

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

ELMER BROWN

Interviewed by Mel Endy and Carol Locke-Endy

February 19, 2000

At his home in Drayden Maryland

Logged by Tania Jordon on September 11, 2005

A verbatim transcript is available

Original format is two cassette tapes

1 hour, 54 minutes, 46 seconds

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Track 01

- 0:00 Introduction by Mel Endy
0:37 Born 9/16/32 in Drayden on Cherryfield Rd., parents owned property and 4-room house; father worked for a doctor (farming), mother was a housewife; family moved to doctor's dairy farm in Frederick, Maryland (age 3).
2:00 Father was apartment house janitor in DC until 1942 (age 5/6)
3:06 National Capital Housing Authority - as a steam engineer until retirement in 1970:
3:40 Mother died in car accident when he was about 8/10, father married Florence, who had 1 daughter, in 1946

Track 02

- 4:51 Schooling: Attended elementary school on Prospect Ave (near Wisc. & M); family moved to S.E., attended Gillians (4th & G S.E.); family moved to public housing in Anacostia attended Garfield Middle (8th grade), Randall Jr. High (9th), Felts Vocational for 10th-12th grades, no college but number of correspondence courses and educated himself
6:32 Earliest memories: At age 5/6 playing on top of the hill (home place) every summer; interested in baseball
7:30 Didn't have any problem growing up in DC, only black child in Wisc. Ave. neighborhood was a sort of convenience for whites in apartment houses (ran errands)
9:14 Wondered why the white children went to school around the corner and he caught a streetcar to go to kindergarten.

Track 03

- 10:07 Race relations: Not many children in Wisc. Ave neighborhood, they all needed someone to play with
- 10:46 Father was big influence in his life; believed in a man taking care of his responsibilities: Started family; married at 18
- 11:56 Had to go to church; country uncle was lay preacher; Baptist church in DC, Methodist in the country
- 12:43 Illnesses: normal boy's stuff, hit by auto and knocked 30 feet, stayed in hospital for 2 weeks
- 13:27 Auto accident happened at a *Safety Zone*

Track 04

- 15:03 Went to school on the trolley; elem. school was brick with wooden floors and desks. Teacher, Ms. Segrick, grade 3, was a great influence –gave good guidance; wore dresses that touched shoe tops reminded him of Hope Swann.
- 16:50 Mrs. Perscell, middle school, taught English and destroyed any desire/interest for that subject, enjoyed math and history
- 18:26 Studied aircraft mechanics, wanted automotives. DC schools had one curriculum. Wilson HS (white) had aircraft mechanics and carpentry trades; Felts had shoe cobbler, metal works, bricklaying, aircraft mechanics, automotives and pipefitting. Curriculum geared more toward whites than blacks

Track 05

- 20:46 Racial experiences: When young could not understand why some people could go some places and some couldn't; i.e. restaurants/eating places and gasoline stations.
- 22:11 Bus station at TB: Big difference in seating facilities; had to go around back for food, got more chicken because served by the cook.
- 23:35 In Anacostia there were more distinct prejudices; lived between 2 low to middle class white neighborhoods (Fort Drum/ Livingston/Congress Heights and Anacostia-down-at-the-Bridge; riding the bus to school was troublesome
- 25:11 Race relations was not really talked about in youth

Track 06

- 25:54 After got married and had to find a job, race presented more of a impact: even with high school education not many opportunities open to make reasonable income for family/ had to work 2 jobs. Marriage brought obligations: 1950's
- 27:19 Military: DC National Guard activated during Korea: Fort Belvoir-97th Engineers learned to work on heavy equipment; made sergeant and became an instructor in Mason Pitts; made several trips to Korea to carry equipment - stayed in Guards for 10 years.

Track 07

- 29:38 Work Experience: For 23 years always worked 2 jobs, second job was usually seasonal/temporary/fill-ins; with OEO & Community Services for 17 years, hauled gasoline for Central Fuel
- 30:56 Worked for Exxon because of experience with Central Fuel and Urban League's intervention; belonged to Exxon's Promotion Club (deliver average of 600 gals. per hour) learned how to schedule his deliveries and won competition 3 months in a row
- 34:18 Made tractor-trailer deliveries to commercial sites; he and other black became transport drivers. Could haul to satellite stations but never to gas stations. Exchanged system (Exxon, Colonial). Worked from 5am to 1pm
- 36:18 Good handle on what happens with gas, oil, etc: Also drove truck to Richmond 5 days a week for (Krusty) Pie Co - worked from 1pm until about 12:30 am

Track 08

- 37:12 Family life: Had 4 days when didn't work 2 jobs, brought home day-old pastries, and spent all free time with children; bought fresh donuts from Krusty/Krispie Cream Donuts for his kids to sell in the neighbor, had steady customers and no problem selling 50/60 doz.
- 39:29 Children's experiences growing up in DC; older ones very active in school and sports; lived in closed/ black only community – didn't have much interference
- 40:00 Children not as interested in integration as parents: First 5 years of desegregation was as hard on kids as on adults: Kids soon found out that teachers and other children were not agreeable – they had to go through a training period.
- 40:46 Integration in Anacostia didn't affect that much; made kids go to school closest to where they lived: Stewart & Anacostia, (white schools), Brown, Shaw & Dunbar (black schools)

- 42:18 Integration in DC - Community Busting: brought 1st house for \$13,000 from Mr. Losleter who paid \$8020 12 years before (capital gains may not have had much impact) –This was example of white migration to suburbs, blacks coming in, and schools becoming mixed
- 43:25 Desegregation in DC public schools was gradual; happened mainly because of community busting rather than busing as in other areas

Track 09

- 43:42 Race Relation - Both sides were loser: Media played up disturbances in the south, read more and remembered condescending attitude of whites on Wisc. Ave
- 45:27 Became militant in mid 1960's -influenced by H. Rat Brown and Little Rock; realized that people were denying him things he was entitled too. Told kids to be prepared to do whatever to survive
- 46:58 Started working for betterment of mankind/ Urban League taught classes on how to react if called out of your name or even take a licking.
- 47:24 Became more conscious of possible attempts to jeopardize job with tractor-trailer: Covert actions

Track 10

- 50:55 Moved to St. Mary's in 1968: Difficult relationship with alcoholic wife; he and kids moved out and to country; commuted to DC for job
- 52:15 Johnie and son moved to different residence in country; moved in together after 6 months; mother advised them to marry
- 53:18 Dealing with wife's alcoholism, diabetes and death
- 54:35 Aug 1980 started working for county government
- 54:50 Asked to start management program in St. Mary's public housing working with Joe Mitchell
- 55:13 Worked in Community Services Adm.- Housing (DC) monitoring migrant workers and Indians; did a lot of work on Eastern Shore; traveled a lot.

Track 11

- 56:01 Changes in county: Navy Base caused a lot of growth but the same inadequacies were still here, exposure to money and banks (none)
- 57:00 Worked in Tubman Douglas – still plenty of barriers even in 1980. Became involved in retraining the people living there and others around the county

- 58:23 Situation with Old IGA: recommended NAACP monitor black patronize at specified times: Give the store a reason to hire blacks.
- 1:00:57 Similar approached used at Safeway; Millie Gross then Mary Robinson then Johnie out front. Stockmen Alton & Ralph Thomas had been only blacks at store.
- 101:34 Worked with NAACP Youth, seldom with regular NAACP
- 1:02:30 Tubman Douglas 1980-1995: Inadequate housing

Audio CD 2 of 2

Track 01

- 0:00 What he accomplished at Tubman Douglas; people owned homes, changed lifestyles, had bank accounts,
- 1:15 Gave them reasons for the need to get married
- 1:54 Lessons taught: Listen to your house and it will talk to you: running water may be broken pipe, blinking lights may mean a short; Lock screen door if that's the way the wind is blowing, don't run water until it become hot – contact Tri County Community Action Agency for repairs

Track 02

- 4:27 Provided space for Social Services, brought in Crime Solvers - how to protect property; keep property up and if everybody does it the whole project will be clean
- 5:40 As manager helped people to adept; at times was intermediary, family counselor, educator, social worker.
- 5:46 Selling drugs on property/ possibility of loosing home
- 6:49 Tubman Douglas converted from rental to ownership
- 7:33 He & Joe Mitchell developed process for people to buy their homes: 4 bedroom house cost \$35,000, they had to pay \$10,000 within 5years and promised to stay in property for 15 more to get a simple deed
- 9:47 Out of the 30 units only 2 lost out

Track 03

- 10:53 Process became model for East Coast: People became property owner of ¼ acre even when some households had annual income of only \$6,000.

- 11:40 Joined National Business League (NBL) in Prince George Co. Many Section-8 landlords had a lot of repairs after tenants moved out; he put together BMS (Brown's Maintenance Services) to be general contractor to put homes back in rental condition
- 13:00 Told young dropouts at Tubman Douglas he would enter them into a training program and show them what to do and how to do it.
- 13:10 NBL was a nationally known network of contractors, after a year started one in St. Mary's. Ray Haysberry and Senator Douglass from Maryland General Assembly were his mentors – beginning of Minority Business Alliance (1984)

Track 04

- 14:10 Salt & Pepper: he is a debater/challenger- told Ed Cox (County Administrator) that St. Mary's needed a 'Set Aside' program; federal government said procurement opportunities had to be fair and equal. Most black businesses were small and could not bid on county contracts
- 16:16 Bobby Knott could bid to be general contractors for big jobs then hire his friends to sub-contract; the Baileys (B&B), janitorial services in county buildings.
- 17:56 He and Ed debated then decided to meet off governmental property to talk about these issues some more. Led to Salt & Pepper where each was to bring 7 blacks or 7 whites. Only requirement was not to go away mad

Track 05

- 18:45 White contractors meet at places like the Brass Rail and Friendly Tavern to share their work; black contractors didn't meet.
- 19:45 'Set Asides': didn't happen because commissioners view current system as good.
- 20:36 Salt & Pepper is only group in county that meets to deal with issues across the board, wrote to Poverty Law Center about Salt & Pepper, found out others around the country were doing same thing (Atlanta).

Track 06

- 21:51 Major contributions to the county: Christmas in April Program, MBA, Masons (past member), trustee at Bethesda Church-got some things changed like toilets, well etc.
- 23:09 Did more with individuals rather than organizations, people who didn't know where to turn (particularly older people). Interest extended over to Calvert Co. (Mike Moore). Delivered wood, work transportation, food

Track 07

- 25:42 He and John Lancaster; can not get young people (18-24) to meet in a cloister to talk about who will take over after them
- 26:13 More whites volunteer than blacks and 80% of people you see at one meeting you will see at all the meetings
- 27:29 Churches are shutting down and limiting their participation; no priest/pastor belongs to Christmas-in-April – In older days if you had a problem you went to the church, now you get the 3rd degree and then turned away.

Track 08

- 29:48 Base Influence: it has made St. Mary's. It consumed a lot of property and changed people's lives. Changed farming and the people who supported that system
- 30:50 Seafood Industry: No seafood processing plant or collection place in county
- 32:00 Economic and other impacts on race relations and the community: Some commanders had a community interest but military is a group that has always taken care of their own and may not have reached out to as much as they could have.
- 33:00 Lots of certificates that family have earned. Family life has been terrific since moved to county.

Track 09

- 34:36 Talked about children: Sheila is a registered nurse at Southern Maryland Hospital, Elmer Jr. is a carpenter and owns commuter vans, Mike is a park ranger at Point Lookout, Tony is a registered plumber (TLC), Kevin has a DJ business (DJ Brown), Little Tony (Johnie's son) works with BMS and Michelle is in the Service. All gainfully employed and most own homes - told them in 10th grade that "Daddy don't run a hotel". Between 14-16 grandchildren
- 38:23 Mae was mother's name, Florence is his stepmother. Dora and Arthur Brown were his father's parents; his mother's were named Amanda and Jeff Smith
- 39:30 Occupation: Retired, but still working

Track 10

39:55 UCAC: at a MBA function thought about the people in the audience standing on others' shoulders - Nobody was recording the history of those people. Andrea (Hammer) had information recorded by the Farm Bureau about the southern end of the county.

41:37 Record history of people who made a big difference to St. Mary's; didn't want to head it because still worked for government; sort out organizations to head UCAC. Approached Jolly Gents/Donald Moore (25 men and their wives) wealth of information, Masons/Reggie (Brown) 45 to 50 Masons and Eastern Star members. After 3 years decided to head UCAC himself

Track 11

44:14 Very few things that he attempted that he didn't accomplish
Church- bathrooms, well & kitchen; Jolly Gents (old St. Joseph's School)-relocated to Rt. 235; MBA- became nationally known; Salt & Pepper, a premier organization; Housing- McIntosh Rd and Tubman Douglas. Life has not been a waste

45:55 Boy's Scout Troop in DC (15 boys) with 3 Eagle Scouts

46:27 Gloria Duke a distressed mother, with a lot of religion- son recently signed with the University of Michigan; Joe & Pete Holly recovering alcoholic

Track 12

48:11 Monument- get a goal in mind: Would not let the idea go: People will become more involve if they see something, \$2000 donation, Spencer (Scriber) working on the stones (32,000 lbs of stones)

50:31 McDonald's creed: Made sure each child knows what the golden arches mean.