

# **Bernice Brightwell**

## **A Transcription of an Oral Interview**

1207 West Beslin Street  
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Interviewed by  
Melinda Roundtree  
Patrick Tyler

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## **Introduction**

This interview is with Mrs. Bernice Brightwell, a retired librarian at the University of Illinois. Mrs. Brightwell is the daughter of the late Albert R. Lee, who was the Chief Clerk at the University of Illinois. Mrs. Brightwell was born in Champaign on June 24, 1907.

The interview took place on July 18, 1983, at Mrs. Brightwell's home, 1207 W. Beslin St., Urbana. The interviewers were Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives.

**Bernice Brightwell, Oral Interview**  
**SIDE A**

Bernice Brightwell: I was born at the old home place at 605 North Walnut Street, Champaign. I was the only daughter of Albert R. and Maude McCurdy Lee. I had two brothers, the eldest being Albert M. and the youngest being Maurice W. My childhood was uneventful; back in those days in the late teens and early twenties, I received my schooling at a little school about two and a half blocks from my home, which was called Gregory School. At that time, Negro children weren't too well respected. I don't know. The black children would always play together and be together, and then the white children would always play together. But as I grew a little older, it seems to me I became a little more accepted.

When I entered the sixth grade, the teacher of the sixth grade was the principal of the school and she sort of took me as her pet. I was tiny and I read well, and she liked for me to read to the class. After school when we'd go home we would hear such remarks as, "I see a dark cloud. It must be going to rain; I see dark clouds coming down the street." That's just the way prejudice was back in those days. Well, we disregarded - we didn't pay any attention to it.

Finally, my days ended at Gregory and I was ... At that time they didn't have junior high schools. They had a school that was sort of a bridge between like the junior high school. You went to seventh and eight grades there, and when you finished there, then you went to high school. So, it was called Central School. They have a historical marker there now. It's where the old Post Office used to be, across from

Robeson's. The Post Office was on the corner and Central School was there, where they have this historical marker. It was the first old high school too. My father, I think, went to high school there. It says on the historical marker. I think it says Champaign High School. Then I went on to high school. I finished seventh and eighth grades at Central, which had four years of a college preparatory course. My father insisted for my language that I take Latin, because he said that was the basic language and since I planned - I always wanted to teach English, and that was a very good background study. So I took that, Latin, all of my two years that was required for a foreign language. Then when I finished high school - do you want dates?

Patrick Tyler: Yes, I was wondering what date you were born.

Bernice Brightwell: Oh, I was born June 24, 1907.

Patrick Tyler: And you graduated from high school ...

Bernice Brightwell: I guess, let me see I don't know what date that would be. Anyway, I graduated at the age of seventeen. I don't recall what date that would be though. Let me see. Eight years, since ... well it was around 1925, I think, say and then I went on to college. At that time my father, of course, was working in the President's Office at the University of Illinois, and this made it easy for me because they helped me register, all of the various ones that worked in the office. And then I knew quite a bit about the University already, as I visited my father quite often in the President's Office. So it

wasn't hard for me to become adjusted to the University as it is for most students. I knew most of the buildings and all that sort of thing. And registration proved to be very easy, because I knew what my major was going to be, so I took my first-year courses in the proper order as prerequisite for those that would have to follow. In general, I went through college very smoothly, no difficulties. I recall the only course I flunked. I flunked it twice and that was swimming, and until today I don't like swimming.

[Laughs.] I flunked swimming twice; that's the only two courses that I know of that I failed.

And then I got my bachelor degree in education in 1930. Then I went away to teach at Tennessee State University, Nashville, Tennessee. My brother also went there. He was teaching at Crispus Attucks High School in Indianapolis, but since I was so young and immature the president of the college thought it would be wise if my brother would go also. He persuaded him to take a position there also, as head of the department of industrial arts. I taught there a short while. I didn't like teaching; it was disappointing to me. My mother's health wasn't too well, so I came back here. The most important work that I had was at Chanute Air Force Base in the personnel office, Military Personnel Office, and working in the University of Illinois Library for 25 years. I didn't have library science. At that time when I started working in the library, they didn't have very many Negroes in the library. When I left, by that time they were hiring. But, I ran into so many difficulties in getting good positions, positions that I should of had according to my training. I ran into difficulties because back in those days there was so much prejudice. You had to go South to teach. You had to go South to do anything worthwhile, really.

Now when I came back, after I came back from teaching in Nashville, I went back and got my master's degree. I got a Master of Arts in English. Really it didn't do me very much good. I look around - see how these children can get jobs now without all that training even, you know, and get much better jobs than I got with all that training. So, it was very difficult for us. You don't realize it - how those prejudices hurt us young people in those days. We did well if we got a job in domestic service really. So I took little jobs - I was glad to get any sort of job - I took little jobs like stock girl at Robeson's Department Store and little jobs like that in between times until I could get a worthwhile job like the one at Chanute Air Force Base, and then the one at the library. And I missed quite a number of years because my parents were both ill, and I had to look out after them and take care of home and all that sort of thing. So I didn't have a chance to do very much other than that for quite several years.

Patrick Tyler: Could you tell us a little about your parents?

Bernice Brightwell: My parents? Yes, my mother was just a domestic person. She just loved to do housework. And my father - I'm sure you read of all this if you read anything about him - he was a prominent Mason, thirty third Degree Mason and he was head of the Knights Templars of this county. They call it the International Conference of Knights Templars. He's changed it to, he - what did he call that? Anyway, he changed the name of it. I can't think of it. It might come to me. Anyway, he was the head of Masonry, and then he was a church worker also. He was president of Bethel A.M.E. choir for about 35 or 40 years, and he was a district

superintendent of Bethel A.M.E. Sunday School for equally as long a period. So he was interested in the University in that he did so much for the black students.

When the students would come here to register they knew automatically to go to Mr. Lee, because some others had told them about him. So many of them weren't able to pay their fees right away so they could register. My dad would go to the main offices and help them defer their fees and pay later when they could afford it. He was always looking out for Negro students, in getting them positions when they finished and trying to encourage them in athletics. They didn't want Negroes on the football team in those days. And a young man that stayed at our house, he could pass for white, but they knew he was Negro, so they made it hard for him. He was high-tempered and Coach Zuppke knew this and he would play on those things so he could be dismissed from the team. My father fought valiantly for athletics. That was one of his main fights. I was trying to remember the coach. I have read some of the letters he wrote to them, interceding for black students.

And finally, gradually, they put them on the track team, on the football team, and basketball, eventually. It took time, but my father, before he passed, he saw the realization of his dreams. I mean some were playing, because I used to date a fellow that was a track star on the track team. My father would always encourage them to go to church. They used to have a meeting they called the Lyceum and it was for the community and the students. They would meet on a certain night every month and have a paper about the students, you know, sort of little intimate things about the students. This was a way he won the students over to coming to church. Then he would put them in the choir, singing in the choir. He was always - that was uppermost

of his mind - promoting various things that might help Negro students live a better life here.

I recall way back when my brother was in college, I was still in high school and they used to kid about a place they called the Beanery. That's the only place they could go on the campus and eat and it wasn't exactly on the campus. It was on the corner of Wright and Stoughton I believe. Anyway, that's the only place they could go eat. Then when I was in school, during lunch hour if I didn't want to go home, the only place we had to go was the women's building and lie down. They didn't have the Illini Union Building then. When I was in school the place where the Illini Building is now was an old dilapidated building called University Hall. This was the main building most of the classes - your English classes and so forth usually had in there - had it in that building. My father said that it used to house all of the administrative offices and all of that. And then the building there on the corner that's called the Mathematics Building, it used to be the old library I believe. My dad has bits if I can find them, telling about some of those old buildings. You know the library when it was located there on the corner - on the corner of Wright and - well, it wasn't really on the corner it sets back. It's on Wright Street actually. And lets see what else I can remember - got me stirred up. Now just, oh, say, about a couple of years ago Mr. - oh, I can't think of the man that's the archives librarian. He sent me this faculty directory. This is what the faculty - you've seen the faculty directory now haven't you - how thick and big it is, and this was back in 1914 I believe. Yes, in 1913 to 1914. This is the note and I can find his name on here. Mr. Brichford. This is the note he sent me. This is the faculty. See how few

people worked there then and now the faculty book is about that big [referring to the thickness of directory].

Patrick Tyler: This belonged to your father.

Bernice Brightwell: Yes, that book belonged to my dad. That was among his possessions. Oh, I never did tell you I did join a sorority, too, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. I belonged to Gamma Chapter, when I was an undergraduate and they didn't have graduate chapter here for so long, and I guess I was one of the ones responsible for Epsilon Epsilon Omega being here now. At that time we had so few members that I had to double both as "epistolis" and "grammatis," recording secretary and corresponding secretary. I had to do both.

So I wrote a letter to our regional director in Chicago. Soro Wilkins, I believe was our regional director then. And at first she refused. She said she didn't think there were enough black women on this campus to have both a graduate and undergraduate chapter. I wrote her back the second time. The second time she granted it, granted us our charter. So I was honored about twice by my chapter here, Epsilon Epsilon Omega for being a fifty-year member. I have a pin they presented me, also a little locket they presented me, so I was honored twice actually. So I have been a soro - sorority sister for quite a number of years. I'm not very active now. I go occasionally. I attend the various functions that we have. I enjoy being with them, with my sorors. And I didn't want to leave that out. I was just about to forget that.

Now, you want to know a little more about my brothers. My brother Albert, the oldest boy, he didn't see fit to go on to college but he got a good position carrying mail on the campus. And my brother, Maurice, went to school. He was taking electrical engineering. He felt that he wanted to get a little experience, so he stopped school and went to Chicago and he got a good job, you know, doing this type of work. But, they found out he was a Negro and then they tried to get rid of him. So then he came back to school. The first time he was in electrical engineering. The second he came back, he saw the Negro didn't have much chance there, in electrical engineering. So he took industrial arts and that's what he finished in, industrial arts at the University of Illinois.

He married an Oklahoma girl. Her father owned a lot of oil lands there, so he was in control of a bank in a little town called Boley, Oklahoma. So my brother went there to work in his father-in-law's bank. It really wasn't his bank, but I mean he was controllership. And it is the same bank that the Pretty Boy Floyd gangsters held up, and they killed the president, a Negro. They killed him, but those Negroes got their guns out and they really went, and they killed one of his best men. It wasn't - what was the one they caught in Chicago? It wasn't him. It was one of his best men, Pretty Boy Floyd. I can't think of his name. I have a book in here. If you'll excuse me for a minute, I'll see if I can find it. It's about the story of Boley. [She goes to get the book.] In that it tells about that robbery, and the man that wrote it is a native of Boley. It's an interesting town. They have their own - everything is run by Negroes, no whites. They don't allow it. Whites can come in and go out. But this is their rodeo they have each year, Boley Rodeo. And this - I'm getting a little ahead of my story, but my nephew, my

brother Maurice's son, had a daughter that was Miss Black America - well, she was first runner up to Miss Black America.

Well, speaking of my brother, he climbed very fast there in Boley. He taught school for a while, then he became official of the bank, and then he invented this cooker - you no doubt heard of it - I can never think of the name of the cooker. I should know that, and I can never think of the name of it. My husband knows it. I'll soon tell you. He had programs and so forth on the air about it. It's called Smokaroma, his cooker. He invented that. He not only invented it, but he manufactured it himself right there in Boley. That gave a lot of the black people there work. A lot of those farmers who weren't doing so well farming worked in his factory. Now the boys are carrying on. His two sons, Maurice the older and Forest Albert the younger, they're carrying on that business. They go all around the country. My nephew was on T.V. on Dan Rather's Show. Did you see that? Oh, he was on Dan Rather's. It's some kind of difficulty they're having. I don't understand it, you know women. [Laughs.] Anyway they're solving it, whatever it was. They had him on for about ten minutes or so on with the national hook-up with Dan Rather. And I'll show you after awhile the picture of the family. Life Magazine ran a picture and a story about Boley and the Smokaroma Cooker.

Now the first thing my brother invented was a little small cooker. You make, cook a hamburger in five minutes or five seconds or something like that. Now they have them on the market. I said well, my brother invented that several years ago, because he passed it - I think it was seventy, seventy-one or two, someplace along there. Now my other brother, I think I told you what he did. He carried mail on the

campus. It was just the three of us. Is there anything else now that you want to ask about?

Patrick Tyler: How about life in Champaign-Urbana during the war, the Second World War?

Bernice Brightwell: The Second World War?

Patrick Tyler: Well, even before the war. How about the Depression?

Bernice Brightwell: The Depression, oh yes, that hit pretty hard, but dad still had his job over at the University in the President's office. But, you know the salaries were so low back then in those days. Of course, food was low, too. [Laughs.] You could get a loaf of bread for a quarter or something like that, and get a hamburger - a dime one or a nickel one. So, of course, the prices were down but his salary wasn't very much. But he kept on through all right because he still maintained his office. Now what they really - they named him Chief Clerk, but he was really administrative secretary was what he was - because he was a ghost writer for the president. I read some of the speeches and things he wrote. Like he wrote the greetings that you see in the athletic programs, you know that you - souvenir programs. Like the greetings, and like that, my dad wrote some of those, I think. He was a ghost writer. Now they would probably call him administrative secretary or assistant, wouldn't they? Administrative assistant.

But, in those days they called him Chief Clerk in the president's office. So, I don't know what else I can tell about ...

Patrick Tyler: How is the black community, you know, how did the Depression affect the black community?

Bernice Brightwell: I think people here did pretty well. The group that I went around with, like the church people, our neighbors, most of, so many of our neighbors belong to either Bethel church or Salem Baptist. Those were the two largest Negro churches here, Salem Baptist, and African Methodist Episcopal, Bethel. Those were the two main churches here. I think most of the people seem to fair pretty well. I mean, you know, like my uncle now in Chicago, he was an architect. Well, he suffered terribly during that time. He planned the Pythian Temple and they couldn't go through with it. Plans all fell down and so he was left high and dry. He suffered now, in Chicago. But here in this little community, we didn't suffer too badly I don't think. It might've been some of them out of work, but the domestic. I'll tell you, most of our people around here did domestic work anyway and that didn't affect that too much. They still had to have cooks and housekeepers. And so many of our people worked on campus as maids, and cooks in fraternities and sororities. So for many, I don't think it affected them too much. It did affect them I'm sure, but I don't think too badly.

At that time we didn't have very many Negro students here, during that period. They had a pretty hard way to go, some of them. Most of the black students worked in the sororities and fraternities as waiters, and worked at the Champaign Country Club,

and the Urbana Country Club, you know, as waiters. I wish I could show you his book now. A friend of mine who was a coach of Gary High School, and was responsible for several of the outstanding football players sent down here to Coach Ray Elliott's team. He finished with Coach Ray Elliott, and they were close friends, so he had sent him a lot of good fellahs down here from Gary.

And then here he was in the physical education department here. His name is John D. Smith. Have you heard of him? He was here for about three or four years I guess. I don't know just what his title was. I guess he was assistant to some of the coaches or teaching physical education, or something like that. And he has written a book. I have five copies which I was unable to sell, so I just sent them back Saturday. A young lady was going up there, and she took the books back. Now what else did you want to know? I'm wandering off.

Patrick Tyler: That's okay. During the war, you know after the Depression, how did the war affect Champaign-Urbana, the community?

Bernice Brightwell: Well, I don't know that it affected Champaign-Urbana too much. A lot of people were unemployed, just as they are now. Unemployment, I guess was the biggest problem. People seemed to make it through okay. That's back when I was young, and didn't pay any attention to those things, so you can't get so much out of me there back in those days, because I was so young I wasn't paying any attention to any Depression. All I knew is I lived all right, and some others probably were suffering, but

like I say my dad with his little salary wasn't much but we still were able to go on pretty well.

Patrick Tyler: Can you remember any outstanding things that happened as you were growing up, here in the community?

Bernice Brightwell: Probably were a lot of things that don't come to my mind now, probably a lot of things. Well, would you like to know about our sorority? We didn't have a house, and we finally got a house. My father stood back of that, too, and helped them raise money, so we finally got a sorority house. When I joined they stayed together, banded together in some rooming house someplace, but they finally got a house of their own on Stoughton Street in Urbana. The Omega Psi Phi, they had a house right next to them. Now it's difficult for me to know too much like I say, about the other part of the community because I was so much into school, you know, education. The church seemed to do all right. I don't remember any difficulty, financially. No, they seemed to do all right.

Melinda Roundtree: How about the church involvement with the community? Did they interact a lot with the community then?

Bernice Brightwell: Yes. Now what do you mean? Now maybe I'm ... .

Melinda Roundtree: Okay like I say, for instance, now - you know Dr. Young, what's happening with him and the school board at the junior high. The churches are supporting him, getting money ...

Bernice Brightwell: Oh, now Mr. Thomas Taylor would be able to tell you more about that because he taught himself, and he was one of the heads in Urbana - vice principal or something, so he could tell you more about that. Have you been to interview him?

Melinda Roundtree: Yes, I called him.

Bernice Brightwell: Taylor Thomas, now he can give you better about then I can about the educational part. Yes, he can help you better than I can with that, I think. I just know generally, but he can probably go into it more.

Melinda Roundtree: Maybe any other way, helping the people in the community, the families, other than educational. People who can't get food, maybe the churches gave them food or something like that, you know, any kind of ...

Bernice Brightwell: Yes, well the churches have a program now to see that people get food through the missionary society. They have it pretty well organized now, and they're supposed to bring canned foods and so forth like that to distribute it. And the sorority does a lot that way, too. But there is a group at church now that's responsible for seeing that the food is distributed among the poor.

Patrick Tyler: Did they do it in the past?

Bernice Brightwell: I don't recall their doing so much in the past. I recall our church had quite a bit to do with the recreation of the blacks. We had a park, a playground ...

[End Side A]

**Bernice Brightwell Oral Interview**  
**SIDE B**

Bernice Brightwell: Ruth Hines, well she could tell you a lot. She could have, I mean, she could have. I beg your pardon.

Melinda Roundtree: She did a tape. Well the Douglass Library, they were doing tapes on black members of the community, and they had one on her and we heard it. It was real nice.

Bernice Brightwell: She should give you a lot more information that I can, because she was older, and she was in the community more than I was. I was, like I said, I used to be around the sorority kids all the time, and I didn't get around town, you know, visiting like I should have church and the sorority, between those two. But, Mrs. Hines could give you a good picture of all the community better than I can.

Melinda Roundtree: She spoke of the sorority, you know, when they first got a house.

Bernice Brightwell: Yes. My father helped them get a house.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you know Blanche Harris?

Bernice Brightwell: Yes, I know her.

Melinda Roundtree: She's at the Urbana Nursing Home.

Bernice Brightwell: Yes, I know her.

Melinda Roundtree: I read something about her in the Archives department, and it said that she was former editor of a black newspaper. Do you remember ... ?

Bernice Brightwell: Yes, Mr. Harris, her husband, was editor of the newspaper here. I remember that, and I'm trying to think of the name of the paper. I can't think of the name of it. What was that called? Her husband was from Danville, and he did edit a paper here.

Melinda Roundtree: Oh, he was the editor or did she ... ?

Bernice Brightwell: Well she, you know, co-editors I would say, husband and wife. I think she could give you a lot more information than I could, and then she, like I say, she was out in the community more than I was.

Patrick Tyler: Could you tell us a little bit about some of the stuff the newspaper published? What kinds of things did they publish?

Bernice Brightwell: You mean ...

Patrick Tyler: Articles.

Bernice Brightwell: Articles. Oh, I remember back in the older days, they always used to say so-and-so colored did so-and-so. They always had to mention the fact that they were colored, whereas if they didn't say colored, you assumed that they were white. That's one thing I remember that was outstanding. They were always trying to paint Negroes black.

Because this lady lived next door to me since I've lived over here. She's dead now but she would always say, "Did you read about that colored woman in the newspaper?" You know a Negro woman shot her husband or something like that, and she would always bring that up. "Colored people," she always said. That term's been out. [Laughter.] In the library, Negro was the word. You used to be colored, and you can see where it's marked out. There was a lot of prejudice here in this community. That's why most Negroes live north and east of University Avenue. North and east you'll find most of the Negroes. Some of them have bought homes recently, some of them that are on faculty and all that, they have new homes out in these new additions. But, I'd say the majority of black people live out in the community east and north of University Avenue. That's what they call the east side, or the north end. And that's where they always look for crime, you know, always in the east end of town, or north end they call it.

Patrick Tyler: How was crime when you was growing up?

Bernice Brightwell: Well, it was quite a bit of it, but it wasn't so cold like it is now.

There were some rape cases, but you didn't read of as many rape cases as you read of now. Drunk and driving cases, there's always been that, a lot of arrests for that.

You didn't read of these horrible crimes like this girl in Orchard Downs killing her two children. You didn't read of things like that very much. But it's always been quite a bit of crime. There's so many dope or drug related crimes now, although they've used drugs from way back in ancient times, but it didn't seem to be so prevalent as it is now, especially among our people, blacks. These - what do they call these stores that have these - pornography, pornographic stores and things like they had one over here right here on the corner. Negroes fought. I noticed that he's gone. They run him clear out of business now. We didn't read about things like that. It probably was going on, pornography, but not like it is now. Now, like these - well, they call them hookers, prostitutes. They had a house. I know of one. Mary Strauthers had one on First Street, on the corner of First and Hill I believe it is. She was arrested for killing a University of Illinois student. He came to her house after hours and she really had a right. He kept banging on her door, and she shot at him, and hit him, and she had to go to prison for that, several years. But, I only know of one house of prostitution then. It wasn't so much of our black people in prostitution as it is now. I mean, like that Root case. I mean, you didn't hear of Negroes being involved in that sort of thing back in those days. Like I say, they had prostitution, but you knew there were these two houses. The mother and the daughter - when the mother died, the daughter carried on. But you didn't hear so much of it - Negroes being involved, you know, as you do now, I don't think.

Patrick Tyler: What would you say the problem is now? The Negroes are ...

Bernice Brightwell: That Negroes are involved more now? I don't know. Seems to me it's parental. Parents don't treat their children right, and then the children want to get out from home, and the only way they can make a dollar is to get out and be a prostitute, you know, become a prostitute. I think that's the things now. Mothers don't care for their children like they used to. When I was coming along, we didn't get out from our parents 'til we got married. We didn't get into apartments like these kids do now. I never left my home until I was married. So, but these kids leave home, and they try to make it by themselves, and they just can't make it by themselves out there now with the cost of living being as it is now. I think that accounts for quite a bit of prostitution among blacks. So many of them have to get out from home - they got to make a way someway - and that's the only way they know how. And so many of them don't go on through school. Now there's opportunities for blacks if they go through school. As a matter of fact, when they finish high school, there's some opportunities. Of course, I know jobs are scarce now, but I think they do have a little bit more opportunities than we had. Because like I said, I couldn't get a decent job here in my own hometown where I had grown up. I couldn't get a decent job.

Patrick Tyler: Were there ever a time - you know, how it was in the South when blacks were going to a place they had to sit in different places ... ?

Bernice Brightwell: Oh yes. It was segregated yes, in the Rialto Theatre, and the Orpheum, and the Virginia were the three best theaters here at that time. And I remember you had to sit up in - we called it Jim Crow row upstairs in the Rialto Theatre. And in the Orpheum you had to sit back in one little section, and the Virginia you had to sit up in the balcony. Yes, because they had youngsters, had a fight one night about that. Three black boys, they forced their way in and sat where they wanted to. Yes, segregation was real bad here. I mean for a northern town.

Patrick Tyler: Can you remember, was there any restaurants that ... ?

Bernice Brightwell: There was no restaurants available. Like I said, even for the students, they had no restaurants available. They just started opening those things up, you know within later years. There for a time, there wasn't any place we could go. So we knew a Negro man that had a little place in the north part of Champaign near us called the Idle Inn. All of us kids on Sunday, we had no place to go, we'd go there and he'd serve soft drinks and little sandwiches and things of that sort. We had no place to go, really. There were no restaurants available to us, and not on campus. Like you can go on campus now and eat at the Illini Union. We had nothing like that. We had no place to go.

My mother used to feed a lot of students. They were hungry. This young man I was telling you about, the coach from Gary, he used to call my mother "mom." He said, "Us from the Kappa House always knew where to go on Sunday afternoon. We'd go over to mom's and she'd have those big, fat, hot rolls of hers, and she'd always

know we were hungry, and said, 'Sit down and eat boys. I know you're hungry.'" But see, they had no restaurant or anything to go to, and then most of them didn't have much money to spend. They didn't have money to spend. Their parents were putting them through school, or else they were trying to work their way. They didn't have no money.

Melinda Roundtree: What were the costs then, of going to school? You know, tuition.

Bernice Brightwell: Tuition. I think it was around \$100 a semester, I think, when I was going. I don't know much about that because dad always footed the bill. [Laughter.] And, I think it was around \$100 a semester - I mean the straight fees. Matriculation fees.

Melinda Roundtree: About your sorority, the AKA Sorority, do you all do educational things for, you know, black students?

Bernice Brightwell: Yes, yes. We have the Salad Bowl, and we have this dinner dance every year. Now, we just had the Salad Bowl in July, and we raised some money for that and we give them scholarships. They are given some scholarships.

Melinda Roundtree: Yes, because I got one last year.

Bernice Brightwell: Did you? Good. Good for you. Good for you. You just finished high school recently?

Melinda Roundtree: Two years ago.

Bernice Brightwell: Really. Are you in college now?

Melinda Roundtree: I go to school in Mississippi.

Bernice Brightwell: I beg your pardon.

Melinda Roundtree: Mississippi.

Bernice Brightwell: Oh, you go to Mississippi. That's nice. Are you in school now?

[Talking to Patrick.]

Patrick Tyler: No. I was at Parkland a couple of years.

Bernice Brightwell: Oh, you were at Parkland. See now, they even have Parkland now. You know, they needed - you need to go to a school like that because it's such a major change going right from high school to the university. If I hadn't had the advantages of my father being over there, it would have been most difficult for me. As a matter of fact, it was difficult as it was. You know, the sudden change from high

school - I think Parkland College, a junior college, is really needed. I think you can kind of get a foothold here, and then go on to a university. Get your degree. But, Parkland offers almost anything now. I don't see any necessity of going to a university. I mean, if you start in Parkland, you can just get anything you want.

Patrick Tyler: I was interested in what year you got married, and about your husband. How did you meet him?

Bernice Brightwell: Oh, yes, my first husband I married in Chicago. I didn't have a wedding. We just got married. That's all. Well, my first husband and I separated after a year. We were both young and didn't know what we were doing. But the husband I'm with now, I married him in 1946, just before I lost my mother. She passed three months after we were married. I married a nice young man. When I was working at Chanute Air Force Base, I said I was working in the military personnel office. I met my husband up there. He was from Ohio, and he comes from three of the oldest Negro families in Ohio. This year ... [She goes to get his family reunion book.] This is their ninety-third annual family reunion, and it's all organized. You can see how well it's organized. Now he's an \_\_\_\_\_.

We went to the ninetieth, and I think we were at the ninety-first, but we're not going to go this year to the ninety-third. He comes from a fine family, three of the oldest families in Ohio. Negro, black families I mean. So, I met him at Chanute Air Force Base and we married in 1946. We've been married 36 years, soon will be 37 years. It is 37, goes so fast. He is with the Illini Pest Control Company. My father got

him a job there. The manager of the pest control company called and said he wanted to hire a Negro. He hadn't hired any Negroes. He wanted to hire a Negro and my father said, "Well, it so happens that my son-in-law is available." So, he's been working for the Pest Control. That was in 1947, so he's been working there ever since. Illini Pest Control.

Melinda Roundtree: Did you know Mattie Burch?

Bernice Brightwell: Miss Burch, yes.

Melinda Roundtree: Did she die? Do you know?

Bernice Brightwell: I don't believe so. The last time I talked with her daughter, Grace - I don't think she's dead. I must talk to Grace. Her mind kind of waivers, Grace told me, but she's still living.

Melinda Roundtree: I've been reading about her, too, about her family background. Her grandfather founded Mound Bayou, Mississippi.

Bernice Brightwell: Oh.

Melinda Roundtree: Yes, it was interesting.

Bernice Brightwell: Well, this might be interesting to you, too. My uncle lived in Chicago, was the architect. He finished here in Illinois, got his master's degree here, and planned some - that building, I think that church building. I think they've torn it down now. It used to be across from University High School. That was his project that he planned for his master's degree. Well, this is interesting point though, he taught down at Tuskegee Institute when Booker T. Washington was living. Yes, he taught there before he went to practice architecture. He taught it first, and then he planned those bathhouses down in Arkansas. Is it Little Rock or Hot Springs? Hot Springs. Well, he planned the bathhouses there. So, that's interesting to know. And in Chicago he planned the Ida. B. Wells housing project, the first Negro housing project in Chicago.

Melinda Roundtree: You know Mrs. Ransom, Mildred Ransom, principal of Yankee Ridge?

Bernice Brightwell: I think I know. Yes, I think I know her.

Melinda Roundtree: She said her family was one of the first blacks to live in the Ida B. Wells ...

Bernice Brightwell: To live in those, yes well, my uncle planned those. And he started the Pythian Temple, you know, and they had the Depression. His money was sunk.

Patrick Tyler: Could you tell us a little bit about your husband? A little bit more about him ...

Bernice Brightwell: Well, it isn't much to tell about him. He's quiet, very quiet, and he loves to pitch horse shoes. He has several trophies, which I'll show you in here. He belongs to Champaign-Urbana Horse Shoe Club. And then he belongs to what they call Thursday night club, dinner club. The fellahs go every month to a different restaurant. And a lot of the outstanding men of the town belong to it, like ... who's the Urban League, I can't think of his name.

Patrick Tyler: Barkstall.

Bernice Brightwell: Barkstall and different ones like that. Our outstanding athlete that lost his job as coach over at Urbana High School.

Melinda Roundtree: Caroline.

Bernice Brightwell: Yes, J.C. Caroline. He did belong. Excuse me, this is getting away from - but what did happen to him? [Turned tape off to discuss J.C.]

Patrick Tyler: [Tape turned back on.] I was just going to say, I was reading an article in the library on your husband ...

Bernice Brightwell: On my husband?

Patrick Tyler: Yes. Mr. Brightwell. It was about his garage that he was building.

Bernice Brightwell:. Oh! Let me tell you about all of that then. Oh, he built all of this. Our house and let me see - I'm always glad to show you this. [Walks to the kitchen.] Our house was only to here [referring to the end of the living room] and this window was here and we looked out into the back yard. And he planned all of this himself. He planned this and did most of the work. He had one helper, and then we had to have somebody to put up the main - build it up. Then he did most all the work in here. When we first bought this house it had just a little front room and a little dining room here and we tore all of that out when we first moved in here.

Patrick Tyler: In the article it was talking about the neighbor complaining about the heights ...

Bernice Brightwell: Yes, this old, these people next door, the one that I said always talking about colored people, she's dead now, bless her heart. They did all kinds of complaining because they were jealous. That was it. They just didn't want to see us have - colored people shouldn't have things that nice. Yes, they took it up with the - I don't know where you go, wherever you go to complain about buildings, because the building inspector came out here, and I showed him the permit. I said, "We have the permit. What are you coming out here for?" It made me so mad.

Because my husband's mother had passed away and he had gone to California, you know, and I said, "What are you out here bothering me for?" Yes, they complained. They tried to give us all kinds of trouble. And, when they poured the concrete drive out there, they tried to complain and said we were on their property line. We said, "Have you had your property surveyed? We've had ours surveyed." The man surveyed it and he told us, "These Negroes on this side, and there's white people on this side. So, they gave me a lot of trouble trying to find out where the line was. I told them, you pay \$50 and you can find out." Oh yes, they gave us all kinds of trouble.

Patrick Tyler: How about your other neighbors? Has Reverend Williamson always been your ... ?

Bernice Brightwell: Yes, ever since we moved here, he's been down there. The people next door, I don't know them very well. A mother and her mother, and they have some children. They're very nice people, seem very quiet. Other than that, I don't know so many of the neighbors. Reverend Williamson, I know them. [Tape is turned off for a moment.] They fixed it up beautifully like they have it now. It's beautiful. [While tape was turned off Mrs. Brightwell mentioned Mrs. Kelker, a former grade school teacher at King School.]

Melinda Roundtree: Kelkers?

Bernice Brightwell: Kelkers. You know the Kelkers?

Melinda Roundtree: They're not here anymore are they?

Bernice Brightwell: No, they're not here.

Melinda Roundtree: They used to live on Eads Street?

Bernice Brightwell: Yes. They used to live on Eads Street. They went back to Florida. His home was in Florida.

Melinda Roundtree: Their daughter, Mrs. Kelker, she is a teacher at King School.

Bernice Brightwell: Yes, she used to.

Melinda Roundtree: She used to be my teacher in fourth grade.

Bernice Brightwell: Was she? Oh, did you go here to ... ?

Melinda Roundtree: Yes ma'am.

Patrick Tyler: I used to go there, too.

Bernice Brightwell: Did you? They used to call it the Hays School when you were going, or did they ... ?

Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler: No, it is still King.

Patrick Tyler: It was just recently built when we started.

Melinda Roundtree: You know Mr. Jordan, Sandy Jordan?

Bernice Brightwell: Yes, Sandy.

Melinda Roundtree: Sandy went there, too.

Bernice Brightwell: Yes, he was a janitor, wasn't he? I used to work in those elections up there, you know, school board elections. I used to work up there, and I got to see the school more that way than any other way. Now you see, when she came along she could get a good job, Ozella, teaching. I couldn't get it back when I finished.

Melinda Roundtree: What kinds of things do you like to do? What are your interests?

Do you like to read or ... ?

Bernice Brightwell: I love to read.

Melinda Roundtree: What kind of things do you read?

Bernice Brightwell: I like to read heavy stuff. For fun I like to read mysteries. I like mysteries. I just love to read mysteries. And I like books like Roots. And Forever Amber, I read that. All those masterpieces, modern masterpieces. Of course, I had to read a whole lot in English.

Melinda Roundtree: Yes, I was going to say that. [Tape turned on and off for a moment.]

Bernice Brightwell: ... Slave and you had better not vote Democrat ticket. You better vote Republican. [Tape turned off and then back on.]

Patrick Tyler: That's because back then . . .

Bernice Brightwell: Because back then, my parents taught me to, you see. He [grandparent] taught them, and they taught me. So, we always voted Republican, always. And things here, are usually run by mostly Republican. That Crane, you know, he's Republican representative.

Patrick Tyler: How about during the sixties when John F. Kennedy got shot, and Martin Luther King?

Bernice Brightwell: I think a lot of people turned out to be Democrats when Kennedy ran. I really do. I think a lot of people - because they liked him as a man. I think he changed a lot of people's minds. I think a lot of people probably went over to the Democratic Party then, least I'm speaking for myself, and I think a lot of others did, too. I'm not much of a politician. I'm not much on politics. I know it's important, and I vote because I feel that we have the right to vote and we're given that right and should use it. I do believe that.

Patrick Tyler: How about during like the Civil Rights Movement with Martin Luther King? How did the community react?

Bernice Brightwell: I don't really know what their reaction was. Well, I think as far as the NAACP and all that around here, you know, I think that they try to make people cognizant of the fact that it was important - politics was important and they should vote. Because a lot of Negroes just don't vote. They just say, oh, we're not going to get anything anyway, so we just might as well not vote. So I think that they became more aware of the fact that they should be a part of things, and they should vote. I think this stimulated the Negro to voting more than they had been in the past.

Patrick Tyler: How did the Civil Rights Movement affect you in your own personal life?

Bernice Brightwell: Well, it didn't affect me so much because I was already secure and had my position. If it had come earlier, it would have done me some good, but as it

was it already had - about time for me to leave now they come offering me some good positions, better positions - about time for me to retire. Come for an interview over to the personnel, University of Illinois personnel office. And it was too late then. See, now, I could have climbed upward and onward, but it was too late for me then. See all this came too late for me.

Melinda Roundtree: What did you want to do?

Bernice Brightwell: But I was glad to cooperate for the ones coming along now, you know for our people that are coming along now.

Melinda Roundtree: When you mastered English, what did you want to do? How did you want to use it in your career?

Bernice Brightwell: I really wanted to teach English, but now that I know that television and all that sort of thing is so popular now I would have gone into a different field. They call it journalism now. They don't call it that now. I would have gone into journalism. Do they still call it journalism?

Melinda Roundtree: Yes. I'm majoring in English/Journalism.

Bernice Brightwell: Well, that's what I would have gone into, but you see back in those days it wasn't needed like it is now. I would have preferred that to teaching. I found

out I didn't care much about teaching English. But, I would have gone into that field of journalism. But like I say, everything came too late for me. I was born at the wrong time. That's true. I read an article about someone who said that same thing, and I said well, that's true of me. I was born at the wrong time. You know, everything happened after just a little too late for me. Like Taylor Thomas, when he got his good position. See, he got it later, but it was too late for me.

Patrick Tyler: What job did you retire at?

Bernice Brightwell: The library, main library.

Patrick Tyler: I have no more questions, and we would just like to thank you.

Bernice Brightwell: Okay.