

Eliza Bridges

A Transcription Of An Oral Interview

904 Wascher Drive
Urbana, Illinois
August 8, 1983

Interviewed by
Melinda Roundtree
Patrick Tyler

Champaign County Historical Archives
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Introduction

This interview is with Mrs. Eliza Bridges. Mrs. Bridges came to Champaign in 1954 from Mississippi to be with her husband who was here working. Her first job upon arrival to Champaign was at Mercy Hospital in Urbana.

This interview is being conducted on August 8, 1983, at her home, 904 Wascher Drive, Urbana. The interviewers are Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department.

Roundtree: First off, Mrs. Bridges, could you tell us where you were born?

Bridges: In Brooksville, Mississippi. Brooksville.

Roundtree: Brooksville?

Bridges: Uhm. Mississippi.

Tyler: Could you tell us the date that you were born?

Bridges: Yes, I was born December 7, 1909, in Brooksville.

Roundtree: Okay. Could you tell us a little about your family background, your parents, the names?

Bridges: My mother was named Annie Kay. Let's see, what was her maiden name? Malone, Annie Kay Malone. And my daddy was named Wes. Oh, Lord, I don't know my daddy's last name now. (Laughter.) I didn't know my daddy. My daddy died when I _____. But his name Wes Harris. It had to come to me. I never saw my daddy to know who I was looking at.

Roundtree: Could you tell me about your childhood and how it was growing up in the South?

Bridges: Terrible. (Laughter.) Terrible in Mississippi, where I was born and raised at in Mississippi. So it was terrible there.

Roundtree: Did you go to school?

Bridges: Yes, I went to school. The school was at St. Paul's, St. Paul's School.

Roundtree: What year did you come to Champaign-Urbana?

Bridges: What year was that, honey? I really don't know. I have to look on something that's got it on there, 'cause I sure don't know.

Tyler: Was it after World War II or before the civil rights movement?

Bridges: Along that time. Somewhere along in there. I don't like to guess at things. I like to tell it, you know. If that's what you want, you want the exact thing. What it is, you want that exact. But just catch me off guard and I really can't tell what I don't know. What is it, seventy? What?

Roundtree: Eighty-three.

Bridges: I mean . . . I came in '54. I believe it was 1954.

Roundtree: Where did you live when you first came here? What street did you live on?

Bridges: Dublin.

Roundtree: Dublin. Did you work when you first came here to Champaign-Urbana?

Bridges: Yes.

Roundtree: Where did you work?

Bridges: Mercy Hospital.

Roundtree: Mercy Hospital. How long did you work there?

Bridges: I really don't know. I really don't know how long I worked there.

(Pause.)

Roundtree: How were the people in the community when you first came up here? I mean when you lived on Dublin. Were there mostly black children on that street? Were they friendly?

Bridges: Yes.

Roundtree: Did you come here by yourself?

Bridges: No, me and my husband.

Roundtree: Oh, you were married in Mississippi?

Bridges: Yes.

Roundtree: Do you remember what year you were married?

Bridges: No, I have to look on my papers 'cause I really don't remember. I won't tell it like it is anyway. _____ . Just by heart.

Roundtree: Okay. You said you worked at Mercy Hospital. What other places did you work?

Bridges: I worked over at Carson's.

Roundtree: Carson's?

Bridges: Yes.

Roundtree: What did you do there?

Bridges: Housekeeping.

Roundtree: Was that the only place you worked?

Bridges: Mercy Hospital and Carson's.

Tyler: When you first came here, how was the community for a child in general?
Was it segregated or integrated or what? How were the people?

Bridges: Now, I think it was a little. But I don't think, you know, it was as nice as it is now. You see, when you first go to a place, you got to get used to it. And quite naturally people are not going to be as friendly with you when you first come to a place than they will when you stay there a few years. So that's all I know. You have to give a community awhile before people really know you. Just turn ourselves loose to be friendly with one another.

Roundtree: During the 60s, when Martin Luther King died how did you feel?

Bridges: Bad. That hurt me as though that had been my own _____ child.

'Cause I think he was a fine man. _____. That really hurt when he got killed, but that's, we know the image but what does that mean, when a leader gets killed? Somebody that's going to lead the people right, in the right way.

You know what that means. 'Course you know they killed Christ, the Savior of the world, so you know what they're going to do for us when we stand up and stick our necks out for the country, for our own country. We'll just come up dead at any time. You can prepare yourself for that. 'Course everybody ain't going to like it. Everybody don't like rioting and everybody ain't going to like running, so for either one you can get killed. You might not get killed. Death might not die dead, but they can kill your influence by telling lies on you. You're not this.

You're not that. You is this. You is that. All that can happen to you. Now, it's like you all are going around, somebody can have a false issue with you all.

Well, you see those little children around here, they don't know nothing. And forget about you reading it from a book. You know what I'm saying. These questions you're asking me now, you're not saying it of yourself either, 'cause some of it you don't know anything about. See, people could put that on you.

You don't now what they're asking me. Quite naturally I might not know the question you could ask me, and you're younger than I am. I might not have the answer, but still, you have to ask me.

Roundtree: What church do you attend?

Bridges: Now? Our church is not _____ it's sort of, I don't know the name of it. I go to Reverend Jones Church down on _____ They named it. I don't know _____.

Tyler: Do you have any children?

Bridges: Yes, I got four.

Tyler: Could you give us the names of your children?

Bridges: My oldest son lives in Kankakee, but all my children are grown. _____ My oldest son is James Thomas Odeneal, 'cause I was married twice. My next son is Ramsdale Odeneal, and my oldest son by this husband is Charlie Wilson Bridges and my next son is Jim _____ Bridges. (Pause.) I just have four boys, that's all.

Tyler: How do you spell your second son's name?

Bridges: Ramsdale. R-A-M-S-D-A-L-E.

Tyler: What was his last name again?

Bridges: Hmm?

Tyler: His last name?

Bridges: Odeneal.

Tyler: O'Neill?

Bridges: Odeneal. O-D-E-N-E-A-L.

Roundtree: Did you have any relatives in Champaign when you came here?

Why did you come to Champaign? Why did you decide to come to Champaign?

Bridges: Well, my husband was up here working and we married in Mississippi and he came on up here. His uncle lived here up there on Dublin and he came on up here working after he got out of service and that brought me up here.

Roundtree: Was it easy to get a job for you? Was it easy for you to get a job?

Bridges: No, I got a job at Mercy Hospital. I was there for about two or three years, I don't know. And then I left there and went over to Carle and I worked over there about two years or more. I don't know how long I worked over there. I was just a working fanatic, I guess and I didn't try to keep up with the years how

long I worked there. I'd come home and started keeping children, and so I kept children here and all them got big enough to go to school. _____ great-granddaughter. I always kept a house full of children.

Roundtree: How was crime when you first, for the years you were here? Was it worse, not as bad as it is now?

Bridges: I can't say. I think it was when I first come up here _____.

Roundtree: Do you remember the games, brothers and sisters, the games? _____.

Bridges: _____.

Roundtree: What did they do? What kinds of things did they do? Did they ever come over this way?

Bridges: No, down on that lower end over in Champaign.

Roundtree: You said you used to get the newspaper, right? You said you used to read the newspaper, right? What kinds of things would they have in the newspaper?

Bridges: What kind of what?

Roundtree: What kinds of articles did they put in the newspapers?

Bridges: Articles?

Roundtree: Yes.

Bridges: Well, they put all articles or something that happened in the city you know in the area.

Roundtree: I know that in interviewing some other people that they say they used to put, you know, like "this colored person did this." You know, and they'd use, you know, "colored people." If they didn't use "colored people," then they'd assume that the person would be white, you know.

Bridges: Looked like they'd put more colored than white, but you know we have to put up with all that kind of stuff.

Roundtree: How has the community changed since you've been here? I know you said you didn't go out much, you know, but just watching TV or whatever. How has the community changed, or you know, the people, the town?

Bridges: Well, it used to be people getting killed here a whole lot, but it don't be that way too much now.

Roundtree: So, you think it's better now? You think it's better?

Bridges: Yes, seems to be.

Roundtree: What kind of, what do you do in your spare time? Do you like to read?

Bridges: No, I don't do too much reading since I've been wearing glasses. I watch television a lot but I think that's a little bad on my eyes than reading the newspaper. But I will watch but I don't have to read that. I don't take the newspaper now. I used to but I don't now, and so the news that I get, I have to watch the TV to get it.

Roundtree: Those are all the questions that I have. Is there is anything that you want to tell us that you remember?

Bridges: No, I don't guess so. That's about all I know about.