

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions  
Oral History Documentation Project

**ETHEL W. JOHNSON REED**

Interviewed by Joyce Blackwell

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[Begin Side 1, Tape 1 of 1]

Joyce Blackwell: . . . Reed, and we'll start off with -- What were times like when you were a child, Mrs. Reed?

Ethel Reed: Stormy.

JB: Explain.

ER: Well, I know I had foster parents, and I have an idea there's so much missing there. Not to have a real parent, but the other foster parent.

JB: Okay. How did you and your family live? And since you said you had foster parents, what can you tell us about that?

ER: They were nice people, hard-working people, and religious. They were religious and my foster mother, she brought me up that way.

JB: What were their names?

ER: Robert and Easter Johnson.

JB: Easter?

ER: Um hmm [yes].

JB: What kinds of things did you eat as a family?

ER: We had a good table because always they had chickens, they had pigs and we had vegetables because we lived in the country and raised everything. There was always plenty to eat.

JB: Were times better or worse than they are now?

ER: I don't how [to] compare that time with today. Naturally, today is better because we have all modern conveniences. In that day, we had a pump. We had to haul the water and we lived like any other American I imagined. It was a farm, was a good farm.

JB: What were your duties on the farm? Did you have --?

ER: Everything. [laughter] I hauled water. I pick up chips. I cut wood. I did all those things and would tend the fields also. And by the time I was seven years old, my mother gave me a hoe and some seeds and she said, "Go out and plant," and that's how I learned to plant vegetables.

JB: What is your earliest memory of your childhood?

ER: I don't know. The biggest part I think I remember more -- I did see my real mother. She came to see us and she always sent things for me--presents, but the biggest thing came one day when she died, and that took an big -- That was very -- That was a sad time of my life.

JB: Do you have any memories of any interactions with your mother?

ER: Not particularly. She would come to visit. She would bring presents, and she'd stay awhile and then she would go back to the city because she was living in the city, in Richmond.

JB: So, why is it that she was not able to raise you? [pause]

What kinds of things did you do as a child besides the work that you've already described on the farm?

ER: Oh, I used to play with my dolls. I washed and ironed for them and made mud cakes.

JB: What did you like to do the most?

ER: I liked to play. I played some, but then there was always work to do. Children in that day didn't have freedom and pleasure with everything they wanted like today.

JB: How did your foster parents treat you?

ER: They were good. They were good, but there seemed to have been unhappiness with me. I wasn't always happy.

JB: Do you know why that was?

ER: Well, any little thing that you did always brought on a whipping. Anything little thing.

JB: What did they do to you that you remember the most, or remember the best?

ER: A lot of punishment.

JB: For anything in particular?

ER: Well [pause].

JB: Do you feel like they prepared you well for life?

ER: Well, they furnished me with whatever I needed, I mean. That is, they nourished me at the table and they gave me a roof over my head, and they tried to correct me or direct me in the way I should go. It was a good learning because I know when I did go out on my own, I always able to make it.

JB: Now, were there other children around?

ER: No, Neighbors. We had neighbors far away and family that lived across the road from us; but for some reason, I wasn't allowed to play with them.

JB: Okay, so your foster parents didn't have children of their own.

ER: No.

JB: Or other foster children.

ER: No.

JB: Describe your formal schooling.

ER: Hmm hhm! [chuckle] Well first of all, we lived in the country and it was a poor country.

We never got into school until the last of October, until all the farm work was taken care of. And in something like April, you were out of school.

JB: How did you get to school?

ER: Walked something like, more than a mile.

JB: And did you walk alone?

ER: More or less, yes. There were some children that used to come along, maybe, but more or less.

JB: What was the classroom like?

ER: One room.

JB: Approximately how many students were there?

ER: I don't know. All the children in the neighborhood. I don't know. I can't -- I can't give you a number because, but there were quite a few.

JB: Who was your favorite teacher, or did you have more than one teacher?

ER: At a time? Only one teacher. We were fortunate enough to have her.

JB: How far did you progress in school? You mentioned earlier.

ER: I went to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade.

JB: So did you keep the same teacher the whole time?

ER: See, perhaps this year, you would get -- you'd advance to the next grade, so, but I don't think I completed that because you never finished a grade during the year. Where you stopped in this particular book, well, that would go on the next year when you go to school. You have to take that part.

JB: So, are there any particular teachers that you remember from your schooling?

ER: Yes, there were a couple. They were nice. Let's see. There was, yes, there was one that was very nice.

JB: What was your favorite subject?

ER: None! [laughter] Maybe the Reading, Writing, Arithmetic. That's all we had.

JB: What were your dreams of becoming as a young adult?

ER: I don't know because you see, not having much to go upon, difficult to know anything.

JB: As a teenager, did your foster parents let you court or date?

ER: No, because I wasn't home. By the time I was 11 years old, I had to go out and work.

JB: And that didn't allow any time for dating or anything? What was it like when you were first on your own?

ER: Well, I always knew how to take care of myself, to protect myself. I was -- I knew how to be economical.

JB: And, how old were you when you did go out on your own?

ER: Eleven years old.

JB: So you no longer lived at home with your foster parents?

ER: No. No more, because my foster father had died by the time I was nine. He had plans.

JB: What did you fear the most?

ER: I don't know. I don't know.

JB: So, where did you go and what did you do?

ER: I lived with members of the family in the city, cousins.

JB: Now what city was that?

ER: Richmond.

JB: Richmond. What kind of jobs did you do?

ER: Housework.

JB: And what was your money situation like?

ER: I made a tremendous wages! 75¢ a week! [laughter]

JB: What other kinds of work have you done to support yourself besides housework?

ER: Oh. [chuckle] Well, there was a little older I worked ... [pause] But, it was always whatever. It was always honorable, and I had to do that. But in the meantime, then very few years later I went to New York. I had cousins up there, and I continued school. I

had correspondence courses mostly...YWCA was always there, and they were very, very aware of the opportunities ... We had everything. I took English I took Spanish, and I had learned how -- I learned a lot of things. I completed the dress making course and ladies tailoring and studied some art, and so it was in bits and pieces.

JB: So, how long did you go to night school?

ER: Well, at least about a few months to a year. That's the best I could do because of these jobs you have. You can't always make the time.

JB: What other kinds of work did you do besides in a restaurant and as housekeeping?

ER: Well, then I moved to Washington...for government jobs. I became a clerk and I stayed there until retired...nearly 26 years for the federal government.

JB: Was it difficult, or what was the most difficult work you've done?

ER: Well, it wasn't difficult. Things sort of fell in places. There those that have always, who were able to help you if something you didn't understand.

JB: How much money did you make as a clerk?

ER: It as a first-rate -- I think I began at -- What was that wage? Something like \$1,440 a year and then of course, it got up after years to 16, 18, you know, with the grade.

JB: What do you remember about your wedding?

ER: [laughter] It took awhile for me to say yes.

JB: Why was that?

ER: Well, as you go along you meet so many different people and different nationalities and - - but anyway, finally Harry said, "You're off on Wednesday." He said, "I -- Let's go to that place in Maryland where people used to go to get married..." And we did. We went; we married.

JB: So how did you meet Mr. Reed?

ER: [chuckle] Through a friend. At that time, he was working at the Shoreham Hotel. And there was a friend of his who knew a girl and I had just come to Washington. Well, this

girl said to this fellow, said, “I know some nice fellow over at the hotel you could bring. So, this girl is a stranger here.” And, she handed me the phone. And, he brought him a long. We met. We sort of looked at each other, you know. I thought, hum, Oh, another good looking man. I don’t know what he felt about me. Well, that was --.

JB: So why did you decide to get married?

ER: I was tired of being single and I was tired of meeting these various guys.

JB: Did you go on a honeymoon?

ER: No, we didn’t because at that time I was – No, he went home; I went home and we didn’t get together until about a month later. [chuckle]

JB: So describe what your marriage -- married life has been like.

ER: It’s been a beautiful life. Beautiful.

JB: And there were no children from this relationship?

ER: None.

JB: What part has religion played in your life?

ER: A great -- everything. I learned that God was giver of all. He has all things and He gives you all things. Without Him, that’s nothing.

JB: So what church did you or do you attend?

ER: I attended Metropolitan Baptist Church for the -- years before I came to Maryland, then I came to joined the Episcopal All Saints.

JB: How do you know there is a God?

ER: [chuckle] That’s a great question! I couldn’t have exist had it not been. I believed in Him. All these things and accomplishments and protection -- I’ve met so many beautiful people who were always so good and kind to me. I never forgot.

JB: How do you feel about your life in general today?

ER: Had a great life. A great life.

JB: How different is it from the way it used to be?

ER: Now that I'm retired, I do what I must and let it go at that. Done many things, traveled to many countries and places.

JB: Are people different now than they used to be?

ER: I don't know. I don't know. They would have to be -- Yes, because many changes come about that have been beneficial to all people. Yes, it's -- I think people are more gentle and kinder and of all the people I know, I'm sure if others asked them for help, they'd give it to me. So.

JB: Can you describe how you came to St. Mary's County and why?

ER: I don't know if I can say why. I don't know why we came. This place here in St. Mary's County -- There were those who came in contact with those who were buying lots or selling lots, and they said it was an interesting place. And, we came down to take a view of it.

JB: Now, what year was that?

ER: Had to be in the 50's. '51. We came through the gates up there.

JB: The gates at the top of the hill that say -- Did it say "Longview" at the time?

ER: Yes. I don't remember it said "Longview", but I guess -- I suppose it said that. We stopped on the hill and looked down, and it was so picturesque, peaceful, beautiful, water, trees, and we decided. The agent showed us this spot here and we decided, well, maybe we'll try to afford it.

JB: So how is it that you decided to set up a business here and not to just have a residence?

ER: This happened to be a business lot, commercial lot. There were something like two or three down here, but this was and we felt this would be a great place. I don't know the dream came about to open up a business, but --

JB: And how did you, how did you decide the type of business that you wanted to set up and what kind of help did you have?

ER: Well, we both had worked in the restaurant business and we got -- Thinking maybe this is

a small. They have...Well, somebody said “what about a hot dog and hamburger place?”

And we thought, “This is too much of something for that. We should go beyond that.”

That everything else just seemed to fall into place.

JB: So how did you get the business established -- the building?

ER: Well, Harry drew the plans to the place.

JB: He drew the plans to the place? And then, how did you go about finding a builder to put those plans into play?

ER: Harry had a lot of friends who were builders, and they helped. I said to him, “What?” He said, “We will make an L shape.” And I said, “That’s good. L stands for many things: Lord, light, love...”

JB: So, you had -- Both of you had a background in restaurant.

ER: Yes, and we had -- he worked for Agriculture...They had their own restaurant...very distant...not many things, and he wanted to know about.

JB: And how did you both decide to add the hotel part? What was that all incorporated in the old--?

ER: What -- Well, a place to eat. Maybe a place to sleep?

JB: So how many years did you run the business?

ER: We must have opened up ‘51, I’d say. I’m not sure about that and -- In ‘55, I think we -- Well see, the front was here...your father, your aunt...How many years?...Too long. Then, they had a man here.

JB: So was the business -- The business was open all during the week, but you two were just here on weekends? Is that right?

ER: We come on weekends, but somebody else was here --

JB: During the week.

ER: During the week.

JB: So how difficult was that to run a business when you were just here on the weekends?

ER: It didn't do too well; but yet, it went along. It depends on who was running it when we're not here.

JB: And how long was open? What year did you decide that that was it?

ER: It was somewhere in the 50's, maybe, Harry might tell that because --

JB: It was in the 50's? It didn't run into the 60's?

ER: Everything seemed to happen in the 50's.

JB: Did you find the people here in St. Mary's different from the people that you had been used to dealing with?

ER: We met a very prominent family that really was a lifesaver.

JB: Okay. Tell us about this family.

ER: Mr. Leroy Thompson was his name.

JB: Now why did this family have such an affect on your life?

ER: He was everything. He helped us in so many ways. I can't tell you the things he did. It was everything. He just took care of it. He was a big brother to us. The whole family. Without them, we wouldn't have been able to exist.

JB: So exactly what kinds of things did Mr. Thompson do?

ER: Everything! [laughter] Everything! [laughter]

[End of Side 1, Tape 1 of 1]

[Begin Side 2, Tape 1 of 1]

JB: Specifics that he had done?

ER: Well, he was a jewel to us and not only to us but the whole...Mrs. Thompson and Mr. Thompson, all the family were just excellent to us. And not only to us, but apparently he had the reputation of being just right there with people. He was definitely a diplomat.

JB: Why do you say he's a diplomat? What kinds of things?

ER: Because he knew how to deal with situations. Whatever would come up, he was the peacemaker.

JB: How have you dealt with race relations here in the County or even before you came to the County?

ER: Race? Oh, I have -- Everyone had been good to me.

JB: Has that been throughout your life that you found that?

ER: Yes. People -- Sometimes I wonder: Perhaps they feel sorry for me. Really!

JB: Now, do you think maybe your background has anything to do with that? Do you have any other -- What kind of background do you come from other than African American? Or do you really know?

ER: [chuckle] It appears that we are from an Indian tribe: Cherokee Indian, from what I understood.

JB: So do you think more of your Indian blood is apparent than maybe your African American blood?

ER: I don't know.

JB: Or do you think that's made a difference?

ER: I think the two mixed together perhaps might have turned out to be, just however I am.

JB: How do you feel about living here in the County and when is it that you came to live in the County permanently?

ER: In '69.

JB: And can you describe your living conditions here? How you lived in this County and how you reside here in this commercial setting?

ER: We have had a wonderful life here. There's no complaints. We have many friends down here and everyone seems to accept us and we accept everyone. And, it's a peaceful, beautiful place to be. The sun rises: beautiful. The sun setting is picturesque. It's a peaceful place: the birds, the trees, everything. Just wonderful.

JB: So how do it compare to living in the city?

ER: Well, the city, it's crowded. Everybody in his own little corner, but this way we go out. We have our garden. We watch the things grow. We plant the flowers. Everything is very, very enjoyable.

JB: Now you've been here about 30 years. Do you feel there's a difference between County people and outsiders or anyone that you would call an outsider?

ER: Um umm [no]. Not different. I don't know. I just seem to, can fit in with any people regardless where they're from and who they are and what nationality. I can get along with them. All we ask of anyone is to meet us halfway.

JB: Do you think anyone considered you to be an outsider?

ER: I don't know. I don't know.

JB: What do you think of the direction the County is going in today?

ER: I'm not knowing too much about politics. I really don't know, but I think perhaps they have the right direction. I think they will fix things to the best of their ability for the benefit of all its citizens.

JB: How have you contributed to the County through your work, through your volunteer activities, citizenship groups?

ER: Yes. Yes, I have. I've done some work in the church and the Commission On Aging. I have worked with them and other opportunities. And if I were younger, I could -- I would do more, but I can't do anything now. But, I have helped in many fields: worked in the County Fair, Christmas In April and many other things I have given of my time.

JB: Have you ever received any awards or certificates?

ER: For the work that I have done?

JB: Well, you can talk about any time in your life.

ER: I have worked for -- I don't know if I should say. When I was young, I was a swimmer and I passed the American Red Cross Lifesaving Course, and I won a bronze medal and a

cup. I won the silver cup. Blue and white ribbons they give for diving and that kind of a thing. That's about it.

JB: And haven't you received numerous awards for your participation in County Fair activities? How about some of the craft things that you've done that you've received awards for?

ER: Yes, I have won some awards. I have.

JB: Any specific ones you want to tell us about?

ER: I don't know. [pause] If you put something on the Fair and it wins a prize, of course, you get the blue ribbon and I think there's some money, too, that goes with it. I think they give you a little money. I think?

JB: What do you consider your most valuable asset or valuable possession? Something that you could not have done without in your lifetime.

ER: I don't know. My most valuable is my health. I have good health. Must have to have lived so long.

JB: Right. So you've never had any major surgeries or hospitalizations or anything?

ER: Well, I had a cataract removed from one eye and I had my tonsils were removed way back, a long time ago. That's all.

JB: So how do you doctor yourself? What accounts for such good health?

ER: I think it's the living and the things that we eat and a good mind and one's spirituality keeps them going.

JB: Have you done everything in your life that you had planned to do?

ER: You know, I think I have. There are things that I wanted to do. I always wanted to paint a picture and oh yes, I wanted to travel. I wanted to see the other part of the world: how they live, their culture.

JB: Can you describe some of the places that you've traveled to?

ER: One place very, very important to me was when I went to the Holy Land. I was moved. I

had a feeling in that place I have never had in any other place.

JB: What do you think have been the biggest changes in the County that you've seen in your time here?

ER: I think there's good relationship in the County with the people that you can make contact with and the people that you do business with. They always so very nice and do whatever they can. They treat you very, very nicely. I think we have a good relationship. Everybody trying to love everybody.

JB: Any closing comments about your life here in the County?

ER: Yes. I hope that I can live as long as there is life and try to get along with everyone, help everyone that I can if I can help them. Whatever favors I could do for them, I would try to do it.

JB: One question I forgot to ask when I was talking about your married life: what year you and Mr. Reed were married?

ER: 19 and 33.

JB: And so you two have just celebrated which anniversary?

ER: 63.

JB: Well, congratulations, Mrs. Reed and thank you so very for your interview.

ER: I would like to hear some of this because I'm probably gonna have you to throw the tape over in the river. [laughter]

[End of Side 2, Tape 1 of 1]