

UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS

Oral History Documentation Project
The St. Joseph Parish Housing Project

Vincena S. Dickerson
Mildred A. Gross
James A. Somerville

May 27, 2009 at 11:00 AM
Interviewed by Michael McCauley
at their home in Loveville Maryland
Logged by Michael McCauley
A verbatim transcript is available
Original format is digital audio recorder
1 hour, 27 minutes, 27 seconds

Audio CD 1 of 1

Track 01

- 0:00 Vincena Dickerson was an officer of the St. Joseph Housing Project. Became involved as a child when she attended meetings with her parents. Mrs. Alice Marshall was the first secretary and Vincena learned from her and followed in that position.
- 1:40 In St. Joseph's Park, people paid for the land weekly or monthly – Scanlon Herbert came by to collect the payment. It was very close neighborhood – just like a big family. They had volunteers who would do the home building and maintenance – plumber, carpenters. It was not stressful – Father Kavanagh was “chief of staff.”

Track 02

- 4:09 Vincena's father (John T. Somerville) was one of the first Board members. He did roofing and “spouting” (roof guttering) and could materials at a good price – usually half price. If folks didn't have money for the materials, he gave them to them anyway.
- 5:20 Scanlon Herbert came around every week to check on folks and pick up payments. They was no pressure, whatever folks could pay at that time he would write it down in the books – so much to land, to taxes, etc. They used County Trust Bank.

6:53 John Somerville, Scanlon Herbert, and McKinley Herbert would use their own money to purchase land since the money from the archdiocese would come too late – a few months later. People trust each other back then. If you needed roofing or spouting, you got it and then made payments if you could. Vincena would travel with Ed Young, a worker for her father's company, to show them how to do the work. Business was in NW at M Street – “Spouting and Roofing”

Track 03

8:18 They were new to driving back then. Franklyn had experience on the farm so he drove. When he came to the first traffic light he stopped and refused to go through the intersection. He was so far from home and didn't want to go further. He was afraid of new things, of change. So Vincena learned to drive. Remembers when he had to drive to Lexington Park for the first time.

12:32 Everybody got along. No body ever got angry. All the people were beautiful.

Track 04

13:02 When they ran out of land, folks got turned away from the project. Mr. Dorsey? at Summerseat donated land. One of the barracks houses when to Oakley for “Mr. And Mrs. Dickerson.” Another was in Avenue and Dixon Collins lived there. Maggie Branson lived on the corner. Many Dickersons live around Oakley – own the whole waterfront area. The Oakley barracks may have been the home of Al and Elizabeth Dickerson. Maybe could have been Joe and Mary Dickerson's home?? They live on both sides of Dickerson Lane. George, Paul, Shawn, Herman, and Aloysius all lived down there.

Track 05

17:31 Many Dickersons still live down there. Many of the spouses have passed on. They talk about genealogy – who married who and such.

18:56 Mildred Gross remembers getting the house. They were so happy and near Christmas when they moved in. They picked their own Christmas tree and strung popcorn. They got a television several years later but Dad wouldn't let them watch it during the day – and only at night after all your work had been completed.

20:42 Vincena's father checked on the every day. Folks were always stopping by and Mama cook all the time on a wood stove. No body ever complained about the heat from the stove – not even in the summertime.

Track 06

- 21:36 “Kavanagh people” were so welcoming. They had the rec center, a ball diamond, and a skating rink. They rented skates for ten or fifteen cents. “Kavanagh opened the door.” They held a fish fry for the grand opening in the park.
- 23:40 Mildred’s father was a believer in work. He was a haul seiner and traveled for work. When the fish were around, they would catch so many and sell them. Sometimes there were no fish to catch and money was tight for a few weeks.

Track 7

- 25:08 Mildred’s mother said that if you had flour, salt, and sugar, you could cook.” She made bannock bread – said not to cut the bread or it would make it raw. The bannock was big and round and you had to break off a piece. They put apple butter on it.
- 26:28 “If you had a hot dog on a Sunday? Oh my God! You had a dinner!” Vincena remembers her mother asking her to check on the bread. She would open the oven door and call back that it was doing okay – and they were eating all along. Her father had a box that he locked candy and apples in to save for Christmas. Vincena and her cousin (lived with them) took off the back panel of the box and took some of the candy. Also remember “stealing” fifty cents from her cousin and hid it in her sandwich.

Track 8

- 30:16 She lived with her grandmother before they moved into the Project house. They paid about twenty dollars a month in rent. It was typical house. Her mother and father and three siblings as well as her mother’s brother’s family lived there too. The house was so crowded.
- 31:10 Her mother wanted a house of their own so much. One day Father Kavanagh came by and they made the deal. They paid fifty dollars for the land from Mr. John Somerville. They had to clear the trees – huge stumps had to be ripped out of the ground – no horse – just hand tools. He drank a lot but provided well – up until they got the Project house. After that he never touched another drop.
- 32:59 Whenever he got paid he would bring the kids gifts. They went over to the site every day during construction. They had to cross through the woods. Today she is afraid of snakes even just outside on the patio. But as kids, they never thought of that.

Track 9

34:00 Miss Ella Hebb also had a Project house out on Morgan Turner Road. Her grand daughter married a guy from Scrabbletown and had twenty kids. He walked six miles each way to Mechanicsville Church. Miss Ella's grand daughter lived there recently.

Track 10

38:26 They look at photographs and the Project history book. Remembers acting in the play "Danny Boy" and taking it on the road to Ridge School.

40:48 Father Kavanagh came to every one's help. He comforted Vincena when her aunt was dying. "He was an angel." He married her and John.

Track 11

43:47 "He was just a regular guy." Father Kavanagh did the right thing always.

45:10 Scanlon Herbert was very sociable and outgoing. He had a hard time explaining what he wanted. He was always there to help folks – very kind hearted. He drove the school bus. Father Kavanagh left in 1953 yet there was much more to be done with the Project. Younger people stepped up and took over management of the project. But they didn't all agree and things have not been run as well today. People have changed and don't respond the way they once did – helping others and working as one family.

Track 12

48:36 Today some of the houses that folks worked so hard for, and have passed from hand to hand, from generation to generation, are going down. Harry Findley built Mildred's house. John Ernest "Snack" Berry worked on the houses – he worked for Vincena's father. Snack's brother, Uncle Mitchell came back from the war and had "nothing but mouth." He used inappropriate words and was very bossy. As kids they ran away from him.

Track 13

51:47 Mildred got very sick about five years ago. Deacon Somerville came to her house every Sunday and give communion. After that her dedication to attending church every Sunday became much greater. If she cannot go, she watches it on television. Deacon Somerville visits Vincena's house every week. When folks were sick or Tom was dying, Deacon Somerville was always there and comforting. Vincena's mother would "hear" the phone ringing and then talk on the phone to her dead husband – sometimes for a hour or more. Normally she had

such a horse voice, but when she spoke with him on the phone her voice was crystal clear.

Track 14

56:38 All the St. Joseph's people prayed for each other and stood by one another.

57:26 Wilson and Alice Marshall were important players. Alice was the secretary and explained all the terms and agreements. She was a retired school teacher. She never raised her voice and had great patience. She was active in the girl's club – giving good advice and leading them in the right direction. She fostered charity and community relations.

Track 15

59:55 Scanlon Herbert, John Somerville, Harry Fenwick, and Jimmy Rustin (carpenter) started it all. They worked well together.

1:01:00 The only opposition was in acquiring the land. Folks did not want blacks to own land. The lawyer Dorsey helped them and stood with them. (Became Judge Dorsey). Charles Fenwick was the head of the bank. He counted every penny yet he always had time to talk to them and help them out.

Track 16

1:05:21 NAACP was wonderful. Blacks were disadvantaged back then – they did not have the education and experience necessary to work with legal issues.

1:06:15 Father McKenna was also a big inspiration. He visited St. Joseph's all the time.