

Charlotte Nesbitt

A Transcription Of an Oral Interview

310 E. Bradley Ave.
Champaign, Illinois
July 8, 1983

Interviewed by
Melinda Roundtree
Patrick Tyler

Champaign County Historical Archives
Urbana, Illinois
2000

Introduction

This is an interview with Mrs. Charlotte Nesbitt, the director of the Douglass Branch Library in Champaign. Mrs. Nesbitt has been in the Champaign area since 1956. She's worked at the library for four years.

This interview is being conducted on July 8, 1983, at the Douglass Branch Library, 310 East Bradley, Champaign. The interviewers are Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department.

Charlotte Nesbitt

Oral History Interview

Melinda Roundtree: Okay, first of all, Mrs. Nesbitt, could you tell us a little bit about your early life, when you were born, and your childhood?

Charlotte Nesbitt: Well, I was born in Chicago, Illinois, and my family moved from Chicago to Danville. I was there a short time, like a couple of months, and then I went to San Antonio, Texas, and went to school there at a Catholic academy. And then I came back from Texas to Danville. Then, I went to Chicago University for a short time. I went to Parkland out here, and I've been working all the years that I came to . . . Let's see, I came to Champaign-Urbana in 1956. That's when I got married to Bruce Nesbitt, and the Nesbitts have been here for I guess evidently a long, long time because I know his mother came from Homer, Illinois, here. And there are a large number of Nesbitts in this community.

And different jobs I've always worked mainly with the school system, the Boy's Club, I worked for the state as a caseworker for five years, and then worked for the university, Levis Faculty Center as a bookkeeper, and then I came to the library. And I've been working here now for four years.

Roundtree: What kind of things do you do here at the library? What are your duties?

Nesbitt: Right now, I'm supervisor of Douglass Branch Library and that calls for programming, ordering books, materials, a lot of little technical work that goes on day-to-day, library work that . . . Basically, here in Douglass it calls for programming and getting materials to relate to predominantly black people.

Roundtree: You said you went to Chicago University and Parkland. What did you study?

Nesbitt: Just general curriculum when I first went to Chicago University because I didn't even know what I wanted to do. And out to Parkland, I took some business courses, karate, and dance classes when I was out there.

Roundtree: [Inaudible].

Nesbitt: Well, I did volunteer work for a long time with the senior citizens and was under Iva Matthews that started with the Honeys. But she was over that group of senior citizens.

Roundtree: Do you attend any churches?

Nesbitt: I'm Catholic. I go to St. Patrick's. When the children were younger, we were at Holy Cross because we were in Champaign. Then when we moved to Urbana, I started going to the Urbana Catholic Church, St. Patrick's.

Roundtree: When you first came to Champaign did you live in the same place that you're living now, or did you move?

Nesbitt: No, when I first came to Champaign, Bruce and I lived on Ash in Champaign. Then we moved from Ash Street to Dunbar Court in Urbana, and then we moved on Church Street in Champaign. Then, from Church Street to Healey, and from Healey to Oregon, where we are now, where we have been for the last ten years.

Roundtree: You said you've been here since 1956. Could you tell me about the changes that have come and gone? Or are they still, you know, the racial prejudice or whatever is still in the community. Have you seen any since you've been here or, could you tell me?

Nesbitt: I'm sure there's a lot of prejudice still around — it's just a little more covered up than it used to be. But still Champaign-Urbana wasn't quite as prejudiced as Danville where I came from when I came over here. When I first came over here, everyone knew everyone, you knew everyone, you know, in the black community. It was sort of like, you know, in one group in this part of town, in the northeast part of Champaign was predominantly the black community, when I came here. And there weren't that many people, black people in southwest Champaign, like it is now. Now people are spread all over. There are people that I have met recently that have said they have lived here five to ten years that I had never seen in my life. But at one time when I first came here, that wasn't so. Everyone knew everyone, but that isn't the way it is anymore. There's a lot of things that have been torn down, rebuilt, everything since when I first came here. The public school system in Champaign, when the children were earlier, I didn't have that much contact with them because my children went to parochial school and that went all

the way through eighth grade. They had one year of junior high in Champaign. Then they went to high school and my oldest girl was at the high school only, what, one year because she graduated when she was 15 from Central High School and that summer she went to the University of Illinois. She got accepted and she went to summer school and her name is Terry Nesbitt. We let her stay on campus. She stayed out in FAR Dorm on Florida Avenue on campus. Then by that time, we moved to Urbana and the kids were put in, my two boys went to Urbana. One went into Urbana High School and one went into his last year of junior high over at Fisher campus, and then my youngest daughter started in Leal School in Urbana.

Patrick Tyler: What's your children's names?

Nesbitt: Terry Lynn Marie Nesbitt, that's my oldest; and then there's Bruce Donathan Nesbitt II; there's David Loran Nesbitt; and Dorian Nesbitt. And none of my children are married and I don't have any grandchildren.

Roundtree: During the sixties, the Civil Rights Movement, do you remember how the blacks acted during that time and how it affected them?

Nesbitt: In this community?

Roundtree: Yes.

Nesbitt: Well, during the sixties, what I remember predominately about this community is that we had the gangs during that time. We had the Peace Stones, the Panthers and there was quite a bit of confusion, during that time. A lot of shooting, a lot of fighting, a lot of killing. During that time, my husband was working on the Champaign police force and he was sort of right in the middle of it during that time. That's what I remember most about the sixties in this community.

Roundtree: When you came here, how long did it take you to get a job? I was wondering about the job opportunities. Was it hard?

Nesbitt: I have never, I can't really say, speaking for myself, because I have never had a problem finding a job, when I wanted one. In the early years of my marriage, I didn't work and when I did work, it was at a job, a specific job that I wanted, that I went out and got. But I didn't have any problem, so I don't think I would be a very good example of what the job market was like because that has never been a problem for me.

Tyler: Would you say that the jobs are open to the black community in this present day?

Nesbitt: You mean the job market open? I don't feel that it is. No, because, unless you have, especially in this community, unless you have a certain skill, or you have degrees of some sort to qualify you for something, the job market is almost null and void for the average black person because we don't have a large industry here. The two predominant industries we have, is what? Kraft and Humko? And then they have this steel place,

Clifford & Jacobs, and the majority of the people that Clifford & Jacobs have, have been there for years and years and years. Kraft and Humko at the present time aren't hiring that many people because the people that are there are keeping their jobs. I feel that the job market is very bad, especially in this community and the surrounding communities, for the black person. The young teenager has a difficult problem finding a job. Where before they could go to the fast food chains, and get summer work and things. That's where most of your college students in this area are. And an employer will hire a college student part time faster than he will hire a black teenager with no job skills or anything or perhaps had never even worked before, before he'll hire the average kid. So the people that are hurt in the job market in this area, I feel, are the black people. I'm sure there are whites out of work, but nothing like the black population of this community.

Roundtree: I was wondering about, could you tell us the recent activities that you've had here at the library for the community?

Nesbitt: We don't have activities basically for the whole community, per se. What we do is have planned activities for the children that come here. During the school year we have daycare centers that come in for activities like, story hour, filmstrips, arts and crafts, this type of thing. During the summer our program is geared to the child that is, say, from thirteen down to about three years of age. All our programming is geared toward that age group.

Tyler: Mrs. Nesbitt, I was curious about the changes that have taken place today in the black community, and then from the past, the attitude changes.

Nesbitt: Attitude changes of the people?

Tyler: Yes.

Nesbitt: I feel the attitude, generally speaking, is worse. It's going, I mean everyone to me seems hostile about everything: working conditions, living conditions, this type of thing. And I think that has a lot to do with the fact that the job market is bad, utility rates are up, food costs are up, clothing cost is up. It costs much more to send your child to school because you have to pay for all the materials, everything.

They've got everybody spread all over town in schools — the kids are bused. I don't think to me . . . And in this community there is, to me, a big turnover, basically of your teachers. And a lot of them are putting husbands through school, and they're working, and when they finish they go on. And to them, to me, it seems like that they're not really concerned about what the child is learning. They come everyday, they have a job to do, they do the job with no emphasis on anything. (The phone rings, tape is turned off and on again).

And this type of thing. When you don't have the basic things that you need to make your family function properly, then people become irritated — and irritation brings about hostility. So I think the attitudes at the present time are very bad.

Tyler: Since their attitude is very bad, what would be the reaction of community? Do you think they'll go back to ways of the sixties, you know, the gangs and stuff like that?

Nesbitt: They're trying to form gangs now. I don't know how well it'll go off. I've heard several of the black male adults in the community that used to be in gangs in the sixties, late sixties, have been talking to the children telling them this is something they don't even want to get into. Which I think is very good, for the simple reason they know the heartaches that it brought about. That's why there are a number of young black males who got killed during the time of the gangs. And I don't think the youth now really realizes the problem that having gangs can create. Not just for them, but for the whole community.

Tyler: One last question. Is there anything that you want to talk about that kind of stands out in your mind, something in the past, or that recently happened?

Nesbitt: Not per se. No, not right offhand that I can think of. The only thing that I miss about the community is the closeness. When I came here, everyone was friends. I mean you go down the street and you speak to everybody. You could walk. It wasn't any hassle to walk. You could walk all over this town, and you weren't worried about being attacked, robbed, or this type of thing — at least I didn't.

And I used to walk from one end of this town all the time. It wasn't anything when we lived on Healey to walk from Healey, which is on the south side of University, to Douglass Park, and bring my kids up to Douglass Park because when we lived in Dunbar

Court the kids were always over in the park. But, I wouldn't dare do it now, not walk across town alone, oh, no. That's just some of the things that I miss about the community.

Roundtree: Well, thank you, Mrs. Nesbitt for your time.

[End taped interview.]