

UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS  
Oral History Project

Bernard W. Thompson

Interviewed by Janice Walthour

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at the USCT Interpretive Center in Lexington Park

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a verbatim transcript is available

Original format is MP3 and MP4 from digital audio and video recorders

1 hour, 6 minutes, 27 seconds

00:50 Introduction – Bernard W. Thompson

01:40 Family life and childhood – He was born on December 25, 1946, in Valley Lee, Maryland to Turner and Robert Campbell Thompson. Bernard attended school at St. Peter Claver and Cardinal Gibbons High School in Ridge, Maryland. After high school he was drafted by Selective Service. “I didn't like the draft. I didn't want to go to the Army, so I was a dummy and signed up for the Marine Corps.” Bernard serviced four years active duty and two years inactive duty. He was in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam era. He was stationed in Vietnam and Okinawa.

03:30 Earliest childhood memory – His mother died in 1950. He was raised by his Aunt Jeanette Thompson Talbert for three or four years. After that he left her house, he went to live with his father (Turner T. Thompson), grandmother and Aunt Elizabeth Thompson. He was raised on a farm (“old home place”) with his grandparents. The area where they lived was called Parish Beetle.

04:55 Work – His grandfather raised tobacco, soybeans, and corn. They also produced liquor to make ends meet. Turner Thompson worked for the state road commission and farmed part time. He would also help people in community and they would help him. The community would get together and help each other during slaughter season in the fall (killing the hogs). It was like a big community meeting. The woman would scrap the chitlin’s intestines and stuff the linings with sausage. They would eat a big pot of soup and drink after they were finished working. People don’t help each other now like they did in the old days.

06:10 They weren't rich people and had to make ends meet. He recalled a time when they were having a big meal. They always had vegetables from the garden and his grandmother made a pot of greens, but one time the pot had a hole in it that had been mended before. His grandfather decided to get the community "jimmy pot" (slop pot), that everybody used to resolve the issue. They cleaned and bleached the pot out. He said his grandmother didn't put the pot on the table but served dinner from a bowl. They were crying and had their noses turned up but they had to eat it. She had cooked greens with a hog head in it. He said it did have a good taste.

07:40 Siblings – He had a good relationship with his siblings. They would pout over chores and fight, but they got along well. There were eight children. When his was young, his little sister Imelda would follow him around all of the time. He liked to through rocks at the pole in the big barn. Once one of rocks bounced off and hit Imelda in the head. She went to the house and told his grandmother what happened.

"She said, "What'd he do?" She said, "Come here, boy." Boy, she wore me out and said, "You just do it again. You just do it again. You just do it again. You just do that again." So, I told sister, "Come on, we got to do it again." I went on down there and tore her head up again and the same thing happened. I'll never forget that. I wasn't meaning to do it again like that, but she was telling me that was going to be the punishment. I always got punished all the time. That was a good life."

09:15 Bernard recalled how cousins Paul and Howard Lawrence would come to visit and sit on a bench outside and talk and drink corn liquor with his father. Paul chewed tobacco all the time and spit juice all over the place. If Paul was in the house and didn't have a place to spit, he would open the door and spit outside. One time he opened the door and spit without looking right in Bernard's face. "I'll tell you, I cussed Cousin Paul out. My Aunt Elizabeth tore my hind parts up."

10:20 School – His school Cardinal Gibbons was segregated. Mr. O'Conner was a white man that was in charge of the drum and bugle corps at the school. He and some of the boys at the school would steal the donuts off the truck when the delivery man Sam came to drop off bread to the school cafeteria. They would hide the donuts in the bushes and divide them up in the evening. Mr. Early was an engineer that taught shop. Their other teachers were Oblate Sisters of

Providence from Baltimore. The priest Father Rock was the administrator. When he graduated in 1964, there were 14 or 15 graduates. When he started school there were about 25 students in his class, many had dropped out before completing school.

11:50 What did you enjoy most about school? - He really enjoyed lunch time. On Tuesdays they had hot dogs and beans. Some of the kids would turn their noses up, so he had two lunches. During Christmas, the Base (editor's note: Patuxent River Naval Base) would come to the school. "We were really poverty kids, they give us nice things, and presents. The least fortunate ones got big prizes. The ones that could do a little better got little minimum prizes."

12:30 They initially did not have a football at the school until one of the parents gave one to the school. Later, they had a fund raiser and the school purchased other equipment. After lunch they would play and fight. They all eventually got along.

They had a piano teacher, and he hated taking lessons, but regretted not learning and didn't realize how fortunate he was to have that opportunity.

Every Friday they had to go to church at 9:00. They could not eat before church, so they had to bring a biscuit to eat after receiving Holy Communion. "Man, I couldn't wait. I got in them biscuits; I mean sandwiches before church. What did I do that for? I thought I'd have killed somebody or something, the way she wore me out for eating before I went to Holy Communion. You can't go to Holy Communion if you already ate because I had ruined it for that day."

They rode the school bus to St Peter Claver and Cardinal Gibbons. Tuition was an arm and a leg at \$10. He thanks God, that his father and family had enough money to send them to private school.

15:10 Favorite subject- "I told you lunch." His favorite subject was English. The teacher was strict but very good at teaching the correct rules of English.

16:00 What was the County like when you were young. - Although the roads were terrible, it was very rural. There weren't a lot of houses around at the time. He enjoyed seasonal hunting for rabbit, coon, and squirrel. There were numerous places to fish. Life was good and the air smelled nice in the morning. So many things have passed them all by.

17:20 How did you learn to hunt and fish? - His Uncle Milton always had something he hunted to eat in his car. Hog head, coon, or rabbit. "My goodness gracious." Everything he caught; we ate it. I don't care, but he said, "Don't be killing if you're not going to eat it." So that was my theory of killing the ducks and killing geese, illegal, legal. I'd bring them home. My Aunt Lizzie would say, "Oh, my God. You brought me a duck." This little boy. She would clean that duck and cook that duck."

He and his sister would kill the chickens to eat on Sunday. They had rabbit box traps. He couldn't see in the box, but you could reach your hand inside and grab it. If it happened to be "a daggone possum, put your hand in there, my goodness, it'll tear you up. That happened a couple of times, too." Now you can buy a rabbit at the store. "I still kill a rabbit now and then, but a fresh rabbit or a muskrat, that's some good eating, I'll tell you. Make your tongue smack your brains out your head, it's really does taste that good."

19:30 Guns – The guns were out in the open at the corner of the house, grandpop and everybody had one. He got his rifle when he was 12. He didn't take any official safety classes, but they would practice and taught not to shoot people. At Happyland, everybody had a gun or knife. He used his rifle to kill the hogs, sometimes his uncle would hit them in the head with a hammer. They didn't have any beef at the time. The cow was for milk not for meat.

20:20 - He taught his boys to hunt when they lived in Drayden. He used to hunt deer and ground the meat up and acted like it was ground beef. "They loved ground beef." One day when his youngest son was home sick from school, he saw him ground up the deer meat. When his siblings got home from school, he said, "that ain't no ground beef." After that, they were scared to eat what he cooked, because they didn't know if it was coon, rabbit, muskrat or beaver. Even his sister said she didn't like coon. He fixed her some and told her it was beef, and she said it was good. It was survival.

21:50 Chores – Before he went to school, he had to milk the cow, slop the hogs, feed the cat and dogs. He also had to bring the water in so his aunt could wash clothes. He also had to cut the kindling, bring in the wood, and clean up the chips. I wasn't bad living the rural life. The cow was in the barn, hogs were in the pen and chickens were in the coop. He had to do the chores, but if you "didn't,

you got someone tearing your behind. Them old people didn't play. They would tear your hind parts up. I tell you. They called it discipline, but it was all good.”

23:05 Games – They played hide and go seek, and ball in the yard. They worked so hard, by the time they were finished they would go into the house, eat and go to bed. They also played checkers and told stories. “I used to love to hear them tell stories about this and so forth. It was probably more lies in the stories, because sometimes that stuff wasn't true, but they told it anyway.” They would have a good time when Uncle Leroy, Uncle Milton and the city relatives would come down to visit. He always enjoyed his family.

24:30 Grandparents – His grandfather was a farmer and schoolteacher. His was a wise old man because black and white people would come to him for advice. “You know he was a wise man because his shoes never wore out. He used to switch his shoes. Back then, the heels wore down on the right-hand side. He would take the shoes and switch them over and put the right shoe on the left foot and the left shoe on the right foot and be like cow feet.” He always made do with what he had.

His grandmother was also a school teacher and she was wise too. He remembers a lot of ladies coming by the house for advice. He said they would always like “a little taste.” They made wine and whiskey that was called the home brew.

When they got to old to do any work, his father and aunt took care of them. His grandmother liked to go to Happyland to play the slot machine.

26:25 Religion – He was raised a Catholic. They had to go every Sunday to 8:00 Mass. When storms came, they would have to get on their knees and pray that the lightning didn't hit the house. They burned palms too.

His grandfather was a Methodist. Bernard never went to Methodist church because his grandmother said the Catholic church was the one. She was the boss, so he did what she told him. He said his grandmother prayed the rosary all the time. “One time I asked Grandma, "What are you praying for, Grandma?" She said, "I'm praying for you, boy." I said, "Thank you, Grandma." She was extremely strict about religion. She wore a little black birds nest hat to church. In those days the church was segregated and the blacks had to sit in the back. She had a special pew with her name on it, “Ella Martha Thompson.”

In the late 1950s, his brother Charles and Vincent Briscoe got tired of sitting in the back of the church. They marched up to the front and sat down. It was a big deal, which was when the church became desegregated well before 1966.

29:15 Health and tonics – Back in those days the elders had home remedies. His father accidentally cut his leg with an ax. He didn't go to the doctor. Instead, he put some spider cobwebs in the wound to stop the bleeding, and put turpentine around it and it really worked. They got the turpentine from the trees and put it in a bottle for use later. They would also use sassafras tea made from tree roots. Every spring they had to flush their systems. For nine mornings, they would drink a cup of warm water with two (2) teaspoons of Epsom salt and then drink the sassafras tea. When he was at school during the flush, he was going to the bathroom all of the time. They used the flush to clean them out to prevent sickness. They had remedies around the house for everything useless, they were really sick. There was only one doctor, and his name was Dr. Bean.

31:45 Health – As you get older, your body wears out. He has aches and pains and people say take this and take that. Some things work and some don't. Nothing cures anything. "So, what I do sometimes, I take me a good swig of VO or Seagram's extra dry gin. It keeps me going. It makes me feel good. They say that's bad for you. This is bad for you. Anyway, it makes me feel good. At my age today, I'm going to keep on doing what I'm doing now while I'm able to do it."

33:00 Family – He always loved his family and looked forward to seeing them.

34:20 Adulthood – He had a couple of girlfriends and two proms to attend. He and his friends and the girls all piled into his uncle's station wagon and he basically had his friends helping him control the situation and they had a good time. They dropped all the girls off first, so they didn't know what was going on until the end of the night.

He thought his was going to be a farmer until he got drafted and joined the Marine Corp. His girlfriend was Thomasine Saxon. He was stationed in Memphis Tennessee and got her pregnant when he came home during Christmas. He was getting ready to go overseas so they got married. When he returned, they moved to Georgia. He didn't want to re-enlist to return to Southeast Asia.

When he was discharged, he worked as a chauffeur for the Seafarers Union, in Piney Point. He drove people to and from New York, Baltimore and Washington,

DC. When he wasn't chauffeuring, he was picking up trash. He would take the leftover meat from work and feed his family. "They weren't eating no more coons, and rabbits, and deer. They were eating high on the hog then. "

38:58 When he was still working as a chauffeur, he picked up a hitch hiker in Waldorf on his way back and dropped him off in Leonardtown. He boss found out and told him never to do that again in the company car. At the time he had the payroll in the car and couldn't figure out how he knew he had picked up a hitchhiker when they didn't have cell phones at the time. He knew he had to leave the job. "They're talking about drowning people and throwing people overboard, then I was scared."

39:30 His next got a job on the base as a janitor and it was rough work, so he went to school and got a position as water plant operator. He treated all the water on the base and took care of the pools and water towers. He farmed during the day and worked on the base at night. He was tired one night and overflowed the tower causing a flood in January. They roads iced over so they had to bring out the salt trucks to melt the ice.

"So, they said, "We never had no snow last night." Nope, that's somebody that ran the water towers. So, that was me. I ran the water towers over and had to get trucks out there to salt the whatchamacallit down. I just had to tell a lie. I said, "Daggone the switch was stuck and I couldn't cut the pumps. I thought the pumps were off, but they were on."

40:50 He went to the University of Maryland for training and became a fire fighter on base for 12 years. He had to maintain fitness to pull the hose. After he was not able to do that anymore, he worked in the safety department. That was his last job before his retirement. He was still farming tobacco, corn and raising hogs.

42:20 Children – Yvette, twins Marcella, William, and Paul. William was named after Bernard's grandfather, William Bunton Thompson. Paul was named after his maternal great great grandfather Paul Lawrence. His wife Thomasine named the girls.

43:10 Funny things from the kids – The kids would pull his boots off when he came home from work. He would lock his toes up to make it harder for them and tell them they were weak. When he would go to work on the farm in Drayden, his

wife would tell him to take the hardheaded boys with him. They learned how to cut tobacco, work with corn, drive the tractor, etc.

44:00 Times were hard, and the tractor didn't have any brakes. He would stop the tractor with the clutch or bucket. Paul went over the bank with the tractor and Bernard had to go and get the bigger tractor to pull it out. That was Paul's excitement.

44:50 Wine – He always made wine and whiskey. One day he came home, and all the kids were drunk. Every day he would come home and taste the wine. They saw him tasting so, they wanted to do the same thing. He had a 25-gallon jug on the porch. When it was time to bottle it up, there was nothing left because the kids and Edward Adams had been drinking it up all along.

45:30 Fire – The boys had been playing with matches in the woods and caught it on fire. "I came home, the fire trucks was all over the place. It was terrible down there. We had excitement in Drayden." The chicken house also caught fire. The chickens had smut in their eyes and their tail feathers were burnt. They had "a meeting" in the house. The boys still talk about their punishment.

Paul hated the garden when he was younger, but now he's planting a garden, because everybody loves fresh things.

46:50 Recipes – He has his recipes written down on how to make good wine. You can make wine out of anything that will ferment like grapes, blackberries, and potatoes. Now you have good recipes on YouTube. To make sausage you must smoke it exactly right. One time he made sausage with a shortcut for Aunt Ella, Aunt Jeanette and Aunt Catherine Thompson. They complained that it didn't taste right. He didn't take a short cut after that, they were always smoked and good quality.

48:40 Important event – It was hard to get a job on the base. He was proud to go from a grade 3 to grade 9 in a short period of time. He got on the register in Baltimore and was number seven on the list to be interviewed. Charlie Pegg gave him a chance and hired him. He was so proud and excited that he came home and celebrated. "I went out that night and celebrated so much, I couldn't hardly work the next day." He passed so many people by getting on the register. Anything is possible, they couldn't figure out how he moved up so quickly.

52:30 He had a disagreement with Gus Berry about how to cut up hogs and cows. His cousin Hardrock, Leroy Thompson, Jr. took a course on meat cutting and Bernard followed behind him.

53:40 Today's problem – Drugs are the worst thing today. Everybody has it in their family. The biggest solution is education and encourage them to do the right thing. If you tell kids something, it might not sink now but later. His motto is to don't do as I do but do as I say.

56:20 Community activities – He can no longer help with slaughtering anymore. He doesn't even want to see it now. Bernard attend all the funerals anymore. Life changes. He used to be involved in the church. He gets tired of fighting for changes. There is corruption everywhere you go. As an elder he has to be a good role model.

“The ones that helped in the community have passed on now. A lot of them have passed on. I look around, all of them is gone. So, I said, "Now, I must be the big dog that's got to sit here and be a role model for the young ones and for still ones my age and do the right thing." If you ask for something, I will still do it, even if I can't do it. I'm quite sure if I kick the bucket today or tomorrow and be gone, if you ask me, I'll probably still come. That's how it is with that.”

59:45 Nuns, School, and Father – There was favoritism in school. His favorite teacher was Sister Thomas. Someone at the school said something was wrong with his head. The school made an appointment for him to go see a psychiatrist. When his father found out about it, he went up to the school and defended his son and said he was not going to the psychiatrist. He was so proud of how his father with an eighth-grade education defended him. His father cried like a baby when he left home to go to the Marine Corps. He turned out well and wondered what would have happened to him if he had gone to the doctor. His father was a wise man and he appreciated everything he did for him.

01:03:40 Stuffed Ham – Today stuffed ham is more like dressed ham. You need to have muscles to be able to score it and stuff the ham. “Miss Genevieve Briscoe and a few others around did really do a good stuffed ham, Miss Mary Morgan out at Piney Point did a really good stuffed ham back in the day.” They are now charging \$13 - \$14 per pound. It's hard work and 25-30 year olds don't know what real stuffed ham taste like.

