

A. ELIZABETH WALKER
b. 1943

VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT

1999

Interviewed by Merideth Taylor, associate professor of theater, Andre Perry, coordinator of multi-cultural affairs, and SMCM students [at Cobb House?] in preparation for the performance of "Crossroads: On Common Ground"

Transcribed by Katherine Ryner, March 2010

St. Mary's College of Maryland
St. Mary's City, Maryland

[The recording begins with students introducing themselves and explaining why they are involved with the Crossroads production. MT discusses the various meanings of the word "Crossroads" and why she chose it as the name of the production.]

[13:15 min.]

AP: Well I think, I would love to hear a little bit about your beginnings and maybe start off by telling us a little bit about where you're from, you know, the community you were raised in, and we'll try to go on from there.

EW: Okay. I was born in Park Hall, Maryland, a midwife, actually it was my grandmother who delivered me. I'm the first child of five; I have three other brothers -- three other sisters and a brother. I went to elementary school, I don't even know what the name of it was at that particular time. I went to what was Jarboesville, what later became Carver, high school. I played on the basketball team at Carver --

AP: And how was the racial breakdown?

EW: My school was all-black, all-black. My elementary school was all black including the teachers and student body etc. At that time there was not a middle school; you went from first grade to six and then seven to twelve. There were two buildings for us at the time. And I don't remember any teachers that were not African American. When I got into twelfth grade, or a little before, I had thought about college, I mean I'd dream about it, think about it, would like to go, heard about it, and said I'd like to go. Had no idea about how, how I would go, I knew my father was just a carpenter and by that time there was five of us. So I was in the twelfth grade and Mrs. Fleming who -- this is a military town this here and she and her husband and daughter and son had transferred from California and she was teaching French and I took her French class. And she discovered that, you know, I did want to go to school but we didn't have any money for it and so, I'm not sure what got her taking an interest in my wanting to go but she went home and did some homework, unknown to me, about places that I could attend, and discovered that St.

Mary's was a state-supported school. Up until 1962 we all in this community, blacks, thought this was a private school. I don't know how the notion was promoted or got started but that's the word that was passed around and passed down, St. Mary's is a private school. So no one ever applied.

[17:00 min.]

AP: So in many ways it was private [all laugh].

EW: Yes, it was.

AP: A state private school.

EW: So Miss Fleming for some reason decided to check around or check into this facility, I don't know why. I never really thought to ask her. Perhaps I will before I leave or something. And she came to me and she said, "Well, why don't you go to St. Mary's?" I said, "It's private." She said, "No it's not, it's state-supported which means you can go, you just have to have the funds." And I thought, okay, all right, now I know I can go if I can find some money. So she procured an application and, as I mentioned previously today, we did not completely fill it out. Some of the information we left off.

AP: What type of, what type of information did you leave off?

EW: Ah [smiles], the race part [all laugh]. I'm not sure she put my parents' name on there, as it is, well, I'm not sure. I'm not sure how, how she filled it out. And I got an acceptance letter, you know, directly from high school, and we had to come down here for an initial meeting over there [points behind her], I forget where it was, around a table of persons and myself and Miss Fleming and I think Mrs. Gaskin and we all walked in and it was a surprise [laughs] about the application that had been accepted. I had good grades per se for the program I came up in. And so that, I had As and Bs and I was an honors student in, in Carver. So, you know, that's what the transcript accepted. So, without anything else, it looked a good student applied, which I am, or was, or that I felt that I was. So that's how I got in. And once here, and the knowledge that it was not private and she has the right to be here, I was allowed to stay.

AP: What do you think the results would be if you had put race and different, other information --

EW: Other information on there? Honest? I don't know. But if you ask my opinion, I think I probably wouldn't, I would not have received an acceptance letter.

Q: Did they try to dissuade you in any way, when you met with them, or were they, was it just --?

EW: No, it was, it was, it was done in a way that said we, we have to do this because the secret is out, it is not private, it's state, she has a right to be here so we might as well deal or consequences will probably follow since it is a state school receiving funding. So not much was

said. Nothing I can recall was said. At least not to me. I don't know what was said to Miss Fleming or Mrs. Gaskin who were the instrumental persons in my being here, or getting accepted.

AP: I think it would be helpful if maybe you could describe Mrs. Gaskin and Miss Fleming and their role in the community because it, it sounds like, that they were, you know, very influential or had some type of --

EW: They were. Miss, Mrs. Fleming is still alive, at least I believe she is. Mrs. Gaskin was -- Miss Fleming was a French teacher at Carver, Mrs. Gaskin was a principal of a, a school for I believe slow learners or something like that.

MT: Yeah, Green Holly, Green Holly was special ed.

EW: Yeah. And I guess, because of their status as teachers, certain information might have filtered down from them in various ways. I'm not really sure how Miss Fleming found out what she found out, and how Mrs. Gaskin found out what, what she knew. But Miss Fleming helped me fill out the application. She, she kind of, well she did, she talked with me about coming, she, she tested me on, on different ways of responding to questions, questions that I may have to answer and how I answered them. Mrs. Gaskin was like just a booster, a support to the family and to me. And as I said in there Mrs. Fleming used to check my papers and make sure that whatever assignments I had for my classes that I was doing them and doing them well. And Mrs. Gaskin probably did the same thing, or they did them in conjunction.

[23 min.]

MT: I was gonna say, it sounded like it was really a, a group effort, you know, it terms of, of your time here and your support system --

EW: It was.

MT: Your parents and both those teachers as well as you were working very hard.

EW: Once it became knowledge that I was accepted, there was support from people in the community. I guess, no, there was no guessing, it was, I was being watched, I was in a fishbowl, a glass bowl. Is she gonna make it? Are they gonna let her stay? Is she gonna be able to academically make it or ask her to leave? Is St. Mary's County gonna have a riot, or have problems like that had in Little Rock or Alabama? Are the National Guard gonna have to come out, or is the military gonna have to come? So, it was a fish bowl.

Q: How far away did you live, like, from the College?

EW: From here?

Q: Yes.

EW: I walked. I could walk home. I lived in Park Hall, Maryland, which is, I don't know how many -- do you know where Park Hall is, but it's -- it's a good walk. But I had walked it, and did walk it or, half-way almost. I could walk home if it became necessary.

Q: Did any, did any other student who graduated from your high school attend college?

EW: With me? That graduated with me?

Q: [Yes.]

EW: Off hand, the ones that I can think of, I don't think, maybe one or two. I do know that the ones who graduated with me, a good percentage of them are still here in this county. A goodly percentage of them are here in this county and their children are grown, and some may have attended. I hope so.

AP: Now you, you said that, well, you hope to see Miss Fleming again and talk to her. What would you say to Miss Fleming?

EW: Well, I, I have a question I wanted to ask her. The first time I came back here which was about when Dr. Hammer invited me back, I guess that's been well over six or seven, eight, nine, ten years, Miss Fleming let something slip that I, she, I want to ask her more about. I had no knowledge of the fact that during my tenure here my parents were threatened. Miss Fleming kept that from me and she let it slip out, she let it slip out the night before I left here so I haven't had the chance to talk to her face to face. She said, "We couldn't let you know that because you probably would have stopped," and she said some other things that I want to know more about, about things that went on to keep me here. She said, in essence, "You just don't know." And I want to know what that is I just don't know.

Q: How does all that make you feel? I mean you got in here and like you, you, it's not a private school and you were accepted but you found out that people were against it. How did it make you feel, like, I don't know.

[27 min.]

EW: Scary. I don't think I slept one bit the night before I was due to come here. I knew my dad was gonna be bringing me and picking me up every day, and I knew he couldn't follow me around all day -- he had to work, there were others to feed -- and I know he was thinking about dropping her off and what's gonna happen when I drop her off and pull that truck off. And he drove me and on that first day he didn't say much and I didn't say much either, but I knew what he was thinking and I knew that he was scared some. And he was scared for me. And, but he didn't turn the truck around and I didn't ask him to, we just kept coming. And he parked out, where that rock is, up the right, up that little hill in front of the parish, there wasn't those parking spaces there, it was just, just a place, and he pulled the truck up there and that's where he'd pick me up every evening, that's where I, I'd meet him or I'd walk right down there

where this rock is. I knew no one, at least not any faces. I knew I had a "big sister," she was assigned to me; I got a letter about who she was. And the way I found her is she wore the name tag and of course she didn't have a problem finding me, I was the only one on campus. But I never knew how they approached her about being my big sister. Grace Barolet was my big sister. I, I often, would like to see her and ask her. I never did ask her, I'm not sure why. I just was glad I guess that someone was willing to be my big sister here, and that there would be somebody to talk to, at least on occasion. But she was a year ahead of me so I knew she was gonna be gone and she was very busy but at least I had that one contact. Walking the campus and knowing that no one would speak to you, that no one comes up and says anything to you, it's kind of tough. You know, it's lonely, very.

AP: So, maybe you can start, you briefly starting talking about I guess it was orientation, about where you met your big sister.

EW: Oh okay. They had a tradition on the campus that if you were a freshman, you were supposed to wear the tag that said, "I'm Rat So-and-so." But they knew that that wasn't gonna go over, so that's why I didn't wear the tag. I wasn't given that tag to wear because that would not have gone well and I'm sure they, the administrators thought this was not something we better have her do. So I didn't wear a tag, and I wasn't referred to in that manner either. You know, as a freshman on campus it's, it's okay to do that, but not this situation. So it happened that morning, Grace was, I'd made it as far as, up the hill from what is Kent Hall, and Grace Barolet was coming from the Anne Arundel Hall area, and I saw her nametag. Maybe she'd been watching from somewhere and saw me get out of the truck, but it did happen the first day I came, she did meet me. And her sister was a freshman along with me, so she introduced me to her sister Kathy, and Kathy had a friend Emily, and Kathy, Grace and Emily were the first three to kind of speak or say something to me as I passed through class and on campus.

AP: So talk about, a little bit about your first class experience, first classroom experience. What was it like, how were you feeling, how did the professors treat you, and all of that good stuff.

EW: The one professor that I don't think my race mattered was Dr. Carl Walker who taught business. He had a brace on his leg and maybe he felt we had some connection, I don't know, he had a brace, he felt the odd professor. I don't know, but he saw me as a student, and he helped me when I asked for help, I did his assignments, he questioned me, never said anything that made me feel uncomfortable or nothing derogatory was ever said or done in his classroom. He, he was quite helpful. He taught me typing and I still type today. There were some classes where my reception was not so positive. As I mentioned previously there was my one class where at first I wasn't sure what was going on. The professor would come into class, had to step out. And while the professor was gone, paper was balled up and thrown, a few books were thrown. They never hit me, but they came over me or beside me. Most of the, the chemistry teacher I felt he, because I was enrolled in the class he just did what he had to do. I mean he, I wasn't gonna go away, and the campus wasn't gonna take me out of his class. He was cordial, he was cordial.

AP: But not interactive.

EW: Not, not much. The most interactive class I had was the one that Mrs. Lois Donhiser taught, and I can't remember what it was she taught. I don't know if Miss Donhiser was military or what -- and that's to say that it seemed like people who weren't from this area were the more receiving and receptive; they'd been around, exposed, didn't matter. And I think Miss Donhiser, I don't think she was a local, I'm not sure. I thought her husband was military.

AP: So many of the faculty here were community.

EW: I think they were, a high percentage of them were, as far as I can recall, at least they were here for a good while. Today when I went by the Alumni Office and inquired about some of them, a few, most of them claimed this as their home, home area, so yeah.

Q: Was this an all-girls' school? Was it still an all-girls' school?

EW: No, no it was men but the males did not live on campus.

MT: Do you have any idea how many of the, the white students were from the local area? Or were they more from --

EW: Oh, quite a few. The population of the white students from this area was quite sizeable. It was, there was quite a few of them.

[36 min.]

MT: So it was obviously well-known in the white community that this was not a private school?

EW: I think so, yes. I have to say yes. I believe that to be true.

MT: And you had said that most of the domestic workers and maintenance workers were, were black and they -- do you think it's possible that even though they worked here, they really didn't know it was a state school, that they thought of it as --

EW: They may have, I'm not sure. I, I don't know, I don't know if they didn't, knew and didn't say anything or that, or that they didn't know themselves. I'm not sure. The ones that I knew that were here, one, I understand Rose, Miss Butler, died I think. I don't know if Miss Emma Hall is still alive.

MT: She is.

EW: Okay, she might be someone I could ask. Miss Florence Ball, she is in Pennsylvania, I don't know if she's still alive. I knew Lily Bernard Barnes is dead and some of the other -- Cutchember and Somerville, I don't know if they're still here. So they would be someone that I could ask if they knew but I'm not sure they knew. I would tend to believe they didn't. This idea was promoted for so long. I even thought this was a

private school. Like, "It is? It's not?" I was surprised, quite surprised that it was not.

MT: And, and you said Mrs. Fleming didn't just call up St. Mary's College and say, "Are you a private school or a public school?"

EW: I don't know how she did it. I don't quite know what she did to find out, but she found out it was state-supported.

MT: In your interview with Dr. Hammer you, you think she indicated that she called some people up like in Annapolis or somewhere around there, not, not, she didn't call up St. Mary's College.

EW: She made some calls and found out. She was very resourceful in her methods of finding out, and I suspect some phone calls were in order and, I don't what else she did. She didn't expose a lot of that to me. I guess she felt I had enough to concern myself with about coming and staying here academically, leading as much success as possible. At least I didn't have to worry about how I got here; the less I had to worry about perhaps, like not telling me about the threats to my parents. And I'm sure that's what she meant when she said, "You had enough on you."

Q: How did attending an all-white college affect your views, your life and your views on race?

EW: I will say that the exposure I got here was very good. I, as I said in there this evening, I never would have, I never played field hockey before and no, my, black schools around this area, field hockey? No [all laugh]. Cultural arts activities, concerts, no. So the exposure was great for me. I got to do and see and participate as much as possible in, in activities that I just never had access to. So it made me a, a, want to be, to have more of this. And it also made me realize I had a right to have more of this, and should have had it all along. As I mentioned in there this evening, my school received books that were used from the white high school, books that were already scribbled with names and torn-out pages. I can't recall ever seeing brand-new books brought into my bedroom. And I used to, it didn't register with me for a while when every year we collected the books and put them in the closet for the next year's students, if you were seventh grade you turn in all your books, and I used to feel, "Why do these books come all with names in them?" They would be boxed but, why'd they come with all these names and who are all these people? And, you know, I guess I was just so happy that we had textbook materials, I didn't pursue where, you know, quite why we were getting used books. Maybe in the back of my mind I knew and I didn't want to know, didn't want to think about it too hard. And I thought, at least got the books, use 'em. So we used them. So it mainly know that I had a right to more and it made me decide that, hey, I'm going to get more. And I'm gonna tell what I know and share what I learned and pass it on.

Q: So there was never a time really where you felt like you didn't really want to be here?

[42 min.]

EW: There was. The night, the afternoon after my books and things were knocked out of my hand, I had to hide in -- well actually one of the teachers pulled me into her room and kept me there until my parents came to get me -- when I got home, my mom detected, my mother detected there was something wrong. And she said, "Do you want to quit? All you have to do is tell us and you don't have to go back there anymore." And I didn't immediately say anything, yes or no, I just kind of, I don't even know where I went to think. But whenever I finished thinking, I came out and told her, "No, I'm not quitting, I'm going back tomorrow." So I have, that's one night that I came close to thinking of quitting but I didn't; I may have even had some other slight inklings of quitting, but that one night was the most, the strongest, and I figured if I got through that one, the rest of them could really be pushed aside. Besides that, I had opened a door, as they say cracked the ice, and I knew that if other minorities were going to come here, I probably -- I needed to be the one to open that door and see that it stayed open. And like it or not I got picked and, like it or not I said, "Hey, I'm not quitting." The door's open, it got opened by you, you're gonna finish this so somebody else can come behind you. As apparently many folks did [looks around at the African American students and smiles].

Q: How was it for you socially? Did you make, did you make friends?

EW: Socially? Well, since I didn't live in the dorm -- my parents wouldn't allow it -- I didn't have much of the social contact. The one time that most was sensitive for me was proms and dances. The young, the male escorts for the ladies for the different special dances and all came from the Academy or from local boyfriends or what have you. And I never knew for sure if I could bring -- I had a friend, I had a friend, but I didn't ever ask if I could bring him to the campus to attend the social events. So I really never came back for them. Actually, well not actually, but part of it was my mother and father kept drilling, well they were like, you gotta study, you gotta keep studying, you gotta keep studying, you have to make it. So I spent a lot of my nights studying and studying. So much so that I remember Miss Fleming calling my parents and saying, hey, hold it, you gotta let her go or she's gonna crack. She's gotta get out, let her out through the weekend, let her have a date or something or she's gonna crack. So they started letting me go out for a movie or two through the week, or a basketball game or something like that. So I didn't miss it a whole lot but I missed it some. And I did have a little bit of social contact when, in between classes I went down to the student union which was underneath what is Kent Hall which is now classrooms or something.

Q: The women used to get in trouble for smoking if they didn't have permission.

EW: Yeah, yeah. And there would be a little ping-pong table which was where they played bridge. The tennis court was right out in front. So in between classes I'd go in there and watch the bridge game and eventually got asked one day to sit in and take a partner's place. And I learned to play bridge here at St. Mary's [smiles, all laugh]. But other than that there wasn't much social life and that, like I say that probably was less

because I wasn't here. I don't know what it would have been if I'd lived on campus. I don't know.

Q: What was your feeling the first time you were on campus by yourself? Did you look at the other students and [inaudible]?

EW: When I got out of the truck, slowly, and started walking toward Anne Arundel Hall where I knew I had my class, I kind of, I didn't look down but I kind of like looked past. I'm not sure I made the effort to be the first one to speak. I, I'm not sure, I may have. Basically I'm a fairly, I always was a friendly person, well I still am. So if I didn't get a return I probably didn't bother trying to speak to anyone else 'cause I figured no one's going to speak to me. So I, I went on to class and I can't quite say how that first day went. I'm trying to remember what class it was, I have to think back some. It was on the first floor, that much I know. It, it might have been that English class, I'm not sure but it might have been my English class. And it was, it was lonely for me. No one would say anything to me, I would take my books, take out my books and take notes on whatever was being said, the bell rang and I closed my books and got them and I walked out the door and headed to my next class. If I saw Kathy or Lynn or Grace --

[Tape ends at 48:45 min.]