

Millard C. Gray

A Verbatim Transcription Of an Oral Interview

802 Oakcrest Drive
Champaign, Illinois
June 21, 1985

Interviewed by
Patrick Tyler

Champaign County Historical Archives
Urbana, Illinois
2001

Millard C. Gray, Oral Interview

Patrick Tyler: Okay, Mr. Gray, could you give me the date and place of your birth, the year and the month?

Millard Gray: Birth is De Soto, Illinois, Aug. 16, 1910.

Tyler: Could you give me your parents' and your grandparents' names, as far as you can remember them?

Gray: My parents is Ruth Gray, mother, and grandparents was Smiths.

Tyler: Can you remember their first names?

Gray: No.

Tyler: Can you remember the first year that you came to Champaign-Urbana?

Gray: I came to Champaign-Urbana in 1943.

Tyler: Why did you come?

Gray: Looking for work. And I found a job at the University of Illinois. I worked there 35 years. And now I'm retired.

Tyler: What did you do at the university?

Gray: I was kitchen laborer.

Tyler: How was life at the university, being a black, a black worker?

Gray: It was _____

Tyler: Do you remember some of things that went on back in the '40s, like as far as restaurants and theatres or segregation or what?

Gray: It was segregated then. Restaurants and theaters. They had a certain part of the theater you could sit in.

Tyler: Which theaters? Do you remember?

Gray: Practically all of them here in town.

Tyler: Can you remember your first residence when you came to Champaign?

Gray: First residence was on Fifth Street. Where was that at? Fifth and Columbia was the first residence.

Tyler: How long did you stay there?

Gray. Oh, about two years. Then I moved over to Urbana, to Beardsley. And I stayed there about three years. And I moved to Beech Street in Urbana, 1210 W. Beech in Urbana. And I stayed there until I moved out here.

Tyler: Which was?

Gray: Hmm. I have forgot that year. Eight years ago.

Tyler: Eight years ago?

Gray: Yeh.

Tyler: You have any brothers or sisters?

Gray: Hmm. I have two sisters and the one brother that's living. Sister lives in Inkster, Michigan, and I have one that lives in Indianapolis.

Tyler: Can you give me their names?

Gray: The one in Michigan is named [Erma] Grant. The one in Indianapolis is named [Earnest Merrill] Winters.

Tyler: How about your brother?

Gray: Oh, brother, he's up in Waukegan somewhere. Weldon Gray.

Tyler: Weldon Gray?

Gray: Um hum.

Tyler: Could you tell me a little bit about your educational background?

Gray: Graduated from high school and went two years in college. _____ high school. [Elkville] High School. Two years.

Tyler: Where'd you go to college?

Gray: I didn't go to no college. I didn't make college.

Tyler: Could you tell me anything about your experiences _____ something that was outstanding that happened in your life in Champaign?

Gray: I don't know nothing outstanding.

Tyler: Anything that happened that may have been different that you remember?

Gray: Nope. All I know is work. Work and hike home.

Tyler: How about life during the war? How was it?

Gray: It's very good, for me 'cause I never did go to the war.

Tyler: How was life during the sixties here? What were some of the things that occurred?

Gray: I don't know of anything occurring. I just lived a straight life. Nothing occurring. Only go to church.

Tyler: What church you go to?

Gray: Salem Baptist Church.

Tyler: How long have you been a member there?

Gray: Umm, about ever since I was here.

Tyler: Were you a member there when they had Rev. Moore as pastor?

Gray: Yeh, I was a member then.

Tyler: Do you remember some of the things that happened while he was pastor?

Gray: Huh Hunh. I never did keep up with too many things happening. I just went to church and did my duty and let the rest go.

Tyler: How was the housing when you came to Champaign?

Gray: Housing was fair, barely. Kind of hard to find a place to live at. They finally started letting 'em move different places and it got better then.

Tyler: So it was hard to move anywhere you wanted because you was black?

Gray: Um hum. Yeh.

Tyler: How has crime changed since from when you first came here and now?

Gray: Crime has changed dreadfully since it was when I came here. Got so you couldn't go out at night nowadays. Afraid to go anywhere at night, by yourself especially.

Tyler: How about the youth? Are they, how has the youth has changed since the youth in your day and time?

Gray: Well, they have changed a lot since my day or time.

Tyler: Better or worse?

Gray: They are better now, nowadays.

Tyler: Did you tell me your job at the university? Did you tell me exactly where you worked at the U of I?

Gray: Well, when I was working for the university, I worked at just about every building they had kitchen laborer at. The last one that I worked at was Florida Avenue.

Tyler: Were job opportunities back then good or, or were they kind of bad?

Gray: I'd have to say they was fair. You had a hard time finding 'em. 'Course they wasn't taking in very many coloreds during that time.

Tyler: During the sixties when Martin Luther King Jr. died and the civil rights movement itself, how did it effect your life and you personally?

Gray: Well, it didn't affect me at all hardly.

Tyler: No effect on you.

Gray: Um, hum.

Tyler: How about the community in general? Did you see a change or?

Gray: I didn't see much change in it.

Tyler: Is there any other organizations or clubs that you are involved in?

Gray: Hmm. There is one organization that I belong to, the Masons. Participate in now. 'Bout the only one I . . .

Tyler: Which Masons? Prince Hall?

Gray: Prince Hall Masons.

Tyler: Have you ever heard of the A.F.? The A.F., something like that, Masons?

Gray: Well, Prince Hall used to be A.F. and A.M. until they changed it.

Tyler: So, A.F. and A.M. was Prince Hall.

Gray: Um, hum. They changed it in the name. Just left off the A.F. and the A.M.

Tyler: That's kind of interesting. I'd like some information on a young man back in the 1800s. He was a member of the A.F. A.M. Masons.

Gray: Um, hum.

Tyler: So how long have you been in the Masons.

Gray: Hmm. Let's see. How long is that? Forty-one years.

Tyler: Can you tell me some of your duties or responsibilities?

Gray: Well, I covered all the stations. Now I'm treasurer. I've been treasurer ever since '53.

Tyler: What do you think about, have you heard anything about them closing down Fourth Street here lately?

Gray: I heard about they been trying to stop parking on Fourth Street.

Tyler: What are your feelings about that?

Gray: I think it should stay open. Parking.

Tyler: Seeming that crime is worser now, you have any solutions or how to resolve some of the conflicts, some of the stuff that is going on in our community?

Gray: Well, everybody look out for each other. If any crime appearing, then each one should take care of each other and call in the officers to take care of it. That's one way of cutting it down. Like this program they got going now, the, what is it? Watch?

Tyler: Yes. Crime watch.

Gray: Crime watch. That's a good program.

Tyler: Well, that's all the questions I have right now.

Gray: Okay. Thank you.