right, yeah.

315 WMH: Yeah.

316 LD: And Coos Bay was a lumber town.

317 WMH: It was a lumber town. I really enjoyed there, and then I came up here in Oregon, Portland. Then
318 that's where I changed. After the shipyard was when I married, and we had the first black cab company.
319 See, I had my money down there piled up with what I made in the shipyards, and I was non-drinker, and a
320 non-saver, but I liked to dress. I used to like to dress.

321 LD: You still like to dress, I can tell. The hat and everything. You look wonderful.

322 WMH: I'm 94. But, they had—this is where we had fun, and we had the cab business until something
323 happened there. One guy conned one of our drivers to start selling drugs. We were taking patients—
324 people, I won't say 'patients' but I'm so used to patients—drive—people would, well, we would have—
325 people lived all up in the hills here, would wait, call us. Wasn't no blacks up there, it was all whites, but
326 they called up and we'd go pick 'em up. We had only two cabs, they wouldn't give us but two. And
327 those two cabs stayed busy. We had a lot of customers, and they—somebody conned one of our drivers

328 to sell drugs. And that's—the police called them, we didn't know anything about it. But my husband
329 and—there was another guy, because the one guy that received—you had to have, the city had to give you
330 the number of cabs that you could have, and they would only let us have two. This young man that had it,
331 but he didn't have any—they gave it to him but he didn't have any money to put the cars on the street. So
332 we had the money and we put them out, they were all brand new cars, what have you. And this driver we
333 had, he started selling drugs in there, after a couple of years, and they blew us out. See, the Radio Cab,
334 everybody that was a Radio Cab owner had to be out of the Service. Military. You couldn't just say, "I
335 want to start me a cab." You had to be out of the military.

336 LD: Was your husband out of the military?

337 WMH: No, but the guy that had the mon—I mean, the thing for it, he didn't have the money. He was out
338 of the ["Maritime"? Garbled word] this is how we knew about it. He wanted to start this cab, but he
339 didn't have any money. Well, we had the money. Martin and Hart, and Ruggins, was the other guy.
340 He's the—Ruggins was the one had the military. Martin and Hart worked in the shipyard. Martin was
341 from New York. He had—this was his first time being out of the state of New York. Worked out here in
342 the shipyards, and this is how I met him. He died about seven years ago.

343 LD: Well, when—did—they drove you out of business because of the drugs? Revoked your license?

344 WMH: Well, yeah. There was another company. There were three cab companies here, but they were
345 white. And we were killing them. We were getting a lot of people that were their people. But we would
346 take them where they wanna go, and what have you, you know. We had several whites that would call us,
347 and they'd want to go to Salem! They'd take the cab and go to Salem. So you know—they would—we
348 were getting paid. But they decided to get somebody to pull us out of business. We had a driver, that was
349 Neddy, and he did it. I was pregnant by that time with my son, David, and I said, "Look, I cannot go
350 through this. Let's sell the—" I said, "We could buy some more cabs," because the police picked up the

351 cabs and what have you. But you can't do things by yourself, because one of our congressmen fought
352 that, and they gave us our cabs back and [indistinct] we sold them.

353 LD: Oh wow.

354 WMH: We sold our business, sold the couple of cabs we had to Radio.

355 LD: Which congressman was it?

356 WMH: You know, I'd have to go and look. I've forgotten who it was, it's been so long, but it was—yeah.

357 The only one I've worked with was Hatfield. Yeah, Hatfield is one that stopped—because after

358 everybody finished--World War II was over, these people that they brought, you see—They gave our

359 people money to come here to work in the shipyards. And they wanted to ah—wanted them to get out of

360 here—especially people that looked like us. Well I could stay, because I was here before the war, but the

361 rest—get out. Mark Hatfield, a young politician—well he was just out of college, and he used to come to

362 our meetings all the time.

363 He said that they were going to have a debate in Salem, and he wanted us to come, be there—but

364 we couldn't say nothing and don't move. So there were about twenty carloads of us that went down to

365 Salem to hear this debate—it was all about the blacks that came here that had to get out. Those that

366 helped, you know, so he said “People, they helped to save this country, they fought, some of them lost

367 their lives over there,” and Hatfield says “I am for them staying as long as they are doing okay.” And so

368 the big debate was on. I went, my sister, Ruth—my younger sister went, she's dead now—she went. She

369 says, “Well I'm going down there.” I said, “Why you going? You never bothered about going to the

370 meeting.” She said, “Yeah, but your big mouth...” She said, [laughter] “With your big mouth, if they say

371 something that makes you mad, you're going to say something back at them, and mess up—so I'm going

372 to have to be there to shut it up.” [laughter] So she went with me. And we drove down with the group. It

373 was quite some debate, because this Senator—uh it's all on the file, but I can't—I've lost all those papers,
374 you know. And ah, I can't remember names. I remember him, because—well, what he did, you know.

375 LD: Yeah yeah.

376 HB: What meetings were these? Were these NAACP meetings?

377 WMH: He was a senator. He was a congressman, a senator at that time.

378 HB: Right.

379 WMH: Hatfield.

380 HB: Right, but you said he went to...

381 WMH: They had this debate. In Salem. He and another senator. One said "Let them go, get them out of
382 here!" The other one, Hatfield, said, "No. We let them stay!" And so ah, he was on the side for my
383 people, and the other man was—I've forgotten his name—I got that file somewhere. Anyway, it's all
384 on—it's down in Salem.

385 HB: Okay.

386 WMH: Mark, he had just—I think he had just married, I remember, 'cause he used to come to NAACP
387 meetings. This is the way I met him, and when he told us he was getting married. Then after that, all of
388 this started, to 'get them black folks out of here!'—that wasn't already here. If you were here before the
389 war, then you could stay. Those that came to work in the shipyard—"Get out, get home!"

390 So this debate, the place was full. Even in Salem, they had kids--they have to listen to this. There
391 were any number of white kids there for this debate. It was so heated, I said, "I have got to get out of
392 here." So Ruth says, "Sit yourself down." She said, "Don't you move." I said, "Well, I can't take it.
393 We've had people to die for this country, and this is what they saying?" They was nasty! So as soon as it
394 was over, I jumped up and ran for the elevator. I was the first somebody at the elevator, hitting the
395 button, because "I've got to get out of here and get some air." So Ruth, my sister, was right behind me.

396 Guess what—there was a bunch of these kids—white, all white—and these two girls come running
397 towards me—little blonde hair in the air, it was so long—and crying. They came up and threw their arms
398 around me, and, shocked me, says, “I’m sorry I’m white today, the way they talked about your people.”
399 And I says, “My God.” I says, “Well that’s okay. Because of you, it’d be a better tomorrow. So don’t
400 cry.” The teacher—one of them was Catholic— Sister—and she was standing—shocked, wondering what
401 I was going to say, and I hugged them both, because they threw their arms around me. And I say, “Dry
402 your tears. Because of you, honey, it’ll be a better tomorrow for all of us.”

403 Somebody from the newspaper was in the crowd and saw it, and they wrote about it. They
404 wanted to know who I was. Of course, I didn’t tell my name. About five years later, I ran into a person,
405 and they said, “You are the one that those kids hugged.” She remembered. The Oregonian wrote an
406 article, I think they wrote it about it, I don’t know [unintelligible.] I wish I knew who those little kids
407 were, because they couldn’t have been no more than about the third or fourth or fifth grade—something
408 like that they were short, you know. (giggle)

409 That really made me think, don’t fib---the way those kids made a change for me —that I could
410 take a lot of stuff because when I started school to be a L—I always wanted to be a LPN, because I
411 wanted to work with the people, and so I took my training up on the hill, at OHSU. That’s where I
412 worked. After that, one of the nurses asked me to come where she worked, so I left OHSU and worked
413 over there. Then another nurse [chuckle] conned me into coming to work at—there was a place on Tenth
414 and Washington Street, in Portland, down there. I think they might have something there to this day, but
415 upstairs used to be a small hospital, and I worked there. So she decided to leave and work for the State,
416 and she went down and signed. She say, “Come on Willie, and sign up; they ain’t never had nobody
417 black work there.” I say, “No. I broke the color line in two places, that’s enough.” [laughter] So she says,
418 “Chicken!” [laughter] Yeah, she called me a chicken, so I said, “Okay. I’ll go with you.”

419 So we went, both of us, downtown, signed up, and I went back to my job on Tenth and
420 Washington Street. Two weeks later she called me, and she said, "Did they call you? Are you working?" I
421 said, "No." I said, "They asked me if I knew what to do in a nursing home, and I said, I've never even
422 been inside of a nursing home, let alone know what to do, so they didn't hire me." I said, "So, I'm still
423 busy I don't care." Yes, I said, "I had to tell a doctor off up there." [laughter] I said, "Because this man
424 had a tube in his lungs, see to drain the fluid." [Mrs. Hart uses her hands to show where the tube was
425 coming out of a man's side.] The container was on the floor, and I happen to go back, and there he was—
426 he had it up in the air—[Mrs. Hart uses her hands to show how the doctor was holding the container
427 above the man's chest.]—looking at it and well, all that could go right back into his system—see and if
428 they are on the floor, you'd better get down on your knees if you want to see how much drainage was
429 there, because if you take it and hold it up like this [again demonstrates how not to hold the container]—
430 it's all going back into that person—

431 LD: And the doctor was doing that?

432 WMH: Yep. [LD & HB gasp in astonishment] Yeah, he had it up like this [Again, Mrs. Hart
433 demonstrates how the doctor was holding the container up and level with his face] And I walked in there
434 and I said, "What the heck are you doing?! And I snatched it. [laughter] I said—He said, "What the hell
435 are you doing?" I said, "Well you are stupid!" [laughter] Yeah, I told him, "You are stupid." But I said,
436 "That's going back into that man." And he looked at me—I walked out. And so I was angry. I had put the
437 jug back down on the floor and I walked out. So I told the Director of Nurses; they got rid of him. And he
438 was a new doctor to the—but he wasn't a doctor [Mrs. Hart thumps the table for emphasis.]—he had been
439 in the military somewhere and act as an aide, and came out said he was a doctor. After we found all that
440 out later, so they got him out of Oregon. They didn't just get him out of that job, they got him out of the
441 state. Umm-hmm. Sure did. Yeah, but it was a mess.

442 LD: Should we take a break for a minute?

443 WMH: Yeah, I could.

444 LD: Let's do that.

445

446 [The tape is stopped for a fifteen minute break. Lisa Donnelly photocopied some materials that Mrs.

447 Willie Mae Hart brought to the interview, and Mrs. Hart continued talking through the break.]

448

449 [Interview begins again. The portion of the story that is not recorded involves Mrs. Hart's work with

450 WICS (Women in Community Service) and their prison outreach program called Lifeskills. What follows

451 is the end of her description of a time when she helped a graduate of that program, Sonja Hill, and her

452 family. This story came out in reference to an article written by Sonja Hill in the Women in Community

453 Service, Inc. newsletter, a photocopy of which is attached.]

454 (unintelligible)

455 HB: No that's alright.

456 WMH: Anyway, I came back home. I went there, I showed my credit card and told 'em I was paying up

457 for what they owed, and the next day. I said, "And then I will take care of the rest." But they stayed

458 comfortable, I said, "If they hungry and you have food here, let them eat." So he said, "Thank you." And I

459 left, I went back, so I called, while I watched the rest of the game [football game on television],

460 (laughter). And I called a couple of women—all of them looked like you, that I called—not me, but like

461 you. And out in the suburbs, and I told them what had happened, Anderson and a few others, and I said,

462 "And I paid for it, but we're going to have get someplace else." And so she said, "Willie, don't worry."

463 She said, "I'll send some money, it'll be in the mail tomorrow." I said, "Well, it don't have to be

464 tomorrow, wait 'til next day, whatever." I said, "Well, I just want to let you know, we need some help."

465 And so--three of them sent a hundred dollars apiece. And it came in the mail. One of them was on
466 Monday, the others was on Tuesday. Well then Helen Karina—I called her, she’s Catholic, and she says,
467 “You know we have a place that we send our people that come here out on 82nd.” And she says, “You
468 just mention Interstate and I’ll come right behind you—” she said, “Let’s go out there.” And she says,
469 “We’ll take them out there.” She called the priest, I guess, and told me the next morning she was going to
470 come. She said, “You don’t need to, you’ve done enough.” She said, “I’ll come pick them up, pick you
471 up, and we’ll take them out there.” So we took them out there. And it was a husband, wife, and two
472 kids—and they looked at the man, and they say they didn’t have any rooms. And so we wouldn’t—we
473 didn’t let them stay—if they didn’t have any rooms—okay. We wasn’t going to let them keep the woman
474 and not the man, so we brought them back over on Interstate and put them up at another motel. And they
475 stayed there for three days, and it was Thanksgiving—they had Thanksgiving dinner at my house. And
476 that Saturday—there’s a couple of churches that own apartment complexes out here in Lake Oswego—
477 out that area somewhere, and anyway I could never go back out there, but Anderson came over—and they
478 let them stay there. And they stayed there at this place for three months. They were there Christmas—the
479 church gave them toys for the kids. One of the members gave him a car. And they stayed there until—I
480 think it was February or March they moved on someplace else. And I have heard from them since. Mm-
481 hmm, but this shows you what the churches can do with—and more than one church owned that building,
482 and they have people that come there that don’t have anywhere to go. Then they let them stay for so
483 long—they won’t let them stay permanently—and so I’m sure it’s still out there.

484 LD: How long ago was this?

485 WMH: This has been about five or six years ago—but it’s still going on. And the women that did this for
486 me were all white, and this couple was a mix, one was white and the other was black. And the children,
487 was of course you know, mixed. But they got on their feet, and then they left Portland. But just shows you

488 what people would do, and they never asked me what they looked like or anything. They just said, “Bring
489 ‘em on.” So I know, it’s nothing that I have done—that I can say I did it by myself because I didn’t. I had
490 to have a lot of help.

491 HB: It seemed like you had to build a lot of alliances with others.

492 WMH: Well, we just worked together. That’s the way it was.

493 HB: Nice. And so is the Women in Community Service—is that still active?

494 WMH: Yes, uh-huh. They’re still active, but now the money ran out. The cheese company

495 LD: Kraft?

496 WMH: Kraft—gave the money to the WICS program back in Washington, D.C., and it was quite a few
497 thousand dollars, ‘cause if you read one of those magazines, it would tell you. Then when the money ran
498 out, they got some more. We went to Salem and lobbied—three or four of us—Helen Karina, well,
499 Church Women United—and well, we went to Salem, and lobbied that we should have that to continue—
500 longer, so they just ended it again. It’s too bad, because some of the women that went through that pro-
501 had been in prison, went through that program—some of them are teaching. One of them is teaching in a
502 college. I was looking for the card that she sent me, but I guess I might of—I didn’t need it, but it’s there
503 in my junkyard. (laughter.) Because I’ve got stacks of stuff in there, you know. She’s teaching in a
504 college. And there are several that’s helping others now that I know that are still. And I think the things—
505 now as I showed you one letter—I think it was a letter that I had—was a thank you that I spoke to a group
506 up in Idaho—did you see that?

507 HB & LD: Yeah.

508 WMH: Yeah, and they started something going similar to that, uh-huh. So I hope it’s still going.

509 HB: It seems that you’ve done a lot.

510 WMH: Well, I've done the best that I could, but I probably could have done some more. I'm still trying. I
511 even, after the—when everybody had to get out of the shipyards and what have you and it was still here—
512 then Vanport flooded—I kept a lady with her grandchildren—three of them—at my house until they
513 could find a place to stay. Her husband was working on the railroad, he didn't know where his wife was,
514 because he was on the railroad when the thing blew up out there—the water, you know. And we had the
515 cab business at that time, and we pulled the cab out. We would not charge anybody that day, the next day,
516 and we'd go out there. We only had a couple of cabs, wouldn't give us any more—but we used those two
517 cabs for twenty-four hours to take people where they could find a place—no charge. So, we've done our
518 best. At least we tried. And one lady, she was a little girl—after she was grown and what have you—she
519 became a member of the Council of Negro Women, but she didn't know that she had lived with me as a
520 child [laughter], and I didn't know who she was either, until her grandfather died and I went to the
521 funeral. And I didn't know that she was related to him, you know, until I saw her, and she saw me. And
522 then this lady, was her niece—no, her aunt or something—said, “She's the lady that kept my brother and
523 his wife and you guys, when you were little, and you didn't have nowhere to go.” And then she, “What?”
524 And so she asked me, and I says, “Yeah.” And I says, “And my son got out of his bed and gave it to you,
525 and slept on the couch in the living room, and you guys had a bedroom all to yourself.” [laughter] And so
526 she said, “Oh.” And she had tried to block something that I wanted to do for the Council (louder
527 laughter), and when she started apologizing and crying. I said, “No need for crying or apologizing.” I
528 said, “You couldn't stop me—what I was going to do. I did it, anyway.” [laughter] She says, “I'm so sorry
529 I did.” I said, “Don't worry about it.” [laughter]

530 HB: Considering all of those things, do you think things have gotten better or worse?

531 WMH: Well, I think they're better for us, but we need to be careful, because just like—I spoke to—well,
532 I had a dream about it. One night, after, this church—did you hear? I know, I'm sure you read about the

533 black church that a guy ran into the church and shot a man—and I didn't, I wasn't at that funeral, but I
534 knew the people that were there and what have you—and so, I don't know. One night, I just couldn't
535 seem to go to sleep, so what can we do? And I said, "We cannot do—go and talk to these boys." And just
536 like something, just say, "Why not go to the parents and tell them—have a meeting, and talk to them and
537 tell them they have to change. And then talk to our black pastors to get together and get the men, and get
538 them organized and have something that they can bring to gangs in their building together." One group,
539 they call themselves the Black Panthers and the other one call themselves something else, but get the
540 separate ones—you know, at one time with the men, because a kid, a boy would listen to a man before
541 he'll listen to his mother. Yeah, cause I had one that you'd tell him what to do and he'd say, "Daddy,
542 mama said so-and-so, do I have to do it." I'd say, "You will do it, or he will too. Or get out." [laughter]
543 Then he said, "Mama is tough." [laughter] I did that once, then he never tried that on me. He'd say,
544 looked at his dad and say, "Mama's tough." I'd say, "Yes, you'll do it, and he will too. Now both, get
545 out." [laughter]

546 LD: I have three boys, and they're just like that.

547 WMH: Yeah, well, he used to go to his daddy all the time, and the other one his daddy didn't stay alive
548 long enough. But this one, David, yeah, he'd always go and ask his daddy, and I finally caught him. And I
549 told him off. [laughter] You both get out (carefully enunciated and spoken like a mother). [laughter] Oh
550 gosh. So anyway, and Tom said—my husband's name was Theodore, but I always called him Tom—he
551 would say, "Your mama is tough. You better obey her." [laughter] Oh gosh, that's the way things were,
552 but everything had worked out that we'd tried. Now we had a prayer breakfast, Saturday, and the church
553 women- I mean- the Council of Negro Women, and we are still working to have a meeting with the
554 parents where we talk to the man—that works with the police with these gangs, and he said he would do
555 the best he can to get us—and I told him I was going to talk to the pastors, and tell them that they need to

556 get some men, have a meeting, talk to the boys, and see if they can change. Get rid of that, so that's what
557 we're working on—but not by myself—with the rest, yeah. (Talking about a plant we gave her as a gift.)
558 Look like this is growing. Well, it looks like it's gotten taller since I [laughter]. Don't you—yeah—it
559 doesn't look like it was quite that tall. [laughter]

560 HB: Well, what do you think is important for future generations to learn from history?

561 WMH: Well, I think, well, I learned from the history, and I feel like this—you look at other people, and
562 even though they don't agree with what you say—you can work together, because all of us—we know
563 this or we know that or we think we do. But at least we can try. And if you can't help anybody, you can
564 say, "Well, I tried." And that's the way I feel. That I tried to do this and I tried to do that—and you know,
565 if it didn't work out, well, I just give up on it, because I know I tried. And then sometimes it'll work out.
566 Cause just like this lady had told me once from the time she was upset with me, with what I said, and I
567 said, "Well, I'm not going to apologize for it, because I know I was telling the truth." So she say, "But
568 I've changed, and I know you're right about that." Something going on within the group, and she wanted
569 to go one way, and I figured it was best to go the other way. And we cannot do anything by ourselves. We
570 wouldn't be where we are today if it wasn't for people the color of you that cared, and we cared for one
571 another. You know, because now my grandmother's property and one white guy's join—just separated
572 just like here and here (demonstrates with her hands on the table) and they were going to –came out and
573 were going to drill on his property for oil—and he says, "Well, who else did you ask?" And it was
574 farming property, cause grandma and them didn't live on the farm and Mr. Eggleston didn't neither. And
575 they said, "No," they hadn't said nothing to—He says, "Well, you have to drill on Dora's before you drill
576 on mine." And he wouldn't let them drill, and I went there. I don't have the picture now, it's somewhere
577 in my stuff, because we I went south, and asked my grandma, "What in the world was that pipe?" and
578 Grandpa, he said, "Well I'll tell you what it was." He said, "They drilled for oil. We have oil on the

579 property and the man went and told us that there's gas." He said, "Where there's gas there's oil." The gas
580 is on top. The oil is at the bottom. I said, "What?" And he said, "Yeah, he wanted us- told us we could put
581 a cooking utensil in the house." I said, "What do you mean a cooking utensil?" He says, "A stove.
582 [laughter] Your grandma can make those cakes." [laughter] And I say, "And my lemon pie." [laughter]
583 And he sat and laughed, and he said, "Yeah." But she said no, she wanted to keep it the way it was, and so
584 we didn't do it. And I said, "Oh." And I'm taking a picture of this, and they never went any further, but
585 before grandmother sold the property—I told her, "Don't sell the mineral rights." I said, "You can sell the
586 property, since you're coming to Portland to live." I said, "But don't sell the mineral rights." So her
587 daughter is a year younger than me and she threw the papers away. She can't find them. My cousin was
588 going to have them checked, and he had a heart attack and died in Mississippi—that picture I showed you.
589 LD: Yeah. The military...

590 WMH: Yeah. And so we don't know I told her, "Well we don't know, we don't care." I said, "If they dig,
591 I meant, in Vicksburg, in that countryside, out in the suburbs." I said, "We won't get any money." And I
592 have three friends that their property was in Texas—and it's quite a few people that get money from the
593 property in Texas, 'cause --I guess, quite a bit, it's so close to the ocean. I guess that's why—that's the
594 way I think about it. Cause only Vicksburg have is the Mississippi River, but it's there. So we'll live.
595 We're getting along. Yeah.

596 HB: I wanted to ask—how did you—do you remember when you first became aware of your race?

597 WMH: Oh, when I was a baby. [laughter] In Mississippi you know! [laughter] Because we couldn't
598 just—say, in restaurants, we couldn't go in. Now Italian restaurants had one side for blacks and the other
599 side for whites, and it's funny when you have white friends and you can't stand up on the street and talk
600 to each other. They couldn't talk to us too much. And then we'd write notes, at school the kids would
601 write, because the Catholic school was about three blocks above the one I attended—mine was down the

602 hill—this one was up on the hill. When those kids got off the bus, we'd throw stuff out—we'd throw stuff
603 out at them. You know, if I had a note, and they had a note, they'd drop it [laughter] and I'd pick it up.
604 [laughter] Yeah, we'd drop our notes.

605 LD: When did you get together? I mean, if you couldn't be together in school, and you couldn't be
606 together on the bus, did you—was it outside of school that you were—that you went and hung out?

607 WMH: We'd do it, wherever you'd see anybody. If we went fishing or something and see them—we'd
608 talk, but other than that, and sometimes we'd see each other in the store, and we'd talk for a few minutes,
609 and keep walking—keep going.

610 LD: Wow, you couldn't go to anybody's houses or anything?

611 WMH: No. None of that. They could come to our place, because my grandmother had this store. It wasn't
612 a big one, it was a small one. And Grandpa was a barbequer. We had a big barbeque place outside that
613 was built. They had it built and we'd barbeque a whole hog.

614 LD: That's good stuff.

615 WMH: So he knew how to barbeque, and that sauce—they made their own sauce, and it was good. And
616 the funny part about it was they barbequed for whites as well as blacks. Yeah, the guy would come by and
617 say, "Joe! Will you barbeque—I'll bring you half a hog over here?" He'd say, "Better be clean, 'cause
618 I'm not cleaning no hog." [laughter]

619 HB: Did you ever question that—the separation of the races—when you were a child?

620 WMH: No, only because when I was born it was separated like that, but the funny part about it—now, my
621 father's mother was lighter than my mother's grandmother—you know. And it took me—I was living out
622 here when I found out that she was Irish, but she married a black man—and they thought she was a light,
623 and in school we had all colors. We had so black that they were like this (points to the black conference
624 table) and we had them so white, you know, but we didn't know, because had now Mr. Biedenharn, one

625 of those guys that if you know anything about your history of the South—that Coca-Cola was bottled in
626 Vicksburg—and ah, well, Mr. Biedenharn—we knew him, and his wife was Mr. Albert Eggleston's
627 sister—that's the man that his property and my grandmother's joined, and we had pecans on our property
628 and stuff and we'd sell them. I had a tree, a pecan tree—Don't mess with my tree! I'd go and pick up my
629 pecans, and I could sell them—that's my money. Yeah, grandpa—him would give each of us a tree.

630 LD: Oh, that's neat.

631 WMH: Yeah. And so Mr. Biedenharn—he had a place there where he had soft drinks, and we'd stop in
632 there, and buy the drinks—coming from school. And he was very very nice. So this Coca-Cola was first
633 bottled in Vicksburg, Mississippi.

634 LD: I didn't know that.

635 WMH: Yeah, they celebrated that—I went back—I took my sister, my younger sister, there—well, she
636 was born out here, back to Mississippi. And not knowing they were celebrating—had a celebration about
637 this Coca-Cola. Yeah, it was first bottled in Vicksburg, Mississippi. And the Civil War ended when
638 Vicksburg fell.

639 LD: I did know that.

640 WMH: Well, you know, there is a—I don't know if I have it on this picture—I have one picture here—
641 somewhere—(she searches through her photographs). Let me see. I showed David, when we were down
642 South this last year—I told him, I said, when Vicksburg fell, I said, "Right here, was where they—"

643 HB: Is this it?

644 WMH: Let me see if it's on here, cause he was standing—no. This is the black church that my
645 grandfather helped build. My mother's stepfather, grandpa Johnson, his picture's in there, but this is the
646 black church that they had built, and his father was a bricklayer. And grandpa helped him build it. It's
647 huge.

648 But we had a spot, out on the outskirts of Vicksburg, and it was underground, a bayou—went
649 underground-like, and this black soldier told them—says, “Sir, if you want to get up behind them soldiers
650 that’s taken over Vicksburg—I’ll show you how.” And it was—they’d go underground and then come up
651 in Vicksburg. Uh-huh, it wasn’t that far, and was a little water running, so I told David, “This is where the
652 war ended, when they came up behind the soldiers and took them over.” He said, “Well mother, I want to
653 go there and see.” I said, “Go ahead, but don’t go to far.” I said, “That’s been a long time.” I said, “It’ll be
654 spooked down there (unintelligible because of laughter).” And he laughed. Yeah, so I showed him where
655 the war—you know it was, they took over Vicksburg and the war ended. And it was underground and
656 then you know you come up behind and you know they came up behind—so it was a black man that
657 showed them where it was, ‘cause wherever he was on this—the slave on this property—they probably
658 went under there looking to see if they could leave—cause you know, some of them left. We have a
659 history of some in other places, went underground and got up, and when they come out they were back in
660 New York or somewhere else. [laughter] Yeah.

661 (searches some more for the missing photograph)

662 WMH: Well, anything I’m supposed to tell you. I got to have you call a cab, because I don’t have a cell
663 phone.

664 LD: Sure, okay.

665 HB: I think we’re done. Is there anything else that you’d like to tell us?

666 WMH: Well, I don’t know anything else, I don’t think. I don’t know, I know so much.

667 HB: Well, one last question then.

668 WMH: Okay.

669 HB: How did the Vietnam War affect you and your family?

670 WMH: Oh, terrible. Just to have things going on—it was terrible. But nothing else.

671 (Pulls out another photo.)

672 WMH: Now this was the tree I was talking about.

673 LD: Yeah, in Germany.

674 WMH: In Germany. Oberammergau, Germany

675 LD: That's wonderful. Okay well.

676 HB: This will conclude our interview then. Thank you very much.

677 LD: Thank you again for coming and talking to us, and sharing. This has been fun.

678 HB: Spectacular.

679 END OF INTERVIEW.

24 **HB:** Nice. So after listening to our earlier interview, there were a couple of things that were
25 missed, and I was hoping that you could talk a little bit about the Council of Negro Women and
26 your involvement with the Council—like how it got started--

27

28 **WMH:** Oh, here in Portland?

29

30 **HB:** Yes.

31

32 **WMH:** Oh, because Reverend, I mean President Kennedy gave my name to the head of the
33 Council of Negro Women in Washington, D.C. He had laid out plans for the Job Corps before he
34 was killed. And how I met him—when he came to Portland for a speech, when he was running
35 for office. He and—he had this event here in Portland, but there wasn't hardly any of *my* people
36 there, at this event. So Mrs. Reid and I, she's deceased now, decided we should have him out at
37 Jantzen Beach, and so this is what happened. We had laid the plans for that and when he came—
38 we had told him where we had planned for him to come—he and his sister. His sister was
39 traveling with him because his wife was at home—she was pregnant with a child. And so we had
40 he and his two sisters out at Jantzen Beach, so he could see our people. And he enjoyed it.

41 Of course while he was there, one lady resented it. She was white, but she didn't resent *us*
42 having him there, but she didn't like him because he was Catholic. She said Catholic was going
43 to make the nation Catholic, and she wasn't Catholic; she was Protestant. When I went to get
44 some pop for the—she met me and told me that. And I told her—I says: 'Well.' She said: 'I
45 heard that was just for *your* people.' And I said: 'No.' I said: 'It's for anyone that wants to go

46 and talk them.’ I said: ‘Go down there and talk to them.’ We had quilts laid out for them, and
47 they were sitting on the ground (laughs), and that’s where they wanted to sit. It was a beautiful
48 day that day. And of course, she said: ‘No!’ She was there and her words weren’t very nice when
49 she was talking to me. And so I told her, I says: ‘Well, if you want him to know—we brought
50 him here, because we wanted him to talk to our people.’ I said: ‘Mrs. Reid—the lady that you see
51 that looks like me—I said that she was the other person. I said: ‘but if you want to say that to
52 him, you go. I will *not* tell him anything!’ You know, she made me angry a little bit, the way she
53 was talking about different things about race and then she mentioned about him being Catholic
54 religion. I said: ‘That’s prerogative.’ I said: ‘I’m Protestant. But I finished high school at a
55 Catholic. I never went to public school.’ ‘Well, how did you do that in Mississippi?’ she said
56 kind of funny. And I told her. I said: ‘My people paid for it, because [unintelligible].’ And I went
57 down there—Mr. Kennedy was *Mr.* Kennedy at that time. That’s what I called him. He said:
58 ‘Well, Willie, I’m just going to call you Willie Mae—What was she saying to you? Because I
59 knew you were angry, with the way you was (laughter) lifting up your arms and hands, talking to
60 her.’ And I says: ‘I’m not going to tell you. You know, if you want to know it, you go on up
61 there and ask her.’ And so this lady was still standing up there. He said: ‘Really, what did she
62 say?’ And one of the sisters said: ‘Yeah, What *did* she say?’ And I said: ‘Okay, since you want
63 to know—‘ and I just spilled it out, you know. And I say: ‘Since you guys are Catholic and we’re
64 Protestant,’ I say: ‘You’re going to make everybody a Catholic.’ Well, he knew I had gone to
65 Catholic school because I had told him that when we were talking about schools. So he sat up on
66 his knees like he was in a half-prayer, and he said: ‘If I’m elected President, regardless of what
67 your faith is—I just want you to vote for me. I am Catholic, and whatever you are that’s what

68 you can be.' (laughter) And everybody just—people standing around listening—and everybody
69 started laughing. (laughter) So that was the joke of the day.

70 After he was elected President, in fact, he gave my name to the head of the Council of
71 Negro Women, and said he wanted--if she didn't have a group here, to try to get one and that I
72 would probably do it for her. And he gave her my name, my phone number, my address. Of
73 course he did send me--when he was elected President, as you know, and they had the big ball
74 that they were having from place to place—I was sent an invitation to that.

75

76 **HB:** Oh, nice. Did you go?

77

78 **WMH:** No. I couldn't go, because my baby needed me. My mother wasn't very well. I wanted
79 to go, but I couldn't. In fact, she was a friend of mine, back there in Washington D.C., she said:
80 'I'll send you a ticket.' I said: 'I could buy my own ticket, but I can't leave my kid.' I said: 'He's
81 running a slight fever.' So that's why I couldn't go. Yeah. I was invited back there twice, and
82 didn't go, so I said: 'Maybe I'm not supposed to.'

83 And so that is why after he passed--well he had laid out everything for the Job Corps,
84 how he wanted it, what he wanted, and what have you, and, of course, you know he was killed.
85 And President Johnson knew what he was about to do, trying to do, and he fulfilled everything.
86 And I was sent a letter that the needed, that they would like to have a Council here. And so
87 because of the Job Corps and what have you, they were going to work with it. So I had a group
88 of people that we just had parties, and we changed our name and called it the Council of Negro
89 Women. (laughter) And that's how it was started.

90 And so after he passed and all of this started, the Job Corps started, they would fly them
91 in here from the South--from North Carolina and wherever. I would go to the airport, pick them
92 up, and take them to the place they were supposed to be here in town. And then I was through
93 with that, and they would take over. And take them down the coast or wherever--Astoria or
94 wherever they were going. That's why it was started here, but it had been going on for a long
95 time back in New York. And part of the South, not that much in the South, but it was. This was
96 the first one in the state of Oregon.

97

98 **HB:** Was that its entire mission, the Job Corps, or did it..?

99

100 **WMH:** Well, we were helping them, but we had other things that we were doing. We did what
101 the NCNW (National Council of Negro Women) always did. But please believe me with the
102 WICS (Women in Community Service) you had--I gave you some of the material of the WICS?

103

104 **HB:** Yeah.

105

106 **WMH:** When it was started we, the Council of Negro Women, was the ones that sent the ladies
107 from Washington, D.C. out here to start this WICS program, and it was started out there at the
108 prison, because they work with women who are in prison. And she had my name and phone
109 number (laughs) on the East Coast, and she called me and I told her. I said: 'I'm working on it'--
110 of course I was on the board out there at Columbia Prison, I was on that board. And one of our--
111 he's a senator now, but he was a new person and hadn't been in Oregon very long. He was also

112 on that board, and that's where it began out there. And we had to meet, and Church Women
113 United had a person there also. So the Council of Negro Women wasn't the only group--Church
114 Women United was the other group. Believe it or not, but I was a member of Church Women
115 United. (laughter) Then, of course, when they started training the women which would then
116 begin with this program of turning the women who were in prison--to make a-uh, you know--laid
117 out a plan to change their lifestyle, so when they get out they wouldn't have to come back, you
118 know, and all that. Then the colleges--and I think your college was one of them--that helped.
119 Yeah. And they had women that came out, and they were teaching, and these women were
120 teaching in various colleges that was coming out to talk to the women, and to really teach them
121 how to change their lifestyle.

122 So when they went through this program, they wanted to have a graduation, but they
123 couldn't have a graduation and bring people into the prison. So this lady that was heading it, she
124 didn't know where to go--she didn't know anything about, and I was the one she asked: 'Would
125 you find a place that we could have the graduation?' And I said: 'Wow!' I said: 'That's deep.
126 That's huge, you know.' At one of the meetings that we had, and of course, we talked to the--we
127 had a session. There was another lady that would come out and share our conversations of what
128 we were doing in different areas, you know. Talking to the women and this, and so they seemed
129 to enjoy hearing us, but we would never get to far into their affairs. Of course, the first
130 graduation, that was thrown at me, as I said. I said: 'I have to think about it. No, I'll have to pray
131 about this.' Because they wanted their families to see them, and then one of them said: 'Well,
132 what are you do-gooders going to do for us?' They'd give us a bad time. You know, talking just
133 slanderous-like and so I said: 'Well, we're going to do the best that we can, and we will find a

134 decent place for you to come for your graduation, and your family can share it with you.' So I
135 thought of the schools and a building here on the east side, I knew we could probably get it and
136 something just said: 'Take them to the church.' huh. So I told the instructor what I had planned
137 and so she said: 'You gonna tell them?' I said: 'Yep.' So I told them, I said: 'Well, since you are
138 graduating, your people, your family, can come. You'll be coming. You'll go to the church, to be
139 at the church.' They said: 'What?!' Yes. And I said: 'Not only will your families see you graduate,
140 they will have a chance to visit with you for a time, because you will have your lunch after that
141 and we will have enough for the family.' And that's the way that it happened. And I think in one
142 of those magazines that I gave you had a graduation in it.

143

144 **HB:** Yeah.

145

146 **WMH:** Well that was my church and that was our choir robes.

147

148 **HB:** Oh, nice.

149

150 **WMH:** And I asked if--that was the choir I was in--and I asked the members to give us those
151 robes. Well, each of us bought our robes, we would not let the church pay for our robes, so they
152 said: 'Yeah. You can have them, 'cause we have some new ones.' And I said: 'Good.' So I got
153 those robes. They've never been in Mt. Olivet Church since. (laughter) So that's where it started--
154 the graduation in front of the church and then there was a luncheon immediately afterwards and
155 then they go back to prison until they were out of there.

156

157 **HB:** And you still keep in contact with some of those people?

158

159 **WMH:** Yes I had one I--she tried to call me, and I wasn't here. I've tried to call her, and I can't
160 her, but I guess I'll run into her someplace--but several of them. And one young lady, I asked her
161 to speak for a group in Salem, and she did. She look like you. [white] (laughter) She is teaching.
162 She was teaching somewhere in Oregon, I think. She straightened her life. She changed
163 everything.

164

165 **HB:** Wow. That's wonderful.

166

167 **WMH:** Yes. And one kid, even, wrote me for Christmas, one card, I don't know--I've got so
168 much stuff in this house, my place is a junkyard, but I'm not going to throw away anything.
169 (laughter) He said that 'since my mom has been home with me, we go to church.' And he was
170 talking and he told me about that and he sing with the boys, so I imagine while they in church, he
171 sings with the boys' choir. So there's a lot that I've done, and one of the women--I might could
172 locate her, and she might could come down. I had her phone number here someplace.

173

174 **HB:** Yeah.

175

176 **WMH:** Yeah, I had her speak at our prayer breakfast, one of them to speak at our prayer
177 breakfast. And another one I had her to speak for a church down in North Salem, because she

178 lived down there. So, yeah, it's been just wonderful for me, working with this, because I figure
179 that if I can help somebody. I'm a senior now, and my living wasn't in vain. I know I'm fading
180 out.

181 The same day I received your beautiful card and letter I received one from the Jewish
182 Community for their Passover Seder. S-E-D-E-R. It's going to be Sunday, March the twenty-first
183 at 5:30 at Neveh Shalom. I've been there once, because they furnished the clothes for every one
184 of the groups that graduated. Yeah, because they couldn't where the clothes from the cemen--I
185 mean, place--the prison. And they couldn't let people, the family, bring them clothes, because it
186 could be anything. They could bring them drugs or anything else, so they furnished the clothes
187 that they wore, and we furnished the robes. And this is a ceremonial dinner that they're having--
188 have you ever been?

189

190 **HB:** Yeah, umm I'm actually Jewish.

191

192 **WMH:** Are you?

193

194 **HB:** Yeah, umm, I haven't been uh practicing in a--

195

196 **WMH:** Oh, you haven't?

197

198 **HB:** so---

199

200 **WMH:** I was there for something once, but yeah they furnished our clothes. And one of them--
201 for the first graduation--when they came--they had the camera and they took the pictures. That's
202 how I have the pictures from the first graduation.

203 I went back to Washington, D.C. for a meeting and I told them about this and I had a tape
204 of it, and they said--one lady said they would like to see it, so I sent it back to Washington, so
205 they could see the tape. And they said: 'They furnished clothes for all those women?' I said:
206 'Every one.' And I said: 'For every graduation.' Yep. They furnished the clothes.

207

208 **HB:** That's great.

209

210 **WMH:** And the clothes were theirs, because you know they didn't want them back. The only
211 thing they got back--we got back was the robes. (laughs) Yes. When I was in the Holy Land I
212 met one of the Jewish leaders there, and --quite an event! Yes. So we going to have--I'm going,
213 and the lady told me she'd take me, because I don't drive, because number one my age is against
214 me, number two my wearing glasses and my eyes get weak.

215

216 **HB:** Yeah, and sometimes it's just driving in the city is just hard.

217

218 **WMH:** Well, you know I used to drive from here to California--down to Los Angeles.

219

220 **HB:** Oh yeah?

221

222 **WMH:** Yeah.

223

224 **HB:** To visit your son?

225

226 **WMH:** Visiting my son and my uncles. I had two uncles down there. One my father's, one my

227 mother's, because they was back and forth--each one: 'Where you gonna stay?' 'You know, I'm

228 your uncle on your dad's side.' and 'I'm your uncle on your mother's side.' (laughter)

229

230 **HB:** Well, I look forward to seeing you again, and thank you so much for taking the time to talk

231 with us.

232

233 **WMH:** Well, I had planned to call you.

234

235 [End of recording. There was more to the conversation, about ten minutes, most of which was

236 spent expressing gratitude on both of our parts for the experience, and there was more discussion

237 of the class/public presentation coming up on Thursday March 18th, of which she said that she

238 intends on going to. She said that she enjoyed sitting in on our class for those few minutes, and

239 that all of us young people are so beautiful.]

240