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Interview with Willie Mae Hart

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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?
WMH: Well, sure. I grew up, I had a wonderful family. My great-grandmother lived while I was a kid.
And I, she died when I was in high school. And of course she and her friends—my grandmother had a
large house with a beautiful porch. And it extended around and they had benches on it with pillars in the
back because there were senior women that used to love to come and visit with Great-grandmother.
Whenever they were there talking about where they came from and their history, nosy me would always
get in there and get close to Great-grandma and listen. And then I would write some of things that they
said.
LD: Now who is ‘no—who is the other person that you mentioned? No--?
WMH: My, I was the only child that would sit around the elderly people. There were five or six elderly
ladies that used to always come and Great—my Grandmother what was—we had a little grocery store and
on the weekends Grandfather always cooked barbecue and they would sell it. Then these ladies would
have their share of homemade ice cream ‘cause Grandmother would do that.
LD: That’s fun!
WMH: And so they enjoyed it. They would talk about where they were during slavery. Great-
grandmother, from what they talked about, she was the best among the person that owned them,
because—owned the plantation. When, as I said, when she had to leave the plantation and the soldiers
came back and they asked men to come and fight, they could be free. Great-grandmother said, she said,
“Well, we hope so because we been praying that God would come from heaven and free us.” I would
always laugh and say, “You wanted him to come out of the clouds down here?” It was always fun for me,
you know, to laugh? But she said, “Yes. But he didn’t; he sent the soldiers.” They were white and some
was black that they picked up as they come along and said, "If you wanted to be free." All the men from
the plantation—that was the Reid Plantation in Mississippi, in Canton, Mississippi’s where it was. They
left and so grandmother and Missy—who was the wife of the owner, her name was Caroline. They
spelled their name R-E-I-D. And of course, she and grandmother, great-grandmother not grandmother because my grandmother wasn’t born, she was born after slavery. They would sit on the porch and the soldiers made a trip back. They wanted to see that every slave was off the plantation. She was in the house and they didn’t see her. So they were sitting on the porch, drinking lemonade. And of course, they said she had to go. Well, she had never left, she had never been off that place. So Missy gave her a buggy, a horse, and a mule. And gave her quilts, because I don’t think they even had a blanket in those—because she never said anything about blankets, she said, quilts. Gave her food, gave her money. So naturally, being a kid, I’d grin and say, “How much money did she give you?” She’d say, “I don’t know, but it was money.” I’m sure it was a lot of money because she had it later on.

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

LD: And is that the house you’re talking about?
WMH: No.
LD: That was a different one?
WMH: That was a different one. Because this was when my grandmother was a baby, and grandmother had about nine or ten kids. My grandmother was a baby. When she was grown she built a large one and bought more property. She wasn’t a Reid, my grandmother. Because Mr. Reid was injured in the Civil War and died from that injury and so Great-Grandmother married again, and she married Mosely, so that’s why you’ll see Mosely in here. I have both names. See? [indicates printed booklet she brought with her.]

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

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

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

WMH: Yes.

LD: And you grew there in Vicksburg with…?

WMH: Right.

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

WMH: Yes, I never went to public school.

LD: Can you tell us about that?

WMH: Well, I just think—that’s the only school I ever went to, and I enjoyed that. When I graduated from there, I went to, they had a black college that started there. They wasn’t Catholic, but I was so used to the Cath—being a Protestant—I was a Protestant on Sunday, a Catholic five days. [laughter] I did not finish college there. But then, my grandfather’s, Mr. Johnson, he was my step-grandfather. My grandfather died. His name was Louis Moore, my grandmother’s first husband. See, Great-grandmother had two husbands. Then, my grandmother had two. The first one died, and she married again. And he was
his father, they were, his father was a Indian. So he was mixed. He worked, and so they helped do more things.

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

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

LD: Yeah, Sounds Like it.

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

LD: Oh, that must be fun.

WMH: We had fun, yeah.

LD: Can you tell us about Mardi Gras? What it was like to go?
WMH: Well, yeah. They would have parades, and all these bands that they—all the bands with the—
would have on costumes and earrings and the men would have ropes of pearls—I should have brought
my, one of those necklace that—I didn’t get it there, I got that one in Jerusalem, but it was made of wood,
and they used to have them, they said it was made of wood and it was from trees that grew from where
the cross was.

LD: Oh Okay.

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

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

HB: How old were you then?

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

LD: Oh, that’s wonderful.

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

LD: Oh, that’s fantastic.
WMH: Yeah, so I enjoyed that.

LD: What other things do you remember growing up?

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

LD: Was this all segregated?

WMH: I beg your pardon?

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

WMH: It was segregated, yes! But the thing about it, just like when we went to school and rode the bus, our streetcar, we were riding the streetcar for a while. Well, we had friends that looked like you, and we 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 something we wanted to tell them, and slip it under the seat and go.

Yeah, cause when I came out here and went back home, one white friend, been a friend of the family, she told me her brother died. She said, “After you left Mississippi my brother said he didn’t have a friend.” I said, “I wasn’t his girlfriend!” And I said, “He died?” She said, “Yeah.” Said he started drinking. He said all his friends and he said, your cousin died and he started drinking and he had a heart attack and died. And I said, “I wondered why he died.” Yeah, well they owned a grocery store. We had a small one compared to the one they had. And their name was Arenz, A-R-E-N-Z, and they were from Germany. They were born—the children were born in Mississippi, but the parents came from Germany.
And when we’d go to the store we’d always yackity-yack at the store. Out in front, no. We’d send each other—and I had some white girlfriends and they’d be so glad to see me, and so when I went back, about five years ago, things had changed. And she said, one of them said, “Willie Mae?” And I looked around. I said, “Oh, my god. Janice! I never dreamed I’d see you again.” She said, “Yeah—you know I....” I said, “Where’s your husband.” She said, “He’s here.” Well, she married a doctor, and this doctor had said, he 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 nurse.” Well, I had some training, because my grandfather’s—well, he was my step-grandfather, Johnson, Mr. Johnson, that was Grandmother’s other husband, they, his nephew was a doctor. So after I could not—they wouldn’t accept me in Chicago I went back to Mississippi, he said, “I will train you.” And he brought all of his books and I started reading ‘em and remembered it, a lot. Then I received some nurse’s training by a white nurse that would tell me what to do. Well, you know, it’s one of those things, I was very fortunate. So the reason I’m out here, my friend, Laura, we were in school together, and she knew I had all of this, and she was working for a family that she—they brought her from Louis—no, Arkansas. She went over there and got this job, and their name was Hancock. And Mr. Hancock was down at Coos Bay, but Laura wanted me. I had moved from Vicksburg to California because I said, “I have a baby”—I married after they wouldn’t let me get into training in Chicago, I married then. I had this baby boy, and I 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 mother that, and she said, “Well, where you going?” I said, “I’m going to California;” ‘cause my father’s brother lived in Los Angeles, and my mother’s brother, Fred, lived in Los Angeles.

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

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

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

LD: Oh no!

WMH: That’s why I said, “I will never raise a son in Mississippi.” Well, look at the color of all our
people. You know? The women could do what they wanted. But the men, they wanted to kill ‘em. That’s
what’s happening now. Because I received some material about all these hate groups in Oregon. And now
they want to come back. They’re still here, because they’re down towards the south there in Oregon.

Because I have some material that a doctor sent me. So I know that. But anyway, that’s why we—things
went the way it did in Mississippi.

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

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

So, anyway, I came up, and this was this lady, the Hancocks, they wanted to go to Europe, and
they didn’t want their grandmother to be left alone, by themselves. So I said, “Oh,” and then another lady
that was their friend—they had gorgeous homes down in Coos Bay, and so she said, “Well, Laura is
doing okay, couldn’t we have her? Have Willie Mae?” I said, “Well, I’m going back to California.”

They said, “No, we don’t you to go back because we want to go, too.” Her grand-her husband’s mother had injured her hip. Well, I knew how to take care of that, you know, having been trained by my cousin, my grandfather’s nephew. Course he wasn’t my biological cousin, but we always called him—and he showed me how to—for while I was in Mississippi, what to do. So I stayed there and they flew out of here to Germany, too, with the Hancocks on trips. They had to get back, because that’s when World War II started.

LD:  Oh no.

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

LD:  It’s called “Travelling”?

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

LD:  So then how long did you stay there?

WMH:  I was there all about ten months.

LD:  And then did you go back to Mississippi?
WMH: Nope. I—no, well, we—Laura and I, Laura had an apartment up here in Portland. She would come up here and go to church. In Coos Bay they had no black churches. One Sunday, I decided, I said, "Well I’m going to this white church. And they can kick me out, I don’t care."

LD: Oh my gosh.

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

LD: During the week?

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

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

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

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says, “mommy! everybody ‘round here’s got a daddy! oh, mommy!” i says, “well, i’m your mommy.”

“yeah, but i want a daddy!” and so i had to find him a daddy. [laughter]

in fact, i was teasing him this morning, he called me from los angeles to tell me about a friend

of his that just passed. and i says, “oh.” he says, “and i hope i won’t follow him.” because they were

good friends. i said, “well, i hope not, too.” so i told him, i says, “did you go to church?” and he said,

“yes.” he sings, at church. it’s a white church, too. i was there for thanksgiving. and so he says,

“yeah.” they told me, he says, “you’ve got a singer.” i said, “oh, thank you.” maurice told them, he

said, “my mother used to sing.” i said, “grandmother used to sing. great-grandmother used to sing.

when great-grandmother would sing with that soprano voice, the birds would sing with her. they’d

chirp-chirp-chirp. when she would stop, they would stop. yeah, it was weird. she didn’t realize what

was happening. i said, “great-granny, the birds are singing.” i said, “you sing,” and i said, “stop!

stop!” so i start orchestrating everything, and they would stop when she’d stop. when she’d start singing

again, they would start. [laughter]

ld: it’s fun when we’re kids.

wmh: yeah, it is, isn’t it? you can do some of the—because, do some of the darnedest things.

ld: yeah, and get away with it.

wmh: i enjoyed it. well, then, when i came up here i decided well, after i worked for the folks, for

those people down coos bay, and i said, well, i was going to get a job in nursing up on the hill. so they

started a—licensed practical nurses—that’s when they started. i said “i’ll be one of those because then

i can work with the people.” and i won’t have to—i don’t want to just pass medicine and do nothing and

tell you what to do, and i wanted to work with the people so i got in with that group after that.

but i worked in the shipyard, i was going to be a welder, and one guy looked at me, and he says,

“you know that would hurt your eyes,” and he says, “if i were you, i would never do it.” so i said,
“Well, okay, I’ll just work whatever they say.” And so I started at the office. And I says, “I’m not gonna take no more welding.” I says, “So you can give me—I’ll sweep the floor. I’ll sweep the street, or something.” And he says, “No, you’ll take the material down to the ships.” I said, “Okay.”

LD: So what do you mean, ‘material?’

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

LD: How long did you work there?

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

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

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

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

LD: That night?

WMH: That night. I never did nothing but stand in that corner in a room like this, you know? And check the hats and coats and what have you. And Mr. Hancock would say, “Willie Mae have a son, and Willie 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
do—” “Yeah, here!” [thumps table] “Fifty dollars.” “Here’s a hundred dollars.” Well, they had, all those guys—my grandmother, I went South after that, you know, and picked up my child. And my grandmother said, “Where did you get that kind of money from? What did you do? What were you doing?” ‘Cause I said, “I was checking hats and coats and running my mouth. That’s all.” [chuckles] And she says, “Are you sure?” I had a whole hundred dollar bills. [laughs] Oh, gosh. I said, “That’s all.” Yeah, they were just a nice bunch of young people. They were—some of them was older than me, and some was younger, and they were having a good time. They had a dance and I just stayed in my position and took care of them, and as they, they decided to give—well, they were making all kinds of money with, you know lumber was king at that time.

LD: Oh, that’s right, yeah.

WMH: Yeah.

LD: And Coos Bay was a lumber town.

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

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

WMH: I’m 94. But, they had—this is where we had fun, and we had the cab business until something happened there. One guy conned one of our drivers to start selling drugs. We were taking patients—people, I won’t say ‘patients’ but I’m so used to patients—drive—people would, well, we would have—people lived all up in the hills here, would wait, call us. Wasn’t no blacks up there, it was all whites, but they called up and we’d go pick ‘em up. We had only two cabs, they wouldn’t give us but two. And those two cabs stayed busy. We had a lot of customers, and they—somebody conned one of our drivers
to sell drugs. And that’s—the police called them, we didn’t know anything about it. But my husband
and—there was another guy, because the one guy that received—you had to have, the city had to give you
the number of cabs that you could have, and they would only let us have two. This young man that had it,
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
we had the money and we put them out, they were all brand new cars, what have you. And this driver we
had, he started selling drugs in there, after a couple of years, and they blew us out. See, the Radio Cab,
everybody that was a Radio Cab owner had to be out of the Service. Military. You couldn’t just say, “I
want to start me a cab.” You had to be out of the military.
LD: Was your husband out of the military?
WMH: No, but the guy that had the mon—I mean, the thing for it, he didn’t have the money. He was out
of the [“Maritime”? Garbled word] this is how we knew about it. He wanted to start this cab, but he
didn’t have any money. Well, we had the money. Martin and Hart, and Ruggins, was the other guy.
He’s the—Ruggins was the one had the military. Martin and Hart worked in the shipyard. Martin was
from New York. He had—this was his first time being out of the state of New York. Worked out here in
the shipyards, and this is how I met him. He died about seven years ago.
LD: Well, when—did—they drove you out of business because of the drugs? Revoked your license?
WMH: Well, yeah. There was another company. There were three cab companies here, but they were
white. And we were killing them. We were getting a lot of people that were their people. But we would
take them where they wanna go, and what have you, you know. We had several whites that would call us,
and they’d want to go to Salem! They’d take the cab and go to Salem. So you know—they would—we
were getting paid. But they decided to get somebody to pull us out of business. We had a driver, that was
Neddy, and he did it. I was pregnant by that time with my son, David, and I said, “Look, I cannot go
through this. Let’s sell the—” I said, “We could buy some more cabs,” because the police picked up the
cabs and what have you. But you can’t do things by yourself, because one of our congressmen fought
that, and they gave us our cabs back and [indistinct] we sold them.

LD: Oh wow.

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

LD: Which congressman was it?

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.
The only one I’ve worked with was Hatfield. Yeah, Hatfield is one that stopped—because after
everybody finished—World War II was over, these people that they brought, you see—They gave our
people money to come here to work in the shipyards. And they wanted to ah—wanted them to get out of
here—especially people that looked like us. Well I could stay, because I was here before the war, but the
rest—get out. Mark Hatfield, a young politician—well he was just out of college, and he used to come to
our meetings all the time.

He said that they were going to have a debate in Salem, and he wanted us to come, be there—but
we couldn’t say nothing and don’t move. So there were about twenty carloads of us that went down to
Salem to hear this debate—it was all about the blacks that came here that had to get out. Those that
helped, you know, so he said “People, they helped to save this country, they fought, some of them lost
their lives over there,” and Hatfield says “I am for them staying as long as they are doing okay.” And so
the big debate was on. I went, my sister, Ruth—my younger sister went, she’s dead now—she went. She
says, “Well I’m going down there.” I said, “Why you going? You never bothered about going to the
meeting.” She said, “Yeah, but your big mouth…” She said, [laughter] “With your big mouth, if they say
something that makes you mad, you’re going to say something back at them, and mess up—so I’m going
to have to be there to shut it up.” [laughter] So she went with me. And we drove down with the group. It
was quite some debate, because this Senator—uh it’s all on the file, but I can’t—I’ve lost all those papers, you know. And ah, I can’t remember names. I remember him, because—well, what he did, you know.

LD: Yeah yeah.

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

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

HB: Right.

WMH: Hatfield.

HB: Right, but you said he went to…

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

HB: Okay.

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

So this debate, the place was full. Even in Salem, they had kids—they have to listen to this. There were any number of white kids there for this debate. It was so heated, I said, “I have got to get out of here.” So Ruth says, “Sit yourself down.” She said, “Don’t you move.” I said, “Well, I can’t take it. We’ve had people to die for this country, and this is what they saying?” They was nasty! So as soon as it was over, I jumped up and ran for the elevator. I was the first somebody at the elevator, hitting the button, because "I’ve got to get out of here and get some air." So Ruth, my sister, was right behind me.
Guess what—there was a bunch of these kids—white, all white—and these two girls come running
towards me—little blonde hair in the air, it was so long—and crying. They came up and threw their arms
around me, and, shocked me, says, “I’m sorry I’m white today, the way they talked about your people.”
And I says, “My God.” I says, “Well that’s okay. Because of you, it’d be a better tomorrow. So don’t
cry.” The teacher—one of them was Catholic—Sister—and she was standing—shocked, wondering what
I was going to say, and I hugged them both, because they threw their arms around me. And I say, “Dry
your tears. Because of you, honey, it’ll be a better tomorrow for all of us.”
Somebody from the newspaper was in the crowd and saw it, and they wrote about it. They
wanted to know who I was. Of course, I didn’t tell my name. About five years later, I ran into a person,
and they said, “You are the one that those kids hugged.” She remembered. The Oregonian wrote an
article, I think they wrote it about it, I don’t know [unintelligible.] I wish I knew who those little kids
were, because they couldn’t have been no more than about the third or fourth or fifth grade—something
like that they were short, you know. (giggle)
That really made me think, don’t fib—the way those kids made a change for me—that I could
take a lot of stuff because when I started school to be a L—I always wanted to be a LPN, because I
wanted to work with the people, and so I took my training up on the hill, at OHSU. That’s where I
worked. After that, one of the nurses asked me to come where she worked, so I left OHSU and worked
over there. Then another nurse [chuckle] conned me into coming to work at—there was a place on Tenth
and Washington Street, in Portland, down there. I think they might have something there to this day, but
upstairs used to be a small hospital, and I worked there. So she decided to leave and work for the State,
and she went down and signed. She say, “Come on Willie, and sign up; they ain’t never had nobody
black work there.” I say, “No. I broke the color line in two places, that’s enough.” [laughter] So she says,
“Chicken!” [laughter] Yeah, she called me a chicken, so I said, “Okay. I’ll go with you.”
So we went, both of us, downtown, signed up, and I went back to my job on Tenth and Washington Street. Two weeks later she called me, and she said, “Did they call you? Are you working?” I said, “No.” I said, “They asked me if I knew what to do in a nursing home, and I said, I’ve never even been inside of a nursing home, let alone know what to do, so they didn’t hire me.” I said, “So, I’m still busy I don’t care.” Yes, I said, “I had to tell a doctor off up there.” [laughter] I said, “Because this man had a tube in his lungs, see to drain the fluid.” [Mrs. Hart uses her hands to show where the tube was coming out of a man’s side.] The container was on the floor, and I happen to go back, and there he was—he had it up in the air—[Mrs. Hart uses her hands to show how the doctor was holding the container above the man’s chest.]—looking at it and well, all that could go right back into his system—see and if they are on the floor, you’d better get down on your knees if you want to see how much drainage was there, because if you take it and hold it up like this [again demonstrates how not to hold the container]—it’s all going back into that person—

LD: And the doctor was doing that?

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

WMH: Yeah, I could.

LD: Let’s do that.

[The tape is stopped for a fifteen minute break. Lisa Donnelly photocopied some materials that Mrs. Willie Mae Hart brought to the interview, and Mrs. Hart continued talking through the break.]

[Interview begins again. The portion of the story that is not recorded involves Mrs. Hart’s work with WICS (Women in Community Service) and their prison outreach program called Lifeskills. What follows is the end of her description of a time when she helped a graduate of that program, Sonja Hill, and her family. This story came out in reference to an article written by Sonja Hill in the Women in Community Service, Inc. newsletter, a photocopy of which is attached.]

(unintelligible)

HB: No that’s alright.

WMH: Anyway, I came back home. I went there, I showed my credit card and told ’em I was paying up for what they owed, and the next day. I said, “And then I will take care of the rest.” But they stayed comfortable, I said, “If they hungry and you have food here, let them eat.” So he said, “Thank you.” And I left, I went back, so I called, while I watched the rest of the game [football game on television], (laughter). And I called a couple of women—all of them looked like you, that I called—not me, but like you. And out in the suburbs, and I told them what had happened, Anderson and a few others, and I said, “And I paid for it, but we’re going to have get someplace else.” And so she said, “Willie, don’t worry.” She said, “I’ll send some money, it’ll be in the mail tomorrow.” I said, “Well, it don’t have to be tomorrow, wait ‘til next day, whatever.” I said, “Well, I just want to let you know, we need some help.”
And so--three of them sent a hundred dollars apiece. And it came in the mail. One of them was on Monday, the others was on Tuesday. Well then Helen Karina—I called her, she’s Catholic, and she says, “You know we have a place that we send our people that come here out on 82nd.” And she says, “You just mention Interstate and I’ll come right behind you—” she said, “Let’s go out there.” And she says, “We’ll take them out there.” She called the priest, I guess, and told me the next morning she was going to come. She said, “You don’t need to, you’ve done enough.” She said, “I’ll come pick them up, pick you up, and we’ll take them out there.” So we took them out there. And it was a husband, wife, and two kids—and they looked at the man, and they say they didn’t have any rooms. And so we wouldn’t—we didn’t let them stay—if they didn’t have any rooms—okay. We wasn’t going to let them keep the woman and not the man, so we brought them back over on Interstate and put them up at another motel. And they stayed there for three days, and it was Thanksgiving—they had Thanksgiving dinner at my house. And that Saturday—there’s a couple of churches that own apartment complexes out here in Lake Oswego—out that area somewhere, and anyway I could never go back out there, but Anderson came over—and they let them stay there. And they stayed there at this place for three months. They were there Christmas—the church gave them toys for the kids. One of the members gave him a car. And they stayed there until—I think it was February or March they moved on someplace else. And I have heard from them since. Mmm, but this shows you what the churches can do with—and more than one church owned that building, and they have people that come there that don’t have anywhere to go. Then they let them stay for so long—they won’t let them stay permanently—and so I’m sure it’s still out there.

LD: How long ago was this?

WMH: This has been about five or six years ago—but it’s still going on. And the women that did this for me were all white, and this couple was a mix, one was white and the other was black. And the children, was of course you know, mixed. But they got on their feet, and then they left Portland. But just shows you
what people would do, and they never asked me what they looked like or anything. They just said, “Bring ‘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 to have a lot of help.

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

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

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

WMH: Yes, uh-huh. They’re still active, but now the money ran out. The cheese company Kraft—gave the money to the WICS program back in Washington, D.C., and it was quite a few thousand dollars, ‘cause if you read one of those magazines, it would tell you. Then when the money ran out, they got some more. We went to Salem and lobbied—three or four of us—Helen Karina, well, Church Women United—and well, we went to Salem, and lobbied that we should have that to continue—longer, so they just ended it again. It’s too bad, because some of the women that went through that pro-

had been in prison, went through that program—some of them are teaching. One of them is teaching in a 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 in my junkyard. (laughter.) Because I’ve got stacks of stuff in there, you know. She’s teaching in a college. And there are several that’s helping others now that I know that are still. And I think the things—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 up in Idaho—did you see that?

HB & LD: Yeah.

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

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

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

WMH: Well, I think they’re better for us, but we need to be careful, because just like—I spoke to—well, I had a dream about it. One night, after, this church—did you hear? I know, I’m sure you read about the
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 knew the people that were there and what have you—and so, I don’t know. One night, I just couldn’t seem to go to sleep, so what can we do? And I said, “We cannot do—go and talk to these boys.” And just like something, just say, “Why not go to the parents and tell them—have a meeting, and talk to them and tell them they have to change. And then talk to our black pastors to get together and get the men, and get them organized and have something that they can bring to gangs in their building together.” One group, they call themselves the Black Panthers and the other one call themselves something else, but get the separate ones—you know, at one time with the men, because a kid, a boy would listen to a man before he’ll listen to his mother. Yeah, cause I had one that you’d tell him what to do and he’d say, “Daddy, 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] Then he said, “Mama is tough.” [laughter] I did that once, then he never tried that on me. He’d say, looked at his dad and say, “Mama’s tough.” I’d say, “Yes, you’ll do it, and he will too. Now both, get out.” [laughter]

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

WMH: Yeah, well, he used to go to his daddy all the time, and the other one his daddy didn’t stay alive long enough. But this one, David, yeah, he’d always go and ask his daddy, and I finally caught him. And I told him off. [laughter] You both get out (carefully enunciated and spoken like a mother). [laughter] Oh gosh. So anyway, and Tom said—my husband’s name was Theodore, but I always called him Tom—he would say, “Your mama is tough. You better obey her.” [laughter] Oh gosh, that’s the way things were, but everything had worked out that we’d tried. Now we had a prayer breakfast, Saturday, and the church women- I mean- the Council of Negro Women, and we are still working to have a meeting with the parents where we talk to the man—that works with the police with these gangs, and he said he would do 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
get some men, have a meeting, talk to the boys, and see if they can change. Get rid of that, so that’s what
we’re working on—but not by myself—with the rest, yeah. (Talking about a plant we gave her as a gift.)
Look like this is growing. Well, it looks like it’s gotten taller since I [laughter]. Don’t you—yeah—it
doesn’t look like it was quite that tall. [laughter]

HB: Well, what do you think is important for future generations to learn from history?
WMH: Well, I think, well, I learned from the history, and I feel like this—you look at other people, and
even though they don’t agree with what you say—you can work together, because all of us—we know
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
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,
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.
Cause just like this lady had told me once from the time she was upset with me, with what I said, and I
said, “Well, I’m not going to apologize for it, because I know I was telling the truth.” So she say, “But
I’ve changed, and I know you’re right about that.” Something going on within the group, and she wanted
to go one way, and I figured it was best to go the other way. And we cannot do anything by ourselves. We
wouldn’t be where we are today if it wasn’t for people the color of you that cared, and we cared for one
another. You know, because now my grandmother’s property and one white guy’s join—just separated
just like here and here (demonstrates with her hands on the table) and they were going to –came out and
were going to drill on his property for oil—and he says, “Well, who else did you ask?” And it was
farming property, cause grandma and them didn’t live on the farm and Mr. Eggleson didn’t neither. And
they said, “No,” they hadn’t said nothing to—He says, “Well, you have to drill on Dora’s before you drill
on mine.” And he wouldn’t let them drill, and I went there. I don’t have the picture now, it’s somewhere
in my stuff, because we I went south, and asked my grandma, “What in the world was that pipe?” and
Grandpa, he said, “Well I’ll tell you what it was.” He said, “They drilled for oil. We have oil on the
property and the man went and told us that there’s gas.” He said, “Where there’s gas there’s oil.” The gas
is on top. The oil is at the bottom. I said, “What?” And he said, “Yeah, he wanted us- told us we could put
a cooking utensil in the house.” I said, “What do you mean a cooking utensil?” He says, “A stove.
[laughter] Your grandma can make those cakes.” [laughter] And I say, “And my lemon pie.” [laughter]
And he sat and laughed, and he said, “Yeah.” But she said no, she wanted to keep it the way it was, and so
we didn’t do it. And I said, “Oh.” And I’m taking a picture of this, and they never went any further, but
before grandmother sold the property—I told her, “Do n’t sell the mineral rights.” I said, “You can sell the
property, since you’re coming to Portland to live.” I said, “But don’t sell the mineral rights.” So her
daughter is a year younger than me and she threw the papers away. She can’t find them. My cousin was
going to have them checked, and he had a heart attack and died in Mississippi—that picture I showed you.
LD: Yeah. The military…
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,
I meant, in Vicksburg, in that countryside, out in the suburbs.” I said, “We won’t get any money.” And I
have three friends that their property was in Texas—and it’s quite a few people that get money from the
property in Texas, ‘cause --I guess, quite a bit, it’s so close to the ocean. I guess that’s why—that’s the
way I think about it. Cause only Vicksburg have is the Mississippi River, but it’s there. So we’ll live.
We’re getting along. Yeah.
HB: I wanted to ask—how did you—do you remember when you first became aware of your race?
WMH: Oh, when I was a baby. [laughter] In Mississippi you know! [laughter] Because we couldn’t
just—say, in restaurants, we couldn’t go in. Now Italian restaurants had one side for blacks and the other
side for whites, and it’s funny when you have white friends and you can’t stand up on the street and talk
to each other. They couldn’t talk to us too much. And then we’d write notes, at school the kids would
write, because the Catholic school was about three blocks above the one I attended—mine was down the
hill—this one was up on the hill. When those kids got off the bus, we’d throw stuff out—we’d throw stuff 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.

[laughter] Yeah, we’d drop our notes.

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

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

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

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

LD: That’s good stuff.

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

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

WMH: No, only because when I was born it was separated like that, but the funny part about it—now, my father’s mother was lighter than my mother’s grandmother— you know. And it took me—I was living out here when I found out that she was Irish, but she married a black man—and they thought she was a light, and in school we had all colors. We had so black that they were like this (points to the black conference table) and we had them so white, you know, but we didn’t know, because had now Mr. Biedenharn, one
of those guys that if you know anything about your history of the South—that Coca-Cola was bottled in Vicksburg—and ah, well, Mr. Biedenharn—we knew him, and his wife was Mr. Albert Eggleson’s sister—that’s the man that his property and my grandmother’s joined, and we had pecans on our property 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 pecans, and I could sell them—that’s my money. Yeah, grandpa—him would give each of us a tree.

LD: Oh, that’s neat.

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

LD: I didn’t know that.

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

LD: I didn’t know that.

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

HB: Is this it?

WMH: Let me see if it’s on here, cause he was standing—no. This is the black church that my grandfather helped build. My mother’s stepfather, grandpa Johnson, his picture’s in there, but this is the black church that they had built, and his father was a bricklayer. And grandpa helped him build it. It’s huge.
But we had a spot, out on the outskirts of Vicksburg, and it was underground, a bayou—went underground-like, and this black soldier told them—says, “Sir, if you want to get up behind them soldiers that’s taken over Vicksburg—I’ll show you how.” And it was—they’d go underground and then come up in Vicksburg. Uh-huh, it wasn’t that far, and was a little water running, so I told David, “This is where the war ended, when they came up behind the soldiers and took them over.” He said, “Well mother, I want to 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 spooked down there (unintelligible because of laughter).” And he laughed. Yeah, so I showed him where the war—you know it was, they took over Vicksburg and the war ended. And it was underground and then you know you come up behind and you know they came up behind—so it was a black man that showed them where it was, ’cause wherever he was on this—the slave on this property—they probably went under there looking to see if they could leave—’cause you know, some of them left. We have a history of some in other places, went underground and got up, and when they come out they were back in New York or somewhere else. [laughter] Yeah.

(searches some more for the missing photograph)

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

LD: Sure, okay.

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

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

HB: Well, one last question then.

WMH: Okay.

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

WMH: Oh, terrible. Just to have things going on—it was terrible. But nothing else.
(Pulls out another photo.)

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

LD: Yeah, in Germany.

WMH: In Germany. Oberammergau, Germany

LD: That’s wonderful. Okay well.

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

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

HB: Spectacular.

END OF INTERVIEW.
Portland State University
Black United Front Oral History Project

WMH: Willie Mae Young Hart, narrator
HB: Heather Burmeister, interviewer
Date: March 8, 2010
Transcribed by Heather Burmeister

*This text has not yet been audited as the audio recording is inaccessible at this time.

[The tape begins with Willie Mae thanking me for the card and flyer about our class presentation that I sent after our initial interview.]

WMH: Anything I can do in my little way to help—I, you know, that’s what the Master left me here for—I said my ninetieth year. (laughter)

HB: Okay, well just for the record, do I have permission to record this phone call?

WMH: Yeah, you can record it, depending on what I’m saying. (laughter)

HB: Okay, and could you say your full name and date of birth?

WMH: Yes, my full name is Willie Mae Young Hart—Willie Mae Young was my maiden name. My birth date is April 4th, 1915.
HB: Nice. So after listening to our earlier interview, there were a couple of things that were missed, and I was hoping that you could talk a little bit about the Council of Negro Women and your involvement with the Council—like how it got started--

WMH: Oh, here in Portland?

HB: Yes.

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

Of course while he was there, one lady resented it. She was white, but she didn’t resent us having him there, but she didn’t like him because he was Catholic. She said Catholic was going to make the nation Catholic, and she wasn’t Catholic; she was Protestant. When I went to get some pop for the—she met me and told me that. And I told her—I says: ‘Well.’ She said: ‘I heard that was just for your people.’ And I said: ‘No.’ I said: ‘It’s for anyone that wants to go
and talk them.' I said: ‘Go down there and talk to them.’ We had quilts laid out for them, and
they were sitting on the ground (laughs), and that’s where they wanted to sit. It was a beautiful
day that day. And of course, she said: ‘No!’ She was there and her words weren’t very nice when
she was talking to me. And so I told her, I says: ‘Well, if you want him to know—we brought
him here, because we wanted him to talk to our people.’ I said: ‘Mrs. Reid—the lady that you see
that looks like me—’ I said that she was the other person. I said: ‘but if you want to say that to
him, you go. I will not tell him anything!’ You know, she made me angry a little bit, the way she
was talking about different things about race and then she mentioned about him being Catholic
religion. I said: ‘That’s prerogative.’ I said: ‘I’m Protestant. But I finished high school at a
Catholic. I never went to public school.’ ‘Well, how did you do that in Mississippi?’ she said
kind of funny. And I told her. I said: ‘My people paid for it, because [unintelligible].’ And I went
down there—Mr. Kennedy was Mr. Kennedy at that time. That’s what I called him. He said:
‘Well, Willie, I’m just going to call you Willie Mae—What was she saying to you? Because I
knew you were angry, with the way you was (laughter) lifting up your arms and hands, talking to
her.’ And I says: ‘I’m not going to tell you. You know, if you want to know it, you go on up
there and ask her.’ And so this lady was still standing up there. He said: ‘Really, what did she
say?’ And one of the sisters said: ‘Yeah, What did she say?’ And I said: ‘Okay, since you want
to know—’ and I just spilled it out, you know. And I say: ‘Since you guys are Catholic and we’re
Protestant,’ I say: ‘You’re going to make everybody a Catholic.’ Well, he knew I had gone to
Catholic school because I had told him that when we were talking about schools. So he sat up on
his knees like he was in a half-prayer, and he said: ‘If I’m elected President, regardless of what
your faith is—I just want you to vote for me. I am Catholic, and whatever you are that’s what
you can be.’ (laughter) And everybody just—people standing around listening—and everybody
started laughing. (laughter) So that was the joke of the day.

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

HB: Oh, nice. Did you go?

WMH: No. I couldn't go, because my baby needed me. My mother wasn't very well. I wanted
to go, but I couldn't. In fact, she was a friend of mine, back there in Washington D.C., she said:
'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
running a slight fever.' So that's why I couldn't go. Yeah. I was invited back there twice, and
didn't go, so I said: 'Maybe I'm not supposed to.'

And so that is why after he passed--well he had laid out everything for the Job Corps,
how he wanted it, what he wanted, and what have you, and, of course, you know he was killed.
And President Johnson knew what he was about to do, trying to do, and he fulfilled everything.
And I was sent a letter that the needed, that they would like to have a Council here. And so
because of the Job Corps and what have you, they were going to work with it. So I had a group
of people that we just had parties, and we changed our name and called it the Council of Negro
Women. (laughter) And that's how it was started.
And so after he passed and all of this started, the Job Corps started, they would fly them in here from the South--from North Carolina and wherever. I would go to the airport, pick them up, and take them to the place they were supposed to be here in town. And then I was through with that, and they would take over. And take them down the coast or wherever--Astoria or wherever they were going. That's why it was started here, but it had been going on for a long time back in New York. And part of the South, not that much in the South, but it was. This was the first one in the state of Oregon.

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

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

HB: Yeah.

WMH: When it was started we, the Council of Negro Women, was the ones that sent the ladies from Washington, D.C. out here to start this WICS program, and it was started out there at the prison, because they work with women who are in prison. And she had my name and phone number (laughs) on the East Coast, and she called me and I told her. I said: 'I'm working on it'--of course I was on the board out there at Columbia Prison, I was on that board. And one of our--he's a senator now, but he was a new person and hadn't been in Oregon very long. He was also
on that board, and that's where it began out there. And we had to meet, and Church Women
United had a person there also. So the Council of Negro Women wasn't the only group--Church
Women United was the other group. Believe it or not, but I was a member of Church Women
United. (laughter) Then, of course, when they started training the women which would then
begin with this program of turning the women who were in prison--to make a-uh, you know--laid
out a plan to change their lifestyle, so when they get out they wouldn't have to come back, you
know, and all that. Then the colleges--and I think your college was one of them--that helped.
Yeah. And they had women that came out, and they were teaching, and these women were
teaching in various colleges that was coming out to talk to the women, and to really teach them
how to change their lifestyle.

So when they went through this program, they wanted to have a graduation, but they
couldn't have a graduation and bring people into the prison. So this lady that was heading it, she
didn't know where to go--she didn't know anything about, and I was the one she asked: 'Would
you find a place that we could have the graduation?' And I said: 'Wow!' I said: 'That's deep.
That's huge, you know.' At one of the meetings that we had, and of course, we talked to the--we
had a session. There was another lady that would come out and share our conversations of what
we were doing in different areas, you know. Talking to the women and this, and so they seemed
to enjoy hearing us, but we would never get to far into their affairs. Of course, the first
graduation, that was thrown at me, as I said. I said: 'I have to think about it. No, I'll have to pray
about this.' Because they wanted their families to see them, and then one of them said: 'Well,
what are you do-gooders going to do for us?' They'd give us a bad time. You know, talking just
slanderous-like and so I said: 'Well, we're going to do the best that we can, and we will find a
decent place for you to come for your graduation, and your family can share it with you.' So I thought of the schools and a building here on the east side, I knew we could probably get it and something just said: 'Take them to the church.' huh. So I told the instructor what I had planned and so she said: 'You gonna tell them?' I said: 'Yep.' So I told them, I said: 'Well, since you are graduating, your people, your family, can come. You'll be coming. You'll go to the church, to be at the church.' They said: 'What?!' Yes. And I said: 'Not only will your families see you graduate, they will have a chance to visit with you for a time, because you will have your lunch after that and we will have enough for the family.' And that's the way that it happened. And I think in one of those magazines that I gave you had a graduation in it.

HB: Yeah.

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

HB: Oh, nice.

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

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 her, but I guess I'll run into her someplace--but several of them. And one young lady, I asked her to speak for a group in Salem, and she did. She look like you. [white] (laughter) She is teaching. She was teaching somewhere in Oregon, I think. She straightened her life. She changed everything.

HB: Wow. That's wonderful.

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

HB: Yeah.

WMH: Yeah, I had her speak at our prayer breakfast, one of them to speak at our prayer breakfast. And another one I had her to speak for a church down in North Salem, because she
lived down there. So, yeah, it's been just wonderful for me, working with this, because I figure
that if I can help somebody. I'm a senior now, and my living wasn't in vain. I know I'm fading
out.

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

HB: Yeah, umm I'm actually Jewish.

WMH: Are you?

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

WMH: Oh, you haven't?

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

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

HB: That's great.

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

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

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

HB: Oh yeah?
WMH: Yeah.

HB: To visit your son?

WMH: Visiting my son and my uncles. I had two uncles down there. One my father's, one my mother's, because they was back and forth--each one: 'Where you gonna stay?' 'You know, I'm your uncle on your dad's side.' and 'I'm your uncle on your mother's side.' (laughter)

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

WMH: Well, I had planned to call you.

[End of recording. There was more to the conversation, about ten minutes, most of which was spent expressing gratitude on both of our parts for the experience, and there was more discussion of the class/public presentation coming up on Thursday March 18th, of which she said that she intends on going to. She said that she enjoyed sitting in on our class for those few minutes, and that all of us young people are so beautiful.]