

UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS
Oral History Documentation Project

BEVERLY WATTS DYSON

July 21, 2007

Interviewed by Merideth Taylor

Videotaped by Aaron Brusset

at her home in Callaway Maryland

Transcribed by Andrew Bove on December 17, 2007

Logged by unknown

Original format is digital video download

39 minutes, 18 seconds

[00:00:00]

Recorder setup conversation between the interviewer and cameraman

[00:00:45] Interview Begins

Merideth Taylor: Okay. Well we're gonna start with just the basics in terms of your name. So, and—if you could, you know rather than just saying, like if I say “what’s your name” you say Beverly Dyson, you would say “My name is...” so that, yeah.

Beverly Dyson: Okay.

MT: Kind of work the question into the answer. And so we'll start with your name.

BD: My name is Beverly Dyson.

MT: And—actually lets do it again with—how about your maiden name as well?

BD: Okay, Beverly Watts Dyson.

MT: My name is...

BD: Okay, gotcha. Alright, you ready? [laughs] My name is Beverly Watts Dyson

[00:01:38]

MT: Thank you. Okay, so, and also this is just kind of the formality, but if you could tell us what years you were at Great Mills High School and when you graduated?

BD: I started at Great Mills High School September, 1964. And I graduated in June of 1968.

[00:02:06]

MT: Perfect. Okay so just a little general background. Tell us a little bit about your folks and who made the decision, or how the decision was made for you to attend Great Mills High School?

BD: My parents were the Reverend and Mrs. Garnett Watts, and it was my father's decision that it was time for schools—Schools at that time were beginning to integrate, and then he felt that I should improve my education. 'Cause he felt that the education might have been a little bit better at Great Mills, so that's—He was the one that decided that I needed to attend Great Mills High School.

[00:02:53]

MT: And tell us about how you felt about that?

BD: I didn't want to leave George Washington Carver, because George Washington Carver had all my friends and I was just used to that school. I had been going to that school since kindergarten. And, well first grade, at the time. So I was getting ready to enter the ninth grade. And that was a long time at one school. I just did not want to leave that school. But when parents decide what you gotta do you gotta listen at your parents.

[00:03:28]

MT: Okay. Okay, so far so good. Great. Well, if you could kind of picture the scene for us. You know when you go back to that, now go way back to that first—I think, should we close the door?

BD: No that's him in the bedroom.

MT: Oh that's the dog. [inaudible] Good, alright. Okay. When you think back to, you know, that summer, and looking forward to the fall and you were getting ready to go to school. Or even like the day before. Just that period of time. What were your thoughts or feelings about entering Great Mills?

[00:04:19]

BD: Well, at first I was very nervous because this was a whole new environment. It was, I was going in a different environment. I was going into a whole white school, and I was wondering if they were ready for the integration part. But it made me kind of very nervous. But on my first day it wasn't too bad because at that time they—some of the kids didn't ride the busses. They were still—you had to ride the black busses, and the white kids rode the white busses. So I rode my father's bus to school. So that, that made it a little easier 'cause I—at least I rode to school every day with my friends. Everybody

that I knew. Then I had to get off at Great Mills and depart, but you know, it wasn't that bad.

[00:05:16]

MT: So your—how did your father end up driving a bus?

BD: My father was a bus driver, also. He drove for the public schools in St. Mary's County for many a year.

MT: Were there any other—you were the only student that got off that bus there?

BD: I was the only student that got off that bus at Great Mills High School.

[00:05:43]

MT: So as you, you know, as you got into the swing of things there that first few months, how did things change?

BD: The first few months was—the first couple of months was kind of hard, but then a lot of the kids just got used to seeing us. And some of the kids were like military kids or, and some of them were from right here in the county, and they grew up with black kids. So it didn't bother them one bit. You know? So they started becoming friends to us and it started, it got to be a lot easier in some ways, but then you still had some kids that just weren't ready to accept it. And I had my girlfriend with me, Lorraine, which that was the one my father knew cuz they said we needed to separate cuz we was always getting in—we weren't getting in bad trouble in school, but you know, we were called into the principals office several times. But I had her, and it was, it wasn't bad. I had my buddy.

[00:06:46]

MT: What were the—do you remember any particular incidents of, of any of the white kids being particularly welcoming?

BD: Well, a lot of them you know, they came to us and told us, you know, to, you know, don't pay attention to the other ones, they're a little ignorant in the fact of—that we were black and they were white. And, you know, stick around with them. If anything went down they were there for us at all times. But, you know they were very good about that. They stuck up for us. They really did.

[00:07:19]

MT: So could you talk a little more about—like, how many, you know, were there particular—was it just a few white kids and just say—talking about, work in the white kids so we know who you're talking about. Just talk a little more about the attitudes of the white kids if you would.

BD: Oh their attitudes towards us? How they acted towards us during the time that we were there? Sometimes we could enter into the classroom they would raise up the windows

MT: Yeah I'm really sorry. But, it's the attitude of the white kids. Just put that in there so the listener knows you're talking about the white kids.

BD: Oh okay. The attitude of the—the attitudes of the white kids at the school when we started there. They would, we would walk down the hallways and some of them would get up against the walls and stuff like, you know, we were diseases. We could walk in the classrooms, they would open up the windows because they said there was an odor coming in. As we'd go down the halls sometimes we would be called the N-word. It was, you know, it was just a little, small little things that they did.

[00:08:34]

MT: I was really shocked the first time I heard those things.

BD: Oh yes ma'am, it happened.

MT: Okay, what about—talk a little more about the teachers at Great Mills.

BD: We had some wonderful teachers. The principals were remarkable. At the time when I first started there, Mr Marvin Joy was the principal. Mr. Duke and Mr. Moses, and they were very remarkable. The teachers we had, some were—they were kind of still a little negative about it. But the majority of them were very welcoming, very helpful, and very understanding. They were—some of them were very special, but some of them gave us the little attitude also.

MT: Well talk a little more about that. About specifics.

BD: We had one teacher that one day point blank told us that we should return back to our schools. We shouldn't be there. We should go back to where we belong. You know. And we had one teacher that one time we went into the class—this was wintertime and it was cold. And some of the kids had put the windows up and instead of him telling the kids to put the windows down, he went along with them. But it wasn't, it wasn't that many. It wasn't but a couple in the whole school that did nasty things like that. And when we told the principal about it, we informed the principal, the vice principal about it, it never occurred again. We had never had anymore problems.

[00:10:15]

MT: How were the white teachers different from the black teachers that you had? Or were they different?

BD: They were. They were much different because the black teachers when I went to Carver—the black teachers, it was one positive thing about them. They made sure that we were, we were taught very well. They were, they were very good about giving us an education. They took time with us. At Great Mills it was much different. The teachers there weren't—they didn't put, they didn't show as much concern towards our education as the black teachers did. We were, by the time Lorraine and I and Thomas Sexson (sp?) had left Carver we were well advanced. We were more advanced than some of the kids at Great Mills. A lot more advanced.

[00:11:15]

MT: What do you think about the teachers? Why do you think that was that the teachers didn't seem to—was it that they weren't paying as much attention to you?

BD: Some of them weren't. You know, some of them would just—you would come in the classroom, they would tell you to read. Take a chapter, read a chapter, and they would go off, sit behind a desk and read the books or do whatever they had to do. But some of them would take time, you know, and really have a class. But a lot of them that—I mean I learnt how to live off the land, to survive off the land and how to trap a bear. And different things like that. I learnt that in class, I sure did.

MT: Was this at Great Mills?

BD: Yes it was, yes it was. It was at Great Mills.

MT: That's something I've never heard before.

BD: Oh yes. We had one teacher who told us about how to live off the land. How to survive. That was English. [laughs]

[00:12:22]

MT: Has that been useful to you?

BD: Well if I ever got in a predicament and got stuck in the woods I would know how to survive. Sure, it will come in handy I'm quite sure.

[00:12:35]

MT: Well you had talked before about some of these teachers who really were not ready. You know--

BD: Right.

MT: --for desegregation and, actually talked about an incident where a teacher used the N-word in a class. Is that true?

BD: Yes it is.

MT: Could you just start at the beginning of that story again and tell us about it?

BD: One time were in class, and we were walked in the classroom, and when we walked in the teacher was in the room and he turned around and looked right at us and said “well, we have several Ns in the class today. Let’s welcome them in.” And then again he used the sentence again when he was referring to a question. He was stating, you know how teachers generally ask questions to their students? So he was asking a question and he reflected to me. He said “well Im gonna ask the N-person over there this question.” Yes he did.

[00:13:38]

MT: And tell us about how the students—how you felt or how the other students reacted?

BD: A lot of the kids, students laughed about it. But there was one thing my parents had taught me, some things you have to ignore. It’s a lot of things you have to ignore. Ignore ‘em, cause for one thing, Im there to get my education. I’m not there to cause problems with that teacher, and I just ignored it. And as the principal told us that if we felt, you know, that we were getting a lot of hassle from people to come to them. So right after class I went to the principal and told him what had happened. And in turn, the principal did call him in the office and with me also and my parents. And never had anymore problems out of that teacher then.

[00:14:39]

MT: How about, can you talk a little bit more about how, you had mentioned your friend Lorraine, but what about the other, the few other African American students there. How did—was there any sense of unity between the various African American students?

BD: In a way, yes.

MT: Can you say that in terms of the African American students or black students, whatever you would say, so we know what--, ‘cause theyre not gonna know the question, is what Im trying to say.

BD: Oh okay.

MT: Just talk about your relationship to the other black students, or the other African American students

BD: The relationships that we had when during the time that we were—Well we kind of all, we basically, we all kind of all basically stuck together because we were more

comfortable, I guess, around ourselves. A lot of us were separated in the classrooms. We had different classes. But when we had a chance to meet up together or during lunch; at lunch time we always ate together. And when there was breaks, you know in the hallways and stuff, we would always meet and talk about the different classes. And a lot of the classes we were in the rooms together and we'd sit together. But it was after a while, like I say, it was September, say from September until maybe December, and then after we left to come back for Christmas. It was altogether different. It was like we left out the school with people not liking us and not wanting us there, and then as when we came back into a brand new year, we were welcomed back by so many different people. And it was like, it was kind of strange. We got kind of used to it. I guess they had accepted the fact that we were there. They found out we weren't bad. They found out they could be friends with us. So it was altogether, it was a lot different. It was a lot different coming back. And those people that were say the ones that acted more prejudiced toward us. They had started changing. They had started becoming more friendlier towards us. And we weren't hearing that word "N" anymore. It had completely stopped, unless someone new came into the school and didn't know about it and hadn't seen it or accepted it. But it wasn't, out of the whole population in the school it might have been four people out of all those kids. So it, after we came back it was so much different for us being black and then being white. It was like—I guess we, they said "I guess all the black folks aren't bad after all." They're a pretty good bunch.

[00:17:42]

MT: And what are your thoughts about why that happened? That transition?

BD: We don't really know. Like I said, I guess they got really comfortable with us. They found out that we were, you know, we were just like them.

MT: So you're saying that—I don't think I heard you put a number to it before, that it was really just four kids or so that were...

BD: Towards the end it was. Until the next following year. September of the next year, that's when more blacks came into the system, and then it changed a little bit. It changed a little bit because we had an offset of different kinds of, you know we had some kids, some black kids that are coming in with that attitude you know, "they not gonna mess with me" and, you know, causing a little tension that didn't need to be there. 'Cause that had already smoothed out. So then we were like starting all over again in some aspects, but then, you know, after a while it just smoothed out again.

[00:18:51]

MT: Do you remember any incidents of any kind of violence or physical incidents?

BD: They used to have fights, you know, among...it used to be fights. But I don't, I can't recall any real bad violent things. Not like the ones you hear, you've heard on the

TV about the things that happened in the other schools. No. None of that ever occurred at Great Mills. We were lucky. We were lucky.

[00:19:21]

MT: Was there any difference in—what were the differences, if any, in how the male students and female students were treated? Did you observe any differences there?

BD: The males, at first the males were treated much different than we were. They were disrespected more than, as being female than we were. They were a little bit more ridiculed than they—they had it a little bit worse than we did. The guys did. Why? I don't know. Maybe because of the guys, you know, because the guys hung around—different guys hung around. You know, you had the gym to go to, and a lot of them didn't, couldn't accept that. But they did have it a little bit worse than we, than the females did.

[00:20:12]

MT: How did it work with extracurricular activities and how, were you involved in extracurricular activities, and did the change from Carver to Great Mills...

BD: I didn't do much extracurricular activities at Great Mills. I still had my extracurricular activities at Carver. I still, you know, stayed with the black school when it came to activities. I didn't, we didn't do much at Great Mills the first year there we didn't.

MT: Talk more about that.

[00:20:50]

BD: I don't know why we didn't, but like at Carver we had, we were mainly into basketball and stuff. Like Great Mills was all into football and different things like that. And we didn't really have football, and we were more like basketball. We liked basketball more, so we were more involved in that. And we had like different things, at Carver they had different programs than Great Mills did. And basically I stayed, and Lorraine and I both did stay at Carver with the activities. Then I think in the second year of Great Mills when more black kids came in, some of the more athletic ones, they did start going out then for the different teams. But basically, I can remember back then it was basketball. I do not recall while I was there of anybody really going out for football, but then they went out for track. I did play soccer in my, in the tenth grade. [laughs]. I did play soccer and I played hockey. But that was just during that semester time.

Those are the birds I was talking about!

MT: Where are they?

BD: They are in my chimney!

MT: Oh my goodness. What kind birds are they? It's amazing

Videographer: It sounds like some sort of machine.

BD: They are in my chimney, remember I said as long as the birds don't start singing?

MT: Now I know what you mean.

V: I was like, you know, maybe you've got some live birds in here.

BD: At the outside, the first time I thought that too. I was like oh my god! And my daughter said "why are the birds in the chimney?" [laughs]. They're gonna die in the chimney. I know, but they're right there in the chimney behind this in the fireplace. See I did warn you!

[00:22:51]

MT: Okay. So you talked a little about the changes over the time you were there and the attitudes of the white kids and black kids. And can you talk anymore about—your friends were all at Carver you had said—

BD: Yes

MT: So what other, not so much extracurricular activities, but what else did you do for—talk about what else you did for recreation in that time in your life.

BD: Back there in that time we didn't have much to do, you know? [laughs] It's not like now, you know you have video games and all that stuff. And usually like after you got home from school sometimes you know you would go play with the frie—your neighbors, or like I said, basically we had basketball. We did a lot of bike riding though. We used to—everybody had bikes. We used to ride around. We did bike riding and—I was, I guess I had a little more advantage cuz in my family we had a beach. So you know, we used to go down to the beach and go swimming and everything. But it was, it was much different than it is now with the recreation.

[00:24:08]

MT: Tell us a bit more about the beach and the name of the beach.

BD: The beach used to be down there in Drayden, where I lived and was raised at, and it was called Smith's Beach, which was my uncle's beach. And Smith's Beach was like a place where everybody would go because you had beautiful sand beach and it was, it was all black. It was a all black beach, and my uncle had a he had what they say back then

those days a jukebox, that you could dance. And they used to have busloads come from D.C. and they had picnics and lots of food and big family gatherings. But it was, it was just—it was a whole lot of love and a whole lot of fun. But that was a many a year ago. And we had the little stores, you know we had the country stores. And the little, and you know in the little country stores they you know everybody. Hung around the stores, ate ice cream and whatever. And we was get together and have baseball games out in the field. In the neighborhood we would have make our own little baseball diamonds or play kickball. But it was like, that was basically all we did. You know. Some of us had TVs and some of us didn't. But it was just all so much different.

[00:25:27]

MT: What happened to that? The beach and that way of life?

BD: The beach does still exist. But that way of life is gone now. We got so modern. People don't...forgot the word love. Forgot the word caring. Forgot the word understanding anymore. Everybody's all in a big hurry. And you got so many—you got TV is so popular now. You got video games. You got so many different things that back in that day we didn't have. We had our music, it's true. But, we had TVs, but we didn't have cable. We had antennas but we had to go out and turn the antennas and make sure you got a crystal clear station. And we had a radio station. I can remember the radio station back then. And the man that had that radio station's name was Hoppy Adams. But he used to play all the music that we always wanted to hear. And—oh back there at Carver, where the old school was, over on the side of it, which I think it used to be the health department? That used to be a Rec center. And they used to have little dances and little fun get-togethers for us to go to and things. And that of course, like I said, all that changed. Kids don't know what fun is like anymore. They don't know what the fun we enjoyed in life.

[0:26:56]

MT: What is some of that music that you were talking about?

BD: That old time music. Like Otis Redding and all those people, and Junior Walker. And we had to go to church. You had—back then in those days. Oh, you might listen to your music, and had that, but you were in church every Sunday. Every Sunday. And the good old gospel music back then was really—and they used to have, years ago the churches, the churches all used to have what they used to call homecomings in the summertime. And all each church would have a homecoming so that means that one little church, they would invite the next church, which would all be in the same area because we had, cause I was Methodist. So I think we had six churches in our little area which was one was in Valley Lee, and one was Lexington Park. One was in St. Inigoes. One was in Ridge, Oaksville, and all these little churches would come together and they would have homecomings. And it's like every Sunday that one Sunday they would dedicate that time and all the churches would go and everybody got together and had all that good food. You stayed in church all day, but you enjoyed it. You enjoyed it, you had a good time. You really did. But families was families, then. You know, they stuck

together. It was strong, very very strong. Education was different because no matter, in school, we got, we got beatings if we were unruly. The teachers did not—there was not talking back to your teachers. You respected the teacher. You had to respect the teachers. ‘Cause they was taking the time to teach you. You didn’t, there was no foul language. You never disrespected your parents because what they used to call Miss Menny or what have ‘em. Switches and different things, and belts. Oh yeah I remember all those. But that, that was good times. We loved everybody. We respected our parents to the utmost, and respected our teachers. And we enjoyed going to school. We know when we went to school we were getting something out of it. That we were bettering ourselves. We were gonna make—‘cause a lot of our parents, some of them didn’t graduate from school. Some of them couldn’t read and couldn’t write. But they wanted us to make sure we got that out of life. And that’s why I, they pushed us to make sure we obtained that education. But it’s different now. Much different.

[00:29:43]

MT: What was discipline like at Great Mills?

BD: It wasn’t nothing like Carver.

MT: Discipline, could you say discipline was...

BD: Discipline was altogether different. It was lax. At Carver if we did something wrong the principal, we would be called to the principal’s office. And if it was that wrong, he would tell us point blank—he had a black belt. Mr E. Jerry Williams was the principal. And he had a black belt. Yes, and a, and a long ruler. And I can not—the ruler had a name. And if you came in that office, if you put your hand out there like that. He would tell you “put, hold your hand out.” And they would hit you dead in your palm of your hand. You move your hand, you got ten more. You got ten more licks. Oh yeah. Then we had one teacher that would tell you to put your knuckles just like that and take that ruler and go crack [inaudible]. Plus you go that in school. When you got home you got it again. Yes indeedee. But those kids was good in school! You were good. We didn’t have, whatd you say, bomb threats. All that stuff that the kids do now adays, nuh huh. That wouldn’t, no. That woulda never made it. Never

[00:31:03]

MT: But, but at Great Mills...

BD: You got called in the principal’s office, so if you got called in the principal’s office then they sent you home. You got suspended. But it was no nothing that you knew you was in deep trouble. ‘Cause we were, at one time I think Lorraine and I had skipped school, [laughs] Well the other kids taught us how to skip school, see. Influence. So we had skipped school one day and it was right down the street. We went right down the street to this store. The store is still there. That little Great Mills Market is still there. And we weren’t, we weren’t allowed to do that. We weren’t supposed to do that. So we

skipped and went down there. And during the time we went down there we were on our—we had gone went across the street to the Laundromat over there ‘cause one of the girlfriends mother worked over there so we went across the street to the Laundromat to get some more money to go back across the street to the store. As we were getting ready to go back across the street to the store Mr. Moses, the principal, came by. So here we were hiding behind the cars so Mr. Moses wouldn’t see us so we could hurry up and sneak back to school. But we wanted to sneak back on that side of the road but we couldn’t do it. So when he went up in the store and got a few of the kids out and was walking them back, now we were trying to sneak back to the school. So we get back, we figure we see him go back to the school so all of us run back across the street, which was four of us, run back across the street, started going back towards the school. As we got down the hill there was Mr. Moses. He was hiding behind the bush. He got us, too. So. He must have had fun that day he got us all. But you know he called our parents and told us, you know, you couldn’t come back to school because we were skipping school. And so I think he didn’t get in touch with Lorraine’s parents, but he got in touch with mine. So Lorraine, she, she didn’t tell her mother what happened, so she made like she was sick that day the next day. So we were both off from school. So the next day we had to come back to school so Lorraine couldn’t come back in unless the parents. See my parents already said okay, they called and talked to them. But Lorraine’s mother she hadn’t told. So I ended up being Lorraine’s mother. Because in the hall at Great Mills there was a pay phone. So what we did, we was in the school, called to the school and talked to the principal and made like, you know, I was her mother. [laughs]. So that she could come back in the school. In the school, yes we did. But it worked. But see that was the influence we were learning from Great Mills. But it was fun. It was fun.

[00:33:46]

MT: That was a great story. Well that’s all terrific. What, yeah I love that story. I had never heard that whole story before. So just, can you talk a little about your relationship to your parents and, I mean it was obviously their decision that you would go and you were unquestioning, I guess. But just how your going to Great Mills impacted your relationship with your parents.

BD: It didn’t change it. It didn’t change it one bit because those two people wanted the best for me. And sometimes, you know, in life, now I see it, you know. As a young child, as I growing up, some things I didn’t see that they were trying to teach me, take me down that road. But my relationship never really changed. I still loved them just as much. I made a little fuss every now and then, tell them I wanted to go back to Carver. But I knew it wasn’t gonna happen so I might as well just shut up and accept it. And that’s what I did. But I loved them just as much. They were very special parents.

[00:34:59]

MT: In retrospect how do you feel about the advantages or disadvantages of having done that?

BD: My advantages of going along and respecting the fact of what they wanted me to do, it did make an impact in my life. You know, it allowed me to see the other side of life also. And to grow up and knowing that no matter if I am black, green, purple, I can be accepted anywhere. It doesn't make a difference. You might have your little downfalls and whatever, but the door always opens for you.

[00:35:44]

MT: Okay. And when you talked before about the Groves and their experiences, that was primarily what you had heard, through what you'd heard about it rather than the fact that you really knew about it first hand, right?

BD: My parents knew Mr. and Mrs. Groves. My father and my mother knew Mr. and Mrs. Groves. And I did remember. I can remember Joan and Conrad. I can remember exactly where they lived and I can remember going to their house, but I remember them talking and telling the stories about what they experienced. I was much younger then. I think I was probably in the sixth grade, maybe. Sixth or seventh grade, but first, yeah I can remember what they experienced during that time when they went to Great Mills, and that was like, first-hand.

[00:36:37]

MT: Do you want to say anything about that?

BD: They had it rough. They had it real bad because during that time integration was not being accepted. Nowhere. Nowhere at all. So they...

MT: Can you say Joan and Conrad?

BD: Joan and Conrad, okay. During the time that Joan and Conrad attended Great Mills High School, they really did have it rough. During that time integration wasn't accepted and they had, they were opening the door, the opportunity for other black kids to go down that road, but they had to experience things that we didn't experience. They were treated really bad. But they stuck it out, though. They were determined. They stuck it out.

[00:37:32]

MT: Okay, do you have any questions? Well, you've given us a lot between the two interviews. Wonderful understandings of your experiences there I think. And I really appreciate your willingness to share that.

BD: It was my pleasure. It was my pleasure. It does bring back lots of good memories, though. It really do.

MT: And when you read, you know, the interviews in the book and...

BD: They were very good, and they were true.

MT: Yeah did it give you more thoughts about it, or did you just feel like, how did you feel about reading that?

BD: It just brought back a lot of memories and it gave me a lot of thoughts about how life used to be and the things we used to have to go through, but no matter what we stuck it out and we made it. We didn't have to go through as much as the kids did in Selma, Alabama and all of those different places. We didn't experience that. It was much different here. It wasn't as hard for us. So its like I guess we have to say thanks to Joan and Conrad for opening that door for us that we didn't experience what the other kids did in the south. 'Cause they experienced some things a lot worse than we did. A lot worser.

MT: Thank goodness it wasn't Selma

BD: No, thank goodness it wasn't Selma.

MT: Well that's great. Thank you

BD: You're welcome. Thank you very much.

MT: Thank you

BD: Now my story's out about me skipping school. [laughs].

[00:39:18]

END OF INTERVIEW