

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions  
Oral History Documentation Project

Erman Thomas Clay

Interviewed by Alma Jordon  
September 15, 2016

Transcribed by REV.com on December 14, 2024

Edited by Bob Lewis on January 22, 2026

A log is unavailable

Original is digital file from digital audio recorder  
53 minutes, 31 seconds

Alma Jordon ([00:08](#)):

Good afternoon.

Erman Clay ([00:09](#)):

Good afternoon to you.

Alma Jordon ([00:11](#)):

Can you give me your full name and age please?

Erman Clay ([00:15](#)):

My name is Erman Thomas Clay, age is 93.

Alma Jordon ([00:21](#)):

Okay. Nice to meet you.

Erman Clay ([00:23](#)):

Nice to meet you.

Alma Jordon ([00:24](#)):

Can you tell me where you were born, Mr. Clay?

Erman Clay ([00:27](#)):

I was born on St. George's Island, Maryland, St. George's Island, Maryland.

Alma Jordon ([00:34](#)):

Okay, and can you tell me what you remember as your first memory as a child?

Erman Clay ([00:42](#)):

Okay, as a child, first of all, I think of my Aunt Emma Jean Blackwell calling me Tiny, and my name was Erman T. Clay. But, from then on, I was called Tiny, because she used to wipe my face into this tiny little baby.

Alma Jordon ([01:06](#)):

Mm-hmm, so it sounds like you were very close to your aunts when you were growing up there?

Erman Clay ([01:16](#)):

Yeah, during the summer, on summer days, we would go to the island to spend with my grandparents and her family, because my mother and dad worked at the hospital. They'd pick us up on the evening, and bring us home, but in the morning, we'd go and spend with my grandparents, Elmo and Mary Blackwell.

Alma Jordon ([01:42](#)):

And your grandparents lived on the island then?

Erman Clay ([01:44](#)):

Yes, St. George's Island.

Alma Jordon ([01:51](#)):

Okay, okay. Tell me about your family growing up, where you lived, and what kind of things you did as a family that you can remember.

Erman Clay ([02:04](#)):

Okay. What I can remember as a family growing up in Piney Point, of course we went to school in Piney Point up until the sixth grade. After sixth grade, we went to Jarboesville High School. While I was growing up in Piney Point, Miss Gaddling [??] was my teacher. Things we did, as during that time, teachers, as far as they went was to two years in college, and most of them went to Bowie State College. But, they were good teachers. They were called, what is now its first line of teaching. I remember subjects that we had, arithmetic and math.

([03:00](#)):

I remember certain plays that we had. We had those in the church next door, which the church was next door. While in school, if the weather was bad, we walked anyway, but if the weather was bad, our fathers and other men would go out and shovel the snow so that we could get to school. Once we got to school, we had what was known as a janitor who would come over and do the fire so that we were comfortable in the school. This was during the wintertime. School started in June, and it stopped in June, started in ... I forget what date, what year? November. November is when it started ... October is when the school started, and October until June, June the sixth, we'd get out of school.

([04:04](#)):

While in school, we did a lot of good things, because in the school, there was a ... It was a one-room school, and there were no more than one teacher. The seniors in the class would then be responsible for helping the teacher out. We had all the various classes ... Various, what I mean arithmetic, spelling, and book reading. A good bit of it was done from the blackboard. We had a blackboard that was used to put our assignments on, and that's where we would take our assignments home to do them home on a lamp light. As you know, there was no electricity at that time. At 9:00, everybody had to go to bed, put out all

the lights, and we woke up in the morning time to go to school. We always had a nice breakfast, and then, we walked to school.

Alma Jordon ([05:11](#)):

Now, you talked about your school there. Was it Piney Point?

Erman Clay ([05:22](#)):

Piney Point Elementary School.

Alma Jordon ([05:25](#)):

Okay. Can you tell me about the setup in the school, about your desk and the blackboard? Where was that located? And also maybe, did you have running water? I'm sure you didn't. But, tell me about your lunch period, what you ate for lunch. Can you share that with me?

Erman Clay ([05:50](#)):

We had a blackboard, and there were several writings on the blackboard. Alphabets, numbers were written on the board. There was a desk, each desk had a drawer, and you kept your ruler and all things that you needed to do work in that drawer. That drawer was inspected each night to make sure that we don't have anything in the drawer that we shouldn't have. Of course, we keep our lunch in the drawer until lunchtime. What else did you say about school?

Alma Jordon ([06:27](#)):

How were the desks made? Can you describe what the desks looked like?

Erman Clay ([06:31](#)):

The desks looked like some of the desks that you see in TV today, which was open and had a drawer to it, simply made, and they were made out of oak. And underneath they had, if I remember correctly, it had a place for your legs under the desk, and most of the time, you had a bookcase, a book sack. Not one that they have today, wasn't made like that. Well, it was made out of the same thing, but it was not a sack like they make today over your head for different shape and size.

Alma Jordon ([07:14](#)):

Now your desk in those days, was it all wooden, or did you have some metal on the desk?

Erman Clay ([07:21](#)):

They were mostly wooden, but they had a place where you put your pen, a round place that you put your pen on top of the desk, and it had a long place where you put your pen. And in there, they had a place where you had your ink pen, you put your ink pen in there.

Alma Jordon ([07:42](#)):

Was there any metal on the desk at all on the side?

Erman Clay ([07:45](#)):

Metal on the bottom of the desk where you could put your feet, like a sewing machine.

Alma Jordon ([07:50](#)):

Right, right, okay. Trying to get a description of what the room looked like. As far as your drinking water. How did you manage that?

Erman Clay ([08:08](#)):

The caretaker? We didn't call him a caretaker. We call him something else, would bring buckets of water to the school, and they would set them on a certain place. All of us had to have drinking cups, and we'd take the dipper. They didn't have a spigot, had a dipper where you'd dip your water out and put into your drinking cup. And after you finish, you fold the drinking cup up like this.

Alma Jordon ([08:37](#)):

Okay, thank you. Now, do you remember taking any trips, school trips, or family trips when you were younger?

Erman Clay ([08:49](#)):

Yes. We would have family trips as well as school trips. School trips would not be that far away, because at that time, we didn't have transportation. Many times, we would do a walk to another area, on example, like his school. We'd walk to his school when it got warm, just to have a hike, and observe what was around us, the corn growing, and this sort of thing.

Alma Jordon ([09:25](#)):

Tell me about your immediate family, your siblings, and what was it like growing up in your household?

Erman Clay ([09:32](#)):

Well, I had one sister and a brother. My sister was the elder one. My brother was the youngest one. We get along fairly well. We always did do bad things to our sister, and the entertainment that we got, especially on the weekend, we'd sit out and watch the cars go by, and each one of us would take a different color car. And over a period of time, whoever had the most cars, that's the one that would win the prize. Then, we had horseshoes that we used to use, had horseshoes and what else? We would hunt in the yard, try to pitch horseshoes, because we were not old enough until we got old enough to pitch horseshoes.

([10:25](#)):

And some of the neighbors would come in, and we would do a contest on who could pitch the furthest home. The girls would come in, and they would use the grass in the yard to plait hair, and then they would plait that hair, and then they would spray all different colors. You all have different colors now, but then they would use the grass in the yard. In the yard, the grass would grow right up tall, and they'd get in there and plait the grass. And the contest was who could do the best, make the best contest in plaiting hair? Of course, the men, they go didn't dare do that, just all the girls.

Alma Jordon ([11:12](#)):

Oh, that's interesting. You talked about you did some trips as a family. Can you share some information about some of your family trips?

Erman Clay ([11:29](#)):

Yeah, we used to go down to Point Lookout. We'd go to Piney Point Wharf. That's where my parents were. We'd watch the steamboats come in at that time. That's the only way they got the material from that steamboat. The steamboat would stop at Piney Point Wharf, and we had a captain who was a captain, but he was a black man. He would unload the ship, and he would see that the ship landed on the wharf, at the wharf and that he would monitor who gets off the ship. And I don't know where you know it, but that's still only way that we got mail at that time from D.C. down to Piney Point. It would leave Piney Point, and then they would go to Drayton. There's a big place over in Drayton, I forget the name of it now, where the ship would land and put off items there. And then, it would head itself in, not Baltimore, but it would go before Baltimore. Then the ship would turn around and come back and go into Washington to be refilled.

Alma Jordon ([12:43](#)):

Did you ever go anywhere on a steamship?

Erman Clay ([12:46](#)):

No, we were not allowed on a steamship. Not only us, but nobody was allowed on a steamship. He would blow the horn, and wherever we were, we would know where to come to watch it land, and to get the letters or anything that was for our youth to bring food and whatnot. There was no mail coming directly from D.C. down there. It had to come that way, or any packages of any kind. That's where we'd pick them up there.

Alma Jordon ([13:22](#)):

This steamship didn't carry any passengers?

Erman Clay ([13:25](#)):

No, it was not a passenger ship.

Alma Jordon ([13:31](#)):

When you were growing up, you talked about playing with each other as children. Do you remember ... I'm sure you do, some of the chores that you had to do, or some of your little jobs around the house?

Erman Clay ([13:45](#)):

Of course, our well was across the road from us. We had to get water from that well in order to drink, in order to wash clothing, and whatever you need water for, that's where you would get it from this well, that they had a bucket that you dip down in to get the water to bring it over. Just so happened the person who owned that well was a Civil War veteran. Sometimes, he'd get able and we couldn't get the water, so we had to wait until they went to the store. He used to walk down to the Swan store at that time, and when he walked down to the Swan store, that's where we would go and dip the water, and bring it to our house. That was the only way we could get water.

([14:38](#)):

And then, behind their house, there was a wooded area, and that's what we used for our bath in before we had our toilet. We would take the water, they called it water, called the thing that we used chambermaid, and that chambermaid was what you used to urinate in, and everything else in. And then, the next morning my father would take that out and throw it in the woods.

Alma Jordon ([15:13](#)):

Okay, so did you ... Was that what you call a pot?

Erman Clay ([15:17](#)):

Yeah, no, we called it a chamber.

Alma Jordon ([15:30](#)):

You talked about the steamship and some of the things around your house and around the area. What was your father's occupation? What type of work did he do?

Erman Clay ([15:44](#)):

Well, in the summertime, my father and mother worked at the hotel. My father was the head waiter, and my mother was to clean rooms for people who came to the hotel. In the wintertime, he would forge them. He would tong, catch oysters, and sell them wherever he could, or to the boat who came from other place to take the oysters in. There came a time when I was able enough to do that, to help him with that, and then the [inaudible 00:16:24] come back. He would do it on the hotel. When I got large enough, I started working at the hotel. Then I started catching crabs to sell. And the crabs that you see today cost \$50 a bushel. The hard-shelled crabs, we couldn't give away. The soft-shelled crabs cost about a penny a piece. Just that much difference. That much difference.

Alma Jordon ([16:59](#)):

And you just mentioned, you talked about crabbing, and soft-shelled crabs, and what they cost. Tell me more about the food in your family. What type of food did you eat, and where did you get your food?

Erman Clay ([17:14](#)):

Well, we got our food from ... They had one store down there called Swans. We get most of our meats and vegetables from that store during the summer, and of course, from the hotel would get food from there as well. In the wintertime, we had what's known as a ... What do they call that now? It's where you bury your food, called a ... Stuff that you didn't have freezing capabilities. What do they call that?

([17:46](#)):

In other words, what they did that dig a big hole in the ground like a grave. And they put food in that, and put straw on top of it during the fall of the year of during the, yeah. Well, this was during the fall. Yeah, so it would keep during the winter, and every time we wanted something fresh, we'd go down in this ... Can't remember what we called it, but anyway, we would call it. We would go down there and get that out. What did they call it, Brooks?

Brooks ([18:22](#)):

I can't remember.

Erman Clay ([18:25](#)):

I think it started with kill, but I don't want to say kill.

Alma Jordon ([18:26](#)):

[inaudible 00:18:28].

Erman Clay ([18:26](#)):

Is that what they called it?

Alma Jordon ([18:26](#)):

I think it's that.

Erman Clay ([18:31](#)):

Yeah, and that's where we kept our fresh food during the winter.

Alma Jordon ([18:40](#)):

Did you do talk about fresh food? Did you raise the food in your garden, or what?

Erman Clay ([18:47](#)):

Every summer we had cabbage, strawberries, corn, whatever we wanted. We used to raise in the garden.

Alma Jordon ([18:56](#)):

I see, okay. What was your relationship with your parents? How were you disciplined when you grew up, when you were growing up?

Erman Clay ([19:12](#)):

Well, there was no problem, because there was a lot of trees. A lot of trees. If you didn't do what they said a couple of times, they'd make you go and get your own switch, and they'd use that, and you knew what to do, and what not to do. They were disciplinarians. You had to do, and you had to do. And that was another way to understand that what you may want to do, you shouldn't do. That was a way of training you, teaching you what not to do. And of course, there was this ... I can remember there was a store right next door to where we lived, and that would be off limits to us if we didn't do what we were supposed to do. And the lady who ran that store, she understood what was going on next door. And she knew if we'd been disciplined, she wouldn't sell us any candy or stuff like that. Old Miss Adams, she was a white old lady.

[recording stops and starts again – the recording device likely changed]

Speaker 4 ([20:19](#)):

What types of home remedies did you use?

Erman Clay ([20:23](#)):

Well, we had the stuff called black sand, and we had yellow sand. We would rub that for certain pains, and whether or not you have got stung by a bee or anything else, you'd use that. If you had pain in the stomach, everybody knew what to use for if your stomach was paining. We had certain illness that the whole community used to cure the pain or the illness. And not only did we have it, our neighbor would have it. If the neighbor had some, we'd get some from the neighbor, and vice-versa. Had a headache, there was certain things to use for headache. All kinds of remedies we would use for different pains. We really didn't have any problems with being ill. When a lady got pregnant, we didn't know ... At an early

age, we didn't know what that was. When the doctor came with the black satchel, we were told that he was bringing the baby to us, and we took that, and we didn't know any better.

[\(21:41\)](#):

When he left, then they had what was known as a midwife. Then the midwife would take care of the mother for a certain period of time until the baby was able to cry, and do all these things. And that's how we went off. And so, for sickness, we had very little ... Few people had cars in order to go to the doctor. The doctor was probably three miles away, and you couldn't walk there if you were sick. You get a bumblebee, you know what to use for the bumblebee, or the mosquito. When I look back now, I felt that some of the remedies that they use then are better than what the doctors are using today. There was no such thing as operations.

Alma Jordon [\(22:35\)](#):

Oh yes. Tell me, do you remember what the black sand was used for and the yellow sand?

Erman Clay [\(22:40\)](#):

Yeah. Black sand was used for sores more or less. And in our case, in order to catch crabs, we would wade in the water. And in the water, there were shells. And sometimes we'd get our feet cut with the shells. For the yellow sand, we would use that. Or if it was another kind of sore, we would use another color sand. Looking back, they all were the same thing, just different colors. Of course, we would gargle our throat with the ... I forget what you used to call that. If we had a sore throat, we'd use that to gargle our throat. And eventually, that got well. We'd stay out of the water.

Alma Jordon [\(23:26\)](#):

Tell me about your teenage life and how was it growing up?

Erman Clay [\(23:30\)](#):

When you said teenage, what are you talking about? Teenage, teenager, teenage, or un-teenage.

Alma Jordon [\(23:30\)](#):

Teenage, un-teenage, it's growing up.

Erman Clay [\(23:31\)](#):

Well, as Brooks had mentioned, Happyland was one of the places that we used to go at ten, but we couldn't stay all night. We stayed most of the evening, and usually, Leroy or somebody had a ballpark right there that we used to play ball. And after that, we'd go to the place to dance. Dancing was very nice then, and well, we had some movies. Leroy's had movies there for us. A lot of things that Leroy used to have that we used to go do was fun, natural fun. And it was not only that place. Families had picnics during the summer and that sort of thing. We'd go to them, and that's where we entertained ourselves. And then, one group would play against the other. One family would play against the other in softball, baseball, pitching horseshoes, and that kind of thing. That's how we really entertained ourselves.

Alma Jordon [\(24:51\)](#):

Okay. What about race relations back in those days? Do you remember?

Erman Clay ([24:57](#)):

Yeah, it depends on who you were. My mother was a very light-skinned person, and the whites respected her very highly. She used to work sometimes with the whites, for the whites on the island, and they treated her a little different from they treated my father. But, since my father was married to her, they had to treat him almost the same way. And that's where the relationship became involved. For an example, most of the folks who were buying oysters were the whites, and they had these big boats. But, my dad was able to sell oysters to those folks when the other blacks could not sell oysters too. And was because of my mother that he was able to do that.

([25:51](#)):

We had won a hotel in Piney Point, and that used to close in the summer, because the white man owned that. And he would give my father the keys to that hotel, and he would allow him the privilege of picking out people to work in the hotel, especially waiters. When the hotel opened in the summer, he would allow him to look at the garden food that was brought in to see if that was all right. And I said, I guess, when he went in the winter, my father had the keys. He got a lot of respect, and it meant a lot to us. It meant a lot to us having that kind of relationship.

([26:42](#)):

Of course, he would make a little more money than the other blacks who were working there. He gained a lot of respect for those people. He was allowed to go to the farm and look at the food that they were bringing to the hotel to determine whether or not he should buy it. And that put him in a different spot than a lot of the other black folks. And it was that way all the way up the line to include [inaudible 00:27:19] and painting. He was in charge of painting houses and places of that nature, and he was able to use the white person in order to help him, but they would pay him, so he could pay the white.

([27:36](#)):

That's the way that I can remember. And of course, after school, we played with the white boys and girls. We played with them, because it was right across the road from where we lived. And we didn't see any problems with that. We didn't get on the same buses. We had different buses to go to school, and things were different. Things were different. But, I guess I picked that up at a certain age, and I tried my best to force that. And I did in many ways. I did in many ways by saying, "If you can do it, I can do it." And it made a difference in my life.

Alma Jordon ([28:27](#)):

How do you feel that things ... Do you feel that things are any different today as far as race relations than they were?

Erman Clay ([28:35](#)):

Well, I listened to what Brooks said, but I don't agree with him. I feel that preparations mean so much. I believe that if you prepare yourself, and able to articulate what you're doing, as opposed to what someone else is doing, then you can get your way. I know you're not getting to employment as yet. But, I worked for the treasury department for a while, and I was working with a white group, and I got to know more about the job than what they did, because I would come home and study. They didn't do that. Whatever they did was right on the job, but I got to be able to tell them what to do, tell them what to do.

([29:31](#)):

I can remember a case whereby the two white supervisors were getting ready to hire somebody, and I was on the panel. They said, "We know who we're going to hire." I said, "You know who you're going to hire before they interview?" They said, "Yeah, we know who they are." I said, "No, you don't." When we got in the room to interview the people, they had already picked out the people that they want, and they were white. I said, "No, look at her record as to the other one." I said, "How can you afford to do that? How can you afford to do that?"

[\(30:05\)](#):

They couldn't give me a reason. And as a result, my black ladies got the job, and they respected me. I come home at night and study, where these folks didn't do that. They didn't do it. They came home, they got to pay it, they came home and that was it. But, I stayed up half the night studying the work, and it really paid off. I'd tell them in a minute. I remember an occasion when we had a job vacant. I applied for the job, was on the ticket to be interviewed for it. I went away on vacation, and when I got back, the supervisor had given it to this white lady. I went in to see him, and he said, "Erman" ... He called me Erman. "You can't do that." I said, "I can." I said, "I know that I'm better qualified than what she is."

[\(31:06\)](#):

He said, "Well, you were away." I said, "I know that." I went to the EEO at that time. That's what they're called now. I went to the EEO. He said, "No, we got an EEO here in the building." I said, "No, you don't." I said, "You don't have one for me." I took time off and went to the main building, the main treasury, and I knew a person over there who was the EEO, and told him about it. He said, "Is that right?" I said, "Yeah." Then, he called the supervisor and said, "What's going on down there?" Supervisor said, "Well, Erman was on vacation." He said, "Yeah, I know." She said, "Yeah, I know. But, he was more qualified than who you put in the job."

[\(31:46\)](#):

To make a long story short, I got the job. I got the job, and just the main of pressing what you know is right, and being qualified for that. He stopped speaking to me. But, I didn't care about that. I didn't care about that at all. I think I took that after my dad. He wouldn't let anybody, or nobody tell him what to do if he knew what he was doing. And it pays off today. It really does pay off today. It pays off today.

Alma Jordon [\(32:26\)](#):

You shared a little bit of your work life. I want to elaborate on that a little bit, but then, before we go to that, I'd like to talk a little bit about life in St. Mary's County. How when you were growing up, how did your family get to the news? How did you know what was going on in the world, that type of thing. Do you remember?

Erman Clay [\(32:56\)](#):

Well, we had a paper call. Don't remember the name of it, but we got that once a month, once a month. You know the name of it? I can't remember the name of it. We got it once a month.

Brooks [\(33:06\)](#):

Was it called The Beacon?

Erman Clay [\(33:06\)](#):

Hm?

Brooks [\(33:06\)](#):

The Beacon?

Erman Clay ([33:07](#)):

Yeah, okay. And it was about 25 cents a month, and my dad wanted to pay it, so he sacrificed to get that paper wherein other folks couldn't see that that made sense. But, I took that after him, and I used that. Then, we talked to people, talked to people who was in the know, like your dad for an example, talk to him, and we found out about things, and pursued it. And I think you can do the same thing today if you are persistent in what's right, and know that you are qualified for that, and can talk just the way that they talk. And I think it works. But, if you assume that you can't get the job, because you're black, that's where you're going to always stay.

Alma Jordon ([34:10](#)):

You mentioned walking to school and living in your area. What about religion, and how did that play a part, and was there a church that you attended growing up?

Erman Clay ([34:27](#)):

Yeah, we had one Methodist church that we all went to school. Well, we had some Catholics there too, but most of us were Methodists. My father didn't go to church that much, but my mother went to church about every Sunday, and she dragged us to church. Then, they had school for, I mean church for kids. That was never done like it should be, because our teachers were not that great in church. But, we did learn something. Not enough. Sunday school was not that great. I got to admit that Sunday school was not that good, but it was there. I remember when we were playing baseball where a Methodist minister, Baptist minister, and we used to go ... The church was at 1:00, 1:00. Baseball started at one o'clock, and as a result, all the people went to the baseball game rather than going to church.

([35:39](#)):

I went to the minister, I said, "Sir, I think you'd have more people coming to church if you change the time, if you change the time to about 11:00." He said, "Oh, no, I can't do that. I can't do that." I said, "Well, you going to be sitting here by yourself." I said, at that time, Reverend Hooper was his name. I said, "You're going to be sitting here by yourself." He watched it for one Sunday, and soon enough, he did have people up by himself. Then, he called me, and he says, "We're going to change the time." I said, "Good."

([36:13](#)):

At the baseball time, it was about, I guess, 60 yards from the church. The church people were loaded, father, mother, sister, brother, all of them want to see us play ball, and didn't go to church. He said, "I know I'm not doing right, but I'm going to change time what you'd see." He changed the time, and I told the folks about that. At 11:00, most of the people went to church, but then they came over to watch us play ball. That'd work, that'd work, especially in the summertime, and the wintertime, we would make our way up there. It worked.

Alma Jordon ([36:55](#)):

It sounds like you enjoyed church, and you enjoyed the family relations with the church, and that type of thing.

Erman Clay ([37:02](#)):

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Alma Jordon ([37:07](#)):

Tell me more about your work life later on in years, and tell me about what you did in life, and your progress in your military experiences.

Erman Clay ([37:18](#)):

Okay. As I said before, when I went in the military, I didn't know what foot to start off with. My mother lake across the street from me, as I told you, civil war, he wouldn't tell us anything about the military. I know he knew because he was in the military. I was drafted at Fort Meade. I stayed at Fort Meade about a week or so. Then I went off to Fort Custer, Michigan, and at Fort Custer, Michigan, most of the guys that were in Fort Custer, Michigan had, had some training in the military, like my good friend here, I had had none, had had none. They were coming from universities, not universities, but they coming less than university training. All of them had, had military training. We had privilege to go on pass, but we had to know certain amount of stuff, military before we go on pass.

([38:27](#)):

I went on pass one day, I went to the company, company clerk. The CQ was, not the CQ, but the captain who was there who answered questions, he said, "I want you to start with the president, and come on down to a private." I said, "You do?" I said, "I can't answer that." He said, "You go back and study." I went back to study, and I thought they were going to ask the same question. They asked me a different question, and I didn't know that. I said, "Sir, I don't want to go on pass." I went on back to the barracks, and pulled out the books, and I started studying. To make a long story short, after a while, I knew more than what this guy did who come out of school, because all they wanted to do was go to town, have a good time.

([39:19](#)):

Then, I got promoted to PFC, and I got promoted to a corporal, and I went overseas. I was a corporal, but I was in better shape than they were, because I was studying, and I knew more than what they did. That was the beginning of my career in the military, so I didn't stop back on. When we got to a permanent place like France, I did the same thing. When we went overseas, we had to have white officers. When we were in the states, we had black officers. But, when we went overseas, they took all the blacks that we had, because they could not go overseas as an officer being black. Then, I continued to study. They promoted me to a corporal, and that meant that I was over there. I was over there, and I performed like a corporal. Then, we went to Normandy, France on ... No, went to Ireland first for six months, I think.

([40:34](#)):

Then, I had Normandy, France on D-2 on the ship. I have a copy of the ship here now. And I continued to study, and they continued to play. I became a sergeant, so I was a big guy there. I was a big guy as a sergeant. When I came out of the military, I was a staff sergeant, and I got out at Fort Custer for me, Fort Minor, not Fort Minor, Indian, not in me, Fort Meade. They wanted me to train for lieutenant, second lieutenant, so I said no. But then, after I got home at Piney Point and saw what the conditions were, what's different when I left, than I wish I had stayed.

([41:27](#)):

But then, I didn't stay. For military, I came to D.C., and got in the National Guard. And I was in the National Guard during [inaudible 00:41:40], what do you call it, when they had a riot here in D.C., I was promoted then to staff sergeant, and then as staff sergeant, I had quite a few people under me. And then, from then on, I started training those sergeants, and I became a first sergeant. And then, from

then on, I moved up to a command sergeant major, which was the highest black ... One of the two highest-

Alma Jordon ([42:09](#)):

They recruited me in there.

Erman Clay ([42:12](#)):

... command sergeant majors in the nation. There was only two black sergeants, one from New Jersey, and myself. Our meetings we'd go to, he and I would stand out, but we never associated with each other. We associated with the white command sergeant major, white sergeant major, and some of them didn't know as much as I did. When I retired, that's when I retired as the command sergeant major, command sergeant major of D.C. National Guard. When they had the riots here in D.C., I was a command sergeant major, and I guess, I had a company, [inaudible 00:42:54], about 80 men to perform duty in the Washington area. And I had a time getting those guys to stay at the guard to do the function that you have to do in service at a time, because I had a second, our first lieutenant. I had to tell him what to do. But that paid off. That paid off. And I was happy that I did because I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed working for the general.

([43:29](#)):

The general came to me one day, and my stuff wasn't ready. You have to get everything ready for inspection. He said, "I had several folks that were not qualified." He said, "Sergeant Major, why aren't these people qualified?" I said, "Sir, they're not qualified. It's because they went to the range, and they didn't qualify." And I said, "I'm not going to pencil qualify anyone." I said, "When I lay down beside a guy in the rock, in the park, so he was going to be qualified." He turned around and went on back upstairs. Then he started favoring me. You know that, right? That was my stint in the military. I retired after, I got old enough to retire. But, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it.

Brooks ([44:28](#)):

Put me in there.

Erman Clay ([44:31](#)):

I enjoyed it too much.

Alma Jordon ([44:32](#)):

And after you got out of the military, what was your work life like then on?

Erman Clay ([44:41](#)):

Well, I was in the guard. I was working for treasury department at the same time. I was working for the Treasury Department. I got to be a GS13 who was working in the check department. And I had 40 civilians who answered to me. And they got to love me, because I'd make them do what they need to do rather than eat lunch all day. And they loved me. At the same time, I joined quite a few organizations in the area, like the NAACP and all of those type organizations. And I was president of this organization for 20 years. And I treated them like I did the military folks.

([45:40](#)):

Every month, we had an executive meeting, and that executive meeting would be here at my house, and one was missing. I'd call them the next morning. But, for the next meeting they would be here. But, after

I stopped doing that, and the other president took over, he didn't know to do that. They didn't make executive meeting. But, what we discussed and decided in the executive meeting, when we went to the regular meeting, that's what we discussed. And I knew I had them, because I had most of the folks in the executive meeting who had signed off on that, and that worked. But, you can't get folks to do that anymore.

Alma Jordon ([46:21](#)):

Yeah. Sounds like you've been quite involved.

Erman Clay ([46:25](#)):

I have, I have. Let me read off something. Excuse me. I just took this because I couldn't remember. I was a president of [inaudible 00:46:37] Garden Civil Association, president of Far North East South Cape East Council, president of Fort East Council, Kiwanis Club, president of the District Columbia Enlisted Association, president of the District Farmers' Market, Vice-chair of the District of Columbia Housing Association, Revocation of the Commitment of Renewal, Veterans Renewal Board, and Promotion Board of Federal Workers. I've been pretty active, and-

Alma Jordon ([47:14](#)):

Oh, yeah, yeah.

Erman Clay ([47:14](#)):

... I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it.

Alma Jordon ([47:14](#)):

Oh, wow, that's fantastic.

Erman Clay ([47:14](#)):

I enjoyed teaching, getting people to understand what they need to do. They got it. Most of us have it, but we just don't try to stick with it.

Alma Jordon ([47:33](#)):

On later years, you married, got married and had a family?

Erman Clay ([47:43](#)):

Yes. Yeah. I got married in 1951. My wife was a teacher, and she no longer wanted to teach, so I got her a position in the Treasury Department, not in my outfit, but making contact, and she enjoyed that, and she retired before she passed. I was involved in a lot of things, because I can't stay busy. I had to be involved. I was involved with the area that I like to tell is it was check liens and checks. There was some people from another country who had taken out the checks. The checks that we used to get, and signed them, and they could put the amount in there that you wouldn't believe.

([48:49](#)):

Can't remember what country. I was elected to go to Georgia where they were having a trial, and I looked around, I was the only black in the court, and the [inaudible 00:49:04] said, "How do you know he is a signature?" I said, "Sir, I've been training in insignia identification," so he shut up. Didn't say no

more, but we convicted people who had been doing that, thousands of dollars. They were taking out checks, and erase what's on that, and you wouldn't think it was done. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed telling him off. I said, "I know what I'm talking about." And I went, "Oh, see how this L and see how this L is? I said, "That's not like it should be." Yeah. But, I've been in situations like that where I was the only black, but never got scared. Never got scared.

Alma Jordon ([49:55](#)):

Well, is there anything else that you'd like to share with us?

Erman Clay ([49:58](#)):

I can't think of anything else.

Alma Jordon ([50:04](#)):

You didn't tell us. Did you tell us how you met your wife?

Erman Clay ([50:08](#)):

I met my wife at the Veterans Administration. She was working at Veterans, and I met her there, at the Veterans Administration. I've been to several schools at DC Teacher's College [inaudible 00:50:28]. I've been to several little schools. Didn't do as well as I expected. Went to engineering school. I thought I liked engineering, but I hated it after I got into that, and I've been on quite a few boards here in D.C.

Alma Jordon ([50:47](#)):

Right.

Erman Clay ([50:49](#)):

I help people to get homes and stuff like that by being on the Housing and Finance Agency. You may have read about this. Some time ago, when my executive gave some money to someone who's running for the mayor, and they caught up on her. One day, I came home, and my wife said, "There's some people who want to see you. These were the, what do they call them, folks who are involved with Hillary now, who's the-

Alma Jordon ([51:36](#)):

Oh, the FBI?

Erman Clay ([51:39](#)):

... FBI. They were sitting at this table, two of them. I walked in and they said, "You're Mr. Clay?" I said, "Yes." "Oh, we didn't come here to see whether or not you've done anything wrong, because you haven't." They spent about an hour and a half here. [inaudible 00:51:54] if I knew anything about the money, the checks that had been given to the person who's running for council member. She was running for mayor.

([52:06](#)):

They spent about two hours, and they concluded that I was not involved as a result of that, not as a result of that. But, I got appointed as the chair of the Housing and Finance Agency. And there was one lady who saw that in the paper and didn't know that I had that position. She was from home, married,

had a child, not my child. [both laugh] She said, "I didn't know that you were in that position. We need a home, and we want you to help us." But, she never came back. She died about, I guess, two months ago. Heaven's Door, that was at Heaven's Door, somebody's died. But, she never came back. Her husband couldn't hear well. Can't think of her name now.

Alma Jordon ([53:03](#)):

Sharon?

Erman Clay ([53:04](#)):

Sharon, yeah. She was the type ... That was the type of a position that I held in the Housing and Finance Agency, and I helped a lot of people, a lot of people who wanted to feel very proud.

Alma Jordon ([53:24](#)):

Good. Did your life turn out the way you planned for it to, do you feel?

[recording ends 53:31]