Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

ALICE REBECCA BISCOE BENNETT

Interviewed by Brenda Coates
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[Begin Tape 1 of 2, Side 1]

[0:00]

Brenda Coates: ...home in Ridge, Maryland. It's September the 5th, 1996. I have told Mrs. Bennett that if she's uncomfortable answering any of the questions, I would understand.

The first question is: What were times like when you were a child? You know, how did you and your family live? What did you eat? Things like that.

Alice Bennett: We was quite fortunate. We was living on a farm and we had waterfront property, so we had—. We raised nearly everything that we had except sugar and kerosene and salt and things like that. And in the wintertime, we had seafood. We had oysters and sometime, ' course they caught crabs along with the oysters. We had fried hard crabs in the winter, and they salted the fish because they had no refrigeration for them. And so, had to salt fish. Make fish cakes! [chuckle] And they always—I remember them killing a beef every year, and we had sheep. I don't remember killing sheep. But when they killed hogs, they already had nine hogs: that's more most people

ever had. And, but, I don't know. My husband—my father, my uncle liked fat hogs because he could eat the fat meat. I hated it! [chuckle] But—

BC: Okay.

AB: But, it was a lot of us. It was nine children. My uncle had seven children and my father had two.

BC: So, both families lived on the farm together?

AB: They lived—it was three brothers that lived on the farm; but the oldest one had another child that had a son, but he was grown before we was even born because he was the oldest brother. And so, it was Uncle Randolph and my father, and my father had two children. Every other child died. The oldest one died and my sister lived. The next one died and I lived. And the baby and my mother died in childbirth.

[3:22]

BC: Okay. So, you're saying that—.You told me earlier that you all lived on St. Jerome's Neck Creek.

AB: It was St. Jerome's Neck, but the creek was bordering on our property, and we lived about a mile from the Bay; St.—I mean, Chesapeake Bay, but our property wasn't joining the Chesapeake Bay.

BC: And, you said you—St. Jerome's Neck is at the Dameron post office now; but quite a few years ago, they had their own post office.

AB: Yes. I'm trying to remember what year that was. It was in 18 and something.

BC: Okay. Do you think, back then when you were coming up, the times were better or worse than what they are now?

AB: There wasn't as much violence anyway [chuckle].

BC: For sure!

AB: And, they have more finances now, but they had very little money in those days.

BC: So, you're saying because there's more money now that things are better or?

AB: Better financially.

BC: Yeah. Better financially, but overall do you think it's?

AB: No, because now people seem to be more independent and they don't associate like they used to then. Because, I remember when they used to have something—the families used to have something they called run-ins [chuckle]. What they used to: They would tell one member of the family what they going to do and they would have a, prepare everything like they were going to have a party, and they didn't come to your house until late I guess about nine or ten o'clock that night. And, this one person would greet them at the door and, you know, show them in where they're going to have the dance and refreshments.

And, all the children would be in bed and we would hear this music down there playing! [laughter] And dancing! [laughter] And, this man—this one man they call Steven Neal, he had the base fiddle. George Thompson played the violin I think, and somebody else, his brother had the violin, but I don't know. They wouldn't let us come down stairs unless we, you know, had an excuse. Coming down for some water or something.

And, but, we had a large house, and one side of the house had a—we call it a hall, a long room. It was the length of the house, and it was—you could dance in there. I mean, you know, there was nothing else in there. We used to hang cloaks in there, but, you know, it was just a clear space for dancing.

[7:11]

BC: So, did a lot of people have these house parties like that?

AB: Yeah. They didn't have the space that we had, except my grandfather, I mean, that's what they used to do down there to raise money for St. Peter's. Even before the parish separated from St. Michael's, they used to have entertainments down to Ben Biscoe's house and, to raise money for St. Peter Claver.

BC: St. Peter?

AB: Um hmm [yes].

BC: Hm. Okay. What is your earliest memory? You know, one lady told me her earliest memory was riding behind a horse and buggy. [chuckle] But, what is your earliest memory?

AB: I was two when my mother died. I didn't know what was going on, but I do recall my aunt had me in her arms and she was standing at the end of the porch crying. I was always concerned about, you know, her physical condition or whatever.

BC: Your aunt?

AB: Yes. The one that raised me, Aunt Aggie. They call her Aggie. That would be my earliest memory, and I was telling my cousin today. I mean, I remember my aunt trying to teach me how to dance because I always wanted to know how to dance, and I see it on one of these commercials or something they have on TV. This man. I think he's got this little girl standing on his feet dancing? That's what she used to do. And I say, I must not have been too big because I always kind of stout, you know.

BC: And you was standing on somebody's feet?

AB: I would stand on my aunt's feet. She tell me, stand on her feet, and she would teach me how to two-step. That was the famous—. If you could two-step, you could do anything else. Later, I learned to waltz and do the one-step [Brenda laughs] and stuff like that, but the two-step.

BC: Okay. Describe your relationship with your sister. How did you all get along? Did you all play together?

AB: Oh, we got along fine. I mean, she was six years older than me because of the children in between, and she would tease me. Sometimes, she would pet me and she would tell me that my aunt was—. I had probably done something I wasn't supposed to do and she said, you know Aunt Agnes, when she catches up with you, she—. So, she hid me one day in the closet and told me I better stay in there. She must have forgotten all about me because I couldn't get out of there [chuckle] 'til later.

BC: Oh, goodness!

[10:45]

AB: But, we got along alright. All I'm saying, we, they would always scare you. She would always want me to go upstairs with her to make up the beds and I told her, "No. I wasn't going because she was going to scare me."

BC: [laughter]

AB: And she said, "No, I'm not." So, when we got ready to come downstairs, she would always run down ahead of me 'cause she was bigger and everything and tell me to stand up there. With three eyes! One in the middle of the forehead. And I was scared to death! And if I woke up during the, in the morning, in the summertime and all the rest of

the people had gone downstairs, my cousins and everybody, I was afraid to go downstairs. I remember praying to the Lord and then I'd say, "Mr. Devil, these are for you." Said some prayers and trying to change him back because they say he likes everything the wrong way. But, I guess we were like any other children, normal, but she sure liked to scare me. [chuckle]

BC: [Laughs] So, how long—? Were the two families together all during the time you were growing up on St. Jerome's Neck?

AB: Yes.

BC: Okay.

AB: My sister left. She went to Washington with my father when she was 14, but the rest of us stayed on the farm until we grew up.

BC: You said she went to Washington with your father?

AB: Yes, because he—I was seven years old when he left home to go take a government job.

BC: Oh, okay.

AB: He worked in the House office building.

BC: Okay. So, your other uncle and his wife? Her name was Agnes.

AB: Yeah.

BC: They raised you along with their children.

AB: Yeah.

BC: Okay.

AB: Although Agnes didn't have but one son, but Randolph was there. That was Ernestine and the rest of them's father. It was three brothers on that farm, but just two of them had

children: Randolph and my father.

BC: Agnes was the oldest brother's wife?

AB: Yeah.

BC: Oh, okay.

AB: She took care of the youngest—I mean, the other two brother's children which was no relation to her at all, just by marriage.

[13:36]

BC: Oh, okay. Okay. I get it now. Okay. And, how did you get along with your cousins then?

AB: I get along with them fine, better than they got along with each other. I could get along with all of them, you know, and they'd rather be with me than, you know, [chuckle]—

BC: With their own brothers and sisters. Okay. I have it now. You said you went to St. Peter's Church. Okay. St. Peter's Catholic Church on St. Peter's Church Road.

AB: Yeah.

BC: Okay. Did you take any trips as a child?

AB: Yes, we took trips to—I remember going to the Washington Monument and to the Smithsonian, and I think to the Capitol. And, Mrs. Marshall—she was Daniel Barnes' daughter, she had a store, a restaurant I guess up there in Washington, and we went there and she—. We had cocoa. Hot cocoa. The first time I remember drinking hot cocoa and [chuckle] I don't know whether we had sandwiches or not. I'm sure she must have furnished us with sandwiches because, you know, the cocoa gets the—

BC: Skin on it.

AB: Skin on it. I thought it was—I didn't know it was that hot, and I had borrowed—. We all had these middie blouse, and I had borrowed it from my cousin. I swished this hot chocolate on it. It burnt me! [chuckle]

BC: Learned your lesson after that! Okay. During the time that you were coming up, how were senior citizens treated? You know, what happened to the people who were too old to care for themselves? You know, did the families take care of them or were there any facilities?

AB: No, facilities at all. I mean, they stayed with the family. Whoever was in the family just, you know, took care of them.

BC: Okay. About your health concerns: How did your parents, when I say "parents" in this, you know, instance, I'm talking about your father until he left and your uncles and aunts. How did they deal with health and illnesses, and did they have any home remedies? And, did you used to have a doctor? Where did you go for medical reasons?

AB: They had a lot of home remedies [chuckle] and I was delivered by a doctor. I think all my, I mean, you know, my mother's children was delivered by a doctor, I guess. I mean, I know I was.

But, I don't remember going to a doctor until I got grown. I mean, you know, until I probably went to a doctor myself on my own because my grandmother was a midwife, or my great-grandmother. Great-grandmother was a midwife, and she—they would always send for her. Don't care what time of night it was because those children had the measles and had a real high temperature, and they sent for her. They said my breathing was shaking the whole cradle.

BC: Okay. So, you don't remember any doctors at all while you were coming up.

AB: No. I do remember when the rest of them. I didn't get it. It was about three of us that didn't have the typhoid fever. That was the first time I remember a doctor being in the house. His name was Dr. Brown, and he would come down there. He taught Beatrice and myself, Beatrice was around my age—that was Uncle Randolph's daughter, how to take the temperature. And, what we used for disinfectant here [he] told us to take this carbolic acid and put a certain amount of it into a glass and fill the rest up with water and keep the thermometer in there, and that's was we used to disinfect for, I mean, the thermometer.

[18:33]

BC: Okay. So, did you ever have to go to a hospital when you were coming up?

AB: No.

BC: Okay. So, okay, so besides that one time that you can remember that a doctor was in the house, the family did not go to any medical facilities that you knew of?

AB: No.

BC: Okay. And, you said you all depended a lot on home remedies. Like what? Can you name a few?

AB: [chuckle] One that sticks out in my mind; I don't know what I had that this lady told my aunt to take these. I don't know what these little bugs are, something like armadillos because when you touch them, they curl up like an armadillo. Told her to put them into a bag. So, she got a little tobacco bag. You know, like you had to put this smoking tobacco, and somebody that used a pipe or something. Had this little bag with a draw-

string on it. Some people call it wood lice. I don't know what they are. They come from under the boards and things.

I begged her not. I was too sick to resist anything. We called her Nanny. I said, "Nanny, please don't put those things on me." But, she tied it around my neck. So, I don't know what. Then, she put onions, onion poultice. For a long while, I couldn't stand the smell of onions. It would make me sick. I felt like I was going to faint. I'm just getting so I can eat onions. Sometimes now, I crave them, but...I was working for the priest. I cooked onions once. I had to leave, go home. I couldn't go Sunday either, you know. I left all the dishes and everything on the table till Monday morning. I don't know what they thought of that! [chuckle] Onions.

BC: Well, to go back with the little armadillos. What was that for? I mean, what was that supposed to cure?

AB: I don't know whether I had—didn't seem like it was the whooping cough. I don't know what it was. I had a temperature. I always had something wrong with me. I don't know if it was for a fever or, I don't know what it was for! I know, all I know, I was sick.

And another thing, when you was sick, they wouldn't give you—. If you had a temperature, they wouldn't give you cold water. If they give you water at all, it was warm water, and you [chuckle] already had a temperature. So, my sister used to steal me—go to the well and get water and sneak it to me.

BC: Okay.

AB: I guess that's the only thing that saved me [chuckle]!

BC: Was that cold water that she got! Okay. What types of things did you do as a child?

You know, did you like to play ball or, you know, what?

AB: We would try to play ball every evening in the spring every year, you know, when the weather got warm. Other times, we had a Victrola. It wasn't a big Victrola. It was a phonograph because you would wind it up and it had, didn't have these flat records. It had round cylinder records, and you didn't have to change the needle. It had a diamond needle on there and it never wore out. And these cylinders, you just push it on. Real old-fashioned phonograph except my aunt had give us—. She bought it in Baltimore, and she got tired of it. She gave it to us, and we kept it until, you know, we wore it out. We used to dance to that. I used to ask—my aunt taught me to dance. I tried to teach the other children how to dance. (laughter) I loved to dance!

[23:05]

BC: Okay. What kind of chores did you all have to do?

AB: That we didn't do?! [chuckle] We had to leave home so early in the morning, we didn't do anything only just try to get ourself together in the morning to get out of there because we had to cross the creek. We had to cross St. Jerome's Creek every morning to the other side, and walk about nine miles to school through the woods and come up through the graveyard. And in the evening, if they had the boat—I mean, by the time we got back home after crossing the creek, after going back home, I guess it was nearly around six o'clock or some kind. At least five o'clock.

And if it was in the spring of the year, the beginning of the year, I'd sneak out the back door and go out there until learn how to plough with this double-horse team. But, we were supposed to be making up the beds. Didn't have inside plumbing, so we had to

carry our containers and stuff like that. Clean the lampshades and fill up the lamps and bring in the wood and get water. And, anything that else that needed to be done around there.

BC: Okay. Your aunt and uncle, how did they treat you, you and the other kids? You know, how did they discipline you and what did they discipline you for?

AB: We were one big family and you didn't know whose children were who, you know, or anything like that, and I never heard a curse word until I got grown and moved over on this side. I don't know why. I used to wish I knew how to curse. For what, I don't know! [laughter] 'Cause sometime used to hear people talking about it and, you know, I didn't know how to go about it! [laughter] But, if you broke a lampshade, you probably get a spanking for the window light or something that because I guess it was so hard for them to replace. But, I never understood, you know, 'cause everybody has accidents. That's what they would do. And, you never know. I guess, it depend on who did it! [laughter]

BC: Okay. So basically, they didn't do a lot of discipline because—?

AB: Oh yeah! They kept you in line. Oh yeah! No, we didn't, but we had so—they did—I mean, they were doing their thing, you know, farming and things like that, and we'd go off to play. They didn't know what we were doing, you know, if we got—and we couldn't fight each other. Not to let them know because we'd get spanking again. So, we just fight out there among ourselves and just on, dust ourselves off, and go on home. I mean, go to the house.

[26:58]

BC: Okay. Do you think that they prepared you for life?

AB: I think they did the best that they could. I mean, they used to talk to us a lot, and they used to talk a lot, and they used to explain a lot of things more than most of the—

BC: Parents do now?

AB: Most parents did in those days. I don't know about now, but they did an awful lot of explaining to us because they, you know, at night, they would talk over everything and we would be there with them. I mean, they'd explain what went on with them, young and all that.

BC: Okay. The next question is, describe your formal schooling? You told me you went to St. Peter Claver Elementary School which was about nine miles from you, and that later on you went to night school at Cardinal Gibbons.

AB: Yes.

BC: Okay.

AB: I was married when I went in high school. I mean, I was living here. I was in Father Rockwell's. He taught night school for awhile. I don't know what year.

BC: Yeah, I think he came in '54, some time like that. '53, '54.

AB: But I don't think he started right away. I don't know. I'm trying to remember.

[28:43]

BC: And you said how you had to cross the creek, walk through the woods, then walk up, cross the road and walk up through the graveyard in order to get to the elementary school.

AB: That's right, and we were always late. And when I was about in the 5th Grade, the teachers, Sister Helene used to always say, "Diller the dollar, the 10:00 scholar." So, we

hated going to classroom 'cause she was always calling other children's attention to it.

BC: Oh!

AB: Because all them start laughing because we would have to push the boat off the shore or else, if the tide was high, we had to bail the boat out. And when it got to the other shore, we had to put boards down to get to the shore if the tide was low. And if it wasn't, we'd have, just—. And then, we had no overshoes or rubbers or anything, you know, to protect the feet. Most of the time, we didn't have bottoms in the shoes. We put cardboard. Lucky if you had cardboard. You put newspaper, some kind of paper and then that was that. Used to change that when you got to school. You kneel down and say a prayer. The children push the pencils in the hole in your shoes. Gracious me.

BC: So, this was every day. You had to do that every day.

AB: Every day we went to school. And then if the wind was blowing too hard, we had to walk all the way around, around the road.

BC: So, about how much further was that?

AB: It was about seven miles down in St. Jerome's Neck to—seven or nine miles before you got out of St. Jerome's Neck to Dameron, then we had to go across the woods to Dameron to come out on [Rte.] 5 over here. One day, it was after twelve when we got [chuckle] out to Dameron because the snow was the ground. So, we kept on up to St. James and to Mason and them's grandmother's house up there across from Park Hall Road, but it's still on 5. I guess about two o'clock when we got up there. We got to St. James Church, we ran in there and said a prayer that we made it that far! [chuckle]

BC: Oh! Oooh! Just to hear!

AB: We didn't rate the bus. They say that we didn't live far enough.

[31:43] [tape appears to stop and start]

BC: That you didn't live far enough away?

AB: Yeah, we didn't live far enough away to rate the bus. The children down in Beachville, they could ride the bus. But the one from St. James and one from St., from Park Hall, but they said we were in walking distance. They didn't even know where we lived, and they didn't know until the children got sick with the typhoid fever that they knew where, how far we had to go. And I told my aunt once, I said, "I don't like going to school late," I said, "because teacher always, you know, make mention of it." She said, "You should tell her she should come and go home with you once and see how far you live."

So, I told her that once, but she, well, she didn't go home with me, but I mean, when children got sick, Father McKenna brought the nuns around there because they were quarantined for awhile and nobody was supposed to visit. Then, they go so they could have company, you know, have visitors, the nuns came around to see the children. She never said anything. I mean, she never made mention, you know, anymore about that.

BC: So, who determined the buses? Who determined who went on the buses? Was it the county or the school did that?

AB: Seems as if it was the school. I don't know who was determining it because my uncle, you know, would go to PTA meetings and he said something about, you know, the children riding the bus. Even if they didn't ride the bus all the way home, they could ride it from school around to [Rte.] 235 and we still would have about two miles to walk

before we got to St. Jerome's Creek, then we had to cross the creek which would have been a big help. But, we didn't rate the bus.

BC: Um!

AB: I don't know how persistent he was. [chuckle]

BC: That's a story! My goodness. And think today, kids only have the bus stops right in front of the door.

AB: Yeah, because Germaine used to stand in the door and she could see the bus, and she could walk down there to catch the bus. And she said, "I wish the bus would come through here." You know [chuckle], at the front door. I said, "Girl, you don't know!" [laughter]

BC: Oh goodness.

[34:44]

BC: Okay. When you went to St. Peter's now, is it like it is now or when I went there where, you know, it had the two stories with the four big classrooms? Was it like that when you went there?

AB: Yes, we had that. We had the same thing. I don't know how many grades. I think it was the 4th and 5th Grade. You know, 3rd and 4th Grades. Two grades in every room.

BC: Every room. Who do you remember as being your favorite teacher?

AB: Mother Damien. [chuckle]

BC: Why?

AB: I don't know, but just because she seemed to under—she understood me better, I guess, or she give me credit for having a little bit of sense. And in those days, you know, they

used to criticize the children, you know, if they wasn't too bright or wasn't catching on the way that they thought they should because I remember when the old school, before the old school burned down, I had a teacher. I guess they just, you know, it was somebody—. She wasn't trained to teach because she didn't have any patience. And if it hadn't been for one of my classmates, I'd have never learned how to do long division because what some children would understand, others don't. She would ask, "How many 7's in 21?" I mean, I didn't know how many 7's was in 21. [chuckle] I mean, you know, if you'd say or, "How many times does it go into that?" or something. I said, "It's not going anywhere, you know. [chuckle] It didn't make sense to me.

BC: Okay.

AB: And, so this classmate of mine, I mean, he taught me more than she did. I thought, What's she talking about? He said, "Put down 21 marks and see how many 7's you can get out of it." Then, I understood.

BC: Understood. Yeah. So, Sister Damien had a lot of patience.

AB: Oh, yeah. I mean, with me. I mean, some children didn't like her, but I did because meantime, Sister Helena used to punish me. I wouldn't even talk to her, you know. She'd keep me after school. Not knowing how or where I was going to get home or what, and I was the only child in school, you know, because she had me looking up these definitions and I didn't—I knew how to look up the definitions. I didn't know which one to use, and she thought I should know which one to use. And I'd use it, and that's the wrong one. And so, she tried to get more out of me than what I [laughter] was capable of doing, I guess.

BC: Was Sister Helena your least favorite teacher?

AB: She got a lot of work out of me! [laughter] She kept me, you know I mean, after school. She was determined, you know, that I would get it. She was—she was a good teacher.

BC: What was your favorite subject?

AB: Geography. I could figure that out without doing a whole lot of studying.

BC: What did you hate the most?

AB: Spelling. [laughter]

BC: Okay.

AB: Because they didn't teach us phonetics or—I was, heard them talking about it on TV. All these words that you had to memorize, you didn't know how to figure out, you know, syllables, things like that. You just memorized this long list of words.

BC: Okay.

AB: And you don't learn to spell very well like that.

[39:18]

BC: No. [chuckle] Okay. As a young adult, what did you dream of becoming?

AB: I always dreamed, dreamt of being a wife with two children. Husband and two children. That's what I always wanted, but I used to tell people I wanted to be a nurse when they asked me, and, until I found out what nurses had to do and I found out I was afraid of dead people. [chuckle] I'm not now, but I was. I was dreadfully afraid of dead people 'cause when anybody died in our family, I never see them. I didn't even go to the funeral.

BC: As a teenager, did your aunt and uncle let you court?

AB: Not until I got 18.

BC: Not until you got 18? Okay. Well, when you got to be 18, where did you go and what did you do, you know, as far as courting was concerned?

AB: Oh, I went to Washington shortly after that to live with my sister because she was working. She had two children and I was babysitting. I didn't know it! [chuckle] I didn't realize it, but that's what—I didn't go out too much with—I mean, they didn't have anywhere to take you out anyway. You just probably met at parties, met someone at a party, but I didn't have any, really, steady boyfriends.

BC: So when you were in Washington at your sister's, you went to a lot of house parties?

AB: No.

BC: Okay.

AB: I mean, later on, yes, I did. I mean, after they moved, I mean, because they moved in the suburbs and they had house parties, a lot of house parties. So, that's all they had was house parties. And the theater.

BC: Okay.

AB: And, I remember the first time I went in the theatre. My cousin took me and I had no idea what it was like, and it was, you know, when you come in out of the light, it was during the daytime. She and another girl, I don't know who the other lady was with her, but they sat down and I sit on the other side with them, as I thought, but I sat in somebody's lap! [laughter] And, I was embarrassed because I found I was sitting up higher than everybody else, sitting in this woman's lap and so [chuckle] I had to move over further. But instead of them leaving a seat for me, they sat in the first seat. [chuckle]

Oh mercy!

BC: Okay. What kind of work have you done to support yourself? You told me you worked in civil service for a few years starting about 1944.

AB: Before that, I worked for—my first job was working for the St. Michael's. I worked there for two years, and I think that was in '39 or something like that.

BC: How old were you?

AB: I have no idea. Oh, I guess I was in my 20s.

BC: Okay. But you went to Washington when you were 18 and babysat for your sister and then you came back home, and then you worked for the priest at St. Michael's. Okay. How did you get to work then?

AB: I didn't live very far, I guess, two blocks away.

BC: Oh, this was—?

AB: Over here on this side.

BC: Okay.

AB: St. Michael's. No, I wasn't living here. I was living on 235.

BC: Okay.

AB: Where Joe Bryant lives now.

BC: Oh, okay.

AB: I lived across the road from him. See, I could walk down there. Later on, I bought myself a bicycle [chuckle] and I think I didn't—I was so innocent, like I didn't have sense enough to know that the priest wasn't too fond of me riding a bicycle. I didn't get it. I mean...I don't know. I mean, I'm a slow learner. So later on, I mean, you know,

found out that they thought I should have been walking, I guess. [laughter]

[44:11]

BC: Oh, okay. Why did you go to work down there, down to St. Michael's?

AB: Because the lady that was working there had quit or something happened. I mean, they needed somebody to work for them. I didn't know how to cook. I told them I didn't know how to cook. Father McKenna kept saying, "Do you know how to boil water?"

I told him, "Yes."

"Do you know how to fry an egg or cook an egg or something?"

I told him, "Yes." And that's probably all they got for awhile, I mean [chuckle] because Father Kerr [??] told me one morning—I give him the eggs every morning for breakfast. He said, "Alice, look back here, back of my neck."

And, I looked back there. "Do you see any feathers growing back there?" [laughter] "I ate so many eggs, I think I'm growing feathers!" [laughter]

BC: Okay.

AB: I decided I got to do something.

BC: Back then when you were working down for St. Michael's, about how much money did you make? You know, what were the--

AB: What was the salary?

BC: Yeah.

AB: Five dollars a week.

BC: Five dollars a week.

AB: Five dollars a week and then Robert—. You know, the ladies wasn't allowed upstairs, so

Father had his business office upstairs or his desk upstairs. He make out his check. And even before Robert and I got married I mean, we—I wasn't married when I first started working down there. I mean, we was going together, but we wasn't married. And, he would always send my check downstairs by Robert. I had no way of cashing it. We had to walk over here on 5 to cash the check at Longworth's [??] store. So, he'd always take it over there in Father's car and take his check and cash it. So once, he wasn't there—Robert, I guess about two years later, one time he wasn't there, so Father brought the check downstairs to give me. And Robert come, I told him, "I had got a raise!" He...I looked on it and he looked on it and said, "That's what you been getting all the time." I hadn't seen my check for so long thought I got a raise [chuckle] because he had been cashing.

BC: So for—. How many hours did you work, and you worked every day?

AB: I worked, I think I worked every day because, I mean, on Sundays, I was off. No—□

[47:09]

[End of Side 1, Tape 1 of 2]

[Begin Side 2, Tape 1 of 2]

[47:09]

AB: No. I wasn't even off on Sundays. I was off Sunday afternoon, but I mean, so I was off every time Sunday afternoon, but I think they had dinner earlier on Sunday afternoon. I hated it because I had to fix Father's breakfast, you know, Sunday morning. Father Kerr, because he was the pastor at St. Michael's, fixed him breakfast on Sunday morning. And so, I was there until, I guess, about 4 or 5:00 on Sunday evening.

BC: So, every day you were there for breakfast and dinner.

AB: I'd go home after breakfast. I could go home after breakfast until it was time for lunch. Some days, if Father Kerr, if he was going to Washington, his family was in Washington—I mean, in Baltimore. I didn't have to go so I'd be off for the rest of that day if he was going away to visit his mother.

BC: But you only made $5?

AB: Five dollars a week.

BC: A week. Oh! Okay.

AB: And I didn't feel too bad because I didn't know how to do anything. [laughter] So, he was paying me to learn! [chuckle]

BC: To learn! Okay. When you went to work, Civil Service, this was Patuxent?

AB: Yes.

BC: Okay. What did you do there?

AB: We did, you know, janitorial work, clean the office, but I was working at night. Starting working in the day, you know, but soon transferred to nights which I liked better. I worked at St. Michael's school, too. We cleaned. Each one of us had a hall; we'd clean the classrooms at night.

BC: Okay. What do you remember about your wedding? How did you meet Mr. Robert?

AB: Well—[laughter]! We started in school together where his brother built his house down here, down the street from me. That's where the black schoolhouse was.

BC: This is on 235?

AB: On Bennett Drive.

BC: Bennett Drive. Okay.

AB: Right down the street. The next house down on the left.

BC: Okay. Was the black schoolhouse?

AB: It was the black schoolhouse. The first black schoolhouse was over there where Ann & Tony's store is now. But when we were going to school, it was over here where Ed bought the piece of property where the black schoolhouse used to be.

BC: Okay.

AB: And you know how bigger boys are always put the smaller ones up to doing things? When they march out of the school, the boys told Robert—I don't know whether he told him to feel all the girls' legs or not. Told him to feel my legs, you know. And so, they grew mad. And as I say, I didn't know how to curse, but I told him I was going to knock the slop out of him. That's how I met him! [laughter] That was good times!

BC: Okay. The black school—But that was the public school?

AB: Yes.

BC: So, you—I mean, what were you doing there?

AB: Well, when I started the school, I started down here. They hadn't started the school up there at St. Peter's, I don't think.

BC: Oh, okay.

AB: I don't think they had started it up there. They—maybe they had, but they thought it was too far for us to go maybe. I don't know.

BC: So, you met him when you were real young.

AB: When I first started the school, when I was six, seven years old.

[51:35]

BC: Okay. So, what made you get married? How old were you?

AB: 25.

BC: 25. Okay. What year?

AB: 1940.

BC: 1940. Okay. And, why would you decide to get married?

AB: Oh! [chuckle] We were going together and had been going together, you know, courting each other [chuckle], but I think the preachers over there encouraged you because Father—once in awhile, Father McKenna would said, "Y'all planning on getting married?"

And, we would tell him, "Yes."

"If you don't set a date, you'll never get married." So, that did it, I guess! [laughter]

BC: Okay.

AB: Setting the date did it. I mean, the nuns over there, they practically raised Robert because he lived right next door to them. They taught him his prayers and everything. And the one that cooked over there, she said, "Since you's getting married…" You know, and we told her what date we were getting married on. "…why don't you wait and get married on the Feast of the Holy Roses?" So, that was the 7th of October. So, that's what we did, and they told us any important thing that we planned on doing, you know, do it on a feast day; and, that will help you, too, to remember the date. So, we bought the car, one of the new cars, we bought that on a feast day.

BC: Feast day.

AB: We moved over here on the Feast of the Blessed Mother, and things like that.

BC: Hm. Okay. Did you all have a honeymoon?

AB: [laughter] One day honeymoon! It wasn't a honeymoon. I mean, it wasn't anything because Father McKenna loaned us his car. We took Charles Forrest, Ernestine, and Ben—Ernestine and Ben were cousins—I mean, was brothers and sisters—all of us got in the car and we went to Washington and Baltimore and came on back home, and that was... you know, rode out. [laughter]

BC: Okay. So, you all took other people on your honeymoon?! [laughter]

AB: That's right! [laughter] That's right! We took them on the trip for whatever. That was the end of our honeymoon.

BC: Okay. What has your family life been like? You know, describe your marriage, your life with Mr. Robert and, you know, the kids, Ernest? Well, all the kids?

AB: Oh, I enjoyed it. I mean, 'course Robert. I mean, he...some men want to be the boss of everything, so I let him be boss, you know. He—I don't know whether he—. He used to give me money to pay the bills and I'd keep it in purse and, you know, forget to mail it, and he'd think he was going to be late with payment and stuff like that. So, he took that over because...he'd ask me to mail the oil bill, you know, in my purse. And, he started doing the shopping because he said the stuff that I bought was just things that I'd seen advertised, like on commercials or stuff like that. Until he got tired! [laughter] He did it for quite awhile. And, sometime he called me to go shopping. I didn't know a thing about buying a roast or beef or nothing else. I mean, you know, I had to have somebody

else, "Was it a good piece of meat?" or ask the butcher or somebody? I didn't know how to pick out meat, especially.

BC: Okay. But besides that part of it: Him, as you say, wanting to be boss, you had a good relationship?

AB: I had a good relationship I think because, I mean, we always had meals together, all of us, and we'd always talk and he'd always explain what he was doing, you know, and things like that. He didn't think I was paying too much attention to what he was saying, but a lot of times I did.

[56:45]

BC: Okay. Now, you said that you raised a couple of your brother in-law's children.

AB: He was my cousin.

BC: Your cousin. That was Geraldine.

AB: Geraldine was Mason's daughter which was my first cousin's child and Barbara. Barbara, she wasn't a relative at all. She started out as just a foster child.

BC: Okay.

AB: And so was Pamela, and then I also had Jeanie for three years. She was my nephew's daughter.

BC: Okay. So, you raised Geraldine from the age of eight until she graduated from Cardinal Gibbons and Barbara from the time she was five until she graduated from, where? Great Mills?

AB: Yes. Great Mills.

BC: From Great Mills. And, Jeanie for three years and you said, Pam for two years.

AB: Pam stayed out here about two, three years. I don't remember.

BC: Okay. What part has religion played in your life? You said you've always attended St. Peter Catholic Church, right?

AB: Um hmm [yes].

BC: So, what does the church mean to you?

AB: Oh well, I think it helps you morally and because, I mean, our parents—especially my aunt used to always say, you know, you be all responsible for any wrongdoings that you did [chuckle] and I was always thinking about these things that she used to tell us. You know, that you would be held responsible for them after death. And, very often think about it, and she said, and on the last day, you be judged and everybody be listening to everything that—. That's the part that I thought about. Listening to all the sins that you have committed. [laughter]

BC: Oh yeah! That would sort of make you say, "Well, I can't do any sinning because everybody's going to hear it!" [laughter]

AB: Everybody's going to know what I did one of these days!

BC: Yeah. Okay, and you were telling me how much the nuns and priests influenced your life, you know, as far as sort of making you set the date for your wedding and then telling you what date you should have.

AB: Yeah.

BC: The church, as a whole, has influenced your life a lot.

AB: A lot.

BC: Okay. What community activities do you participate in?

AB: Now?

BC: Do you belong to any clubs?

AB: Not now. I mean, I don't know any clubs. I mean, I don't belong to any clubs now. I mean, the Knights of St. Jerome. I don't whether you call that a club or what.

BC: Do you participate in church activities?

AB: Not now. I mean, I did. When the nuns—I mean, when they had—. Before the school closed over there, I cleaned the classroom, the 1st Grade classroom every evening, and the toilets because the sisters said, you know, they couldn't stand it, the smell. And, I used to help them with everything. You know, Rob and I used to sand the desks that's in the 1st Grade room. We took all the varnish off the desks and sanded them and help Sister Camellia with those. The next year, Father changed around another classroom. She was so—I'm telling you.

BC: I didn't know that.

AB: He put her in where they had the 1st—I mean, where they had the 7th and 8th Grade classroom, and I don't know why.

[1:01:34]

BC: Well, I guess by the time I got there, the 7th and 8th Grade were over to the other school.

AB: I guess so.

BC: Yeah, because it only went to the 6th Grade on that side. Yeah. Okay. I'm a ask you about, so more about your involvement with the nuns at St. Peter and you helping out with the some of the school activities, especially, as I remember, the Drum & Bugle Corps, and I know you used to travel a lot with Sister Camellia.

AB: When they first started with the Drum & Bugle Corps, Father—I mean, the priests and the nuns wasn't any of them interested in it, you know, because they didn't think it was going to amount to anything. [pause in conversation]

BC: Because the priests didn't think that it was going to amount to anything, so she didn't get the kind of support she should have.

AB: She sure didn't, and we took our car and, which was a—I think it was a □51 Chevrolet, two-door. And, you how that is with the children getting in and out the back of it. We had to take the Drum—I mean, the children home, especially the majorettes [chuckle] home when they practiced because parents didn't know what it was all about and they didn't bother to come after me until after the first performance. And then, they was lined up outside because, I guess—. You remember that first performance?

BC: I don't remember the first performance, but I definitely remember you taking us home and stopping at the ice cream place on Willows Road.

AB: And, you don't know what that was all about because she, Sister asked the children, "Would you children like some ice cream?" □

"Yes, Sister."

You all started jumping out the car going in there. Sister didn't have the first penny. And after all you all get out, she said, "Mrs. Bennett, would you loan me some money to buy ice? I'll pay you." She didn't have no money, no way of paying me nothing. I looked at her.

"What's the matter? You think I'm not going to pay you!" [laughter] And, you all ordering up ice cream, and I'm going to have to pay for it, take you home, pay for gas

to get you home. And when you all used to march down here, call yourself give you all marching lessons. Exercise or something? And had a thunderstorm, and you all came here and all the boys was out there on that porch there because all of you couldn't fit in the house here.

She gets me, take me down to the store. She asked me to take her down to the store. Get down there and she orders up this soda and stuff to bring back here to treat you all.

[BC: With no money.

AB: No money. [chuckle] But, I don't know what happened. She used to do those sort of things. And one time, I looked in my purse and I had money in there. I mean, you know, after, a few days later. I thought she had sneaked some money in my purse. I don't know where it came from because I didn't have that much money. I wasn't even working. I mean, you know. I said, "I don't know where the money came from?" I said, did she put it in there and she said, "No." So, somebody paid me back! [laughter] Or furnished me with the money! I didn't know. That's what she would do. She would aggravate me like that! [chuckle]

[1:06:14]

And she know it, and I'd have to take her to get—to Bugles. We went to the second-hand store in Baltimore down on Central Avenue, and it was a little old one-way street. Then when you got inside, you got down in the basement. I mean, you went down to get into the store, then you had to go through a little hallway. No lights to get back in the storage room where you had all this second-hand stuff in there. It wasn't even—. It

was dark on your way getting back in there. And one time, she left her money bag [chuckle] down there—what money she had left—down there at the store. And, my sister was having a benefit party for her up there at St. Peter's in Baltimore. So, she got Josie and Leslie to go down there to ask them, Did they see it? They went down there. They found the money. They gave her the money. But to get money to get those intimates, she had, you know, she'd sell popcorn. And so after awhile, I stopped going over there to help her pop popcorn. I used to pop the popcorn here and put it in a big bag and then I'd put it in these little old sandwich bags and staple it up, and all she had to do was reach in there and get it and sell it to the children. And, that's what she bought the band instruments with, popcorn money.

BC: I'm really—. You know—. I belonged to the band for all the time that the band was there, and, you know, naturally as a child, you don't know all of these things. So now once, after the first performance, the parents and the other teachers and, the other nuns and priests were for the band, but they still didn't give that much help.

AB: They gave more help because, I mean, Father bought this old station wagon and I guess you remember it from surplus place, and that's what I could always use after that to carry the children home in, especially the majorettes. And that's how, on the way back, Sister Camellia could learn how to drive! [laughter] But, she would never get her license because she would never went out and she didn't, she was afraid that she wouldn't pass, but she knew how to drive better than some other [inaudible] I taught I don't know how many of them how to drive. Mother Anselm didn't get as quick as the rest of them. [BC laughs] I don't think she ever learned how to park. [chuckle]

BC: Okay. How do you feel about life in general today in St. Mary's County? In what ways is it different from what it used to be? You were talking earlier about the violence now. You know, what other changes have you seen?

AB: Well, people don't socialize as much unless they, you know, out at some entertainment. That' the only time, you know. The people don't visit each other. They may have a few friends they visit, but I mean, people used to stop all along the road and, you know, visit anybody that they knew. They don't do that now. I mean, they have television to look at. They don't communicate with each other as much because they're sitting there looking at television. Somebody say something: Hi! Hi! Wait a minute. Something on television that they want to hear and things like that.

[1:10:47]

BC: Do you think the quality of life is better now than it used to be?

AB: Sure! [chuckle] Yeah, I think so. You know, years ago, I mean, they didn't have any convenience. Didn't have running water. Didn't plumbing. Didn't have electric lights. My uncle always read the paper, but he had to put it on the other side of the lamp. The lamp would be between him and the paper to read.

BC: Okay. The next question is: Are people different from what they used to be in St. Mary's? And, I know you've answered that question in that, you know, you talking about the violence and then you were talking about, you know, they don't communicate.

AB: They don't socialize. I mean, you know, you just have a few friends that will, I mean, that come in and if somebody else come in, you wonder what they coming for. [chuckle] One of those numbers.

BC: Okay. Do you think teenagers are better today than they used to be?

AB: No. No, because I mean, your parents could correct my children, as well as I would correct them. I mean, anybody would correct a teenager or any child, and they did. And my aunt, I mean, said when they were coming along, I mean, you know, they would spank them if they seen them doing something. And then if they told the parents, they'd go home and get another one. [slaps hand and chuckles]

BC: [laughs] Okay. Well, what do you think, you know, caused the change in the people's attitudes, you know?

AB: Well, they got more independent. I mean, they didn't have to depend on them for transportation because when we used to go to church—I lived over on 235 and we walked all the way to St. Peter's Church. And if you caught somebody that had a car, which wasn't many people that had cars going our way, I mean, Mr. Gant and Mr. Gunn was the only two there for awhile, and they would pick up anybody until the car got loaded, you know, and take them to church if they were walking. I mean, if it wasn't too many of them, they'd take them to church. They never passed up anybody. And now, they look at you and keep on going. [chuckle] Even if they want to pick you up, they afraid to pick you up.

[1:13:58]

BC: Right. Yeah. Okay. Do you think the race relations—. Do you think there's a difference in the County?

AB: It's a difference. It's a different kind of difference [chuckle] I say because they—. People , they seemed to know how to get along with each other years ago; but now, they

don't even try, you know. Most of them don't try to get along with the other one. They don't have to put up with you and, because people—when we was over in St. Jerome's Neck, I mean, it wasn't but three black families around there and we all got along like one big family because what one had, the other didn't have. We was always running out of kerosene, and I think, thank Robert Lee Owens' mother—she's like [inaudible]. His grandmother, we always borrowed kerosene from her and we always had a bottle. It looked like a fifth bottle I guess, about that size, and it had a string tied around it. I always had to be the one to go and ask her for, to borrow this kerosene.

After awhile, I found out what she was doing. She would just sit the bottle there until I come back again, and she either pour it in there or give me the bottle that, for the kerosene. Just change bottles. And I say, if she can do it, I can do it, too. My uncle would go and buy kerosene when they go shopping. I'd swipe that much kerosene out of there and go and hide it up in the barn. And [chuckle], when she said she'd run out of kerosene and go over Miss McKay's and borrow some kerosene, I'd go up in the barn and get it and carry it to it. I got really embarrassed to keep going over asking for kerosene. And after I found out what she was doing, I said that taught me a lesson—how to save, I mean, to do for yourself.

BC: Yeah.

AB: And then when they went shopping, on Saturday mostly, I'd get some flour. I put that upstairs in my father's trunk. Get salt. All the stuff that they get from the store, I'd get some out, and baking powder and stuff like that. Carry upstairs and put it, lock it up in the trunk. So, my aunt used to say, "You got any things in your storeroom?" [laughter]

BC: How old were you then?

AB: I guess I was about 12 or, you know, 12 or 13 years old or something like that.

BC: So, okay. Where did you get the money from to buy these?

AB: I didn't have to buy those things. When they went to the store to get supplies, when they come back with the supplies—

BC: Oh!

AB: I'd take some of them.

BC: Oh, okay.

AB: They didn't know I was taking. I just take them and hide them. [chuckle]

BC: So that when they told, when they ran out, you could go to—. Okay. Okay. You were saving for a rainy day.

AB: Yeah! [chuckle]

[1:17:25]

BC: So, you saying that every—you all got along very well with the whites that lived in your area.

AB: Yeah.

BC: And that, but today, you don't think that race relations is that good.

AB: No.

BC: Okay.

AB: No, because I mean, even they would visit you, you know, and we'd visit you. Or if anything went on or—. We had a farm and they'd come after milk and cream or, you know, butter or whatever, and we'd borrow sugar and things like that from them, and

kerosene or baking powder or stuff like that. You know, everybody borrowed from everybody. Now, you don't have to do that.

BC: Okay. When segregation was here, were you afraid of any group or person, you know, practicing hate?

AB: No. The only thing we were afraid, that school, that building over there, Ridge Marin was a white school.

BC: Okay.

AB: Public school, and we walked down this road and you know, they call you a lot of names, racial names, slurs and stuff like that and go out there at you. I mean, only time we was afraid of them is when you were passing these schools. And, you pass St. Michael's School and the convent—they had borders. girls bordering there and they'd stand out on the bank and call you names, and that's the only time you had to tighten up.

BC: When you passed schools?

AB: Yeah.

BC: The public and the Catholic schools that were down here in Ridge. Okay. How do you feel about living in the County? You said that you lived for a short while in Washington.

AB: I never liked the city. I never liked the city. I couldn't stand the smell of, you know, different odors, I mean, like the streetcar and the soft coal that they burned for fuel. It used to make me sick, and then I didn't like riding the streetcars—I'd get motion sickness. Things like that. I mean, I like the wide open space that you see here.

BC: Okay. Do you think that there's a difference between the people that were born in the County and the outsiders who came in even though the outsiders may have been here for

50 years?

AB: I don't know. I mean, it depends on where the outsiders came from. A lot of them came from the South and they worked for, worked harder, seemed to be worked harder than people around here, for the money, because they hadn't been used to getting that kind of salary, and they was grateful for it. Like the Filipinos and the people now, you know, they come here. They work for less money and so they always got better rating than the people around here when they went to work for different people. But other than that, I mean, they got along, seemed they got along fine.

[1:21:05]

BC: So, you don't think there was really a difference in the people that were born here and the outsiders who came in?

AB: No. Not far as their character and things like that too much.

BC: Do you interact with outsiders living in the County?

AB: What you mean, interact with them?

BC: Well, do you associate with them?

AB: I love talking to them because, I mean, you know, it teaches you different things. I mean, you learn what they were doing, you know, different from what you were doing. I always like to talk to, you know, someone from somewhere else.

BC: Somewhere else. Okay. Okay. Now, besides living in Washington for a short period of time, did you do any other traveling? Did you live any place else besides down here in the Ridge Dameron area?

AB: No. I mean, no. Only visited with relatives or something like that.

BC: Okay. Do you travel or interact, associate with people in the other sections of the County, like for instance, the 7th District or over in the Piney Point area?

AB: I love the Piney Point area [laughter] in St. George's and Valley Lee because I know more people around there, and I like going around there. I like going to Scotland, I mean, but most of the people that I new in Scotland, most of, all of them dead now, and I like going out in the county. You know, meeting people that I used to know. I mean, visit with people I used to know anytime that I can.

BC: Okay. So, when you do go to the other parts of the County, you go there just to visit, you know. Okay, but I guess the question is: About on the average, how often? You know, is it once a year do, you know, you find yourself only going to, like the 7th District maybe once a year or once every three years or you haven't been in the last 20 years, or what?

AB: No, sometimes I just, if I, you know, have a friend of mine, we just ride around.

BC: Okay.

AB: And decide that we—. Even if you don't stop at anybody's house sometime, we just ride by and I just show them where, places I used to visit because now you don't know when people are home or when to drop in or stuff like that.

BC: Okay. Do you think that people are different in other sections of the County?

AB: I don't know. I mean, you know, when you're around people that you see oftener, you just take them for granted I guess and you're always glad to see these other people. What you say, wave your welcome mat or something and stuff like that? But, I mean, I love meeting up with people that I haven't seen for quite awhile.

BC: Okay. What do you think of the direction that the County is going in today?

AB: I hardly know what direction it's going into! [chuckle]

[1:24:58]

BC: Okay. I'll sort of get back to that question in a minute. How have you contributed to the County, you know, through your work, your family, your citizenship, politics, and your other values, you know, besides St. Peter's and the band and like that which, as far as I'm concerned, was a big contribution? You know, have you done anything else like that?

AB: I can't recall. I mean [chuckle] anything too important.

BC: Did you—. Were you involved in the 4H?

AB: When I was in school, yes, in school.

BC: When you were in school, but as an adult you didn't?

AB: No. No.

BC: Okay. Okay.

AB: I seemed to furnish more transportation for what somebody else was doing than anything else, like taking people to the doctor. Sometime I have to take them to three different doctors. I mean, three different people to three different doctors the same day and things like that. I didn't have time for too much other things.

BC: And you still do that today, right?

AB: I do a lot of that now.

BC: Okay. What do you consider to be the most valuable thing you have ever had, something you could not have done without in your lifetime?

AB: A home! [chuckle] I don't know. I mean, I—. We lived in my aunt's house when we first—aunt's house when we first got married. I always wanted a home. That was one

thing I wanted because she, every—. She went away and when she come home, she always bring all these relatives with her. We didn't have any place to sleep. Sometimes she used to sleep with Robert and I. I'd get up and leave them both in bed together and he'd find that he was in bed with her, he'd get up because she'd make up all these other beds and put linen on for company waiting for them to come, and sometimes they wouldn't come until the next morning. I always said I wanted a place of our own.

BC: Yeah. Okay. Have you done everything in your life that you wanted or planned to do?

AB: I guess. I mean, as—I mostly played it by ear I guess! [laughter] I mean, I got married and I hadn't planned on working too much [laughter] away from home.

BC: Okay. So, what you had planned or wanted to do, you did. Okay. If you could go back and live your life over, what would you change?

AB: I don't know anything special that I would—I mean, I can't think of anything that I would do too much different. One thing, when we bought this place, we didn't have any credit. So, we had the cash money, but you know, we spent it all buying a home. You don't have anything left, so I would try to build up some credit before I tried to buy something.

[1:28:59]

BC: Okay. What do you think have been the biggest changes in the County in your lifetime?

AB: I guess just the growth of the County. I mean, you know, the Base up there was the biggest change I imagine.

BC: Okay. One of the question is, what are your feelings about the Base? Were any of your family affected by the government coming in and taking land?

AB: No, because all my family, you know, that had property was down this section. It was just people up around St. Nicholas and Jarboesville that was affected.

BC: Okay. So, your family weren't hostile to the Base for coming? They thought it was a good move?

AB: Yeah, I think so.

BC: Okay. Well, what are your feelings now about the Base that's standing? You know, that was, you know, then in '44 when the Base came, you know, like you were saying□, like that was a good thing. Now that the Base is expanding and all of this new growth is coming in, do you think about that?

AB: I really have no—the only thing I thought earlier is the drugs coming in and strange people were, you know, more people coming in that you don't know about and how violent they are or what. You just don't know.

[1:30:57]

[End of Side 2, Tape 1 of 2]

[Begin Side 1, Tape 2 of 2]

[1:30:57]

BC: How did black folks get news, you know, when you were growing up?

AB: [chuckle] Our family always had *The Enterprise* or *The Beacon* because my uncle always read the newspaper. One of my uncles couldn't read. My father, he left, you know, when I was—to work in Washington when I was seven. So, I always remember Uncle Randolph reading the newspaper. I thought folding it back was half of the reading, you know. [chuckle] I thought that if you didn't know how to fold it, paper, you didn't know

how to read! [chuckle] I used to marvel at him doing that, but he always got the newspaper. But, other people just got by word of mouth, I guess, a lot of them because a lot of them couldn't read and might have come along. I mean, even when people died, they didn't know. A lot of times, they didn't know that somebody had died.

BC: So, did you all have radio?

AB: No. I don't think we ever had radio. We used to go up to a neighbor's house, one of the white ones, and go up there and listen to radio. And then, they had this thing "The Three Black Crows" [chuckle] program that come on. It was white people, but they were talking, you know, black and "Molly & Fibber McGee."

BC: "Fibber McGee & Molly." Yeah.

AB: "Fibber McGee & Molly" and thing like that. But, a lot of times my uncle would just go up there. Uncle Charlie, the oldest uncle, and he'd catch things after work, but my father, he was younger than the other two and his wife was dead so he'd go out courting some time at night and dress up and then go out in horse and buggy. But, my other uncle used to go play cards and Uncle Randolph, he used to sit around. He was a homebody person. The first time he went out, if they went out like the 4th of July and Labor Day and take the children, and he'd start taking them home about five or six o'clock in the evening. And if my aunt wasn't out there by that time, he'd take me home, too, and I didn't want to go! [chuckle] And, I used to look up at that man and say, "Must be crazy!" [chuckle] Music just beginning to start and he's going home, but I didn't realize that he had all these children and he had to take them home before they went to sleep because they were walking.

[1:34:05]

BC: Oh, he didn't have the horse and buggy?

AB: No, no. I mean, he didn't ride out with the horse and buggy at that time. I don't even remember him carrying to the party sometimes, I mean, to entertainment out there. But sometimes, he would, they had games over that. They had tournament?

BC: Over at St. Peter's.

AB: And he would bring the horse out then because he'd ride tournament. I always remember he got first crown, the Queen's Crown. My father got the First Maid of Honor and he was running around looking for us to crown us, the children. Ernestine, they put a crown on her. She got to get the crown and I got the Maid of Honor and we didn't even know our parents won. [chuckle] We were just running around.

BC: So, what kind of tournaments were these?

AB: Horse tournaments, you know. I mean, you know how they do with the—

BC: Jousting?

AB: Jousting, and they had this lance.

BC: Yeah.

AB: That you catch the rings on? And whoever caught the most rings would get the Queen's Crown.

BC: Okay, and they had that over at St. Peter's? Can you share any old stories about what life used to be in the County when you were young?

AB: No more than what I've said.

BC: The stories you have already told! [chuckle]

AB: Some of those, I told. My aunt had a—. Later on, I guess I was about 11 or 12, she had—I wasn't that old when she first started this dancing pavilion. She had a party every Saturday night at the dancing pavilion.

BC: What was that?

AB: Over here on 235 here in Ridge called Alan's Park.

BC: Alan's Park on 235. About where?

AB: Where Joe Brian is. Joe Brian is on the right going south and she was on the left going south, and she had a house there, too, but I mean she had a pavilion. Kids used to shoot pools upstairs, and she had a camera downstairs. Used to make the homemade ice cream and fried chicken sandwiches and cake and, cake and pies and things like that.

BC: And dancing?

AB: And dancing.

BC: And dancing yeah.

AB: And then she put me behind the counter and she said soon as I collect from these people you can go dance. And, I said, " I'm a slow learner." When they get ready to play "Home Sweet Home," she said, "Now you can go dancing." She was collecting all that time. And, there's two things I hate to do now is collect money, sell anything or I was so glad people forgot about playing "Home Sweet Home!" [laughter] They always used to play that. They always ended with that, and she'd tell me—I'd get halfway around the floor and that was the end of it.

[1:37:33]

BC: It was—I thought it was another question I had wanted to ask, but, you know, like I said,

I know how much you worked with the nuns at St. Peter's and especially with the Drum & Bugle Crops, and I remember many a time coming over here and you doing our hair and Shirley Temple curls.

AB: Yeah, some was taking baths while I was doing others hair because Father had decided to have a photographer down there to take your picture, and Sister say, you know, "You all have to be looking decent" which you were when you got finished. And, I'd go up there and pick up a load, then she'd start—seemed when I was doing start pressing somebody's hair and when they got finished with the last load, some of them said, "Sister, I didn't know you knew how to press children's hair." She said, "I didn't. That's the first time I ever pressed somebody's hair." They said, "Oh gracious. If I had known that, you'd have never got a hold [laughter] of my hair!"

But, I remember this—but—I was telling you about that first performance you all had. She let the, had some of the children to line up on the stairs and you all came down with your heads down, you know, behind and they couldn't see you until they drawed the curtain, and they couldn't see you until they open up the curtain and all of you all was on stage performing.

BC: Majorettes, yeah.

AB: People were just crying. I mean, they were so happy and they were so proud of their children. [laughter]

BC: I don't remember that at all!

AB: You don't remember that?

BC: Well see, I was only in the 2nd Grade at that time, so—.

AB: Oh. When you was a majorette?

BC: Um hmm [yes]. Yes.

AB: I didn't realize how young you were. I got some pictures of that.

BC: Yeah, I was. I'm sure I was in the 2nd Grade.

AB: But I don't know what happened to the colored pictures I have because Sister Camellia give me all her pictures about two weeks before she died, and, but, you know, you loan them here and you loan them there. And if you see something interesting, you go ahead and take it. But ah—.

BC: Well, that concludes the interview. I hope the sound is good on this. If not, I will have to call you and ask you, "Please can I come back and do it again when I get it right." But, this concludes the interview for today, September the 5th.

[1:40:44]

[Tapes stops and starts again]

[1:41:45]

BC: Biographical Data Information on Alice Rebecca Biscoe Bennett.

PO Box 404, Ridge, Maryland 20680

Telephone Number: 301-872-5379

Birth date: November 14, 1915

Birth place: St. Jerome's Neck in Dameron, Maryland

Education: Tall Pines Elementary School. She believes that's the name of it. Then, St. Peter Claver Elementary School and night school at Cardinal Gibbons.

Miss Alice worked in the Civil Service from 1944 to 1949. She babysat from 1953 to 1955 and then her occupation was homemaker. Her husband's name was Robert Anthony Bennett. Her maternal grandparents were John Lafayette Langley and Catherine Marie Biscoe Langley. Her paternal grandparents were Benjamin Biscoe and Sarah Ann Biscoe. Her grandmother was also known as Mariah and she doesn't remember what her maiden name was.

Her mother was Roxie Adeline Langley Biscoe. Her father was Joseph Adam Biscoe, also known as Rex. Her sister is Hilda Regina Biscoe White Hewlett. Her son was named Norman Bernard Bennett who died at age 9. She raised Geraldine Biscoe, Alfred Rogers, and Barbara Bennett Brooks.

Geraldine's children are named Iris Alfred and James Rogers. Barbara's children are Erin Brooks and Shena Brooks.

That's the end of the biographical data information on Alice Rebecca Biscoe Bennett. [1:42:48]

[End of Side 1, Tape 2 of 2]