

UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS
Oral History Project

Dorothy M. Thomas

Interviewed by Alma Jordon
with Merideth Taylor, Anna Moseley, Jeanette Pettit, and Clarissa Stripling
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37 minutes, 38 seconds (original and below timestamps)
36 minutes, 48 seconds (edited)

Speaker X ([00:07](#)):

March 16th. Yeah, but just hold on. Today is the 15th.

([00:10](#)):

15th.

([00:10](#)):

All right. Write it on paper.

([00:12](#)):

15th.

([00:12](#)):

2016. Hold on.

([00:15](#)):

[inaudible 00:00:15].

([00:15](#)):

It gives us here a few minutes to erase. I say 15. I'm glad that turned off whenever that was

([00:27](#)):

Ready? [inaudible 00:00:40].

([00:27](#)):

All right, I think [inaudible 00:00:43].

Alma Jordon ([00:50](#)):

Today is March 15th, 2016. We are at Southwinds facility in White Plains. We are here to interview Mrs. Dorothy Thomas. And my name is Alma Jordan.

Merideth Taylor ([01:11](#)):

And I'm Merideth Taylor.

Jeanette Pettit ([01:13](#)):

I'm Jeanette Pettit.

Clarissa Ashton Stripling ([01:15](#)):

Clarissa Ashton Stripling.

Anna Mosley ([01:18](#)):

Anna Mosley.

Alma Jordon ([01:20](#)):

Thank you everybody. Mrs. Dorothy, first we want to ask you to tell us about your family and where you are from.

Dorothy Thomas ([01:33](#)):

Well actually I lived in Valley Lee. My mother was born in Baltimore and she brought us down. Our grandmother raised four of us. That was, I was the baby Thomas Lane. He was my brother, Leroy Walton. That was my brother. And Leona Walton. My grandmother raised the for us. And of course there they have all deceased except me and Leona. Some of y'all know Leona Walton.

([02:27](#)):

Anyway, she died at 85 and in fact all I have left now is me and my sister next to me. All my family's dead. My sister just died in California two weeks ago and they haven't had the service yet. But I'm the oldest and I have one Paul, June or Brown, she's the next one. June's 84 I think and I'm 89.

Alma Jordon ([03:19](#)):

Okay. And you actually lived in Valley Lee most of your life?

Dorothy Thomas ([03:23](#)):

No, I was about... I'd say I maybe lived down there about three or four years and my grandmother's... Their house burnt down and then we moved to Leonardtown. Leonard Hall School if you remember we lived there for a while and my grandmother died there. My grandmother, I was nine years old when my grandmother died. I was nine years old. I remember that. And we stayed there with my Aunt Lou and Uncle Theodore. Some of y'all know Lou Daly.

([04:10](#)):

Okay. But we moved further up the road somewhere near Hollywood and my uncle Theodore died. And of course Leroy died. He got drowned or something. He died. Thomas died in Baltimore and Leona died down here about... It's been about 85... She died about six years ago I'd say. She died at 85 and she had one son, Mickey Rice. I know y'all don't Mickey Rice. And he died too. So I have no siblings but one sister. And my sister that died, she had, she had one daughter and she's in California. But all my folks had passed, everyone passed except me and June.

Alma Jordon ([05:19](#)):

So at some point you lived in or near Drayden?

Dorothy Thomas ([05:24](#)):

I lived in Drayden. Of course we were close enough... Those the days you walked to school.

Alma Jordon ([05:34](#)):

Well, tell me about your school and what a school day was like.

Dorothy Thomas ([05:38](#)):

Well, knowing Mr. Stuckey school had to be strict. He was very strict teacher. He would tear, I don't care who it was. His children, anybody, he would tear them up with the switch. You had to be good in his class because he was a very strict and kind of a mean teacher. But he didn't teach me long, I guess maybe about a couple of years. And then when we went to Leonardtown, I went to Banneker School and Brent Thompson taught me. Brent Thompson taught me.

Alma Jordon ([06:23](#)):

So when you were in school in Drayden, what was the name of your school and how old were you when you were at the Drayden school?

Dorothy Thomas ([06:34](#)):

I don't even know the name that school. And you know, that wasn't yesterday, but [inaudible 00:06:39] will tell you what the name is.

Alma Jordon ([06:42](#)):

Was the school Drayden School?

Dorothy Thomas ([06:46](#)):

I don't remember. I actually don't. I went there but I was small. But Mrs. Stuckey's daughter, when you talk about she don't know the name of it, I remember [inaudible 00:06:56].

Alma Jordon ([06:55](#)):

[inaudible 00:06:59].

Dorothy Thomas ([06:59](#)):

Yeah, that was one of his daughter's names. Maybe she went by one name. But I went there not too many because my grandmother kept me home with her when it was... I was schooled late. Mrs. Stuckey used to keep on that there you got to send her to school. But my grandmother taught me at home actually. And then at one point in time, then I went to school with the other kids. But most of my education was at Banneker School.

Alma Jordon ([07:39](#)):

Tell me about your earliest memory when you were a young girl. What is the first thing that you remember.

Dorothy Thomas ([07:51](#)):

Concerning what?

Alma Jordon ([07:53](#)):

Anything.

Dorothy Thomas ([07:56](#)):

Well, I could remember that I had a fantastic grandmother. Yes, I had a fantastic grandmother. She was strict on us. I mean, you had to do what she told you to do, but she was a wonderful grandmother. She kept us in mind. You had to do what grandma said do. If you don't, you got the switch. And that was good. That's why today I wish she had lived longer because she could have given me better guidance than I had. She would've been strict on me.

([08:48](#)):

Then you get out in the world too young and you make your mistakes and you wish you had waited. And if you know where I'm leading, you know what I'm talking about. Because I got married too young and I won't say the rest. But I had fantastic children. My children were very and still are very, very good to me. Very good to me, very good.

([09:21](#)):

If I'm sick they're all there. Even the grandchildren, they're all there for me. So I don't regret them at all. I stuck by my children and stayed with my children and raised my children through all the difficulties that I had and God has blessed me for it.

Alma Jordon ([09:52](#)):

Now, I know that you weren't at Drayden School very long, but do you remember anything about recess or what you did for fun when you were at school? Can you tell me about that?

Dorothy Thomas ([10:07](#)):

Well, that's going to be hard to do because that was a long, long time ago. We had recesses, you know, and it was... I guess we played ball and little things like all the other kids done. But I wasn't there that long. But I tell you where we did go, we did go to... You remember Miss Freeman.

Speaker X ([10:34](#)):

No.

Dorothy Thomas ([10:37](#)):

Barrett Alma Young?

Speaker X ([10:39](#)):

Yes.

Dorothy Thomas ([10:41](#)):

Okay. She taught us on that little schoolhouse on Loveville Road. There was a little schoolhouse up there, of course one-room schoolhouse at those days. And she was a good teacher, but she was strict too. But you had to get her work and you had to do... And as long as my grandmother lived, everything was done fine because she kept checking on you. You had to do everything. But after she died, if people are not used to [inaudible 00:11:18] you've gotten everything you needed and some of what you want.

But the strictness wasn't there. You more or less... They weren't as strict as my grandmother was. You better do what she said.

[\(11:36\)](#):

But they all were good to us, but I think we needed more supervision. They gave us a little too much freedom, I'll say it like that. But they were good and wasn't nobody no better than my Aunt Lou and Uncle Theodore. And some of y'all knew Aunt Lou, I guess some of you know Aunt Lou and Uncle Theodore. They were good people because they finished raising the four of us when my grandmother died. And I do remember I was nine years old when she died. I guess that's why I'm scared of dead people today because they rested them in the house them days.

Alma Jordon [\(12:16\)](#):

Tell me more about that. Tell me more about the times before they had funeral homes. Do you remember your mom, your grandmother?

Dorothy Thomas [\(12:29\)](#):

Yes. I remember my grandmother right in my living room. In our living room. She had on a maroon dress with a veil over her face and they rested there until the time come to be buried. And then the undertaker come there and took her from the house. And I guess that's what made me looking... I always had been afraid of dead people since then. I guess I was [inaudible 00:12:58] I don't know why, it's very stupid. But there's one thing you going to see me if I go to a funeral and you a body, you can believe [inaudible 00:13:09]. I can count the people... I can count the funeral that I have been to since then. I can count them.

[\(13:17\)](#):

Now after my husband died, of course I looked at him naturally. And then his grandmother died and his mother died and all their siblings died. Except Lawrence's children are living. Both Lawrence and Geraldine, remember Geraldine. Geraldine. Lawrence Chase's his wife. [inaudible 00:13:55]. Most all them had passed. I think all the Chase's... Lawrence's children are living. But all those, [inaudible 00:14:09]. But it was nice when they all were living and Geraldine was a sweet lady and was nobody better than Lawrence's mother, Annie Chase,

[\(14:27\)](#):

She was a wonderful woman. She was a wonderful, wonderful sweet lady.

Alma Jordon [\(14:36\)](#):

Well, thinking back Ms. Dorothy, when you were a young girl, how did you get your news back then? How did you find out what was going on in the world?

Dorothy Thomas [\(14:48\)](#):

Well they had radio then.

Alma Jordon [\(14:49\)](#):

Tell me about all that.

Dorothy Thomas [\(14:49\)](#):

They had radios. I used to even listen to stories on the radios. They had radios at the stores and music [inaudible 00:15:01]. But it was more or less back in those days there was no television than nothing. And you entertained yourselves, you went out and you played ball. You made your little things that you hop on, things that we made your own things to play with and you didn't have real balls. You made balls out of cloth and stuff, balling them up like that. And we played and run up and down hills and all that. That's why I [inaudible 00:15:32] run they had and I fell down [inaudible 00:15:36] stuck a hole in my head.

[\(15:41\)](#):

I did. My brothers told me, you go back and they might as well had said, come on. And I just missed my eye and I was a little teeny thing then. And I can see my grandmother picked me up on the shoulder and told the boys, y'all know better than leave Dorothy back.

[\(16:03\)](#):

But all in all, it was a good life because we had supervision and plenty to eat because they raised their own stuff then. They raised their chicken, whatever they ate they raised them and that's where you wash your clothes in a bucket. We had to go down to the spring and bring water up and heat the water. My grandmother made her own soap and stuff, but it was good clean living in those days. My grandmother raised a big, what you call it? Truck garden.

[\(16:47\)](#):

There was everything out in the garden you want and she canned it. We had a day we went out and picked huckleberries and blackberries. She canned those. She had a day for going out, cutting the wood. And had a day for doing the laundry, everything. She had a day for everything. We all followed with her and helped her, but she canned everything and we ate healthy good food with not a bunch of junk in it. She fed us good. She even had... At her kitchen window, she had a trap set and we used to catch birds. I wouldn't eat one now, but I guess I ate them then. And she trapped them [inaudible 00:17:41] down and catch that bird. And she was a wonderful lady and she took care of us.

Alma Jordon [\(17:53\)](#):

Well you mentioned your grandmother canning in a garden and all that. Did you have any chores when you were a child?

Dorothy Thomas [\(18:03\)](#):

Well actually I was at the age then that my brothers and my sisters had chores, but I was young so I didn't have too many chores at that time. I was too young. I guess they spoiled me. But she made you mind that I got my butt beat plenty of times. She'd tell you, don't go up that hill. Don't climb down that hill. You do it anyway you got to beat when you got home. You go out and get your own switch sometimes. But she was a wonderful woman. I was nine years old. I remember when she died. But it was...

Alma Jordon [\(18:52\)](#):

Do you remember, you talk about when you were young, but when you were older, do you remember when you started going out on a date or something like that? What was that like?

Dorothy Thomas [\(19:08\)](#):

Well, I tell you what, it was too young and you meet the wrong people. You think you meet the right people, but you don't meet the right people. And that part, I say my Aunt Lou was a lovely lady, but she

was too lenient on us. And you get married too young and I won't carry that any further. But I stayed with my children and I raised my children through thick and thin.

(19:49):

A lot of it was thin, but I won't [inaudible 00:19:58]. Because some of y'all know, y'all know what I'm talking about. I don't even have to tell you. You leave [inaudible 00:20:03] talking. You know what I'm talking about. You know what I'm talking about. But I raised my children and stayed with them through thick and thin and God has blessed me for that. I mean, [inaudible 00:20:20] my birthday, ate the brothers. Okay.

Alma Jordon (20:28):

Well tell me how was your relationship with your siblings?

Dorothy Thomas (20:34):

My brothers and sisters?

Alma Jordon (20:35):

Yes. Yes.

Dorothy Thomas (20:37):

Fine. We got along fine.

Alma Jordon (20:39):

What kind of things did you do together?

Dorothy Thomas (20:41):

Well, Leroy and Thomas, Leona and myself. We were raised together. June and Gloria and then they were raised, my mother raised them up there. She kept [inaudible 00:21:01] raised them. But we all played together. We had a lot of fun. We had just little, little fights, a little misunderstandings. But we all got along pretty good. But we had to do what she told us to do. And if you didn't, you got your butt beat.

Alma Jordon (21:24):

Well you talk about your relationship with your grandmother and your aunt. What part did religion play in your life?

Dorothy Thomas (21:34):

Well, we went to the church down there in Valley Lee, United Method Church I think it was called. There's a lovely little church up there, a little white church. But we went down. Reverend Statesman was teaching, was the preacher then. And I remember my grandmother dressed me up and she and I walked to church. So she was a church lady. I remember we used to have camp meetings in those days and we'd stay on camp, stay month, a week. We would stay at the church and they'd have camp meetings and preaching and Miss can't think of name now. They used to do the cooking. We just line up for them ice cream cones. But those are the good days. And you don't realize as you get older how good they were until they're gone. Those were the good days.

Alma Jordon ([22:47](#)):

Well, when you grew up and started doing things on your own, what kind of work did you do? Can you tell me about that?

Dorothy Thomas ([22:58](#)):

Well, I went housekeeping with one of the ladies once, but then I was working at the laundry. I worked in some laundries. And then I worked at that where you [inaudible 00:23:10] I worked there. And after that, in between the children I worked for McKay's Food Plan for 28 and a half years. 28 and a half years I worked at Food Plan. That was my last job.

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

How do you see that life has changed from when you grew up to now as far as segregation in that type of thing Ms. Dorothy?

Dorothy Thomas ([23:44](#)):

It has improved a lot because when I was growing up... Okay, when I was working in the drug store, when the service guys come in to be waited on, I had to tell the black boys I have to keep you your food to go. You can't sit. But if it's the white service guys, they could sit down. And at that point in time they all would leave. There was girls that worked over to the hotel over there in Leonardtown, no, in Lexington Park. They all had to come in to get their lunch. They all stand up and had to get their lunch to go.

Alma Jordon ([24:31](#)):

How did that make you feel?

Dorothy Thomas ([24:34](#)):

Well, it made you... Well you were used to that. Outside they had you go to a bathroom on this side, said coloreds. That says all white. And you had no choice. You couldn't go down and sit in these restrooms like you do now. It was all segregated. The buses you had to in church, I think it was Holy Face Church. You had to... I didn't go to that church. But when they went to that church, they had to sit in the back.

([25:18](#)):

The black folks had to sit in the back of the church. The white ones [inaudible 00:25:21]. But it changed after so many years it changed. But it was... Even when they taught their children [inaudible 00:25:40] and they'll confirm there was a separation there. But it's so much better now. But it was bad there one time. It was very bad. That's why you had no choice. You had no choice.

Alma Jordon ([26:02](#)):

Well, tell me about the situation when you were confirmed. How was that organized? You said it was different.

Dorothy Thomas ([26:13](#)):

Well, mine was different because when I got married I wasn't Catholic. Then I got married and I'm a Catholic. And the priest came to my house and taught me. And I was confirmed privately. And at that

time things were different, when I got married. Things were different then than they were at first they were different. But in the years before then things were separated and people, they didn't like me, they had no choice. They had no choice.

Alma Jordon ([26:51](#)):

What is the biggest, tell me, the biggest change, the biggest changes you recognize in our country today or even in the location where we live. What are the major changes that you see?

Dorothy Thomas ([27:07](#)):

Well, the major changes now are that we all can mix together. Just like here. We all mix together. We come down here and we sit down, we play together. And the whites can marry the blacks. The blacks can marry the whites. They sneaked around in those days. And that's why some of... There was slaves, the men used the women. They worked in these homes and the men would go down and have sex with the women and get pregnant by them and have their babies. I remember that.

([27:52](#)):

But now you can marry anything comes along if you want. And that's what some of them do. Just as long as they are white, there's better than that. But just as long as they were white, that was fine. You white, I'm going to marry you. They thought that was something great.

([28:16](#)):

They thought that was something great. And you see a black man walk with a white woman, oh, that was something they were proud of. And sometimes they women look back [inaudible 00:28:32]. But now things are changing and much better. Because I think if I had a remarriage, I don't know where this is good or bad. I don't think I'd marry another black man. I might have had luck... I'm sorry. [laughs] He'd have to be some other nationality. Doesn't have to be white, but some other nationality I would want [inaudible 00:29:21].

Alma Jordon ([29:20](#)):

Can you tell me why you would prefer not to be married to a black man?

Dorothy Thomas ([29:30](#)):

Because I didn't have any luck with them. And some of them white ones is just as nasty. But maybe if these white guys that wasn't used to going with the black women and vice versa, maybe they thought, well, I got something that I hadn't had before. I should treat this nicer, be nice to them and vice versa. And that's just, that is because you picked the wrong person. Now if you pick some men and there are some good black men there and there's some good white men and there's some nasty in both. Both white and black, there are some nasty ones in them.

([30:29](#)):

But if you get that bad apple, you don't want another apple that bad. And I am telling you like it is. And I won't go any deeper than that because you know. I wouldn't go any deeper than that. [laughs] But I was lucky enough to have sense enough not to marry anybody again. I'm doing all right by myself. I had two friends and both of them are dead. And I ain't looking for nobody else. I'm doing all right by myself.

Alma Jordon ([31:11](#)):

Is there anything else you'd like to share with us today about anything?

Dorothy Thomas (31:19):

Well, I'll put it this way. When you growing up, you get married too young, that goes for anybody. And you stick by your guns and you say, I have children here. I'm not going to spread my children all over the place I'm going to raise my children. And if you do that, God is going to take care of you. God is going to take care of you. God is taking care of me. I'd be 90 on my birthday and I still couldn't get up and walk around and do things. Do you think if I had a [inaudible 00:32:12] hit the streets and leave my children all by themselves, God wouldn't have blessed me like that. But he knew... I'll say myself. He knew I was a good mother.

(32:34):

And I tell you one thing, my children's great-grandmother, Annie Chase was a jewel. Henry Chase [inaudible 00:32:52] you know who I'm talking about Annie. She was a lovely woman. She was a sweet woman. But I say, if you do what you know is right and stick by your guns, God will bless you. And he gave me a blessing. I have aches and pains everywhere, but I still move around and walk and can do. I cook for myself. I believe in cooking. I don't like a whole bunch of frozen foods, I cook. And I used to make cakes and bring them down here. You'd think I was a bakery or something. But I like to cook and I bake and all that. I bake cakes and everything. And I still cook my full-course meals, even though [inaudible 00:33:49] meat. I eat it and if I eat enough I put it up in the freezer. And then when I want it, I'd take it out the freezer. But I like my food.

Alma Jordon (34:01):

Well, thank you very... Oh, go ahead.

Merideth Taylor (34:03):

Well, I would like to, yeah. I would like to know a little bit more about what you remember about Drayden's school because we're very interested in trying to learn more about what life was like for the school children. And I know you weren't there very long, but do you remember... If you tried to picture the schoolroom, what do you remember about what was in the room and how it looked? And [inaudible 00:34:26].

Dorothy Thomas (34:25):

See, I was so young then. I don't remember now. I...

Merideth Taylor (34:37):

Did you have a blackboard? Did you have a blackboard? Did the teacher write on a blackboard?

Dorothy Thomas (34:41):

Oh yeah. They had blackboards for you to write on. Yeah, I liked that. And course I was too young for that. But most of my education I was at [inaudible 00:34:55] school. Mrs. Freeman used to walk to school up there if I missed the bus and then at Banneker School where your uncle taught. Brent, Thompson, Brent. He taught school there. And I think I was one of his favorites. But I remember one thing about Mr. Stuckey, he was a good teacher, but he was very strict and he didn't care about tearing his children's hides up either. If they did something wrong, he would tear them up just like he would in anybody else's children. And then when you got out of school, you better go right straight home because the people in those days, your grandparents wouldn't mind if they switched you and tell you to go home.

[\(35:52\)](#):

You could do that in those days. You stopped at somebody's house and you weren't supposed to be there. When you got home, you got another one because in those days it was all right for other outside parent to correct you. You can't do that... They can't hardly do that in the schools now. But the people, if anybody... You was out somewhere doing something you wasn't supposed to do, they would tell whoever you was raised and you got your butt beat because they could do that. They helped each other. But now I think it's so much different. But those were the good days. And you don't realize it then until you get older and then you realize what a good life you had.

Merideth Taylor [\(36:50\)](#):

What was your favorite subject in school?

Dorothy Thomas [\(36:54\)](#):

I don't know because I wasn't too good in school. But anyway... I would say arithmetic in which I wasn't the best student in school. But now when I was going to school, my grandmother would make you get your work. And when I wasn't going to school, she taught me at home. But she made you get to work. You didn't play around with her and...

[recording appears to end abruptly]