

UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS

Oral History Documentation Project
The St. Joseph Parish Housing Project

MARY ELIZABETH HERBERT

January 16, 2007 at 10:00 AM
Interviewed by Michael McCauley
at her home in Leonardtown Maryland
Logged by Michael McCauley
A verbatim transcript is available
Original format is digital audio recorder
1 hour, 10 minutes, 34 seconds

Audio CD 1 of 1

Track 01

00:00 This interview is regarding St. Joseph Project in Oakville. They were living on Morganza Turner Road at the time of the project. Her mother worked for the nuns at St. Joseph Convent and the priest for 16 years. At the time her mother made 50¢ per day. When Father Cavanaugh came to the church he was very concerned about the plight of the poor people of the community. He went to the Archdiocese to get her mother a raise and retroactive back pay increase. Her mother was given a choice of whether to receive back pay or put the money towards the purchase of land to build a house. She chose to purchase the land.

Track 02

3:34 Mrs. Herbert was married at the time of the project. She was living with her in-laws. She moved to a tenant house on Harry Reeder's Farm. They built the house from the old barracks from Fort Meade. Her brothers and many other people went up to dismantle the barracks and reassembled them. She remembers Mr. Rustin and several others helping put up her parents house. They all worked together in groups.

The families that received the barracks were: The Jerry Butlers, Minnette and several others.

7:00 Most of her brothers and sisters were still living at home at the time of the move. She had five brothers. The oldest was not living at home at the time but did come back to help with the construction.

Her father was very sickly due to a kidney condition. He went to Washington, DC for treatments. The children all helped on the farm.

Track 03

8:07 Thomas was very tall and quit school when he was in the 5th grade. He hired himself out to help with the bills around the house. He would come home on the weekends. This brother got married and moved to Leonardtown. Her brothers that remained at home were Lewis, Joseph and James (“Mutt”).

9:50 She moved back home with her husband and two children after her parents got the barracks house. Her mother would get up early to go fix breakfast for the nuns and come back home and fix breakfast for her father. She would do the same thing for lunch and dinner.

Track 04

11:08 The property that her mother bought had an old house on it that was used by the church sexton. Jerome’s house is not the original barracks house. After her children became grown and moved out, she and her husband moved to Chases apartments. The part that they moved in was part of the original St. Joseph’s School for the “colored” children.

14:00 Pam stayed in the house for quite a while. She continued to pay taxes of the property for years and eventually signed the property over to Jerome. The barracks house was moved. She thinks that William Holt has the original Parish house.

15:20 Jerome is having some problem with people who build a big house in the area. They are trying to move in on the property. Her mother had put an iron post in the ground to indicate where her property line ended. At the bottom of the hill there is a big stone to indicate the property line.

Track 05

16:40 The process to get the property and build the home was smooth because people helped each other in those days.

17:00 Her mother was raised by two white ladies (Johnson and Mattingly) from the time she was five years old. They lived across from Mother Catherine Spaulding School. Her father was raised by the white ladies in Oraville. They were Dickson’s. There were 17 people in her father’s family. Her parents never talked about why they were given away. Her material grandfather died and her grandmother moved to Washington. She left her mother with the white ladies and the other children with her aunts. She came back eventually and took all the children to Washington except Mrs. Herbert’s mother. Her mother worked for these people and did not have the opportunity to get an education.

Track 06

21:15 Her mother could not read but she could remember a recipe after someone read it to her once. Her mother cooked, cleaned and washed clothes for the nuns. Her father did most of the cooking at home when he wasn't ill.

23:45 Her brothers worked on the Harry Reader farm with her father. The old farm house is still standing. It is just north of St. Joseph's church on the right hand side of the road.

Track 07

25:17 The family was very excited about getting their own house. Father Cavanaugh used to come and visit them. He enjoyed visiting people. He was a lovely person. Her father would laugh and tell Father Cavanaugh that it was something that his wife didn't have an education but would put those big words in the right place when she spoke. There house was very cold.

28:00 The blacks in the church cried when he announce that he was leaving. She used to write to him when he went to India. He helped them form a choir in the church. Most of the choir members were her children. Her brother (James Albert) and another boy where the first "colored" alter boys. Father Cavanaugh had a special mass for the "colored people" in church.

Track 08

31:07 Father Cavanaugh would travel quite a bit and would take her brothers and Josh Stewart with him.

32:00 Her oldest brother got married and moved to DC. He became a deacon. This was the brother who left school early to help contribute to her parent's household. The church he attended in DC (Incarnation) advanced his education through a retired elementary and high school teacher.

Track 09

35:45 She is sure there were people in the community who did not want Father Cavanaugh to help the poor blacks but she was to busy to pay attention.

37:30 The house did not original have running water and the bathroom was outside. Later they put in a well. They had to walk to Miss Ching's house for water before they got a well. They were the only black family in the area and they got along with everybody. They had a neighbor who was in the Service that really liked her brother McKinley. When he moved, he wanted to take her brother with him.

Track 10

40:10 When they raised tobacco the landlord got $\frac{1}{2}$ of the sale price and they got $\frac{1}{3}$.

40:44 She knew some of the people involved with the project. They were: Scanlon Herbert, Mr. Reston, Mr. John T. Somerville, Garland Thomas, Miss Alice Marshall, Harry Fenwick, McKinley Herbert, Leif Price, and Alfonso.

Track 11

44:21 She would stay with the Marshall when her father had to go to Washington, DC for treatment. Her family used to have a spring until her brothers and their friends enlarged it for a swimming hole. They would take bathes in big wash tubs.

47:00 The Chase's and the Holt's would take the family on a picnic annually to beach.

48:00 Her mother would come home at 1:00 to help her father get the family's dinner ready. Once a week they have a roast, cabbage, potatoes, cake, and homemade ice cream.

Track 12

49:27 They would make a ball out of her mother's old stockings. Her father and mother would play with them. When her father got tired he would hit the ball over in swamp. Her father would tell them stories about old times and his parents. They would all say the rosary before they would go to bed. Her father would make faces while they were listening to her mother say the rosary. Her parents would always visit the sick family members and stay up with them all night. Her father died in March of 67' and her mother died in November of 67'. Her mother had an operation on her legs and lost her job with the nuns when she got well. Then she worked in housekeeping at St. Mary's hospital. Her father also worked at the hospital until he got sick. They went to live with her brother after they got sick. Her mother did not like Washington so she came back to live with her until she died.

Track 13

56:12 After she got her last two children in school, she started working for Tri-County. She set up a schedule and showed her children how to cook, wash and iron. She set up menus and they shopped for the food. They did all the cooking. She made them self sufficient. Her youngest son Robert is name after Sister Robert.

Track 14

1:01:53 Mr. Herbert discusses moving the houses – cutting them into parts to bring to the new location. All the men that went up to get the barracks did not get paid, it was self help

1:03:30

The County Commissioners turned them down two or three times before they could build a community center. The Commissioners dictated what kinds of activities they could have at the center. Mr. John Wooten gave them the loan to build the center. They paid him back within a couple of years. Mrs. Reed is the Treasurer. Jerome was very organized and had the center running well while he was the president of the organization.

Track 15

1:06:01 Building a new center – strong congregation. The interview continues with MH discussing the current status of the community center and problems with leadership in the organization.