

Beulah Townsend

A Transcription of an Oral Interview

108 E. Washington St.
Champaign, Illinois
July 20, 1983

Interviewed by
Patrick Tyler and
Melinda Roundtree

Champaign County Historical Archives
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Introduction

This interview is with Mrs. Beulah Townsend, a resident at the Washington Square, a senior citizens apartment complex. Mrs. Townsend was born in Ripley, Tennessee, in 1901. She came to Champaign in 1928.

This interview is being conducted on July 20, 1983, at Washington Square, 108 E. Washington, Champaign. The interviewers are Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler, representing the Urbana Free Library archives department.

Beulah Roundtree, Oral Interview

Side A

Melinda Roundtree: Mrs. Townsend, could you tell us where you were born and when you were born?

Beulah Townsend: Ripley, Tennessee.

Melinda Roundtree: Ripley?

Townsend: Ripley, Tennessee. R-i-p-l-u-i.

Patrick Tyler: Could you tell us the date that you was born? The date and month?

Townsend: Hmm?

Roundtree: The date.

Townsend: No. I wouldn't know that. 'Cause I just, you know, just, you know how people, older folk, they don't give you no, day, what date. But all I know I was born in Tennessee, Ripley, Tennessee, that's all I can tell you. And I lived, I didn't live right in Ripley. I lived out on a place called [Elough] Farm. Um hum.

And worked at a farm, chopped cotton, scraped cotton, _____ up to the cotton and picked cotton. I made \$50 every afternoon, picking cotton. So. And then I went back from here to Memphis, Tennessee, and stayed, took care of my brother there at the government hospital. And he died and then I come back to Champaign. I had six brothers and four sisters.

Roundtree: Could you give us the names?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: The names of your sisters and brothers?

Townsend: The folks' names?

Roundtree: Yes ma'am.

Townsend: Frank Malone, Ira Malone and Ed Malone and Jim Malone. Now you want the girls?

Roundtree: Yes ma'am.

Townsend: [Loula] Malone, Beulah Malone and [Heydena] Malone.

Roundtree: Okay.

Townsend: They're my sisters and brothers. And I got a lot of them down there, I'll tell you all.

Roundtree: Are they living? All of them living, most of them living?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: Are they all living?

Townsend: No, all of them? I ain't got but one brother living. That's Frank. He lives in Memphis, Tennessee, Frank do. And the other one lived in Ripley.

Roundtree: Which one?

Tyler: Ripley.

Townsend: Ripley.

Roundtree: Oh, I, okay.

Townsend: And them are the sisters, all the sisters I have. And brothers I have.
I just had a father and mother. Winnie Malone is my mother.

Roundtree: Did they all help pick cotton? All your sisters and brothers?

Townsend: Ya. Polk Malone is my daddy. P-o-l-k-s.

Roundtree: How about your father? What did he do?

Townsend: Hmm?

Roundtree: Your father? Your parents?

Townsend: I said father is Polk Malone, that's my father. And mother Winnie
Malone.

Roundtree: What was his occupation? What did he do?

Townsend: He worked in the field, too, farmed.

Roundtree: And did your mother work, too?

Townsend: Yes, she worked, too.

Roundtree: Okay. Do you remember what year you came to Champaign?

Townsend: Hmm?

Roundtree: What year you came to Champaign? Came here?

Townsend: Yes.

Roundtree: After Memphis? What year was it? Do you remember what year it was? The year?

Townsend: The year? Oh.

Roundtree: About what year, you know, estimate if you don't know exactly.

Townsend: No.

Roundtree: Do you know how old you were?

Townsend: I know how old I was when I came to Champaign.

Roundtree: How old were you?

Townsend: 27.

Roundtree: 27?

Townsend: 27.

Tyler: How old are you now?

Townsend: Hmm? Now? 82.

Tyler: You're 82?

Townsend: Um hum. 82. Ya. 82. And my husband's from Tennessee, too.

Norman Townsend.

Roundtree: Is he living now?

Townsend: No. He died. Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Ya. He's been dead a pretty good while.

Roundtree: Did you and your husband get married here in Champaign?

Townsend: No, we married in Tennessee.

Roundtree: Oh, in Tennessee.

Townsend: Um hum. See, he come _____ to the penitentiary, why he would hurt me, that's the reason, I'm here like I am. Can't work now, or nothing. So, he _____ he come back to the pen, he went to Milwaukee and got sick there and put him in a hospital then. He died up there and we went up there and seen. And he died. But he had done away with the homes and the money and things. He had done away with that. So, and I got one son in Chicago, Norman Townsend. I guess you know my other son here, don't you? Clarence. At Lakeside Terrace. I got a son.

Roundtree: I've probably seen him. I don't know if I've seen him. Where did you live when you came to Champaign?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: Where did you live? What street did you live on?

Townsend: In Champaign?

Roundtree: When you came here. When you first came here?

Townsend: Let's see which. Beslin.

Roundtree: Beslin?

Townsend: Um hum. Ya.

Roundtree: How long did you live there?

Townsend: Oh, about three years.

Roundtree: Three years.

Tyler: Could you tell us a little bit about your neighbors?

Townsend: Huh?

Tyler: Could you tell us a little bit about your neighbors when you first moved here?

Townsend: Can tell a person, oh, ya, oh, no, I just know there was nice people. All I know, I never know many of them. Mrs. [Snell]. And you know [Birdie Boyles]. All different ones of them.

Roundtree: Were there a lot of blacks living around you?

Townsend: Yes.

Roundtree: Or more whites? More whites?

Townsend: No. There wasn't no whites. All blacks.

Roundtree: All blacks.

Townsend: Um hum. I just lived around whites since I've been up over in this side.

Roundtree: Where did you live when you moved from there?

Townsend: Hmm?

Roundtree: Where did you go then? After you lived on Beslin? What street did you move to then?

Townsend: Dunbar Court.

Roundtree: Oh, you moved to Dunbar Court?

Townsend: Ya, I lived in Dunbar Court. And I moved out and then I come over here. _____. See, I was in the hospital and when I got out of the hospital, Pat had moved me here. Lived over here. It got tough in Dunbar

Court. We lived, I lived like right over there in an apartment and this lady stayed right over next to me. She was younger. I seen you over there when I was _____ . Right. Right.

Roundtree: I actually was. . .

Townsend: And the girl next door to me. She had a baby three weeks old. And I come in one day from the, been out on a _____, police, as I got in the house changed my clothes, police come to the door and said, 'Beulah,' said, 'Come here.' So I went to the door and these two well-dressed men, they were dressed, they wasn't dressed _____, said, 'You see them two men there.' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'We find them two men up in the clothes, in our clothes closet, standing up in our clothes closet.' And she lived downstairs. I said, I heard 'em _____ . I said, I was in the kitchen watching dishes. They took the screen down off the kitchen, the screen _____ and _____ down side the window. And so the next night, they come in, they could get in. And he was dressed in red shoes, red suits on, red slippers, and black shirts. They come back in and went right on up that stairs, went in our clothes. And she didn't know they was in the house.

And she said, he said, 'Well, Beulah.' Said, 'I'm gonna give you some bus fare. You can go out to there, to the, that other hospital.' You know what I'm talking about. County hospital. And see that lady out there what they had beat up. And I went out there and saw. She's 77 years old. That them same people, and this girl stayed, Miss Wright's daughter, she came by, and she heard the baby scream in the same house, and she went by to see it, see what the matter baby, the man, she opened the door and went in and he slapped her back

outdoors on the ground and throwed a pistol on her face. In the same house, where I stayed, next to where I stayed, Dunbar Court.

Roundtree: The Wrights.

Townsend: Ya, Miss Wright.

Roundtree: Is it on that corner?

Townsend: Ya, hmm. Well, that's where. And it got, and she said, my son-in-law come on ahead, [Eddie Lyons] told the police that, now you all better do something said, 'cause if he go here hitting my mother, mother-in-law, I'm going to kill him. That's _____ husband, 1007 N. Sixth. And so the police, well, he said, we're going to send him to the penitentiary. So I guess they did already. _____ . And so Pat moved me over here when I got out from the hospital and went to her house, she said, 'Momma, you got a good place to stay over in the apartment over on Neil and Washington.' So she had moved me in here. And I've been here ever since. I like it over here. Folks are nice. The white people nice. Colored is too. Treats one another just as nice.

Roundtree: So you lived in Dunbar Court until you moved here?

Townsend: Ya.

Roundtree: After you moved from Beslin, you moved to Dunbar Court and you stayed there all that time.

Townsend: Ya. Uh huh. So, she didn't want me. I said, 'Well, I knew the girl.' And I said, 'I knowed to see the gentleman's face at the church.' I said, 'I don't know who he is. But I know the face when I see it.' She said, 'I know him.' I said, 'Well.' She said, 'Well go ahead then and talk to him.' I said, 'I know both of 'em.' Ya. She said, 'It's all right.' She said, 'Because I, I do you, I help you and you don't need no more help, I help you.' I said, 'Well.' She didn't come in from that. She wasn't coming for to help me. She, she wanted to talk with us and things, so she said go ahead. See?

Roundtree: So. Did you work when you came to Champaign-Urbana?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: Did you work?

Townsend: Ya. I worked for [Annie O'Donnell] on Church Street.

Roundtree: Could you repeat that?

Townsend: [Annie O'Donnell]. White. White.

Roundtree: What did you do?

Townsend: Cleaned up and worked for [Kellys], 601 S. Willis.

Roundtree: [Kellers]. Is that a restaurant?

Townsend: No. It's a home. Both of them dead. Mr. Keller dead and Mrs. Keller's dead. So the girls moved away. Ya, I worked, did I work. I've been working, 'cause see I didn't have no husband and then I had to work, but kind of glad I didn't have him. (Laughs.)

Roundtree: What other jobs have you had? What other, as you got older what other jobs did you have besides these?

Townsend: No, that's all. Just the two jobs, no, yes I did. I worked for Sturdyvins, Church Street on this side and Hill on that side. I forgot that street it was, but Joe Sturdyvin was his name. He was undertaker, used to be white undertaker. I worked for them. Agnes Sturdyvin was the wife, Agnes Sturdyvin was the wife. I worked for them, too.

Roundtree: Do you know how to spell the last name?

Townsend: Hmm?

Roundtree: Do you know how to spell the last name, their last name?

Townsend: No. Sturdyvin, no. I never known it.

Roundtree: Okay. What was the name of the owner of the funeral home you said?

Townsend: Um hum.

Roundtree: What was the name of it?

Townsend: I don't know that, see.

Roundtree: Is it out of business now?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: Is it out of business? Or is it still in business?

Townsend: Ya, he out of business. He, they all moved away. He brought, they brought the help here, a woman to cook but they used me to clean up, clean the house and like that. Ya. He was, of course, all of them helped me. He did, too.

Roundtree: Okay. What church do you belong to? What church did you say you belong to?

Townsend: Hmm?

Roundtree: What church did you say you belong to?

Townsend: Pilgrim Baptist. Rev. Keaton is my pastor.

Roundtree: When did you join Pilgrim?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: When did you join the church? When you first came here?

Townsend: Child, I joined, when I first came here. Been there ever since. Ya. _____ 'cause if something happened that I need help, he see to me getting what I wanted. Helped me. But I don't let that be that way 'cause I can help myself. I ain't going to get nobody, but oh mama, if I pay my bills and _____ I got some laid back for the next check comes, see? And therefore I don't have to suffer for nothing, see? If I pay, or I draw Social Security, get welfare check so therefore I don't have to worry about nothing. Pay my bills, _____, and I eat out _____ on 5th Street. I eat out there. Wednesday. Mondays and Wednesdays. Two days, that's all I eat out. When I don't go there, I got that meals here at home to fill them days out, you see. When _____.

Roundtree: What kind of things do you eat there? Is there a lot of people that go?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: Go to eat there?

Townsend: Ya. Ya. A lot of folks go.

Roundtree: They have cooks?

Townsend: They have, he was telling about I don't want to go, but you know if you got friends they want to take you with them, why I go, you see. Supposed to go tomorrow out to Lake of the Woods. I don't know whether I go or not.

Roundtree: Oh, that's nice.

Townsend: Of course, I, see I took [Ceil] with me to _____ something, of course, she got, I shouldn't done it but you know you hate to see anybody fall around like that way. She got _____ and I tried to hold her and like that but it kind of got against me but I won't let Pat know it 'cause she be raising _____. So I can't sleep on nothing but my back. That's all. I can't sleep on the side. Hurts so bad. See, holding her, she heavy and I've been sick. I shouldn't have done it. I know I shouldn't have done it, but oh Lord, I hate to see anybody be like that and she was a lady to me, too. Her husband was my sister's boy and he passed and died. I know how it is, you know, she had a husband and I tried to help her. So, but I don't let Pat know that, I won't even call her or tell her nothing about that. I'll just go and doctor best I can to myself, take my medicine, 'cause she won't like it. And I won't tell her nothing about it.

Roundtree: What kinds of things were you involved in, are you involved in, at Pilgrim, at the church?

Townsend: Hmm?

Roundtree: What kinds of things?

Townsend: Mother Board.

Roundtree: Mother Board?

Townsend: Um hum. We pay, I pay, \$3 to Mother Board and \$3 church dues, \$6. _____. Lord will bless you if you do things right, don't you know that? I tell them I say I don't worry about nothing 'cause I don't, I don't, I just, I just serve the Lord and you know. He say if you need me call me up. He _____. That's what I am, see? Ya. That's the way I am. He'll bless you. You just sit down and look for something you ain't working and he say _____ to work. Whatever it is, I'll pay you. I goes in that way. That's it. Tell you. So He blesses me. And you, you, you do the things that you want to do, but I'll tell you, you do that. I'll be all right with you. You don't charge nothing, do you? Do you charge anything?

Roundtree: No ma'am.

Townsend: Well, you go on and do it whatever you're asking me. If you ever have to ask me, you ask me, you hear? You ask me, don't be scared to ask me.

Roundtree: How about the community? What kinds of things have you done in the community? What kinds of things have you done been involved in?

Townsend: Hmm?

Roundtree: What kinds of have you been involved in, in the community, the black community? You remember?

Townsend: Now, since I been there, I goes to 'em. To bingo parlor and business meeting in here. Just whatever they have in here I goes in there and whatever, meals, they have meals in some _____, \$3, I go in there and eat, help, help me like that. I don't mind, course it's, you don't know when you need help and if you do things for other folks, they'll do for you when you get out, see that? We got nice times in here. I wouldn't want to go no other place to enjoy myself in here. Up on the sixth floor, all right, now let's go to all over. I tell them, they laugh at me 'cause I said I don't go in elevators by myself. I go with somebody 'cause I was in Chicago, stayed with my son right across next to the dining room, I heard a lot of noise. I called my son. I said, 'Junior. Come here, come here, something's wrong.' A man, 50 years old runned a boy 18 in this elevator _____ in a building like this. Clean off the top. Cut his head and arms off. And I won't get in them with _____ unless somebody's going down with me and help me up there. I'm scared. I get nervous. I won't ride it. These folks can carry me up.

Roundtree: You saw that?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: You saw that happen, right?

Townsend: Ya. Saw that happen.

Roundtree: That's terrible.

Townsend: So, _____. I can't go in 'em. Pat carried me to the doctor, to the clinic. I say, well, Pat, I'm scared to go in. She say, Mamma, I know how to run it, I know how to do it. And she take me. And that's the only way I get in there. Somebody take me. I ain't going by myself. And you see something like that.

My son-in-law's a Muslim and you know and I told him all the time, I said, listen your children want to be in a Baptist church, your children don't want to be in Muslim. And I said, you ought not to want them to be in that. All 'em causing trouble but the gals. Them boys. That's the reason I don't go stay all night with 'em, 'cause if you do your father bad, you won't, you won't. I'm scared to go stay with him, all night with him. She, _____ come down here from Chicago and I got off a Champaign bus. The lady got off, she said, I said, 'Oh, lady you sure's got a beautiful coat on. Where you get? Champaign ain't got no coats like that.' And she said, 'Do you know Mark Townsend?' I said, 'Uh huh.' She said, I said, 'That's my grandson.' She said, 'He brought \$475 worth of fur coats down here and sold 'em. \$475.' That's my son's, he got a place in _____ town and he, that was his daddy's _____. He sent him to penitentiary. But see the mother done called his dad. They don't give a, I hate to say that, but they ain't nothing. See now that just tore up his home. On account of the Muslim.

Roundtree: The Muslim?

Townsend: Ya, because the baby boy come down here last March it was and Ed Lee, that's my son, said, Don't you all go out tonight. Told these children, [Doug] and [Benny]. He come in one _____ and you know the gangs from Chicago come down here? Gonna kill us? We had to hide.

Roundtree: When was this? What year was this? Do you remember what year it was?

Townsend: Last March.

Roundtree: Oh, this year. Oh.

Townsend: Ya. I tell you. So I don't, I don't fool with it. Them boys are bad. And I told you, _____. He calls them John 'cause he was in it. And they didn't want to be in it, see? The children didn't want to be. He the cause of it, 'cause they had no business put the children in there.

Roundtree: I wanted to ask you about, about the sixties, you know, when Martin Luther King. Do you remember, you remember when he died, right?

Townsend: Ya.

Roundtree: You were living in Dunbar Court, here in Champaign. How did the blacks react? What did they do? How did you feel about it?

Townsend: Well, I don't think they, I don't think they did right, right about Martin Luther King. I don't believe that, they didn't, they didn't, they didn't act right about it. 'Cause we was talking about it the other night, come on T.V., and we heard them talking about it over the T.V. right in here and they didn't _____ about it. 'Cause the white _____ on the T.V. didn't act right about it, see? And, no, they didn't act right. I don't think it was right the way they treated him. No. Colored, the colored done the worst thing. The colored done it. They didn't appreciate.

Roundtree: The people talking about it, your friends? Were talking about it and stuff?

Townsend: Ya. Ya. And I thought, Oh well. _____ this and ____ that. I said, Well no. I said, I don't think Martin Luther King was bad. 'Cause I use to go up to Chicago when they had this, they was be on the T.V. This colored man.

Roundtree: Jesse Jackson?

Townsend: Ya. Ya.

Roundtree: PUSH? Operation.

Townsend: We went up there to his place to meetings. And he don't think it's right either. And Mrs. Mathews used to carry us up there on senior citizen.

Roundtree: Mrs. who?

Townsend: Mathews.

Roundtree: Eva Mathews?

Townsend: Ya, you know.

Roundtree: The Anna Tutt Honeys?

Townsend: Ya.

Roundtree: Is that what you're talking about?

Townsend: Ya. Ya. We go up there to the place to meetings, you know.

Roundtree: Oh, that's nice.

Townsend: And he don't think it's right. And he comes on the T.V. every day, Jesse Jackson. Every morning I get up and put, get the T.V. on about nine or something, he comes on. He be up there on T.V. talking.

Roundtree: What other places did you go with the Anna Tutt Honeys with Mrs. Mathews?

Townsend: We were all _____. We went to all down south. Ya. We just went everywhere. Went to swimming and then we went to meetings down the road here somewhere. I wouldn't know all them places we didn't go. We went to _____, she had it. _____. They don't do nothing like she do. I said Lord, I wish we would get back so, 'cause we went some places, had big time, met folks that do things, you know. Well, these here are all right but they got funny, I don't like the way.

Roundtree: Did you have to pay for it or did they pay for it, the trips?

Townsend: No, we didn't have to pay for it. They paid for it. No, we didn't have to pay. They paid for it. So I said, it look like she ain't gonna get back or

something. He ain't that a way, you know. He find a way. I told him, she wasn't gonna come back to her property here on Grove. She ain't come back neither. She didn't move back over there. I told him, she ain't gonna move back over there. She ain't moved there neither. 'Cause he, he won't do like she did. And we don't try to work over there. She had good workers, though, white and colored. But they don't do that, so.

Roundtree: Do you remember some of the names of the people who were in the senior citizen group at the Anna Tutt Honeys?

Townsend: No, nobody. Oh, Lord, I couldn't think. I had _____ oh, I couldn't think of all of 'em. Myself.

Roundtree: Do you remember Mrs. [Birch]? [Mattie Birch]?

Townsend: Yes.

Roundtree: Was she in that, too?

Townsend: Yes, we had them, too.

Roundtree: Did you know if she's still living?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: Do you know if she's still living?

Townsend: Who? _____.

Roundtree: Is she still living?

Townsend: Ya.

Roundtree: She's living? Do you know where she live at?

Townsend: She live right yonder where Miss [Matthis] stayed now. She live right there. I try to think of some _____. We had white, we had the, Julia, this girl named Julia, she carried us out, last Thursday, out to Lake of the Woods. Julia, this white girl, she's just like a mother to me. This girl, she's young. About your size and all.

Roundtree: What did you do?

Townsend: We had a good time. Out there, we fished and she said, 'Now Beulah don't you try to fix or nothing 'cause you've been sick. I'll fix it.' So, we went out. We had a good time. Caught fishes. I cooked them fish out of the icebox the other day. I cleaned 'em. _____ gave 'em to me. Oh, ya, we, I said I hope _____ we'd have _____. He got all that big building up there. He ain't had nothing. We had a white man working, we had a white working _____. You know we were at Alabama. _____.

Roundtree: Alabama? Really. You were visiting a lot of people?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: Where did you go? What places did you go?

Townsend: We went to beauty shops down there and we went to [Durant], Mississippi. [Kosciusko], Mississippi, all down in there. See [Lottie Pearl], you know Lottie Pearl up there where _____ store at? Got that _____ . Well, that's where she from. We went down there. And she come back up and bought all that on that side down there.

Roundtree: And you stayed all night down there.

Townsend: Ya, we stayed all night. See, my son in Chicago married to her sister. _____. And see this lady named Lottie Pearl. Lottie Pearl. Ya. We got to go _____ when we with Miss Mathews. I said, we get to _____ again soon.

Roundtree: When did the, when did you all stop?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: When did she stop? When did she close down the place? Do you remember what year it was?

Townsend: The year when she took sick, last, she been sick now, near a year. She been sick just about a year. And she, she _____ Dunbar Court
[End Side A]

Beulah Townsend, Interview

Side B

Townsend: I said now you know tomorrow I have to meet this girl today 'cause tomorrow they'll come get me again tomorrow. Take me out with 'em tomorrow. I didn't get to go to the _____ 'cause I wasn't feeling good but they want to come get me in morning, a friend of mine want, live on Washington. She gonna take me with her. So I said I go with her tomorrow. Pat won't allow me to go by myself. I have to go with somebody. Well.

Roundtree: Do you remember how the jobs were when you first came?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: Was it easy for a black person to get a job when you first, you know?

Townsend: What?

Roundtree: Here in Champaign. When you first came here. Did you get a job easily?

Townsend: When I got one. Ya. I wasn't no trouble getting a job. _____ . They said, they called me, you want a job? I said, Ya. I'll work so they take me.

Roundtree: Who called you?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: Who called you?

Townsend: Huh?

Roundtree: Who called you? Do you remember who called you?

Townsend: Oh.

Roundtree: The person that you worked for or somebody else that you knew?

Townsend: Mr. or Miss, woman that called, oh, I just talked with the man, I started, oh, he knows 'em. _____. They called me, said Beulah you want a job. I said ya. Well, come on out. And I go out there and talk with 'em and then I get the job, get the job. Wasn't hard getting one. The undertaker, Joe Sturdyvin was the undertaker, you know, and white _____. Well.

Roundtree: That's all the questions I had. Do you have anything else that you want to say?

Townsend: No. No. No. That's all. That's enough.

Roundtree: All right. Thank you.

Townsend: I'll be seeing you. You'll be out in here and ya I'll give 'em to you.

Roundtree: Okay.