

UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS
Oral History Documentation Project

ELVARE GASKIN

January 28, 1997

Interviewed by Merideth Taylor
at her home in Scotland Maryland

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Original format is two cassette tapes
2 hours, 33 minutes, 23 seconds

Audio CD 1 of 3

Track 01

00:00 Introduction. What were the times like when you were a child? Where did you live and where were you born? I can remember things as early as three years old. Her most vivid memory was riding on the Dorchester Steamboat that came into Miller's Wharf. Her mother lived in Baltimore and her grandparents raised her because her father died before she was born. Her father died in February and she was born in March. Her grandparents would put her on the steamboat in care of the chamber maids. She would ride the steamboat to Baltimore to visit her mother in the summer. Her mother would meet her at the Light Street Wharf. The chamber maids took very good care of her. She got the best food on the boat. The other boat was the North Thumble. She enjoyed saying with her mother during the summer. Her mother worked at Johns Hopkins Hospital and went to Dunbar High School at night.

03:08 Times were very good because they always had plenty of food. Her grandfather had a garden, chickens, and hogs. They would always get their food in for the winter. They would carry their corn to Charlotte Hall to have it ground for cornmeal. They also worked in share gardening with Jimmy Jones. He planted a lot of vegetables in different places. Her grandfather and other men and children would pick and work the gardens.

Track 02

05:05 Her grandmother and Miss Martha Barnes would bake cakes, pies, and rolls at Scotland Beach and Point Lookout. There were hotels and summer cottages at both places.

05:37 Mr. Jones paid the people who worked in the garden and also gave them vegetables. There were two families that worked the gardens. One family had

about 16 children. She was too little to work in the garden, but she stayed home and made lunch to carry to them. The share garden continued when she left the area to go to school. In the wintertime, her grandparents shucked oysters. Her grandmother also worked at Point Lookout Hotel, Scotland Beach Hotel and for the people who had summer cottages.

- 7:45 Were times better or worse in those days? She was always cared for and always kept clean. Her grandmother made her clothes. Times were better because there was more community cohesiveness then there is now. Nobody wanted for food or clothes for their children. If other people in the community knew that there was a family in need they would get together and help them. If there was someone ill in a family, someone else would come and sit up with the sick person to give the family a chance to rest or sleep. “At that time, doctors made house calls. Her grandmother was always called on to help with the sick. She was also a midwife and delivered quite a few babies (black and white)”. The cohesiveness was there because it was a small community. There weren’t too many strangers in the community except the ones who came to the hotels and cottage in the summertime.

Track 03

- 10:36 Where there a lot of families in economic need during that time? The larger families needed help at times because the mother didn’t work and the father would run a farm, work gardens, oyster, crab, fish and do other things in the area. There weren’t many jobs that took you away from the area. Later they would go to shuck oyster in Rock Point in Charles County and New Jersey to dredge. They also sold the food items to people in the hotels and cottages.
- 13:05 There were other midwives in the area (Carroll) and one in Lexington Park (Clayton). The doctors wanted her grandmother to get her midwife’s license but she wouldn’t get it. If she had gotten her license, she would have been required to go deliver a baby whether a doctor was present or not. Her grandmother would not go unless a doctor was attending. She stay after the birth and would go back and forth until they were well. Several people who her grandmother helped deliver their babies are still alive.

Track 04

- 15:14 What is your earliest memory? Remembering the steam ship rides at three years old. She went on the steam ship until she was about seven or eight. After that, she still went to Baltimore for vacation to visit her grandmother’s brothers and sisters. Her grandmother had two brothers and two sisters in Baltimore.
- 16:30 Describe your relationship with your siblings? She didn’t have any sibling until she was nine or ten years old. He really wasn’t a sibling. Her aunt Nanny (Marie) Barnes raised her cousin. His mother died during childbirth. There were

only boys in his family and the oldest boy was initially taking care of the baby. The baby's father wanted her aunt to come and raise him.

17:25 What church did you attend? They went to Methodist and Catholic Church. Her grandmother was Methodist and her grandfather was Catholic. At that time you had to promise that their children would be bought up in the Catholic Church. Her mother, aunt, and uncles were bought up Catholic and they would still go to the Methodist Church. They went to St. Luke's Methodist Church.

18:10 Did you take family trips as a child? They went to Baltimore, Anne Arundel County and Washington, D.C to visit relatives. If you went by car it took all day. If you went by boat, you rode all night and docked in the morning.

Track 05

19:09 How did your family deal with health and illness? The doctors made house calls. The doctors were Dr. Bean and Dr. King. "Doctor Bean was still making house calls when my first child was born." Both doctors were white.

The home remedies were castor oil for colds. They dipped brown paper in vinegar and put it across your forehead to get rid of a fever. The paper would dry out, so they would keep dipping the paper until the fever went down. They would give them a teaspoon of Vaseline coated with sugar for coughs. They would use sweet oil for ear aches. It was like olive oil. Her grandfather would go out in the early spring and get sassafras bark to make a tea. "It was supposed to be healthy for you." It would ward off a lot of diseases and make you strong. They would use mustard plastered and Vicks Salve on your chest. They would use lemon and castor oil. Sometimes they would use lemon and alcohol to make you perspire to get rid of a fever.

The doctor would be called for something serious like flu or pneumonia.

Track 06

23:25 What activities did you like to do when you were a child? There wasn't much to do except go to church. At Sunday school they would have lawn fest. They would put up four post with tires and let them burn. This was used to light the event. They would have booths and sell lemonade, hot dogs, sandwiches, and crafts. They would have a May Pole. They also had promenades in the church hall. It was similar to a square dance with partners. Their music was provided by a drum, accordion, and guitar. Your partner would treat you to lemonade and cake.

There was a county sponsored field day for all the black children. They would go to Banneker for this event. They played dodge ball, egg race, stick race and had

relays. People would come from as far away as New Jersey for this event. The event lasted all day long. She excelled in dodge ball and relays.

Track 07

28:21 What chores did you have as a child? Her grandmother shucked oysters, so she would get up at three o'clock in the morning to wash clothes. She would help her grandmother wash clothes. There were three tubs of water. One was soapy water with the wash board, next was the rinse water and then the final bluing water. The blue water was used to make the cloths white. Before she went to school in the morning, she made up her bed, put oil in the lamps, and cleaned the lamp shades and living room. If it looked like it was going to storm, she wood get the chips and wood in for the fire before she left for school. She was standing on a box washing dishes and clothes at nine years old. As she got older, she got other chores such as scrubbing floors.

30:05 In her free time she would come home from school and play with herself outside. She would through the ball on the house. She and her grandmother would go and visit people after dinner time in the spring and summer.

Track 08

31:11 How did you get along with your parents? They treated her beautifully. She really enjoyed her life. Sometime her cousins would come down from Baltimore and spend the summer with them. She never got in trouble until her cousin came down to visit. He cousin falsely accused her of doing something wrong and her grandmother was going to beat her with a golden rod until her grandfather said that he saw the cousin do the deed. Her grandmother started after the cousin. She ran through peach, cherry, apple and pear trees yelling "police, police." "My grandmother said theirs no police here."

The golden rod was from a bush with yellow flowers. Her grandmother would take the flowers off and use the stick as a switch. She didn't get many beatings. If she got one, it was because she didn't like to wash dishes. Her grandmother wanted the dishes washed by the time she got back home. If they weren't washed, she would get in trouble.

34:20 She liked visiting family and friend and going on vacation. She also likes it when her grandmother read her bible stories.

35:30 Her grandparents lived in the house where she was born. Her mother lived in Baltimore, Washington and New Jersey. She didn't know her father. Her mother married again when she was nine. They both worked away from the county. They worked at Point Lookout Hotel in the summer. He was a head waiter and she was the head chamber maid. When Mrs. Gaskin was 11 or 12 years old, she

worked for congressman Dyer at a cottage. Miss Louise Burrell did the cooking. She cleaned and washed dishes. This was the first time she worked for a wage.

Track 09

37:09 How did you get to school? She walked to school. She started school when she was five years old. Her grandmother boarded teachers and they would sneak her to school everyday unless the superintendent was coming to visit.

38:00 What was the classroom like? It was a one room classroom with long benches. Three students could sit in a seat. There was a potbelly stove in the middle of the room. The barber shop by St. Luke's Church was the old Scotland Elementary School.

38:35 Who were your favorite and least favorite teachers? Her favorite teacher was Narissa Louise Taliaferro. She was outgoing and made lessons come alive. She used a lot of art as a teaching tool. They did the layout for St. Mary's Seminary in clay and plaster of Paris. Everything she did was picturesque. She was the one who inspired her to be a teacher. She was her teacher through the 7th grade.

Her least favorite teacher was Miss Hall from Ohio. She was a good teacher but she was peculiar. Her grandmother would fix her lunch and she would put it in brown bag and put it under her arm. "Children were like sticks, she didn't have any humor." Everything was strike. She had the makings of an old maid.

Track 10

41:29 What was your favorite subject in school? She loved English and wanted to be an English teacher. She also loved math, reading, and geography. She like history but it would have been her least favorite subject. She did a lot of reading. She had easy access to books because the teachers that board at her house gave her books for her birthday or Christmas. She skipped a grade because she started at age five.

43:25 What did you dream of becoming as an adult? She always wanted to become an English teacher. She wanted to go to Hampton to become a high school teacher. Her mother was not able to send her to college. She had to pay for her to go to Cardinal Gibbons, but when she went to high school in Pomonkey, the county paid for her education. He mother had to pay for her room and board.

Track 11

45:35 Did you parents let you court as a teenager? When she went anywhere, she was with her mother or her aunt most of the time. They would take her to St. Peter Claver festival or dances on Labor Day or the 4th of July. Some young gentlemen

would walk her home behind her grandmother. If she got too far behind, they would call her. She didn't really start courting until she was in college.

48:00 What was it like when you first went out on your own? She would catch a train from Bowie to Washington on weekends. Her mother was cooking at club in Bethesda and her stepfather was chauffeuring.

49:00 What was the money situation like at the time? It was slim and she had to budget. When she came home in the summer, she worked at the Point Lookout Hotel as a chamber maid. At that time, she got her first social security card. The lady she worked for paid her social security. The money she saved paid for her clothes. Her mother and grandmother helped her. When she went back to school all the girls would bring back a care packages from home. Things didn't cost as much than as they do now.

Track 12

51:08 When she graduated from Bowie, it was a three year normal college. The next year it was going to become a college. She felt she needed to work and then go back to college. When she graduated in 1939, she taught in a one room school in Oraville. She walked about 2.5 miles to school. She was paid \$65.00 per month. She paid \$22.00 per month to board. When the weather was bad it took her about one hour to walk to school. You couldn't see the top of her head in some places.

54:00 Was it difficult work? She had a one room classroom of 1st through 7th grade. It wasn't difficult because she loved her work. She is 4'11.5" tall and some of the 7th grade boys were taller then she was. Some of they boys were almost 6' tall. Some were hard to handle. She only had to expel one boy during the six years she taught at that school. He had bought a knife to school and had it out. He was sitting in the middle of the long seat. She grabbed him by the collar and backed him out the door. She called the truant officer and he was expelled the next morning.

Track 13

56:03 What types of worked did you do? She washed dishes and cleaned for Congressman Dyer; was a chambermaid; taught school and help her aunt wait tables at John Bean's waterfront restaurant in the summer.

57:10 What has teaching meant to you? I loved doing what I was doing and loved to see children grasp information. The most rewarding were the years she spent with special ed. To see the children who were limited grasp enough information to be able to work and live on their own. It was also gratifying to have several of her students come back and teach in the same building with her.

- 59:05 How much money did you make? She made \$65.00 per month at her first teaching job. She received \$62.50 after the retirement deduction. She paid \$22.00 per month for room and board.
- 59:50 When did you get married? She married the first time in 1941. She married the boarding lady's son. He seemed to want a marriage of convenience. She was too young to know the difference. She was married for six years, and then got a divorce. She met her second husband on a greyhound bus to Washington. At that time there were no beauticians in the area so she was on her way to get her hair done. He knew her aunt, mother, and all of her family. He said that he wanted to take her out to the movies when she got back in the county. She didn't see him anymore for about three weeks. He knocked on the door and they dated for 1 ½ years before they got married. He had moved to the area from Florida. He was a cement finisher on the base.
- 1:02:40
How did he get to know your family? He came to the area when the base first started.

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Track 01

- 00:00 Parents had a bar and boarded folks. How did he get to know your family? People who came from different areas board with local people.
- 00:46 Why did you decide to get married? He was a nice young man and she was still young and she didn't want to be alone. He was very protective and very loving.
- 01:25 What was your honeymoon like? "Which one"? They went to New Jersey and Delaware. It was very nice.
- 01:50 What was your family life like? Her relationship with her husband was very good. Of course they didn't see eye to eye on everything, but they worked things out. They were always on the same wave length regarding the children. There family had a good relationship. Her oldest son (Robert James) graduated from University of Maryland Eastern Shore. Alonzo graduated electronics school in Baltimore. Bernadette was at Morgan when her husband died (1973). The children have been protective of her. She couldn't want any better children.

Track 02

04:35

Robert is the Personnel Supervisor for the Prince Georges County Board of Education. Bernadette, Alonzo, and Letha all live in St. Mary's County. Bernadette works in personnel at SMECO. "Letha didn't grasp as fast as the others." She worked on Base for quite a few years. She married and has two children. "Her husband walked off and left her."

07:32 She has nine grandchildren. One of her grandchildren is teaching in Prince Georges County. She is working on her Masters in Counseling. Alonzo's daughter is graduating from Bowie in the spring. She wants to work with computers. Bernadette's children are next. One is a junior at Great Mills, Marcus is in 7th grade at Spring Ridge; and Marissa is in 3rd grade at Ridge School. Her other daughter has a 3rd and 5th (Sierra Smith) grader at Carver. She has a beautiful relationship with her grandchildren.

Track 03

9:45 What part has religion played in your life? She now attends Zion United Methodist Church. Religion plays a major part in her life. She was a Lay Member for the Annual Conference for several years. She is now an alternate member for the Lay Conference, President of the Adult Choir, Chairman of Worship Committee, Lay Speaker, and Lay Leader. She is a member of the United Methodist Women's Group. She travels with them to different conventions. "Without the Lord in my life, I don't know what would have happened. When my husband died in 1973 one daughter was still in college and one in grade school. My daughter wanted to stop college. I said no because the Lord would make a way. I sat on the steps and asked the Lord to show me the way. Whatever you reveal to me is the way I'm going.

12:30 She called the school to see if they had any scholarships. They said no but told her there was a bank in the area that would help them. First National Bank in Leonardtown approved money for her to finish school. She became a long term substitute at Green Holly.

Track 04

14:43 Bernadette applied and got a job at SMECO. She has worked there ever since. It was her faith and Goad's help that allowed this to come about. Since her husband passed, everything has worked out fine.

16:42 What other community activities do you participate? She is a Membership Chairman for the hospital auxiliary; Links; past President of the Retired Teachers Association; SALT (organization that helps seniors become aware of their surrounding); Eastern Star and NAACP. Talks about the beginnings of the local NAACP branch.

Track 05

20:40 How do you feel about the quality of life in this area? In some instances, there has been much improvement, yet I don't see the closeness of community like it was in the past. Maybe it is because the community has grown larger. "Everybody is going their own way."

There are better jobs. More people are buying homes. Most people didn't have their own homes.

24:10 Are people different now? People don't seem to be connected now. At one time if someone was sick people would be concerned about who was taking care of the children. "Now they just go on their merry way."

Track 06

25:01 Do you think the gains from the civil rights movement have impacted the cohesiveness of the African American Community? "It has in some areas, it has brought them closer, but we have a long way to go." People need to be more like a closer nit family of all colors. People need to do things together regardless of color. Race relations problems are due to the lack of communication.

Track 07

30:21 One of the major problems with integration is that there are not enough black teachers. For some reason some of the teachers seem to be afraid of the students. Some of the teachers are not getting to the students based on the curriculum. The history and science curriculum does not have enough information about the contributions blacks have made.

"There is more then one thing that has to happen with the curriculum, teachers, and the students. A whole lot needs to be done."

34:50 A lot of school are desegregated because of districting. There are very few black students in Hollywood Elementary. It is really not pure integration. The more they redistrict the more they segregate.

Track 08

35:10 "The schools need more money and the superintendent has to do what the Commissioner dictate to them".

36:45 How are the teenagers different now in St. Mary's County? They are quite different because of one parent families. Even in the two parent families both parents have to work. They are like latch key children that are left on their own. When I was coming up, my grandparents were home when I got home from

school. Most children are home two or three hours before their parents come home. There is a lack of discipline. Now you can't touch them or look at them "real hard." "If you don't do this, I'm going to report you." "That has been the failing of our society." The discipline has been taken away from the parents, teachers, and principal. When she was coming along, you did what you were told to do.

Track 09

40:31 Some of the parents chose not to discipline. Some parents are weak or afraid. "When we came along, discipline was handled in the home. Children now have too much freedom, starting with the TV." Now kids come to school telling teachers "you better not hit me." Parent and teachers are on opposite sides.

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Track 01

00:00 Parents use to go to PTA meetings. At one time the parents would come to find out what was going on and what they could do to help. Now there is so much talk about philosophical things that parent don't understand what they are talking about, so they don't come.

01:16 The parents use to help build schools. When they had fund raisers for bricks to build schools, students would take bricks from their parent's chimney's to help build schools.

01:46 At one time teachers would have to visit each child's home twice per year. Parents don't try to have parent teacher's conference when their children come home with poor grades. "You can't be to busy for you children".

Track 02

04:28 Are race relations different today in the county? What was segregation like? Where you ever afraid of anyone practicing hate in the county? Race relations have come a long way because of the people coming into the county. They have helped change the race relations in the county. Some people that came from other places said that never looked at color because they were raised around all types of people.

05:34 Segregation was tough. It was even segregated in the churches. Her mother always made them sit up front in church and they could not turn around when the door opened in the back of the church. She went to a funeral in a Catholic Church and was stared at like she was an animal because she sat in a pew towards the front of the church. When she went to give a peace offering to a nun, she put out her hand and the nun would not take her hand.

07:03 The movies were segregated. They had to enter the movies through the back stairs. She only went to the Leonardtown movie once. Her date took her to the movie theater in Leonardtown. She was so upset about going up the back steps through the “colored entrance” that she never went again.

08:54 You had to go up the back steps and doors to go to the hospital, stores, and bars. They had white only signs.

Track 03

09:17 She was so curious that she went into the bar anyway. When she was a little girl, she was able to go into white homes when her grandmother would deliver babies. She played with the little white kids and even slept in the beds with them.

Track 04

12:09 Things haven't change much in the 7th District in Clements and other areas. When she went to a forum at Leonardtown High School, there were several “red necks there.” She had a confrontation with a man whose children needed to be inoculated for school. When she went to his house to inform him of the law, he cursed and said “no so-and-so Nigga was going to tell him what to do.” “I’m sure there are still some in other areas of the county, but you can still see them in the 7th District.

Track 05

16:29 One parent called her office and said that his child needed shoes. She said OK and that she would pick his wife up to go to the store to get the child some shoes. He said, “What color are you”? “I said green.”

17:04 In some areas people are really trying to change. The Raley’s that owned the grocery store had issues, but their boys have bought them around. Racism comes from the parents, if you could get the children together things will change.

Track 06

19:00 When one of her daughters was sick in the hospital, the patient who was sharing the hospital room complained to Dr. Bean. Dr. Bean said, “she has just as much right to be here as you”. The next day Mrs. Gaskins went to the ladies bedside

and asked her how was she feeling and was she feeling better today. She was holding her hand when she asked the question. The lady told her in a nervous voice, “I feel much better.” “I hope she wasn’t going away from here because I put my hand on her. I said Lord I hope she isn’t having a heart attack.”

20:23 When she went to Israel on El Al Airline, one of the white women on the flight made several attempts to move to another seat to keep from sitting next to her.

Track 07

23:50 How do you feel about living in the county? If you had a choice between living in the city and living in the country, which would you choose? “I like the country. I never liked the city because I was afraid of the city. The country is quit and you get to know people better.” She didn’t even want to live in Lexington Park. “There is a difference between the country and city mouse.”

25:50 What do you think of the direction the county is going in today? People don’t have as much say in what’s going on like they use to. People are not informed before things are done. There is not as much cohesiveness now.

Track 08

27:25 How have you contributed to the county through your work (paid and volunteer)? What awards and certificates have you received? She also belongs to the Democratic Club. “I think I have made a difference by working with children and families. She also worked in juvenile court for 10 years. She was the liaison between the court and the board of education. She helped with Green Holly which was the first all state funded school in the county. She has been involved with the county for 46 years.

29:57 She has received numerous awards. She received an award from the Governor for working with the handicap. She received a community service award from the Mason’s; community award from the Maryland Eastern Stars; and volunteerism, to name a few.

Track 09

33:45 What do you consider the most valuable thing you’ve ever had? She could not have lived without having the opportunity to teach and work with people and without the Lord as her helper.

35:55 Have you done everything in life that you wanted or planned do? No, she wants to go to Alaska and Hawaii.

36:10 If you had to go back and live your life over again, what would you change? She wouldn't have gotten married so young. Her life has been a success and happy. There nothing she would change.

37:30 What do you feel has the biggest changes in this county in your lifetime? The physical area of the county (highways, development, and base) brought many changes. Also the changes in the school facilities and churches. There are more churches. The physical make-up of the county has change tremendously.

Track 10

39:01 What was life like for your grandparents? She remembers two great grandfathers, two great grandmother and two grandmothers. They mainly traveled by horse and buggy. They lived in homes that had wood stoves for heating and oil lamps. One of her great grandfather was a slave towards the end of slavery. He told her about how master would put them in a hut. The slaveholder was lenient with him (may have been because it was towards the end of slavery). He talked about having to get up during the night to cut wood for heat.

They talked about having to work on the farms and living on other people's farms. What work they had to do. How they had to take care of the other peoples children. How they had to live in close quarters with their children. How the children became helpers on the farms as they grew.

Track 11

43:00 How did black folks get news/information when you were growing up? They got their news from battery operated radios. There wasn't a radio station in the county at that time. They got a newspaper about once per month. They got the Afro from Baltimore. Now they get there news from the telephone, radio, television and newspapers.