

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

Estelle Clayton

Interviewed by Merideth Taylor

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At her home

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[this interview is not logged]

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1 hour, 11 minutes, 42 seconds

- Merideth Taylor: I think we're set. Alright, this is Merideth Taylor with Estelle Clayton, and we're doing an interview for UCAC. Um, we are at the home of Estelle Clayton. And, uh, her home is in, uh...
- Estelle Clayton: Fort Washington.
- Merideth Taylor: Fort Washington, Maryland.
- Merideth Taylor: Okay, it's going now.
- Estelle Clayton: Go ahead. You can start ... Just start again. Tell me about where you grew up, and, how you grew up, where you lived.
- Estelle Clayton: I grew up in a area called California, Maryland, and the home place was, uh, situated where it's, the CVS is today on 235. Uh, during our childhood, they ... Grandmother and Grandfather raised my sister ... We call her Teeny ... and my two cousins, Deloris and Loraine Smart.
- Estelle Clayton: Uh, Grandmother and Grandfather were lovable parents, and they were very strict. They want the poor girls to grow up to be young ladies. Uh, we were assigned different tasks at home. Uh, at that time, I would have to go to the store in California ... a little grocery store ... and we would get the food on time from George Abel. And George Abel, at the end of the month, would tell Grandmother how much they owed for the food.
- Estelle Clayton: Uh, also, uh, at the same time, Grandmother served Biscoe, which was my grandmother's, Estellee Chase stepmother, would come down in the summer to, uh, pay for the food that she received from George Abel. And of course, George Abel, at that time, was the father of my step-grandmother's daughter, Rosie Gladden ... though she was Rosie Biscoe Gladden. And, when Grandmother served, Biscoe would go and see how much she owe, George Abel will say, "You don't owe anything," because he knew he was the father of her child.

- Estelle Clayton: Also, um, we had a crop, where Grandfather would raise some potatoes and corn ... uh, string beans, and we'd get, and we would pick string beans ... Grandmother would do a lot of canning at that time to survive. We would ... At that time, we would have to sterilize the jars by scalding them in a big pot ... Sterilize the tops and the rubber bands. And then, you would put them in the jars, and on the top them, you'd either put wax or a tiny bit of salt on top of the preserve that you made. That would keep them from spoiling.
- Estelle Clayton: In the wintertime, Grandfather would make, uh, uh, a thing that were called a kiln. I think that's the word. And it was a big hole, and they would put straw in it, and then Dad, Grandfather would put the potatoes and cabbage in that, and it would last during the winter. And that's how we preserved some of the food.
- Estelle Clayton: Also, they would kill hogs at that time, or pigs, and they would preserve they meat. It would last during the summer with a lot of salt and, um, brown sugar, and that would keep the hams during the summer, and it wouldn't spoil.
- Estelle Clayton: Also, something I hate to do was to kill chickens. That was a terrible thing. The poor chicken ... You would kill him, cut his head off, then you would put him in a pot of hot water and you'd scald him, and then you pluck all the feathers off him, and then you would put newspaper and you would cinch him, get all the little feathers off him. Then, you would cut him up, and then you would eat him. Poor chicken had a time.
- Estelle Clayton: Also, Grandmother would make quilts, and we would have to cut the pieces out and sew 'em by hand. Everything was sewed by hand. Then, she would buy real thick cotton and put in-between two pieces of material, and the quilt would be enough ... Put together would make a spread or blanket for the winter. Sometimes, it'd be so cold in the wintertime, my grandfather and my uncles would have old coats from the army. We would put the coats on the end of our beds to keep warm. And all four of us girls would sleep in one bed; be two at the head, and two at the foot. And then the teacher will say, "Put the windows up for fresh air." We didn't have to put any windows up; was enough holes in the house. We didn't need to put the windows up.
- Estelle Clayton: Uh, also, in the summertime, um, my father's cousin would work for this white people where the base is now in the waterfront, and that was Mr. Brown's home. Was Helen Hayes's father. And, um, we'd call cousin Annie "Chase," would come and get the four girls of us: Deloris, Loraine, Teeny, and I, and we would dance for Helen Hayes in the summertime. Uh, Helen Hayes would buy us beautiful dresses every time we came down, and we would play with her daughter, Mary, who was around our age. I think we were around 9 years old at that time.
- Estelle Clayton: Um, also, Grandfather Arthur Chase would make moonshine, and he would drink more than he would sell.

Alma Jordon: (laughs)

Estelle Clayton: And that's how ... He would sell it and he would help him survive.

Estelle Clayton: Then, um, also, we began to improve our way of living by people playing numbers. And the guy will come around and collect our player number. If you play for a penny, you get \$5. And that's how a lot of blacks began to get ahead, by playing the numbers. And now, they'd pick the numbers now, making a lot of money, from what some of the black people start doing.

Estelle Clayton: Um, also, I went to elementary school, and at that time, was called St. Francis, and it's across the road from the home place on 235. The grades were from one to eight, and I was in the first grade, and my uncle, Emery, was in the eighth grade. The school was a little one-room school. We would read ... They would give us the books that the white people, children had, and then we had to use secondhand books. We had secondhand desks. Um, we had outside toilets. We didn't have running water. Um, we used mayonnaise jars for to drink water out of a cooler. And the floors were used with old oil that we'd get from cars and put it on the floors. The desk would seat three children to a desk. Um, outside, uh, toilets, you'd have to use this soft tissue paper sometimes that come from Montgomery Ward or Sears Roebuck. And, uh, and the old toilets when we went out because we'd run out of paper.

Estelle Clayton: Um, we would bring our lunch every day to school. One day, something really happened funny. Um, a cousin of mine, um, came to school with his lunch, and the teacher told him to pass the lunches out. Instead of him passing the lunches out, my sister, Teeny, passed the lunches out. And, of course, she dropped the lunchbox that he had, and in his lunchbox, he had these hard pancakes and cabbage for his lunch. The pancakes hit the floor, started rolling like little wheels under the desk. (laughs) We were laughing.

Alma Jordon: (laughs)

Estelle Clayton: (laughs) It was so funny. He got upset, but we couldn't stop laughing. To see those pancakes rolling up on the desks ... But, we had fun. Uh, we'd play ball at recess time.

Estelle Clayton: And then from St. Francis, we went to school at, um, Patuxent Beach School. And, then, from Patuxent Beach School, then we moved to Jarboesville high school, which was, um, two sections of a building put together like a rectangle. And the elementary teachers on one side, and the high school's on the other side. And then we would always have, uh, uh, play day against Banica and Jarboesville, which was lots of fun. And Grandmother would fry chicken. All the parents would fry chicken and put the chicken into shoe boxes, and then the school bus would take us all to the play area, which was Banica. But we had lots of fun. It was really lots of fun.

Estelle Clayton: Then, Jarboesville changed, and that Jarboesville area now there was a corner store called " Jarboesville Store" on the corner. And on Sundays, that would be the hangout for Mom and Dad, and to buy groceries. And then, um, before they took the base, we had ... we would go to church. We would walk from our house down to the base where it is today, and that was called St. Nicholas Catholic Church. In the Catholic church, we had four pews on each side for the blacks, and the whites had the rest of the, uh, area, were on the church.

Estelle Clayton: The whites would go to Communion first, and then the blacks would go. Uh, the one day ... one Sunday, uh, this man named, uh, Albert Thomas, was so upset, so he went hunting one night and caught a owl, and cut the feet off the owl, and then that day ... that Saturday before Sunday, he put the owl feet in one of the white people's pew. And when the white person came in, they wanted to know who put these owl feet in the pew. No one said nothing, but we went through it.

Estelle Clayton: Also, we had a recreation center there, uh, at the church where we began to have ... play games, and the government would pay for that on every Saturday. And the two people in charge of that was Marie Barber and Frank Thomas. They were in charge, and they would pick us up on Saturdays to play there.

Estelle Clayton: Uh, but, we had a good life. Getting back to, uh, Grandmother and Grandfather, uh, they were very protective of us, and they, uh, would say, uh, not to go to the car ... Don't let ... Don't go to a car to greet a young fella. Let him come to the house. And our parents would always want to know about his background. "Where did he come from? Who are your parents? Where did they live?" And, Grandmother would always say, "Don't do anything to hurt the family because it'll affect all of us." And that has stuck with me today. Whatever you do, in the family, it affects all of us, not just one part of the family. And, that's the part ...

Alma Jordon: Oh.

Merideth Taylor: Uh, could we ask you some questions about some of the things you said? I mean, it was great that you did have-

Estelle Clayton: (laughs)

Merideth Taylor: ... so much, uh, story.

Merideth Taylor: Uh, the owl feet? Um, did that have some, do you think, special significance? Why, why would the owl-

Estelle Clayton: Well, I wasn't ... I think it was because the claws on this foot, on the beak ... If he didn't even see them and he would sit down on them, he would have to jump up and move. I think that maybe that was one reason.

Merideth Taylor: Yeah, yeah. Thank you.

Estelle Clayton: You know, uh, maybe the position of the feet ... You know, to put them up-

Merideth Taylor: Yeah.

Estelle Clayton: You know, you know-

Merideth Taylor: They would look threatening.

Estelle Clayton: I guess ... Right. That was really funny. Right.

Merideth Taylor: What about ... Um, I also wanted to ask you, uh, when you danced for Helen Hayes-

Estelle Clayton: Helen, right.

Merideth Taylor: ... What kind of dancing?

Estelle Clayton: We did, uh, uh, um, tap dancing.

Merideth Taylor: Oh. So, where did you learn to tap dance?

Estelle Clayton: Uh, from my aunt, Eunice. Mm-hmm (affirmative), she taught us that dancing right. It was Deloris, Loraine, and Glory, and I; all four of us.

Alma Jordon: Where did she learn to tap dance? How did she learn?

Estelle Clayton: She just done it one her own. Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's how, um ... Your Aunt Eunice is, uh, Yvonne and [inaudible 00:15:07] and all of them mother. Yeah, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Merideth Taylor: And, and, I had one other question about the school. Um, the oil on, on the floor-

Estelle Clayton: Oh, right.

Merideth Taylor: ... was, was it a wood floor, or, or-

Estelle Clayton: Yes, it was a wood floor, mm-hmm (affirmative). Gotta be careful walking on it, and slip down on it.

Merideth Taylor: Yeah. So they recycled that-

Estelle Clayton: Right.

Merideth Taylor: ... that oil.

Estelle Clayton: And then they had the wood stoves and all. Yeah. They ... People in the community, the men would come and make fire in the morning to keep us warm.

Merideth Taylor: And, and so, where was, um, St. Francis again?

Estelle Clayton: St. Francis is across the street from the CVS, the 235 CVS? It's right across the street. Today, uh, Kelly and Viola lives there.

Merideth Taylor: Okay.

Estelle Clayton: And that's where St. Francis hall is.

Merideth Taylor: Thank you.

Estelle Clayton: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Alma Jordon: 'Kay, uh, during your conversation, you talked a lot about your family. Uh, what ... Were all of these your sisters, uh, that you talk about, or were they your siblings, and what were their names?

Estelle Clayton: Well, Deloris, Loraine-

Alma Jordon: Yes, you talked about-

Estelle Clayton: Oh, God. Oh, my sister was, uh, um, Gloria and we'd call her "Teeny." And, and, my sister and I parents was my, my grandmother's oldest daughter, Alice's, children. Loraine was my mother's sister. She was the next oldest sibling, and her children was Deloris and Loraine.

Alma Jordon: 'Kay. And your grandparents ... Tell, tell us their names.

Estelle Clayton: My grandparents' name, uh, Joseph Arthur Chase, and my grandmother's name was, uh, Edith Estellee Chase-Biscoe.

Alma Jordon: Okay.

Estelle Clayton: Biscoe. Some people think that Briscoe is the same, but it's not. It's two different people.

Alma Jordon: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Estelle Clayton: Okay.

Alma Jordon: Now, you mentioned there were the four of you there at the house with your grand ... grandparents. Were there other, uh, children there as well?

Estelle Clayton: There were older, uh, children on my grandparents ... They were, um, Irving Chase, Emery Chase, and Bernard Chase. Uh, Eunice and Geneva, they lived on out. They were murdered that time.

Alma Jordon: So, were you actually born in California, or were you born somewhere else in-

Estelle Clayton: I was born in Baltimore city, Maryland.

Alma Jordon: And about what age was it that you moved to California? Did you come to California when you were a baby or infant?

Estelle Clayton: I was, um, I was one and my sister was a little infant baby.

Alma Jordon: Oh, I see.

Estelle Clayton: So, my mother and my father had separated then, and so my mother decided to send us home with Grandmother so she could work.

Alma Jordon: And what type of work did your mom do?

Estelle Clayton: Well, my mom started out teaching, uh, elementary school in Baltimore city. Then, she left and went to Washington, D.C., to work. She worked in a laundry, and at that time, she was making, like, \$24.50 a week. That's what she would ... That's how she'd ... Well, she'd often send ... She'd sent her whole check home-

Alma Jordon: Oh, my.

Estelle Clayton: ... and, uh, just to help to take care of us. She had a little part-time job also. She survived.

Alma Jordon: Did your mother work somewhere else when, uh, during that time while you were at your grandparents'?

Estelle Clayton: Yeah. My mother, uh, also worked in the federal government. Then, they, uh, shut down that ward, and then she got a job at Chevy Chase Country Club.

Alma Jordon: And what was that like?

Estelle Clayton: It was a beautiful place. It was in Chevy Chase, Maryland on Connecticut Avenue.

Speaker 4: [inaudible 00:19:48] (laughs)

Estelle Clayton: I have to call you back.

Merideth Taylor: Thank you.

Alma Jordon: Scared me. (laughs)

Merideth Taylor: (laughs) We were really, really focusing. That was good. Yeah, I'm sure we wanna hear more about that.

Estelle Clayton: Why would they call at this time?

Merideth Taylor: It's okay.

Estelle Clayton: Did you cut it off? Start again?

Merideth Taylor: No, I did not. (laughs) We will take that out later.

Alma Jordon: Okay, you were talking about-

Estelle Clayton: And at that Chevy Chase Country Club, and there she became the, uh, supervisor of, of the cleaning up at the club. She was there. That's what my mother worked for. She worked there 38 years. And then, for her retirement, when she ... after she worked for 38 years, they gave her \$318 a month for retirement money.

Alma Jordon: Now, you lived with your grandparents, um ... Did they live on a farm, or, or ... What was, uh, their livelihood?

Estelle Clayton: Okay. The, the place where Grandmother and Grandfather lived belonged to my grandmother's father, which this lady ... What was her name? She was a white lady that gave this land to my grandfather. And from the history that my daughter looked up, uh, Sheila Renee, she put connections that this white lady probably was in love with my mother's father before, and probably ... She gave him this land. It was, I think, uh, eight acres of land that she gave him. And that's how he got this land. That's it. At that time, um, it was a hush-hush thing, you know? That white and blacks were together. But if you looked at ... My grandmother was birthed there, and my grand, uh, my mother's grandfather was a ... I forget the name they call when they crossbreed ... uh, mulatto? Mulatto. Right.

Estelle Clayton: And, uh, then after, uh, my mother's mother died ... My grandmother's mother died in childbirth. Then, my grandmother's stepmother, named Sarah Biscoe ... Her husband died, and she had a child by George Abel. Further back I talked about ... But, my stepmother's father died in the St. Mary's River, down in St. Mary's City. And, that's how they ... Then, they decided to get married. My mother's ... My grandmother's father and Sarah Miles Biscoe decided to get married, and to raise my grandmother, Estellee Chase-Biscoe. That's how they got together.

Estelle Clayton: I have to call you back.

Merideth Taylor: We'll just take it out.

Merideth Taylor: Um, he drowned in the river?

Estelle Clayton: Yes, in St. Mary's City River.

Alma Jordon: Okay. And ... But, this was your grandmother's stepmother?

Estelle Clayton: Right.

Alma Jordon: And her name was Sarah-

Estelle Clayton: Sarah Biscoe.

Alma Jordon: And the land belonged to her?

Estelle Clayton: The land belonged to, uh, my, my grandmother's father. And then they got married. Then, Grandma Sarah became ill and she turned the land over to Edith Estellee after she died. That's how she got the land.

Alma Jordon: And that was your grandmother?

Estelle Clayton: Right.

Alma Jordon: Now, um, you talked about, a little bit about, uh, the food that you raised. Uh, can you elaborate on, you know, your meals and what you cooked and that type of thing?

Estelle Clayton: Oh, um, Grandmother ... Grandfather would cut the wood to put in the old wood stove at that time. And then we had an old ice box that the man would come along and put so many pounds of ice in the old ice box. Then, he'd put a pan underneath the ice box, catch the water. You had to empty it before it flows over, and had to keep the food warm.

Estelle Clayton: Some people used to make ... Uh, they'd take the butter ... And we, and we used to make butter. We'd put the ... take the cream off of the top of the milk that you get from the farmer's, and you put it in a jar, and you would shake it and shake it and shake it, and it would turn to butter. And then they would put it in a wooden, little wooden round thing shaped round and had a little print on top of it. And, some of the butter ... Some people put the butter down in the wells to keep it ... to stop it from burning, but we had our ice box.

Estelle Clayton: And then we had a old wooden stove, and on the side was a thing called warmer. We had to put water on that to keep it warm. Then, over top, you had a warmer. You had to keep the bread and other food warm, um, for the food.

Estelle Clayton: And, most of the time, we had fried potatoes and onions every morning, and the old bacon that Grandfather had from the hogs. Um, we had preserves. And Grandmother made biscuits every ... two or three times a day, she made homemade biscuits, and they used, uh, flour and baking powder and lard, and then the [inaudible 00:27:10] that spoiled from the milk, and mix it together, and then she would throw it up and make the biscuits. And you had, um, butter on the biscuits and pear preserves or tomato preserves, all kinds of preserves. And then, Grandfather would take the peelings and make wine out of the peelings. That's how they made the wine.

Estelle Clayton: Also, Grandma Sarah would, uh, take cornmeal and make cornmeal wine out of cornmeal, and it was so strong. Then, they would take apples and make what you call "applejack". They'd make applejack and put liquor in it. Grandma Sarah also made, uh, soap. She'd take the ashes from the stove, and lye, and all old bacon grease, all kinds of grease. And then, she would mix it up, and then she'd take some perfume and put it in there to make it smell. And we'd use that for soap to wash Grandfather's old pants that had grease and stuff in them, and they would come clean. She'd pour it in a pan, and shape it into balls, and that was the soap. She made soap.

Estelle Clayton: So, those were things we had to do, you know, to survive: the canned food and kill hogs, and make things just to survive. And we, as children, we couldn't afford, uh, our ball, so we'd take Grandfather's old socks, and then stuff it with old rags and put a stone in it. And then, you'd cut the top off it so you could tie it real tight, and we'd take a stick for the bat. And then, we made our bases out of wooden ... We played baseball with that, and that's how we'd survive and, uh, playing that game. We played hopscotch, and, uh I was trying to think some other things that, uh, that they, uh, did.

Estelle Clayton: Oh, and in the summertime, the houses, when they'd turn ... The wood on the outside of the houses would turn dark, we had a man to come and call "whitewash" the house. And they'd mix some type of white powder together, and they'd splash it on there. It's funny, it didn't wash off when it rained. And that's how they kept the house ... We'd always have clean yards and, uh ...

Estelle Clayton: Then, if you had a hole in your sock, in the heel of the sock, they would take, um, uh, a thing that looks like a rattler, they'd stick it in that sock, and then you'd take a needle and sew it real tight and save the socks like that.

Estelle Clayton: And, uh, they'd want certain colors, so they would dye clothes, you know, from sheets. Grandmother Sarah made clothes from the beasts, from the pigs and the sacks and wash it; made slips that we used to wear ... underwear and the rubber bands around them, and ... We had to survive. We did.

Estelle Clayton: Uh, another thing at that time, we had chinchies, little chinch bugs. How do you get rid of them? So, Grandfather would go and get what you call, uh, "sulfur bomb," and he'd say, "We have to get out the house and stay out all day. You

can't come back in. Put that in there," and it would kill the ... The chinch would get in-between the mattress all around. Sometimes, they'd use kerosene to put around it to kill the chinch and that.

Estelle Clayton: Uh, uh, I know we went to church one time, and this man had a, a chinch was coming out on the back of his coat. Someone had tapped him and said, "You got a chinch on the back of your coat," and he turned around and he said, "You just like the white folk. Don't want to have me have nothing."

Merideth Taylor: (laughing)

Alma Jordon: (laughing)

Merideth Taylor: How do you spell that, the bug?

Estelle Clayton: The bug, "chinch"?

Merideth Taylor: Yeah.

Estelle Clayton: Ch ... I don't know. They just called them "chinch."

Alma Jordon: Chinch.

Estelle Clayton: I guess. Right. It was funny. We had a good time.

Alma Jordon: Well, it sounds like, you know, you did a lot as far as games, various games, and the dancing, all of that, to entertain ...

Estelle Clayton: We played cards. We played cards. Uh, checkers, dominoes, pick-up sticks, hitch-hop, um ... We played hide-and-go-seek. And then, we played, um, the one who catch the most lightning bugs at the night. Have a jar to catch the lightning bugs, put the top on them, then we can't see most of them. (laughs) Lightning bugs.

Alma Jordon: Well, how did, um, you and your siblings get along? Did you, you know, play all the time-

Estelle Clayton: Oh, we played together, and then my sister and I were the first ones there before Loraine and Deloris came. And sometimes, we'd get arguing and whatnot, and we'd have what you call a "Mason-Dixon line," you know ... Two on this side, two on that side. If you come across the Mason-Dixon line, you're on our side, and then we'd take the clods of dirt and try to hit each other with-

Alma Jordon: (laughs)

Estelle Clayton: ... with the dirt. But, we got along fine. We came up as sisters, you know? We loved each other. And Deloris and I still ... My sister and her sister are dead, but Deloris and I are very close. We come up as sisters.

Alma Jordon: Now, you talked a lot about the things that your family did. Were they many, uh, any health concerns during that time, and how did you treat them?

Estelle Clayton: My grandfather had a disease that no one knew what it was, but it wasn't catching. They took him to Johns Hopkins. They took him to D.C. And every spring, he would break out, and he would shed like a snake. His whole arm would come out ... Real hard skin would come out his hand, and underneath of it would be real raw and soft. Arthur's hair would come out ... He shed, his whole body shed just like a snake. Then, after the summer, then my mother, grandmother had to keep olive oil ... My mother would send olive oil by the gallon to keep it soft. So he'd shed, and he was fine. Every spring, he would break out. And Johns Hopkins said they didn't never seen nothing like it.

Estelle Clayton: And, um, my grandmother died of kidneys. And my mother died of diabetes. Uh, my father was an alcoholic. Um, and, uh, I think most of us, like, high blood pressure. My sister, uh, died of cancer. And, uh, I think that's about it, most of it.

Alma Jordon: How did ... Did you have any home remedies that you use back then to treat minor illnesses?

Estelle Clayton: Right. Uh, if you had, uh, indigestion, you would take, um, baking soda and vinegar, and that would, uh, kill the indigestion.

Estelle Clayton: Uh, Grandfather would clean his teeth ... He would take the pine needles, the long pine needles from the tree, and go between and clean his teeth.

Estelle Clayton: Um, let's see. Grandmother ... Grand Sarah Biscoe would take, um ... what's the name of that green plant?

Alma Jordon: Aloe?

Estelle Clayton: Right, right ... And ball it and mix it, and would heal sores. You know, you go and you get a sore, and they'd heal it right away. Um, I think that was most of what I remember.

Merideth Taylor: What about doctors? Did-

Estelle Clayton: We had one doctor in the area, black and white. It was Dr. Bing. Dr. Bing would have so many people. He would go to sleep and give everybody the same pill, the same pill. Uh, I had my, uh, Tyrone and I ... Dr. Bing was my doctor, and I had, uh, Ty on the Leonardtown Hospital. I couldn't go in the front door. I went in the side door, and when I went in the side door, they had mats on the floor

for us to lay down on, and we couldn't go ... That's where I had Tyrone. And you ... wouldn't circumcise him, and I had to ... Tyrone was circumcised when he was four. They wouldn't circumcise black boys in Leonardtown.

Estelle Clayton: Also, in the movies, we had to go in the side door, in the movie theater. The whites would be at the ... coming at the bottom; we'd be at the top.

Estelle Clayton: We'd go to the store, and if, uh ... Like, if George Abel was waiting on us and some white people come in, he would stop and wait on them, and we would be last to wait on us.

Estelle Clayton: We had to ride the back of the bus. We couldn't sit in the front of the bus. They had a bus coming down, we had to sit in the back of the bus. We couldn't sit up front. But, Grandmother taught us to go along, don't get in any trouble. But, my uncles Irving, Emery ... Uncle Irving, Uncle Emery, Uncle Albert, and Uncle Bernard had just come from the army, and they went to Tennyson's store to purchase drinks, and they told them they couldn't come in the front door. And they had been in the army and come home, so they decided, "If we can't come in the front door, no one else is." They tore up all the chairs, broke down all the glass and everything. They went to jail, but my grandmother got 'em out. From that day on, Tennyson built another store, and then the blacks started going in.

Merideth Taylor: So, he built another store?

Estelle Clayton: Oh, yeah. They tore up that one.

Merideth Taylor: He closed it.

Alma Jordon: Where was Tennyson-

Estelle Clayton: Tennyson's Store is right across the road from, um, something Hanson Lane, up there before you get to California ... What is that street you can go from 235 over to [Great Mills 00:38:33]? What's the name of that lane now?

Alma Jordon: Where the base is?

Estelle Clayton: No. Over-

Alma Jordon: Chancellor's Vine?

Estelle Clayton: Right, Chancellor's Vine. That's quite a while.

Merideth Taylor: And, this was, uh, after World War II?

Estelle Clayton: Right.

Merideth Taylor: And, he built a new store and he accepted, uh,-

Estelle Clayton: Right.

Merideth Taylor: ... colored customers.

Merideth Taylor: And, the hospital, though? They actually had mats on the floor?

Estelle Clayton: Right. I had to stay there a long time. Mm-hmm (affirmative), right. Upstairs ... We were upstairs in a little room.

Alma Jordon: And you stayed there for several days-

Estelle Clayton: Yeah, after that.

Alma Jordon: ... and you slept on the mat?

Estelle Clayton: And I slept on the mat, right.

Merideth Taylor: What kind of mat?

Estelle Clayton: It was, um, not a folding, um, made of vinyl mat, you know?

Merideth Taylor: Like a mattress, or not?

Estelle Clayton: It was the full length of me. I guess it folded in a few parts, something like that.

Merideth Taylor: But, it was on the floor?

Estelle Clayton: Right, it was on the floor. Black people went through something. (laughs)

Alma Jordon: So, did the doctors, uh, come to your houses in those days, or did you experience a doctor coming to your house for any illness?

Estelle Clayton: No, I went to Dr. Been. I went to him.

Merideth Taylor: Was his office in the house?

Estelle Clayton: Did the doctor come to my house?

Merideth Taylor: No. Where was his office?

Estelle Clayton: On Great Mills Road. Dr. Bing's house.

Merideth Taylor: Was it at his house?

- Estelle Clayton: It was on Great Mills Road ... not far from Great Mills High School ... was Dr. Been's office. You know ... Been building is named after him.
- Merideth Taylor: He didn't see people at his house?
- Estelle Clayton: Right, exactly, at his home.
- Merideth Taylor: Oh, he did see people at his home?
- Estelle Clayton: Oh, right. He had his office at his home. Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Alma Jordon: We talked, uh, about your schooling. How far did you go in school, and tell me about what happened with you after your schooling?
- Estelle Clayton: Okay, I, uh, graduated from Jarboesville High School ... I think it was in 1947. And, we started out ... I think it was about 35 or 40 people in our class; when it end up, we would have only 8. Most of them, the girls were pregnant; some of them had to drop out, work on farms. And, we had to take a State test to enter college. I was the only one that passed the State test in my class, and then I decided to go to Bowie.
- Estelle Clayton: The reason why I decided to go to Bowie, because in the afternoons, I would go on the base and I would work for, uh, the officers on the base. I would have to was their babies' diapers and clean the house, and I think I would make, like, \$2.50 a evening, and I decided it's not be a better way. I am not gonna wash diapers all my life. I'm going further. So, [Mr. Meers 00:42:01] at that time told my grandmother that I should go to college and my grandmother said, "I don't have the money. I can't afford her to go." And so he said, "Well, maybe her mother can, uh, send her to college," and my mother said, "I can do the best that I can, but I can't do it all." So, I decided I will work at college and, uh, because I wanted to go.
- Estelle Clayton: So, then, Mr. Meers said, "I will take you there, and I'll see that you, uh, pay your interest fee and your books and things," and he did that, the principal did. And that's how, then, I worked, uh, at the college for a while. And then, my mother and ... met a friend, and he came out to see me, and all the girls were dressed real nice and then ... So, my mother's friend said, "Where is your Sunday dress?" I said, "I got it on." I had on a plaid skirt and a top. So, he said, "Oh."
- Estelle Clayton: So, anyway, they went back to Washington, D.C., and my mother called me on a Monday, and so she said, "My friend has 25 dresses for you to try on, and you pick out what you want," and "can we come out?" So I said, "I have to ask the matron," and at that time, you couldn't have any visitors; you had to sign out to get in. So, they came, and I tried on all the 25 dresses and I didn't know which one I want, so I came out and I said, "I like all of the dresses, but I don't know

which one I like," so he said, "Take them all." From that day on, I was the best-dressed girl on the campus. (laughs)

Alma Jordon: (laughs)

Estelle Clayton: And so then, my mother got a better job and all, and so she helped me a lot. My mother really helped me a lot.

Alma Jordon: So, who was Mr. Meers? You mentioned Mr. Meers.

Estelle Clayton: He was the principal of Jarboesville High School. Right.

Alma Jordon: And you did say you worked while you were going to school. What did you do?

Estelle Clayton: I worked in the cafeteria. I helped to serve meals. Also, I worked in the library.

Alma Jordon: And when you were a child, what did you dream about doing when you grew up, and is that the field that you went into?

Estelle Clayton: Well, I grew up and say, "There's got to be a better way." And I always wished that I could make my grandmother real happy, and having a better place for her to live. And my goal was to always have a family and to have children. I love children. And ... I like to help other people, you know? I like to be kind, I like to be pleasant. And that was my goal.

Alma Jordon: And so you chose what profession?

Estelle Clayton: Uh, elementary teacher. (laughs) I taught 44 years.

Merideth Taylor: Can you tell us more about that? Where you taught, and your first job, and where all you taught-

Estelle Clayton: Oh, my first job was at, uh, Carver Elementary School, under Mr. Meers, the principal that took me to college. He was very proud of me.

Alma Jordon: And after that, where did you go?

Estelle Clayton: Oh, after that, I became pregnant. And then, uh, I left there and went to Baltimore city, and I worked for a private school for emotionally disturbed children, Jewish children. And that as really exciting because all of the children came from very, very rich families, and the parents didn't have time for the children, and the children were looking for love. Uh, they would buy most expensive toys, expensive clothes, and they really didn't want it. And so, I had four children and I could stay overnight with them, or I could just stay in the daytime with them.

Estelle Clayton: And the first day at this private school, we went to breakfast, and we were all sitting around the table to eat breakfast, and they all picked up a fork and they tapped the fork ... This one tapped and the next tapped, and the next one tapped ... The last person to tap the fork took the table and turned it upside down. All the food and everything exploded. So, the principal of the school came to me. She said, "You're going to have to do better because they're trying you." I said, "Okay."

Estelle Clayton: So then, I ... The next day, I told them about what they did, and I locked the door and the principal said, "You're not supposed to lock the door." I said, "I need to lock this door for just a couple of days." And I talked to them each one by one, and I told them, "Come to me," and I hugged them, and I told them I loved them, and showed them kindness. And I said, "You hurt me with what you did to me." And I said to the first one I think was the leader, "You teaching all the others wrong." And I said, "I don't like it." So, from that day on, they started "No, Ms. Clayton" and that, then "Let's be nice to Ms. Clayton." I got them down, so on weekends, I would take one of them home with me on the weekends. The principal couldn't believe it, you know? "What did you do to them?" I said, "Just showed them I loved them." And that helped a lot.

Estelle Clayton: So then, from there, they were looking for teachers in Washington, D.C., for emotionally disturbed children, and I got the job off, uh ... What's it called? Martin Luther King Avenue now, but it was Nichols Avenue at that time. And these children were the, uh, captains at ... What's that base not from Nichols Avenue? I forget the base. Anyway-

Alma Jordon: Bolling?

Estelle Clayton: Right, Bolling. And some of them was from Berry Farms, which was terrible. Berry Farms was a terrible place. Those children would steal tires and watches and money ... Sometimes I have \$250 or more, and they would put it underneath the school. The school ... And every Monday, I would have to have shakedown with the D.C. police on 11th street. I'd report all these stolen things from these boys. They were all boys.

Estelle Clayton: And then, the supervisor came in to observe me. They were shooting beans through the straws. They were giggling. They were laughing. So, the supervisor said to me, "Um, you gonna be out on that Nichols Avenue if you don't control these kids." So I went home crying and saw ... My, uh, stepfather said to me, he said, "Baby, I'll be right back and I'm gonna tell you what to do." So when he came back, he had a little rubber hose about 8 inches long. He said, "Just tap them with that rubber hose and those marks will be on them." So I went back and they carried on, and I shut the door and locked the door. And every time they carry- I'd take one of them back in that room and I'd whale them with that rubber hose and I said, "This is applesauce and cake." And they started doing all the work and whatnot.

- Estelle Clayton: So the supervisor came back. She stared. "Oh, my. They are working so nice." She said ... and this was a little white little boy ... She said to him, "What did Ms. Clayton do?" I said, "No, I'm losing my job. I know I'm gonna." So, the little white boy said, "Ms. Clayton gives us applesauce and cake and we liked it. We done behaved ourselves," so she said, "Continue to give them applesauce and cake." (laughs)
- Merideth Taylor: (laughs)
- Alma Jordon: (laughs)
- Estelle Clayton: So that's what I did. And then from there, I went on to Sheriff Road Northeast off of Benning Road. And then, a boy wanted to hit me with a chair [inaudible 00:51:12] and I stopped him from hitting me. I said, "It's time for me to leave." So, I left and I applied for a job in Prince George's County, and I started with the fourth grade, and that was the integration time.
- Estelle Clayton: Most of the teachers there did not have a degree; they only had a high school degree, and they were all white. But then, it was the rule you must have a degree to teach in [P.J.'s County 00:51:40]. So, the parents took ... Most of all of them took their children out of my room. They didn't want a black teacher teaching their children. And so, um, um, Dr. King, he said, "Well, Ms. Clayton, just do what you're doing." So it was a holiday when they all the children out.
- Estelle Clayton: So, I think it was two families that stayed, and one little boy's father had a law firm, and he came to me and he said, "My child is upset. He's had so many teachers, and no one has helped him. I'm gonna see what you can do with him." That little boy went up so high, just so in love, came up so high and then got out of the community that I was really special in how I'd helped this child. And from then on, all of them come back, from all those private schools, came back to my room, so Dr. King said, "She can't take all of them. Y'all have to go back somewhere else." So, that's what happened.
- Estelle Clayton: And they didn't want, uh ... And I came up ... The supervisor came to, um, Bayton, where I was, and told, uh, the principal there that we should take me out of that school and bring me up here to Barnaby Manor on Wheeler Road because of the behavior of the kids. I said, "Why do I have to go up there?" And he said, "We need a strong teacher." So I went there. And, uh, [Erlina 00:53:23], a friend of mine, her and I was there. So Erlina said, "We need to get these children together."
- Estelle Clayton: So the first thing we did, we went to the parents that summer and got the parents. "You parents need to work with us with these children." And the parents backed us up 100%. That was the best sixth grader class and every school wanted to come to Barnaby Manor to see what we were doing. But, it shows love for these children, and you care, and you need to get these parents

involved. And that's what they're not doing today. You've got to get these parents involved. And the parents need to get themselves involved.

Alma Jordon: It sound like it was a really fulfilling profession.

Estelle Clayton: (laughs) I enjoyed it.

Alma Jordon: Well, you talked a little bit about, um, your church, um, belonging to St. Nicholas. What about things in the community? Did you have church dinners and what did-

Estelle Clayton: Oh, yeah. We had, uh-

Alma Jordon: ... you do for community activities when you were growing up.

Estelle Clayton: We had church dinners. Uh, the dates for the blacks was one time, and the whites was another time for dinners. We didn't work together at all.

Merideth Taylor: For the same church?

Estelle Clayton: Uh, the church was St. Nicholas Church. Um, other churches were doing the same thing. Um, when St. Nicholas Church ... when the base came, then they moved the church to St. Francis Hall where the St. Francis school was. And, uh, then they ... White people started going to Great Mills over that way. They didn't come up here to St. Francis 'cause St. Francis was dominant black. Right.

Alma Jordon: So, where there other things that you did that you, uh ... Do you remember family going on trips or vacations or anything like that?

Merideth Taylor: Um, a lot of them goes on, uh, cruise trips. Uh, I went to ... I took my children to the World's Fair in New York City. And I had my nephew with me and another nephew, and my three children; I had five. And we stayed in New York City. And my nephew, my daughter's oldest boy said, "Aunt Estelle, I know how to ride the train ... the subway." I said, "Okay," I said, "Well, Devon, you take Tyrone and let me take the others." So we get on the subway train, so at the next stop we getting all off. So the train started ... I said, "Devon, come and sit." "Aunt Estelle, I lost Tyrone. He's back there on the other train. I don't know what happened. The people were pushing. I couldn't hold them." I said, "Where's my child? What in the world I'm gonna do?"

Merideth Taylor: But I had taught him the telephone number there, and I taught him where we were staying. I taught all of them that, "If anything happens, you find the police and tell them." And that's what he did. We stopped at the next stop. There he was with the policeman. He was crying, but we found him. That was the World's Fair, but we enjoyed it. But that was a frightening time.

- Alma Jordon: Oh, my goodness.
- Estelle Clayton: Um, um, but I took to all of the places downtown, to all the museums downtown. Uh, we went to Ohio, um, uh ... We would take trips, just the children and I tried to take them to every place we could.
- Estelle Clayton: A thing that was happening at school ... The children need to go to those places, but the book was saying ... You read about it, but you never been there. And, uh, they enjoyed it, talked about it all the time. "Mama, we went a lot of places." I said, "We did."
- Estelle Clayton: And then, in the summertime, I had to pay the rent because my husband wasn't making enough money for paying all the rent and the bills, and I worked at the camp, Camp [Comb 00:57:52]. Every summer, I worked at Camp Comb with the girls. And, uh, I enjoyed that. And that paid more money ... I made more money there than I did teaching, at the camp.
- Alma Jordon: (laughs)
- Estelle Clayton: So, I worked. That's right, I worked.
- Alma Jordon: When you were growing up, and you started going out, how was it dating back then? I mean, how did your parents feel about you going out as a teenager? What age did you start dating?
- Estelle Clayton: When we started out, my uncle, Irving, was the one in charge of us. We'd go to the little joints there. We called them "little joints," or "big," order some things like that. Uncle Irving said, "We in here. You better not come outside. And I better see you in there." And we had to stay in there until he come and picked us up. And, uh, so that's how we started going out.
- Estelle Clayton: And then, uh, my mother's house, like, on Sundays, or holidays, a lot of people would visit her. And that [inaudible 00:59:01] uh, and families. You go to the oldest member's house, and you eat dinner there and you talk and holidays ... And Christmas was at the ... we called it "the big house." And then they'd go back home. For a Christmas gift, we got one toy and, uh, maybe a dress and a pair of shoes. That was it. We didn't get all of these toys, and we did get a book. But you didn't have a lot of toys. We couldn't afford it. But we were happy. You know, we were happy.
- Alma Jordon: Well, you mentioned, uh, having children and, and you have mentioned about your husband. You were married. Okay, you want to tell us a little bit about it?
- Estelle Clayton: Uh, I married, uh, 1952. And we got married at, uh, Immaculate Hall in a Maryland church.

Alma Jordon: And your husband's name?

Estelle Clayton: John Solomon Clayton. John Solomon Clayton.

Alma Jordon: And you had how many children?

Estelle Clayton: I have three. I have one, uh ... The oldest boy is, uh, my husband's child, and the two are my husband and I child.

Merideth Taylor: How did-

Alma Jordon: You want to ... Go ahead.

Merideth Taylor: How did you meet him? How did you meet your husband?

Estelle Clayton: I met him through cousins of mine, Jimmy Hopewell and him were related. And he brought him around to my grandmother's house. That's where I met him. At that time, he was such a gentleman. Uh, he would walk from Carver Heights up to my house. It'd be cold; he'd have a overcoat. Every time he would walk in the wintertime, the, uh, moon would be so bright it'd look like daylight, you know? And wasn't a lot of problems and killing and all of that now, you know?

Alma Jordon: Now, um, I'm sure that you noticed a lot of changes over the years. How did you feel about life in general in St. Mary's County, and how did you feel about St. Mary's County as compared to the rest of the world maybe?

Estelle Clayton: Um, there's a lot of changes in St. Mary's County. Once, St. Mary's County, in the area that I lived in, was predominantly black. Now, St. Mary's County is changing to predominant white. And, uh, the schools are integrated now, not all-black schools. The black children ... I mean, the white children had their own school bus and the black children had their own school bus. Some children had to walk miles and the bus would go past them with the white buses going past. And they couldn't ride the bus; they had to walk, uh, for miles to school.

Estelle Clayton: Um, the schools are more modern now. Uh, years ago, was just little one-room schools, no running water, no playground equipment, no swings, no nothing. We didn't have it. But today, they do have it.

Estelle Clayton: Um, people have better homes now than they used to have, uh, back there. But sometimes, I think they weren't as happy as we were with the little down homes. We were a close family knit, but now it's ... They seem to be more materialistic. Who has the biggest house or the biggest car? It's not like it used to be, you know?

- Estelle Clayton: Um, religion has changed and a lot of them are leaving the Catholic Church or the Baptist Church. There's so many churches, and sometimes it's like it's a business, you know? But we all serve the same God, you know? So ...
- Estelle Clayton: Uh, children are not as polite as they used to be, and mannerism has gone. Uh, I brought my children up to say "Yes, ma'am" and "No, ma'am," "Thank you". If you see a older person with a bag or something, you help them. Or, if you get on the buses, see some lady, if you're a gentleman, you get up and give the lady the seat. But that's all gone. It's not like that anymore.
- Estelle Clayton: Um, a lot of the parents are not sitting down and helping the children with their homework, and once, all parents back in those days, they were concerned, and they were at that school, you know? And they helped their children. But now the parents will get, "Why didn't the teacher ... ? That's why I send you to school. She's supposed to do it." But we need everybody to help our children. Everybody needs to help.
- Estelle Clayton: And the community ... If someone saw me do something wrong, or my cousin or my sister or something wrong, that parent could correct us, but not anymore. They want to fight you now if you correct ... "You have no business correcting my child." They curse you out. They shouldn't be that way. We should love each other, enjoy each other. And I am proud of my children because I see it was hard, but the results is a pleasant thing, and I'm happy with them. I have good children.
- Alma Jordon: Well, I know that you lived near the naval base. How did people feel about the naval base moving to the area? Uh, were there hostile feelings, or did they feel positive?
- Estelle Clayton: Uh, no. Where my grandmother lived, they came ... They put up a big tower and I don't know why they put that big tower there. The first they said, they had to widen the road. It was only two-way traffic: one this way, and one that way; wasn't as widen as it is now. And, uh, they felt happy because those would be jobs. Every eligible soul were hiring and things ... They needed something there. And if you stepped on that base today, what would happen? So, they made a lot of progress, and that base has helped a lot of them down there.
- Estelle Clayton: But most the time it was, uh ... I know Grandfather did a lot of crabbing and fishing, and that helped the family. So now, they have to work ... My uncles worked on the base, and it helped them a lot. So, I think the base has really helped them a lot, but ... yeah.
- Alma Jordon: Is there anything else that you would like to tell us that we haven't touched on?
- Estelle Clayton: No, I think that's about it. I've enjoyed this conversation with both of you.

Merideth Taylor: We've enjoyed it, too.

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Transcript by [Rev.com](#)

Estelle Clayton: Oh. (laughs)

Alma Jordon: It has been really special. Thank you.

Merideth Taylor: So, uh, just, we're finishing up here with Mrs. Clayton and, uh, I hope we got that earlier part. So, you were born in Baltimore-

Estelle Clayton: Right.

Merideth Taylor: ... city. And, do you ... what year you were born there?

Estelle Clayton: I was in Bowie in 1947 and graduated in 1952 ... '51.

Merideth Taylor: From high school?

Estelle Clayton: Oh, from high school.

Merideth Taylor: No, '51 from high school or from college?

Estelle Clayton: From college, from college. Right, right.

Merideth Taylor: '51. Then, got married in '52.

Estelle Clayton: I was 16 when I went to college.

Alma Jordon: Oh.

Merideth Taylor: Whoa. Bright student. (laughs)

Estelle Clayton: (laughs)

Merideth Taylor: Well, thank you so much!

Estelle Clayton: Mm-hmm (affirmative), okay.

Alma Jordon: Thank you.

Merideth Taylor: This has been great.

Estelle Clayton: You're welcome.

Alma Jordon: This was a easy interview 'cause you just, you know-

Estelle Clayton: (laughs)

Alma Jordon: ... you just shared, and-

Estelle Clayton: We had a lot of history. A lot of my friends say, "You have a lot of history." I think I'm the oldest living black teacher of St. Mary's County now.

Alma Jordon: Oh, really?

Estelle Clayton: I don't think, uh ... Ruth Portee, when she died ... Richard (Portee) wasn't born in St. Mary's County, raised in St. Mary's County. Um-

Alma Jordon: Viola?

Merideth Taylor: Viola, gotcha.

Estelle Clayton: Viola's younger than me. Um, what's that ... Holly [inaudible 01:07:59] died. Elizabeth King is dead. I don't know them. Uh-uh (negative). But those are the black teachers from ... I don't know the ones up the county. Um, uh, Alice Smith; she was a very big ... She died. Um, the Somervilles are dead. I mean, uh, uh, Theresa Somerville, Dorothy Somerville. Uh, Frank Thompson-

Alma Jordon: Benzina? Well, she didn't teach.

Estelle Clayton: No, she didn't teach. Uh-uh (negative). I don't know any others up there. So, I think I'm the oldest living black teacher. I'm 83.

Alma Jordon: Are you really?

Estelle Clayton: Yes, I am.

Merideth Taylor: Eighty-three years young. You have to keep going to the gym.

Estelle Clayton: (laughs)

Merideth Taylor: It's doing wonders. (laughs)

Alma Jordon: Wonderful.

Estelle Clayton: Yeah, I go to the gym every day. Walk a mile and a half every morning. And down there, they say, "You are an inspiration to all of us." I had my little walker, and then when I get tired, I sit down; just rest a little bit and keep going!

Merideth Taylor: (laughs)

Alma Jordon: (laughs) That's amazing.

Estelle Clayton: And watch what I eat. Yeah, I watch what I eat, yeah. And my doctor can't believe it. I have a Russian doctor. She is so hard on you. Gosh! She's hard on me, I'll tell you, but I like her 'cause if you don't do what she say, she'll drop you.

Alma Jordon: Oh, okay.

Estelle Clayton: A lot of them will come in and she'll say, "They don't need to see me. Mm-mm (negative)."

Alma Jordon: That's amazing. That's why you're doing so well.

Estelle Clayton: And my daughter found ... My daughter found ... My daughter's a mess. "I'm gonna get somebody that'll be right on you." But she comes home twice a month and checks on everything, and, uh-

Alma Jordon: Where does your daughter live?

Estelle Clayton: She lives in Georgia. And, uh, up in the mountains. Yeah, the mountains of Georgia. She's the ... one of the directors for Health and Human Resources. Yeah, and she graduated from, um, Maryland University. She majored in English, then she changed it to Health and Human Resources, so she got the degree in Health and Human Resources.

Estelle Clayton: And Irving ... I think Irving has six more credits. I said, "Why don't you finish?" He said, "I'm too old now." I said, "Okay."

Estelle Clayton: And then, Tyrone was the chauffer for some of those people he has there. Who's he chauffer for? But he has had security. Now, what is he the chauffer of? He's-

Alma Jordon: So, some of the Congress people?

Estelle Clayton: Yes, uh-huh (affirmative). He's the chauffer for them. Yeah, but he has top care. But, he's retired.

Alma Jordon: Oh, is he?

Estelle Clayton: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And Reese, his wife, is retired.

Merideth Taylor: What did your husband do?

Estelle Clayton: Hmm?

Merideth Taylor: What did your husband do?

Estelle Clayton: He was working for, uh, Department of Transportation.

Merideth Taylor: Okay.