

UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS

Oral History Project

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Oral History Documentation Project

MARY AGATHA COATES SOMERVILLE

Interviewed by Merideth Taylor
September 24 & 24, and October 16 & 27, 1996
At her home in Morganza Maryland
Logged by Tania Jordon
A verbatim transcript is available
Original format is three cassette tapes
Total length is 2 hours, 56 minutes, 21 seconds

Audio CD 1 of 4
[1 hour, 3 minutes, 21 seconds]

Track 01

- 00:00 September 24, 1996: She was born on February 9, 1909 in Mechanicville, Maryland. Her maternal grandmother was Jenny Butler. Her parents were Moses and Margaret Butler Coates. They were born in Patuxent, Maryland. Her grandparents were from Patuxent also. They lived in a place called Trent Hall.
- 02:20 Her sisters were Edna and Jane Arlington Coates. She had 10 children. Five are still living. She has thirty something grandchildren.
- 3:45 Times were good when she was young. Her parents kept her busy. Her father was a farmer and waterman. Her mother did laundry.

Track 02

- 5:09 They ate crops from the land, manos from the water, and raised hogs. They also caught rabbits. Her Papa taught her how to trap the rabbits and he skinned them.
- 7:50 Her mother did all the cooking. She taught her how to wash, iron and clean. They always had plenty to eat. They only went to the store on Saturdays to buy tea, sugar and coffee. They shopped at Trice Store in Mechanicville. It was owned by Eugene Trice. They also shopped at C.D. Sasser.

Track 03

- 9:06 Times were better in those days because there weren't any drugs or rapes. She could go in the woods to get the cows by herself without worrying about

anything.

11:00 Her mother did laundry for four or five white ladies. Her mother also went to Ashbury Park in the summer to work for a few months. She did laundry for whites and blacks in New Jersey. She worked to buy Mrs. Somerville's school clothes. Her father did all the cooking in the summer.

Track 04

13:35 Her parents had a small farm where they raised tobacco, corn, pears, cherries and apples. She wrapped the apples in paper to put them away for Christmas. They gave apples to their guests during Christmas.

16:50 She remembers that her father would pick up items from the old steam boats. They used a horse and buggy. They had two horses, "one for everyday and one for Sunday's".

18:30 Her sister "Arli" (Arlington) married a man from Canada.

19:00 She went to Immaculate Conception Church in Mechanicville's.

19:50 She would take trips once per year. She either went to Ashbury Park, New Jersey or Baltimore.

Track 05

20:27 Her mother's & father's doctor was Dr. Southern. They used Yeager Liniment for pain in the limbs. They used Castoria and black castor oil. Her mother used to mix mustard and mutton tallow and put it on red flannel. She would wear it all winter long to prevent colds.

23:30 They had a well that was 65 feet deep. She would yell in the well to hear an echo.

25:15 Her mother also used to use herbs to make hot tea to cure colds. She and her children never spent a day in the hospital. Dr. Palmer was the family doctor.

Track 06

27:06 Her chores were to take care of chickens and cows. She worked all the time.

28:00 She had wooden toys and dolls.

30:00 Her mother scrubbed the floors and she scrubbed the table with lye soap. Preserving peaches.

Track 07

31:40 She cut up hog meat to make sausage. She scraped intestines for Chitterlings. They killed hogs in November. Four or five men would help with the butchering. Her mother and two or three ladies would prepare the meat. They cooked the meat in a large cauldron outside.

Track 08

36:00 Her father would read the Bible and Fairy Tales when her mother was out of town. He also told her jokes. He also taught her to read before started school at age five. He taught her from a Quaker Oats box.

38:25 Her father was old and had arthritis. She would have to help him put his shoes on in the morning. When her mother would beat her, “he would jump in between and take some of the licks”. He would say, “don’t hit her no more mama”.

41:15 Her parents were good examples.

42:30 Her parents died when she was 12 years old. She moved to Baltimore with her sister Arli. She went to St. Peter Claver Catholic School when she lived with her sister. She stayed with her cousin Mamie in Chaptico during the summers.

Track 09

43:52 Before her parents died, she went to a one room school called Gravely Knolls. It was a segregated school with a potbelly stove in the middle of the room. Miss Marie Steve’s was her first teacher. She taught at St. John’s in Hollywood. Her other teachers were: Agnes Walton, Elizabeth Shackleford and Gertrude Butler. Her mother used to board the teachers. The white school was approximately ½ mile away. It was called Snow Hill School. She loved spelling, reading, arithmetic, history and geography.

Track 10

51:53 The school used to get books from a fat man named Mr. Calendar. She went to school through the 8th grade. Her mother was going to send her to Cardinal Gibbons Institute in Ridge, but she died that year.

55:30 She wanted to become a school teacher and always like to be in church or school plays.

Track 11

56:46 Thyris Miles and participating in passion plays in church

1:02 Her parents did not let her court.

Audio CD 2 of 4
[36 minutes, 22 seconds]

Track 01

- 00:00 September 25, 1996: Her parents were very strict about courting. Only one young man came to court. He sat on one side of the potbelly stove and she sat on the other. Her mother sat in the middle. They had to talk around the stove. He never came back again.
- 2:45 After her parents died, she lived on Druid Hill Avenue in Baltimore with her sister. She stayed in Baltimore until she was 16. She never went out on her own. Her husband was her first and only courter.

Track 02

- 4:45 She always had enough money for whatever she wanted. Her sister took care of her. She would have her dresses made and shared them with her girl friends.
- 0:700 She did days work for Mr. and Mrs. Sheckle in Maddox. She was 17 years old and made 50¢ per day.

Track 03

- 9:16 She met her husband through her cousin Mamie Brol. He came "calling on horseback". The horse was black and named Stella. She started courting when she was 14 and he was 15. They courted for about two years before they got married. He was from Loveville. His name was James Marcellus Somerville. His mother was Maggie Cecilia Somerville. She was a Hill before she got married. It was love at first site. His father was William Joseph Somerville.
- 12:40 She got married at 16. Her first child was Magdalene. She washed and ironed for white folks. They lived with her husband parents for five years. After that, her husband James started sharecropping for white folks.

Track 04

- 15:17 Her children were born close together. Her children helped her with the chores and cooking. She taught her Magdalene to make biscuits at five years old.
- 17:45 They ate fried and baked chicken, ham, kale and cabbage. The raised hogs and made sausage.

Track 05

19:00 She walked to church for her wedding. They walked through the swamp to get to the church. She wore a blue satin dress, blue hat and blue shoes. She almost slipped in the water. She walked with her two sister in-laws. They were Rosetta and Mary. Joe Winters was the best man. The best man got drunk for her 50th anniversary wedding. Her sister in-law took his place. There were 500 or 600 at the 50th anniversary. She was married November 12, 1927. They didn't go on a honeymoon, "they went right on home and went to bed".

Track 06

23:15 She and her fiancée were underage and needed guardian/parental approval, but she didn't tell her sister she was getting married. She would have moved her back to Baltimore. They were married for 53 years before her husband died. Magdalene made her 50th anniversary dress and the crown.

26:00 She had a good marriage. Her husband would try to get her anything she wanted. He worked hard. Her children were: Magdalene Cecilia, James Alexander (he died at age 6), William Joseph, Lawrence Jerome, John Lee, Dorothy Elizabeth, Mary Ernestine and

Track 07

28:12 James Leo (he died at 18 months). Her husband had to carry James Leo about ½ mile to the road to take him to the car for the trip to St. Mary's Hospital. He caught pneumonia. Her other children are Robert Sylvester and Francis Lynwood. Francis Lynwood died in a car accident. James Alexander died when he was six years old. He was struck in the stomach and huge upside down by a teenage boy at school name Matthews Bowman. He only lived for two or three days after he was struck.

35:26 Sees her living children all the time. She also raised Lynwood's oldest child and Dorothy's girls. She raised 15 children.

Audio CD 3 of 4
[40 minutes, 5 seconds]

Track 01

00:00 October 16, 1996: The Lord has blessed her in many ways. She prays for things and the Lord eventually gives it to her in a better way than she prayed. God is good, kind and merciful. She attends Sacred Heart Catholic Church.

Track 02

5:44 Life in St. Mary's County is alright. There are more conveniences now. They didn't have running water in the old days. They had to take a bath in a big washing tub that was heated in the sun in the summer or on the stove in the winter. People are friendlier now as she has gotten older.

Track 03

9:30 People used to visit more in the old days. People are more violent now.

13:00 Children now spend more time watching television. In the old days children worked all the time.

Track 04

15:02 She would like to learn to use a computer. She got her first television in the 1950's.

Track 05

18:52 Race relations: In the old days black people couldn't go in the front doors of white people's houses or businesses. You couldn't sit at the table and eat with the whites. Blacks had to eat outside or in the kitchen. She was taught that they were all going to be in heaven together. "The Lord don't have no different colors".

They had to sit in the back of the buses and trains. They were not allowed in certain restaurants.

Track 06

24:24 It is more dangerous today than in the old days. "There wasn't any cutting and shooting".

26:00 Blacks and whites get along better today.

27:00 In the old days she had to work all day to get a dress for her children.

27:50 She belongs to the Ladies Auxiliary at Sacred Heart, Women of Globe, Full Gospel Fellowship International and NAACP.

Track 07

30:08 She goes to the senior citizens center. They do crafts, exercise and take trips. She attends family reunions every summer. She acted in two plays at the college.

34:00 She travels a lot for bible study. She's been to Detroit, Toronto Canada, Israel and Miami.

Track 08

36:00 She lived in Baltimore at one time. She prefers country living over city.

38:00 She thinks that people are nice throughout the county. She also believes that people who move here from other places are kinder and more sociable.

Audio CD 4 of 4
[34 minutes, 33 seconds]

Track 01

0:00 October 27, 1996: Mrs. Somerville has won 1st and 2nd prizes at the County Fair for her canned goods. She won a blue ribbon for peaches.

3:20 She is registered to vote but never voted. She didn't have transportation to the polls.

Track 02

4:14 She loves to clean, iron and work. She has done everything she wanted to do and travelled everywhere she wanted to go.

08:05 If she had to do her life over again, she would like to be a teacher.

Track 03

08:43 You got more for your money in the old days. People are more sociable now.

11:00 The roads are better. They used to have "wheel barrel roads". The roads were narrow and muddy.

Track 04

12:31 Her parents subscribed to the Afro Newspaper. They got it every week. They didn't have a radio. Her parents had a Victrola. They got their news from the newspaper and word of mouth. They also got information from an old lady who would travel from house to house carrying news.

16:00 Her family did not loss any land due to the acquisitions for Patuxent Naval Base. She worked on the base for five years.

Track 05

19:10 There were no nurse facilities for the elderly in the old days. There was a "Poor House" for the elderly and the mentally disabled people. She heard that some of them were mistreated and beaten. This was in the 1950's and 1960's.

There also was a woman who took in people but she also mistreated people. Some people would take people in for money.

Track 06

25:28 Mrs. Somerville and her parents never went to the hospital. She went in her later years. She had all of her children at home.

26:25 Her mother used home remedies to prevent illness. She wore red flannel with a mustard taller salve all winter long to prevent colds. She also rubbed her with turpentine.

Track 07

28:42 Worked on the Base too. They would soak herring in water overnight and cook them in corn meal the next day.

31:30 Young folks don't believe anything you say now. They don't have respect for their elders. Men used to tip their hats. In the old days they used to have to get on the knees to ask their godmother for a blessing. Her godmother was Nettie Gardner. In the old days children never talked back to their elders.

Track 08

34:09 The newspaper that her parents read were the Times Herald, The Beacon and the Afro.