

RG: Mrs. Harris, when were you born and where were you born?

OH: I was born August 11, 1915. In Lanexa New Kent County, Virginia. And I don't know why, but my parents decided they were going to come north, and I was five years old and my parents came up to Mt. Laurel. My father was... we stayed with his sister for awhile. My other sister, she was three, and then there was a baby girl. Three girls.

RG: Three girls in your family, no boys?

OH: There ended up to be nine of us. [Laughs]

RG: Nine children!

OH: Yes, I'm the oldest of nine.

RG: You're the oldest of nine. Now you said that your father and your mother came up here from Virginia, but you don't know why they moved to New Jersey?

OH: I think it's because of his sister being here.

RG: Okay, family in the area.

OH: Yes, and he couldn't get work down there and so he came up here.

RG: Okay, and what kind of work did he do?

OH: Anything he could do. He worked for Steward Maines for a long time.

RG: So he was in the construction business?

OH: Yes.

RG: And he was a carpenter? Or...

OH: I think cement finisher, you know.

RG: Oh alright, working with the cement.

OH: As I remember, when they were re-paving Church Street...do you remember where number 7 school was on Church Street?

RG: Yes.

OH: Well, my father and Maines Corporation put down new sidewalk, and I was always a daddy's girl, and I saw daddy out there, and I went plowing through...I'll never forget, I went plowing through the wet cement. [Laughs] To get to my daddy. And he said, "Hey, hey! Get off!"

RG: They weren't too happy with that I bet.

OH: No, because they had to resurface it.

RG: Oh, boy. Now how old were you when you did that?

OH: Number 7 school, I guess I was about...I started it when I was five...I imagine I was about eight or nine. I didn't have sense enough to know that you don't do that.

RG: But I bet after that you did.

OH: Oh yeah!

RG: Now you said your parents originally went to Mt. Laurel, how did they end up coming to Moorestown?

OH: His sister lived in Mt. Laurel, and she encouraged him to come this way. And we stayed there, oh, not long, because my parents got a house on Beech Street, 22 Beech Street, I'll never forget it. You know where the Second Baptist Church is?

RG: Sure do.

OH: There were row houses in back of the church.

RG: They eventually burned down, didn't they, those houses?

OH: Didn't they tear them down? On the right hand side going in across from the church, they burned, because we lived in one of those too. My sister was renting one of them... was she renting it or buying it? But anyhow, the third house from the corner is where my sister eventually moved to.

RG: Okay. And that was a pretty vibrant community I imagine.

OH: Oh, it was lovely. It was lovely. Everybody was one big family. And I'll tell you, the thing how nice it was, some of us were so poor we couldn't afford television... or radio, we didn't have televisions back then, but at 7:00 every evening in the summertime, the people who had radios would turn their radios up loud enough so that those who didn't have a radio could hear Amos and Andy. Oh, that was fun. Everybody would finish dinner, go out on the porch, and listen.

RG: That was really nice. That's nice. So there was a real community spirit that existed.

OH: Oh it was, it was. But my parents were very strict on us, and the girl that her children brought me the plate, we were close, very close, like one big family, and we couldn't go to anybody's house to visit or play like kids do, that was the only house we could go to.

RG: Your own house?

OH: No, my friend down the street.

RG: Okay, your friend down the street. Why do you think your parents were so strict?

OH: I don't know, I guess because we were a bunch of girls. You know how parents are about their daughters.

RG: The boys had a little more freedom, did they?

OH: Well they were so young they stayed home anyhow.

RG: Now do you remember any stories your parents told you about their experiences in Moorestown, when they first came here?

OH: When you say experiences what do you mean?

RG: Like things that happened to them, good or bad?

OH: I know one thing, my mother took us to Second Baptist Church, the three of us, and as I said before, I stayed there until I got married, just enjoyed it. It was a good fellowship there. And most of my friends I met, I met at Second Baptist.

RG: Oh, good. But you really don't recall some of the things that your parents encountered here when they first came to Moorestown?

OH: No, I think it was a real family community, and I think that impressed them a lot. It was, Beech Street was just a family street.

RG: Now, this is essentially where the black community was centered? On Beech Street?

OH: Yes, yes, and Mt. Laurel. And there were spots... like Schooley Street, some lived up on Schooley Street.

RG: Approximately how many families were living in Moorestown at that time? Do you have any idea? Of black families?

OH: No I don't, because North Church Street was predominantly white, and then the blacks started moving in, I remember the Chin family moving in, and Mr. Ambrose, and Mrs. Down's husband's family. And then the whites moved out. Now the whites are coming back, it's interesting.

RG: What was the reaction, you said the whites moved out, what was the reaction to the Moorestown community with blacks moving into the town? Was there a positive or a negative reaction to that?

OH: Oh no, we were very positive. I mean, there were some spots that we weren't allowed to go in Moorestown, the blacks.

RG: Like where?

OH: Stiles Drugstore, I remember. My girlfriend came down to visit from New York and she said...she grew up here in Moorestown, and that was before segregation, and she said, "Let's walk uptown, I haven't been up there for a long while." So we walked up, and when we got in front of Stiles Drugstore, she said, "Oh, gee, I don't feel so hot, I feel like I've got gas." So I said, "Well let's go in here, and maybe he'll give you some Alka-Seltzer, and let you sit down and drink it." When he served her the Alka-Seltzer, he said, "You can't drink it in here, you have to go outside." And he gave it to her in a paper cup. And I haven't been in that drugstore since, because that's still in the back of my mind. And I'm still black. [Laughs]

RG: So you took that, rightly, as a great insult.

OH: Oh very insulted, yes. And when we went to movies at the Criterion, we had to sit in the balcony.

RG: Okay, that was where blacks were restricted.

OH: And when Eldridge Johnson built the Community House, our little kids couldn't go up there and learn to swim. My son, and his little buddies, when we had a big thunderstorm in the summertime, they learned to swim in that ditch out there, because it

would fill up. It was the cutest thing, they'd come running, dropping their pants, and jump in the water, and learn to swim. [Laughs]

RG: Yeah, that's amazing. So the Community House was only for part of the community, then? It wasn't the entire community.

OH: Not for blacks, either. And there was a... Did you hear about Mr. Jim Adams? He was the supervisor of recreation in this neighborhood, up on Church Street, and if you go up Church Street, you know there's a little memorial spot?

RG: Yes.

OH: Well that's where our old center was that Mr. Adams operated from.

RG: Okay, and Mr. Adams, he was...

OH: Black. He came from Philadelphia, and he opened up the way for the black children, like you could go to the pool and learn to swim. You could eat or drink anywhere on Main Street, we didn't have to sit in the corner in movies, he broke down those barriers. And it wasn't easy.

RG: Oh, I believe so, sure. Now, being in a Quaker town, where the Quaker philosophy is that essentially people are equal, and there's no higher status among individuals, do you think that helped in Moorestown? Breaking down any of the racial barriers that existed at that time?

OH: Not too much... but I got a job when I was in high school for an after-school helper, helping this lady get dinners, and they were very nice to me. Do you remember when they were trying to break down the segregation in the South? Of the water, and the churches and so forth?

RG: Yes.

OH: So I was working for this lady on Main Street, way up Main Street, and that day I went in and took my coat off and hung it up and got the sweeper out and started working, and an article was on the radio or TV about the segregation of the schools down there, and the churches, and just as I took my coat off, she said, "I think they ought to stay in their own places, they don't need to be worshipping with us, and keep to their own schools." I put my coat back on and left the sweeper sitting on the floor and I didn't get that day's pay because I walked out.

RG: Did she ever call you and ask you to come back? That was the last you ever saw of that person?

OH: Yeah. You have to have a little fight within yourself to demand respect.

RG: Yeah, you did. And you kind of imposed your own little boycott on things as well, you didn't go back to Stiles, and you didn't go back to the lady who had hired you. Now what did you say to your mother when you came home?

OH: I was grown then, but I told my husband what I had done and he said, "Well I don't blame you." I had support.

RG: And how did he react to these things? Did he face any of the problems that you did? Did he react in the same way?

OH: Well, he was ten years older than I am, and you know where the fellows would get together instead of going to the athletic field, or, you know, they had a gas corner, which was right up on the corner of Church, and there was that big...

RG: Is that a hotel?

OH: No, it's not a hotel, they put it into apartments, but one of the Luskeys lived there. But you know, he was a very nice person, and the kids are today, those who are around my age, they would come out there and sit on the steps, the black fellows would sit up... You know, when they wanted to get together, and just gab, that's where they would sit, on the corner, and he never told them to get off.

RG: So Luskey, what did he do, this man?

OH: He had a store there.

RG: Oh, it was a store. So it was like...a grocery store? Or...

OH: He had some groceries, and you could go there and get a hot dog or a sandwich or something like that. But he was a very nice person, and his kids are, those that I see, they're all around my age, that are living.

RG: Alright, and you called it a "gab corner." Was that the general term that was used?

OH: No, that was my... that's a friendly meeting place I guess.

RG: Now you said that you were the oldest of nine children. Okay, do you have grandchildren?

OH: Oh my lord, do we have grandchildren. I have three kids of my own, I have four grandchildren, and I think it's ten great-grands.

RG: Wow. So there's a passel of kids.

OH: Yeah. Thank goodness some of them are Meekins, the name will continue.

RG: That's right. Do they still live in Moorestown?

OH: No, they're scattered. My granddaughter lives out over on Cedar Street.

RG: Now I'm going to ask you a little bit about your education. What schools did you attend?

OH: Number 7 on Church Street was the first school I went to. I was just five, and, you know, you'd go to school at five years old.

RG: Okay, so your parents were in Moorestown by 1920 then, in the 1920's.

OH: Yeah, in '20, because I was five years old when we moved here.

RG: Right, okay, because I forgot to ask you about the dates, so we got that in. Now, did you walk to school?

OH: Yeah. Had no other way, we didn't have cars. And the buses, the buses didn't run at that time. School buses only went like, to Hartford to pick up kids. Or some would come in from Mt. Laurel.

RG: So Mt. Laurel kids attended school here in Moorestown?

OH: No, at high school.

RG: Oh, high school. They had their own grammar schools in Mt. Laurel.

OH: Yeah.

RG: Okay, now what was the highest grade you achieved in school?

OH: Twelfth grade.

RG: Okay, you graduated from high school, and at that point the schools were integrated in Moorestown, when you went to high school.

OH: But do you know what, when we were in Number 7 School, all the black kids never got a new book. We got the used books from the kids... the kids in number 9 would get their new books, and then they'd pass them on down.

RG: How did that make you feel? Getting the used books?

OH: Well we didn't realize it until we were out of there.

RG: Oh okay, they never told you?

OH: No. When we got into high school we knew that there was a difference.

RG: And by difference, what do you mean? There was a difference.

OH: We had new books!

RG: Oh, you had new books, so the ones you always got seemed to be a little dog-eared...

OH: All raggedy, yeah, yeah. So, for instance, I'm in the second grade, then I go to the third grade and all the second grade kids took the books that the third grade people moved on...

RG: So they were saving money, you think? [Laughs]

OH: No, no. And we had a white teacher would come to teach us penmanship. White teachers would come to teach us sewing, sewing class.

RG: Okay, but the rest of your teachers were black teachers?

OH: Yeah. It wasn't until the integration of Moorestown that we got white teachers.

RG: Okay, about what time did that integration take place?

OH: I don't remember when it was...

RG: But you were out of school by then?

OH: Oh, yes. I was out of high school by then.

RG: But your children experienced the integrated Moorestown. Now what did your teachers explain to you about why blacks went to one school and whites went to another?

Did they say anything about it?

OH: I don't ever remember them saying anything about it... you're here for a purpose, and that's to learn, no matter what kind of book you got. We had lovely teachers, black teachers.

RG: Did you know if there was a pay differential? Where the white teachers got paid more than the black teachers?

OH: Oh, I'm sure there was, but I don't know, I can't prove that.

RG: Okay, I guess that would be in the public records some place.

OH: Yes.

RG: What activities did you participate in while you were in school? Grammar school, high school...

OH: Basketball was about the only one, and I wasn't very good at that.

RG: So you played on the girl's basketball team?

OH: Yeah. And I liked sewing, because we had...one of the black teachers was very versatile in sewing and things, and so she would have a class.

RG: Did you enjoy your high school experience here in Moorestown?

OH: Yes, I did. I made some good friends, white girls, and we're still friends. And the fellows, too.

RG: So it was overall a good experience for you?

OH: Yes, it was. I think it's only one or two of us living that was in my class, but when I see them, which is not often, they're really, they're nice. One of them tells me, "Come on, sit down, let's talk about the old days." He's miserable now, you know, he has to carry oxygen. But I don't think there are any blacks living, other than myself, that was in my class.

RG: And when did you graduate? What year?

OH: Oh, '34.

RG: 1934. Okay, so that was the middle of the depression. How did that affect you when you got out of high school?

OH: It affected me before I got out of high school, because my mother was working, and we had all these little kids, and my sister and I would have to take turns staying home from school to take care of the kids so she could work.

RG: What did your mother do?

OH: Housework.

RG: Housework, so she was a domestic, then. Many of the black women in town did that kind of work.

OH: Yes, that was all, and they hadn't had education enough to go any further, to get any other trade.

RG: Sure, sure. But did you feel that you survived okay during the Depression? Was there any real problem with food, or with money?

OH: No, because at the beginning of World War II, we had food stamps, and we could get food stamps. We never were hungry in our lives.

RG: You were fortunate then.

OH: We were, very, my parents were good providers.

RG: Did your father always have a job during the Depression? He never was out of work?

OH: Oh yes, but he was the type of person like, in the summertime, there was no houses across from me, and the township gave people plots of land to farm on, so daddy had a couple of pigs down there and he had a garden, and my mother canned, and when they produced the tomatoes and so forth, mama canned them.

RG: And so the township gave you this land to farm? Did they lend you the land? Or did they actually give you the land as your own.

OH: No they didn't...you know, you don't sign a contract for it, they just gave you permission to use it.

RG: Oh okay. Did many families take advantage of this?

OH: Oh, yes.

RG: How big a plot of land did your father use?

OH: Well, he had a couple of pigs down there, and then he had his garden, and then he would take his garden, I remember he had a push cart, and he would peddle his produce on a push cart.

RG: He'd take it uptown here?

OH: No, just go from house to house. But he did, later on, he got somebody who had a car or truck to take him to Philadelphia to sell his fresh vegetables. And I remember that because when I got bigger...our father wasn't too well versed with counting money and

so forth, so when he went over there, when I got out of school in the summertime he would take me with him.

RG: So you were like the accountant for your father's produce business.

OH: Yeah. Not only that, like if he wanted to go to the bathroom, he didn't want to leave his produce by itself...

RG: Oh, sure. Wouldn't last too long that way. [Laughs] When you got out of high school what was your first job that you had?

OH: Hm, I guess it was... it was domestic work.

RG: Domestic work, okay. And that's where you ran into that woman you mentioned earlier?

OH: Yes.

RG: And after you left her, did you do any more domestic work?

OH: Do you know the Archer family on Chester Avenue? A lawyer?

RG: No, I don't, but that's okay you can tell me about it.

OH: They were lovely people. He was a lawyer, and she was a very wealthy woman. Her father was head of the...her father started a big business in Camden. And they used to live on a corner of Main Street and Mt. Laurel Road. That big house there, that was the Reed home. But I didn't work there...Mrs. Archer moved to Chester Avenue, and I don't know where she got my name from, because my kids were still in school, and she called me and asked me would I come and give her a day's work. And I said, "Oh, I don't know," I said, "I have little people that I can't work in the summertime or when schools have a holiday, I have to stay home with my kids." Because at that time, my husband was

working all over, it was hard for him, and I couldn't depend on him to be home with the kids. And she said, "Well, I'd love to have you." So I went, and when I came home my husband said, "Well how did you like it?" "I don't like her," I said, "I'm not going to go back." So he said, "Oh, go on and give her another day." I started out working two days a week, ended up I worked the whole week, but my hours were good. I had to go in like 9:00 after the kids had gone to school, and I had to be home by the time the kids got home, so she agreed to that.

RG: Wow, that was pretty nice.

OH: She was lovely, she was lovely. Let me tell you how long I worked there: thirty-seven years. I went from one or two days to every day. I was her companion.

RG: Wow, so that's a heck of a long time, thirty-seven years.

OH: It is. And she would just say, "Alright, I'll tell you what we're going to have for dinner." After the kids got big enough so I could be away, my husband was home to get dinner for them, she would buy something for dinner and she said...I'll never forget there was a funny one she had...prime rib. I said, "How do you cook it?" She said...she didn't know how to cook... she said, "The cookbook's in there, read the cookbook." And they wanted, oh what was that, the little dumplings that they make, I forget what they're called, but I said, "I've never made those!" And she said, "There's a cookbook." [Laughs] They had company for dinner a lot...

RG: You were under a lot of pressure to produce something good!

OH: I've always liked cooking. So I fixed it, served it, right by the book, and Mr. Archer got up from the table and came out in the kitchen and said, "Ophelia, that was the best

dinner!” He said it was cooked just right. And then their kids grew up, they got married, they brought the little people back to me, because one son’s wife died, and of course he couldn’t take care of these three little kids, and I had three more kids added to my kids, but they were lovely people and she and her daughter, her daughter would come from New York to visit with her kids, and when they wanted to go out for supper or to a party or something, I said, “Well I’ll take the kids home if they want to go home with me, I’ll give them supper.” So, why, many a time I brought those kids here and they loved to come, every time I’d say “I’ll take them home,” they’d say, “Oh we’ll go with Ophelia!” [Laughs]

RG: Yeah, that was a treat for them. Now when did you get married? At what age?

OH: I was twenty.

RG: You were twenty years old, so you were a young bride. And you said your husband was ten years older than you were.

OH: Yeah, he was thirty. You know, it was in August, and all the ministers used to take their vacations in August, and we couldn’t find no minister, no black minister, here in Moorestown. We went to Merchantville, and we were married in Merchantville in a black church, and we didn’t have a whole lot of people around, just a very close friend and his wife stood with us, and we go on back, and my friends, we had a little gang from my church and all, they prepared a party for us. A reception for us at one of the girl’s houses who at that time lived in Riverton.

RG: And for how long were you married?

OH: Well let’s see. I’d been married forty-six years when my husband died.

RG: Forty-six years, wow. That's a long time. And how old was your husband when he died?

OH: I was sixty...he was seventy.

RG: He was seventy years old, okay. And tell me a little bit about his work with Hartshorn Movers.

OH: He worked there long enough to become a foreman, even up in Canada when they worked up there.

RG: Okay so he was like, the right hand man then, for Hartshorn.

OH: Yes. He was the boss, he owned the business.

RG: Hartshorn. And so your husband worked there his entire life?

OH: Yes, until the business folded.

RG: Okay, and when did that happen? When did the business fold?

OH: Along about 1955 or sometime.

RG: Did your husband retire then? Or did he seek other employment?

OH: No, he needed a job. We needed to pay for this house then, we had to keep going. Oh I'll tell you what happened, Mr. Archer was on the board at one of the banks in Camden, and he told him to go down to the bank and tell them that he sent him. And they hired him as a janitorial service, and he stayed there with that bank until he retired.

RG: Well that's good, so the Archer family helped you out.

OH: They were beautiful people.

RG: Were they Quakers, the Archers?

OH: Yes. Well, she was, now I don't know whether he was or not, but they went to Moorestown Friends.

RG: Now you mentioned that Hartshorn moved houses, but you also said before we started recording, that when a house is being moved, it was a big event. Could you describe that? What happened when a house was moved in town?

OH: Can you imagine, even my house being on...they'd have to prepare that house and put it on wheels, they had some kind of gadget...wasn't a gadget, it was bigger than a gadget [laughs], that had to get this house off of its foundation and put it on this...I have a picture, maybe I can show you...I have some books about it, here. Would you like a glass of water?

RG: No, thank you. We just stopped the recording for a second, Mrs. Harris just showed me a scrapbook of her husband's work with the Hartshorn Moving Company and a big project they did up in Ontario, Canada, where they had to move quite a number of houses because they were re-routing a river. So your husband enjoyed his work with Hartshorn. He was a good employer. How come they went out of business? They seemed to be doing pretty good.

OH: I think it was health-wise on his part, you know. And then it was, what do you call it, a lost art?

RG: Yeah, it just wasn't being done. They didn't move houses; they just tore them down and built something else. I guess it is kind of a lost art, I don't know if there are any house movers in the area anymore...

OH: No, oh no. You know, I was thinking about that the other day when I saw on the news, the farmer up in Lumberton was closing his farm. I want my little kids to know where milk comes from. Because I used to go with my children when they were in grade school to the farm, every year to see how calves are born, and where the milk comes from.

RG: And that's just all the local farms around here?

OH: Oh, yes! We had chickens, so they knew where the chickens came from, and the eggs.

RG: Okay, so you had chickens right in the yard there.

OH: Yeah.

RG: Can't do that any more, I suppose.

OH: No, not allowed. [Laughs]

RG: Things have changed. Did you go over to the Locust Lane Dairy at all?

OH: I lived on Beech Street, so we walked to get our milk. When we lived there, on Beech Street, we didn't have milk delivery. We had to go up and get it ourselves.

RG: Okay, and did it come in a glass container? Or...how did they do it?

OH: Yes, milk bottle, yep.

RG: Which you had to return. No? You could keep the milk bottle?

OH: Yeah. And I have a milk box, when they started delivering like when we moved down here the milk was delivered, I have one of the old milk boxes that they used to put the milk in out on the porch.

RG: Yes, I remember those.

OH: You remember those?

RG: Yeah, that's the way it was when I was a kid, growing up...that's the way we had it delivered.

OH: Yes, and when it was real cold you had to run and get it before it froze after the milk man carried it. So I use my milk box now for my outside tools, my little hand tools for the garden.

RG: I don't know what ever happened to the one we had. Yeah. I remember that vividly, the milkman making his deliveries. I'm going to ask you a few more questions here... going through my list...When you were growing up what kind of household chores did you do as a child? What were the things that were required of young people?

OH: Washing the dishes. And we had to...on bath night, we had to see that the little people got their baths. We had to heat the water because we didn't have any...we had those big old ranges, coal or wood, and that's how we heated our water.

RG: Okay. And there was a big tub that everybody got in?

OH: Yes.

RG: And what kind of soap did you use?

OH: Octagon. [Laughs] And Ivory if you wanted to splurge. I only knew those two soaps. You know, I still use Octagon Soap in my kitchen; it's wonderful, like if you think you've been in poison ivy or something like that.

RG: Oh yeah, that's something I could use. Do you remember some of the local businesses that existed in the black community when you were growing up?

OH: The hardware store on Mill Street.

RG: Oh, okay. Moorestown Hardware?

OH: It was Collins' at that time.

RG: Were there any black-owned businesses that you remember?

OH: No, I don't remember any of those.

RG: Okay, and how about barbershops and beauty salons?

OH: Yes, there was... oh we always had a beauty salon... no, well first the lady would come from Philadelphia, every Thursday she'd come to Moorestown. If you wanted your hair done, you'd make your appointment from one time to another.

RG: So you had a traveling beautician come through town. I've never heard of that.

OH: Yes, and then she was... she was a lovely person.

RG: Do you recall her name?

OH: It was Beulah, I think her name was. Then Mr. Lewis opened, when the black people started buying homes on Church Street, Mr. Lewis opened a barbershop.

RG: Okay, so you had a barbershop. He worked right out of his house then.

OH: Yes. And then we had a beautician on Church Street that would make appointments for you to get your hair done.

RG: Okay. Now when this beautician traveled from Philadelphia, did she make it a one day trip? Or did she stay over at somebody's house?

OH: Oh no, she'd come one day, and you knew that she was going to come that day. And maybe we would talk to somebody else...it would be worth her while to come.

RG: Yes, so she had several customers that she was dealing with.

OH: Yes, she didn't come over for just one person.

RG: When you were saying that a lot of African Americans were buying houses on Church Street, what bank did they use to get their loans?

OH: They couldn't get a loan. We couldn't get a loan when we tried to buy this house.

RG: So what did you do?

OH: The man next door, Mr. Lamborn, he was connected some way with the Union Federal Bank in Camden.

RG: The Union Federal Bank?

OH: Yes. And my husband and I went up to, it was Burlington County Trust at that time...

RG: Right up on Main Street.

OH: Yeah. It's still there. And we went through every loan in Moorestown and nobody would...and I'm not the only one. The girl next door, when she wanted to buy her house, when we wanted to buy these houses, we were the first two houses, and all of this was fields all around us. This was built up afterwards. So the man, Mr. Lamborn told my husband, "You go. Here's my card. Go down there and you'll get it." My husband walked in, gave them all the credentials and everything that they wanted to know, come out there, he'd been approved for the loan.

RG: Now was this bank a black-owned bank?

OH: No. Because this man was white, this house was a white farm one time.

RG: But you couldn't get a loan...

OH: In Moorestown. And I'm not the only one.

RG: Did they give you a reason for not giving you a loan?

OH: I don't know, they just said it didn't go through.

RG: Didn't go through. So there was no reason. Maybe do you feel that it's because you were black that you didn't get it?

OH: Oh yeah. Positive.

RG: Yeah, yet in Camden they'd give you the loan.

OH: Yeah. It didn't take any time.

RG: That's amazing.

OH: They took our credentials, looked up our credit reference, and got it.

RG: And both of you were employed and you still couldn't get the loan, and your husband had worked his way up in the company to become a foreman. So he was known in town, it's not like he was an unknown individual just coming in off the street. How did that make you feel?

OH: Well, it was no more than you'd expect, we had been mistreated otherwise here in town...

RG: Besides the Stiles Pharmacy and the movie theater and the community house and the used books at school. So this was part of everyday life for Black Americans at that time.

How did you cope with that? The realization in the community?

OH: You had no choice. You knew it was wrong, but you had no choice.

RG: Did you become bitter about it at all?

OH: Afterwards. You realize what we had to go through.

RG: Now, when you tell your children this, and your grandchildren, how do they feel about it?

OH: Well, see, my kids were part of that. As I was talking about my son and his friends...

RG: Oh yes, swimming in the creek.

OH: Mmmhmm.

RG: Do they ever ask their grandmother about these times?

OH: No. Everything is given to them now. So as long as they've got it, they don't want to go back.

RG: So you've seen a big change then, in your life, from race relations in the country, in New Jersey, in Moorestown. Do you feel it's gotten a lot better, or just a little bit better?

OH: I think it's better, I really do. But you know, when you grow up in that type of environment, you learn how to watch your ways, you know. Let's face facts. And I was the type of person, like with Stiles in the drugstore, he didn't have to do that to me again. If you can't give somebody a glass of water in your store, and they are sick...they didn't know whether she was dying or not!

RG: Right. So you said she would have no other recourse but to take an individual action. You couldn't go to an authority and say, "Look what they've done to me." There's nobody who would do anything. Now how did you feel like in the 1950's with Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement, Rosa Parks, Roy Wilkins, and other prominent leaders who pushed for integration?

OH: Very sympathetic with what they were doing. And they were very brave. Well I'll tell you one incident, my little girls were in school, and they took a class trip to, what was it, Mt. Vernon? A day trip it was.

RG: Down to Virginia?

OH: Yes. Do you know they had black water and white water, you couldn't drink out of it? And so I did, I drank out of the fountain that said "white water", and my little girl said, "Oh mommy! It says 'white only!'" I said, "I don't know whether I'm black or white." I told her, and she laughed, and nobody said anything. Same thing with the bathroom facilities.

RG: Well good for you! You've got to be tough to do that.

OH: Well, I'm not black. 'Blacks only'? Am I black? [Laughs]

RG: You're an American, right?

OH: We're all American.

RG: Now how did the black community in general, through the churches react to the Civil Rights Movement in the '50's?

OH: What do you mean?

RG: How did the ministers in town approach it? Did they ask for the black community's support here through donations and things of that nature? To help the movement?

OH: Yes, and I'll tell you, you could see the segregation easing up. For instance, one of our former pastors was elected to have a ministerial group here in Moorestown of all the ministers and all, he was elected president before he left here, so it has come a long way.

RG: So you really see the changes then. Now you lived through quite a few historical events, okay, you were born in the middle of World War I, and you lived through the Depression and World War II. Did you husband serve in the army?

OH: No, because he was still working for Hartshorn, and they were asking for people to volunteer, for instance in Mt. Laurel, on the hill, the mount, they had the antennas and so forth, my husband volunteered to do guard on the mount, and those kind of things.

RG: Oh, so it was kind of like the civil defense force. Was he on there just a couple days a week, or on weekends, or...? How did that work?

OH: I think it was like weekends. They had several others.

RG: And they asked just for volunteers out of the community, and that's what people did. It wasn't connected, then, with any government agency.

OH: Oh, no, no.

RG: Okay. What do you remember about live in Moorestown during World War II?

OH: That was when?

RG: 1941 through 1945.

OH: There wasn't much difference.

RG: Do you remember the rationing that took place?

OH: Yeah, I had a card. Still got a card somewhere around here.

RG: [Laughs] Just in case it comes back? Did you find it tough during the war? Did a lot of young men from the black community go off to war?

OH: Oh, yes. Even my son!

RG: Okay, your son?

OH: Yes, he was a Marine, and he was stationed in Japan.

RG: Okay, he was in the Pacific theater then. Did he serve in any of the battles on the islands?

OH: Oh, no. He was fortunate, he was... he drove for some of the...what do you call them? The people who are over troops.

RG: The Generals? The Officers?

OH: Yeah, yeah officers.

RG: So he was kind of like a chauffeur for them? A driver?

OH: Yes.

RG: Okay. And how long was he in the marines?

OH: His term. What was it, three years? Three and a half years or something.

RG: Did he volunteer, or did he get drafted?

OH: He volunteered right out of high school. I didn't want him to do it. [Laughs]

RG: Oh, I believe that. Now how about National holidays here in town. Did you live through, your youth and as a mature woman, July 4th, or Memorial Day, how were they celebrated here?

OH: They always had a parade.

RG: Always a parade. Did you participate at all in those parades?

OH: I didn't participate, I'd go.

RG: You'd go. They were right up there on Main Street?

OH: Yes. I had no choice, I had those little people, and they wanted to go.

RG: Sure, sure they wanted to see all that stuff. So it's basically the same, then. Did they have fireworks?

OH: But the blacks are more involved in things now than they were then.

RG: Okay. When you went to the parade did they make you stand in a certain area?

OH: Oh, no, no, no.

RG: You could stand anywhere in the crowd. Do you remember when you got your first automobile?

OH: No, we had to pay the mortgage on the house; we couldn't afford a car for a long time. I think it was in the '50's.

RG: Okay, you had a car in the '50's. Did your father own a car?

OH: No.

RG: So everybody kind of walked to where they had to get to, or took the trolley, or whatever was the public transportation.

OH: Oh, the trolley was what we took to Camden. Then if you wanted to go to Philadelphia, you take the trolley to Camden, get off at the ferry, and get the boat over to Philadelphia. Then you walk up the hill to where you're going, if you're going to Strawbridges or...

RG: Okay, so it was quite a while to get there then. It would take you over an hour I guess.

OH: Yes, but it was fun.

RG: Philadelphia, the big city, huh?

OH: Yes.

RG: And did you do a lot of shopping in Philadelphia? Or mostly locally?

OH: No, we went to Philadelphia because there was nothing here! No department stores or anything. Then Camden opened up, we used to go to Camden a lot. Take the trolley, go to Camden, my mother would take us, and I would always...I would be one of those

seasick people. I remember my mother taking me one time and then saying, “I’m not going to take you again.” [Laughs] We got on the trolley at Church and Main, in Maple Shade she had to take me off, I got so sick.

RG: Motion sickness. Oh, boy...

OH: So we’d get back on after I felt better. I think we went as far as...Merchantville, and then I got sick again. [Laughs] She took me off. I think it was about three stops before I got to Camden. But I never got sick on the boat going over.

RG: Oh! That’s amazing! So the trolley was tougher than the boat.

OH: And that was every time! The last time she took me, she said, “I’m not going to do this again.”

RG: It just occurred to me, were blacks treated differently in Philadelphia and Camden than they were here? Or was it more or less the same treatment?

OH: I think they had their guidelines, you know. Segregation was everywhere, wasn’t it?

RG: Yeah, I know it was, I just kind of wanted to know how severe it may have been, or different. Like if you went to Philadelphia you had no problem going to the department stores?

OH: No, never had any trouble. When I got grown, to go on my own, I didn’t have any problem. I’ll tell you an incident: My hair grayed early, and I went past the make-up counter, and the lady said, “Let me show you how to make up.” And she was a white woman...in Strawbridge’s I think it was. And she said, “With gray hair, you need a blush in your cheeks.” And I’ve been wearing cheap blush ever since. [Laughs] Doesn’t do much for me now, with all the wrinkles! [Laughs]

RG: Oh alright so that was pretty good then! So in a sense, you think that same thing would have happened in Moorestown? As it happened in Philadelphia?

OH: Not the people in the drugstores. If they didn't want to give you a glass of water and let you drink it in there then you know they weren't gonna touch your cheeks.

RG: Did the black community use a lot of the local stores uptown?

OH: Yeah, because some of them had no choice because we didn't have cars.

RG: Yeah, you just had to go up to the local stores. And you could find everything you needed up there?

OH: Yeah, the Acme. That's why I could cry thinking about the one on Chester Avenue going down.

RG: Yeah, that was so convenient for so many people.

OH: Yeah. And I think about the older people who don't drive. But...we had one meat market up there, Mr. Deacon. Deacon's Meat Market is where, you know where, next to Burt Edgar is a dentist there. That's where the meat market was.

RG: Alright, so it was just a little butcher shop.

OH: Just a little butcher shop. And he was a nice old man.

RG: I've got a little tickle in my throat here.

OH: You want a mint?

RG: No, I'm okay, I'm okay. It's just the springtime, I get a few allergies coming in and they're hitting me.

OH: Would you like a glass of water?

RG: No, I'm fine, Mrs. Harris, I just...this is something I can handle. As you've lived in Moorestown, what do you notice most about the changing appearance of the town?

OH: I think it's beautiful.

RG: You think it's beautiful. Do you feel that it's changed quite a bit since you first came here?

OH: I think it's always been a very nice town, as far as landscaping and foliage and so forth.

RG: Do you feel it's gotten a lot more crowded than when you first came here?

OH: Oh, my lord, yes.

RG: Do you recall how all the farms eventually disappeared and houses sprouted up?

OH: Yeah, look at Winner's out there on, what road is that, Centerton Road.

RG: Yeah, but Moorestown was basically like that before when you were living here.

OH: And like, as I said, they had pigs right here in town, and chickens, you can't have chickens now! So I'm glad I grew up in an era where I could witness all this stuff.

RG: Yes, so you've seen quite a bit of change, from kind of a farming community to a suburban community.

OH: Yeah.

RG: Do you think the change has been for the better?

OH: I think so. For instance, what were the two football players that built those... one of them had one of those big houses?

RG: Oh yes, I can't remember the name, they used to play for the Eagles.

OH: Yes, and this one that just left, he was such a royal brat.

RG: Oh, Terrell Owens.

OH: [Laughs] Yes.

RG: Who was that other guy...? He was the quarterback. I can't remember. It will come to me.

OH: Yeah. But now, they, the Blacks have had an opportunity to do what they could afford now.

RG: Yeah, before you were kind of restricted as to what areas you could live in.

OH: And they didn't make that kind of money, then. How many blacks played on those big league football teams?

RG: There weren't any. If there were, they were segregated like old Negro Leagues in baseball.

OH: Yeah.

RG: So you feel that things have changed for the better then, overall.

OH: Yes, I think so.

RG: Well... Oh, go ahead Mrs. Harris.

OH: Well I was just going to say, we were, my husband and I, were the first blacks over here in this section.

RG: Oh, you were? The first black family on Park Boulevard.

OH: This house was already built, and then the librarian, Mrs. Brooks bought that one, and all the rest all around us was just empty lots. And they used to call this Harmony Terrace.

RG: Park Boulevard was Harmony Terrace.

OH: Was called Harmony Terrace, and they formed this group of people, men, who decided that they were going to build up and these would be houses for the blacks. But now we have black and white in here, all down the street on that side are white, and a lot of white families are back on the other street.

RG: Is that because blacks are moving out, or is it that this is more affordable for new families, or...?

OH: Yeah, I think so. I don't think it has anything to do with the racial barriers, you know.

RG: Are there more black families in Moorestown now than there were when you were growing up?

OH: Oh yes, yes, and lovely homes.

RG: Okay Mrs. Harris, we've been talking for a little over an hour, and I'm just going to conclude our interview here, and I want to thank you again for allowing me to talk to you.

RG: I'm just going to add a little bit more to the interview with Mrs. Harris. Now Mrs. Harris you just mentioned something about funeral homes and where people had to take their deceased relatives. What were the funeral homes here like?

OH: We had none here in Moorestown.

RG: Okay, none in Moorestown.

OH: No, because I remember my father was...he died, and we had to get a funeral home from Camden and same thing when my mother died. She died a year later. No, my mother went first, and then my father, the next year.

RG: There were no black-owned funeral homes in Moorestown?

OH: No. Oh, no.

RG: So you couldn't use a white-owned funeral home?

OH: Oh, let me tell you. Yes, we could, because when my husband's mother died, about a year after we were married, and we were married in '34, he used Mr. Grover, up where, what's the name of that funeral parlor in Moorestown, across from the bank?

RG: Across from the bank, um... We're both stumped.

OH: Yeah. And he's a very nice man.

RG: Mc- something or other. I can't remember.

OH: That's... Grover was up there. And he took care of my husband's mother.

RG: Okay. But otherwise you had to go to Camden.

OH: Carl Miller, there's a big funeral parlor; Carl Miller comes in to get a lot of the black families now. And I don't that think it's a practice of whites, taking over, you know, embalming blacks. I only know one black, and that was the young man who used to work in the bank, attending, but that was four or five years ago. And I think it was because of his association with the bank and so forth, right across the street from them, the funeral home.

RG: Right, now where were burials?

OH: Now we're in, our gravesite is in Sunset, in Pennsauken, but now people go, what's that one, on 130?

RG: Is it the Veteran's Cemetery?

OH: No, there is a Veteran's, but one that's closer to here, down in Cinnaminson, there's another one.

RG: Oh, yes. Okay.

OH: Yeah. Anybody can go in there, because my grandson is there.

RG: When you were growing up was there a special cemetery that blacks used?

OH: Yes.

RG: Okay, do you remember where that was?

OH: I think it was Wrightsville out here; they had one in back of the church.

RG: Wrightsville?

OH: Yes, you know that church... As you go out on Church Street, at the first, I forget the name of that street, but that's where the black cemetery was.

RG: Is it still there?

OH: Oh yeah, people still use it.

RG: Oh, okay. And your husband, he's buried in Pennsauken, you said?

OH: Yeah.

RG: Alright, well thank you Mrs. Harris, for that little P.S. on our interview. I'm glad we got to that. Okay, I just want to thank you again for your wonderful stories and reminiscences about Moorestown.

OH: It was interesting.

RG: Good, I'm glad.

An interview conducted on March 13, 2006 by Richard Garvin of the Historical Society of Moorestown with Ophelia Harris at her home on 424 Park Blvd. in Moorestown, New Jersey.