Erma Bridgewater

A Transcription of an Oral Interview

608 East Washington Street
Champaign, Illinois
July 26, 1983

Interviewed by
Melinda Roundtree
Patrick Tyler

Champaign County Historical Archives
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Introduction

This interview was with Mrs. Erma Bridgewater, once Director of the Frederick Douglass Center. Mrs. Bridgewater was born in Champaign in 1913.

The interview was conducted on July 26, 1983, at the home of Mrs. Bridgewater, 608 East Washington, Champaign. The interviewers were Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives.

Erma Bridgewater, Oral Interview

SIDE A

Melinda Roundtree: First of all, Mrs. Bridgewater could you tell us a little bit about your childhood, and where you were born?

Erma Bridgewater: I was born here in Champaign, and my father was born here. That part of it - I wish I knew more about his having been born here because I'd like to go back to it now and find out why he and the family came to Champaign because that was quite awhile ago. Let's see. He was born in 1892 or 3, so it would be interesting to me now to know something about the family - you know, why they came here.

But, I was born here in 1913. My mother came from Shawneetown, Illinois. Well, first I was born in a house in the north part of Champaign on Tremont Street. And then the family moved to the south part of town, on the other side of the tracks, which really didn't mean anything because it was a poor neighborhood out there, too. You know, the other side of the tracks doesn't always mean that you [laughs] . . . And it was, oh, it wasn't built up at all. And I think at that time my mom and dad got the house for $1,500, and it took them a long time to pay for it, but that wasn't much at that time.

And I had a brother, and I lived there until after our marriage. It was a predominantly white neighborhood. There were two or three other black families, but they were poor. In fact, the people that lived down on the corner from us still had pigs

and chickens in the yard, and they were - well, what you call poor white trash, because that's what they were - at least that's what we called them then. We went to neighborhood schools. And the closest school for us was about seven or eight blocks from the house. And I guess I was pretty well treated there, because we were - up to a point there were some people there who had children who were college professors; their children always seemed to treat us a little nicer than the poor ones. I guess we were a threat to the poor folks, but not to them.

One of things I remember is we played a game called break the Chinese wall, and you had to hold hands. And some of them wouldn't want to hold hands. And the teacher would come then, and take my hand. And teachers do kind of look out for you, I guess. [Laughs.] And they'd break through the wall, you know, break through. Then, sometimes when they choose sides, I'd be left out and the teacher would see to it that I got in. Let's see, my brother and I were the only blacks in there for a while, then there were one or two others later on. When you get in that kind of situation, you learn to take your place. That's all there is to say about it.

Then we did have some teachers that were pretty good. I remember one thing that happened to me. I guess I will never forget. And that is we had Music Appreciation, and that was Classical Music, and you had to learn the part of the - well, who the composer was, and you know, the whole story of the suite. And I got - well, I liked music anyhow, so I got a perfect score, enough to go to the regional. So, they gave me my paper back and said I wouldn't be able to go to state, because I had put an extra hump on an "m." And that was the only thing they could find wrong. You know I got everything right, but that was their way of keeping me from going on to the

state. Well, nowadays you know, you probably say a whole lot about that, but at that time you just accepted it and went on. You didn't feel too good about it, but you accepted it.

Some little things that happened that were - I remember when I was a kid coming home from school one day, there were men working on the streets and one of them said, "It looks like it going to rain, there's a cloud coming over." And I didn't understand what he was talking about and I went home and parents said, "Oh, you just don't pay any attention to him." Of course, they knew what he was talking about. [Laughs.] And I remember another girl called me nigger, and I jumped on her and got whipped - that's the only fight I ever had in my life [laughter] because she was bigger than I was for one thing. But I think all and all it was probably a good experience. I think probably as I look back on it now, my education was probably better than it would've been maybe at some other school, because with the mix of children, white children there, they had to do a good job there. Well, it was just better.

And I remember much years later when my niece came to live with us, and she was going to go to school there. They told her she couldn't go. She'd have to come back on this side of town. We were still living out there, and they were going to have to bring her to this side of town to go to school. Well, by that time I was old enough to have a little spirit, too. So we told them that it just wouldn't happen that way. She'd have to go to school in our neighborhood.

When I got into high school, there was a swimming pool there, but blacks weren't allowed to swim. And my parents, and some of the other parents went to the principal and told them that they wanted us to have swimming. Young people today

think that, you know, people didn't do anything about things like that years ago, but they fought just as hard. They probably didn't have as many people with them, but they still fought. So they went to them and demanded that we be allowed to swim. What they did was let us swim after everybody else was out you know, all the white kids had their day, and we were able to swim. That was bad except we did get swimming.

And the same kind of thing happened when my kids were going to school. My daughter - I wanted to get her into dancing, ballet - and they told us that they didn't mix the classes. So, I got her into a special class after school. It wasn't very long before it was integrated. But somewhere along the line, you have to do things like that and stick your neck out in order to get them to realize that you're just like anybody else, and you can go ahead and do those things. I've talked quite a bit here at this point. [Laughter.]

Patrick Tyler: I have a couple of questions. What was the name of the street that you lived on the south side?

Erma Bridgewater: Ells, E-l-l-s. It's built up quite a bit now.

Patrick Tyler: And could you give us the names of the schools that you attended?

Erma Bridgewater: I went to Lincoln School. It's now been made into an apartment building, and it's near the Edison Junior High. The high school I went to was Edison - well, what is now Edison Junior High, which is on Green Street. Lincoln is on Healey.

Patrick Tyler: What year did you graduate from high school?

Erma Bridgewater: 1931, no wait a minute, yeah, thirty-one. And I finished college in thirty-seven.

Melinda Roundtree: You went to college at the U of I?

Erma Bridgewater: Uh huh.

Melinda Roundtree: What did you major in?

Erma Bridgewater: Sociology. They didn't have the School of Social Work then, so I got a degree in Sociology.

Melinda Roundtree: What was the first job you had?

Erma Bridgewater: You mean after I finished school, because I did maid work and all that other stuff.

Melinda Roundtree: Yes.

Erma Bridgewater: My first job when I finished the University of Illinois was at Newman Hall as a maid because that was all I could find back then. And my mother was working there at the same time. And I stayed there for about a year. Of course, at the time I was still looking for something else. I never did want to leave Champaign. I was determined to find something here. And I worked there for, I think it was a little over a year, and I was still looking. And the Recreation Department - well, it wasn't the department, but they had what they called WPA then, and they had recreation in Douglass Park. In fact, they had it in a house. And they changed from WPA, and the city took it over. And I went there then as one employee. I was the only employee from the city working with people who were still on WPA. They'd been working there, you know, several years. And you can imagine what kind of reception I got, because I was living down there I mean from my own people - living down on Ells, on the other side of the tracks, coming up here with a college degree, which not too many people had at that time. And to work as director over people who'd been there and knew what they were doing, and I didn't know a thing about [laughs] recreation. And just got it, you know, because of those qualifications.

So, I had a real hard time. They sent me home crying a lot of times. Not only trying to get along with the staff, but trying to get along with the people, kids and so on I was working with. And it was gradual, but I finally made it. What I learned was that I had to swallow that degree, and I did a good job of swallowing it too because I just forgot that I ever had it, and went on from there. And I think that has been a big help to

me really. It sounds silly. Sometimes now I have to remind myself that I did go through school, and I did have some problems going through with getting money to go and so on. But, of course, I don't ever regret having gone, but there were some problems.

Patrick Tyler: At the University, how was the housing for blacks?

Erma Bridgewater: In those times students lived in the community; it wasn't any place for them to live on campus. So, they lived in the community, and there was no place to eat on campus, so we usually boarded wherever they stayed. And it meant that they were a big part of the community. You know, you didn't have the difference you have now. They came to our churches. They were really just in with us in the social life and everything. There were some fraternities and sororities - the AKA's and Kappa's, Alpha's, Omega's. And it gave an opportunity for a lot of the people to - for income, you know, keep the students, washing for them and so on.

That part was good. Now, then it changed, of course, when they got the dormitories on campus, and they stayed on campus, then they didn't come to church or do much of anything else. And then it was sort of revived again with the Cultural Center, (Afro-American Cultural Center on Matthews in Urbana) when they started having black chorus and when they involved people. And there were a lot of programs at the University people from the community were involved in. And I guess it has stuck some but then it seems to be getting apart again. It may be that I'm just not involved - that could be it.

Melinda Roundtree: Some other people we've talked to like Mrs. Brightwell we asked her about the theaters here, like the Orpheum. Do you remember how they were?

Erma Bridgewater: You sat in the back, upstairs, in the balcony. At the Park Theater, the worst seats were down in front right under the picture, so that's where we sat. The Orpheum was two or three rows in the back. And students were a big help in changing that, too. NAACP testing it. They gradually just changed.

Melinda Roundtree: Could you tell us a little bit about your work at Douglass Center, the things you did?

Erma Bridgewater: Yes, I was there at two or three different times because I started in 1939, and as director, like I told you, I didn't know what I was doing, but I learned. And we organized through the years. I worked there I think about ten years, and then I got married, and went back after the first child was born. And then I worked awhile, and then I decided to come home and raised the three children, then went back in 1955. But, things were so different then, the kids were different, and they were doing different things. But we had drill teams, drum corps, a lot of club activities. We had track teams that we took to the city, to the regional, to the state, and some of them have records that probably still stand, girls and boys. And that was a great time. And it was a great time for me in more than one way because I was able to have my own children there,

and I could work and have them there after school. And then I knew what things were going on. They started wearing these tight Levi's, you know. Had I been at home and not known what other kids were wearing I might have said, "No, you know, they're weird those things." [Laughs.] But it was so much nicer that way because I knew. In fact, I learned the latest dances up there, and came home and taught them to them. [Laughs.]

So, it was a grand experience, and I really enjoyed working there. In fact, I felt real bad when I left. And the reason I left was they well, I was, vacillated from assistant director to director, and at the time I left I had been director. They decided they needed a man director, which was all right with me, you know, I didn't mind that. And then, he, they decided that they were going to reduce my salary two or three steps in order to pay him. And I worked there for a while, and I said, "This is crazy." I found out I was doing my work and his, too, and being his secretary and everything, and even still telling the kids what to do and what not to do. So I left, and then I was fifty then and at that age looking for a job was kind of hard to find. So I went then to I finally went to the Courier as proofreader, and I stayed there until the Urban Renewal came along, and I worked there for three years. Then I went to Frances Nelson Health Center the Urban Renewal Project was completed and stayed at Frances Nelson until Community Development came along and suddenly . . .

Melinda Roundtree: Mr. Stratton was part of the Urban Renewal, wasn't he?

Erma Bridgewater: Yes, he was one of the ones that wanted it. It took them a long time to live it down, too, the fact that he was for it. Well, one of the reasons I was able to do that job I think is because I saw people being moved from even basement apartments and real bad housing into some decent housing, and I felt that it was an opportunity to help people to live better. And it was, that part of it, from that point of view it did work. Now the only thing that bothered me was the next program, the Community Development having cleared that whole bit of land up there. Nothing has happened with it since, and that really bugs me to death, because I went in there telling people that it was going to be cleared, and that it was going to be rebuilt. And now I'm beginning to wonder if the city didn't have some other reasons for doing it, and I'm still not sure about it.

Melinda Roundtree: What year did you leave Douglass Center?

Erma Bridgewater: The last was in sixty-four, sixty-three or sixty-four.

Melinda Roundtree: I was reading some articles they have at the library from the Courier, late articles, and I read something about the drill teams that they had at Douglass Center, and it seemed like the community was involved in helping them raise money to go, I think it was to Washington or something to compete.

Erma Bridgewater: Yes, they went to Elks Conventions, and they made their own costumes, their own uniforms and so on. We taught sewing. And they were a nice

bunch of kids, but they always are when you look back at them. You forget all the nasty things they've done. [Laughter.]

Patrick Tyler: What was the difference between the youth back then and the youth today?

Erma Bridgewater: My feeling is that well, I felt I could talk to them. Now I could be saying that now, and maybe I wouldn't be right because if I knew them better I could talk to them now. But I remember grabbing a knife out of a kid's hand. I wouldn't think of doing that now. But I think I learned the things they did wrong was probably drinking. Now, I could deal with that, but I don't think I could deal with drugs. I think that's the difference that it would be for me in the kids then and now. They're much more they have a lack of respect. The youngsters that I saw, even the worst ones, would at least respect me. But then I don't think I could see that today. And, of course, you have to build up respect, so maybe if I was around them more I could build it. But I would be reluctant to go back. I just don't see them being that way. Maybe I'm not being fair.

Melinda Roundtree: I was wondering, like now the churches, they're being supportive for, you know like Dr. Young, and helping him by raising money to help with his legal fees. Did they do those kinds of things in the past, help with educational, or poor families . . . ?

Erma Bridgewater: One of the things I do remember is the job thing, where the picketing was for jobs. You know Penney's was about to open. Penney's Store was about to open downtown, and all the churches really got together then and we were together - and picketed Penney's because they weren't going to hire any blacks. And it was a perfect opportunity because the store was new, and it was just perfect for doing it then, and it paid off. They did hire some blacks. I don't know. I think it was easier then to get people together. We worry about leadership nowadays, and we had a common cause then. And I guess Dr. Young would be a common cause, but you have more distractions from that sort of thing now than we had then. Well, it involved more people, you know, it involved opening up something, and this involved a particular person. Of course, there is a principal there, too, in the Dr. Young thing I don't know. There were things done back then for more of a general reason. You know, we didn't have this, so then you have to picket or work to get this, and not for any particular person.

Melinda Roundtree: I was wondering about the sixties during the Civil Rights Movement, how did it affect the blacks in Champaign-Urbana?

Erma Bridgewater: It affected me. It was a grand time for me. It's like to me, I always think of it as having all of your all black things on your back and finally you stand up and say, "Hey wait a minute, I don't have to carry all that!" [Laughter.] But it meant me going with a natural for one thing. My daughter came home from - she went to college - she came back with a natural and she said, that's when all three of them . .

. I don't know what people would say. So, I went to the hairdresser one morning and when I drove up there I said, Oh, this is the wrong day and I already had my hair washed. This is the wrong day. I said okay that's it, from here on it's just going to be like this. So I did get a lot of flack from a lot of people but it didn't bother me none. But, the sixties were a liberation time for me, because having grown up with all of these different things about you can't do this and you can't do that, go that place, and the freedoms to me came in little bits and pieces. You know to say, here now, I can talk to that person just like I want to talk to him. Whereas before I'd have to get my words together and I could use broken English if I wanted to. And it was, to me it was a great time. Even the riots. [Laughs.] It was a rebellion.

Patrick Tyler: How has the Civil Rights Movement helped Champaign-Urbana in general?

Erma Bridgewater: Well I think we've gotten people into some different kinds of jobs and better jobs. I don't think we've changed the minds of whites, so much. I think they are much more subtle with what they do. But, I think those things have come along. We see people in jobs that we had never thought we would see them there.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you think it brought the community closer?

Erma Bridgewater: I'm not sure. Because as some people step up they step away. You know, I got it, you know, and you get it, that kind of attitude that sometimes happen. You don't find very many people that say come on with me.

Melinda Roundtree: Were there a lot of - okay, the blacks going into political offices, running for it?

Erma Bridgewater: Yes. Running for office and succeeding. I think probably now we will always have a black on the council, I think. Of course, a lot of that will be up to us, whether or not we vote one in. In order to get on, they more or less have to get votes from the whole community anyway.

Melinda Roundtree: I was wondering if you know Blanche Harris and her husband and the newspaper? Do you remember the newspaper?

Erma Bridgewater: Yes.

Melinda Roundtree: What kinds of things they had in it?

Erma Bridgewater: Yeah! They had - some of them of course, were picked from the regular newspapers but what they did was pick the black news from the other papers. They weren't the kind to get into issues, you know, like to influence people like maybe the later newspaper did. The one that Clarence Davidson had. He might be more apt

to get into issues. But of course, they have to be careful in order to make sure that other people buy their paper.

Melinda Roundtree: Did you happen to keep any?

Erma Bridgewater: Um. I only kept one picture out of one and that was a picture of my husband and my son. [Laughs.] No, I don't think - I don't think I have any newspapers.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember any other kinds of newspapers?

Erma Bridgewater: What used to be called the Plain Truth. I'm sure you've heard of that. Roy Williams and John Lee Johnson.

[End Side A]

Erma Bridgewater, Oral Interview

SIDE B

Erma Bridgewater: They would be interesting to talk to because they would be on - well a different - well John Lee, of course, has run for council and so on. Roy hasn't but he's been an agitator pretty well along the way. Agitating for blacks and for the underdog and so on. He's good if he would talk, but he might not.

Patrick Tyler: I want to know about your marriage. What year did you get married?

Erma Bridgewater: We married in 1941 and we ran off and got married. Because my husband is a quiet type person, I was afraid he wouldn't. [Laughs]. But I got him. He was from Tuscola. We've been married forty-two years. We married in 1941. And, he's, well, a nice guy. Must be if we've been together 42 years. But it's been a very nice marriage. I look at some of the things people are saying now about marriage and I really appreciate my own. We were - let me see, I think I was making a little bit more money that he was when we married but I had just finished a course in marriage at the University. It was the first year it was taught and one of the things I learned there was that some of the problems that couples have is in money. So we put our money together and we paid the bills and whatever was left is what we had to spend.

We first lived with my parents until the oldest child was born. Until Anthony was born and then Cecil went off, my husband went off to the Army, to the Navy. And I went back to work. I was able to work while he was gone. He came back in '45 from

the Navy and I quit work again and then had the rest of the family. And later on in about 1955 I went back to work again and these women that talk about you can't run a house and work, too, I think they are wrong. I'm not saying that's the way it should be but that it is possible and it takes well, I know it's possible. Black women have been doing it for ages and still take care of the family. But like I said, I did have a break because after school the kids could come up there to Douglass Center. In that, they got involved with the band and in the drill team and all those things, even square dancing. But my husband didn't object to me working why would he I was making money to help out. I went back to work, for one reason was to help do some repairs on the house and just kept it up. We've been very supportive of each other. He works at the University and works in furniture repair, upholstery and he retired. . . So now we are both retired. But all in all marriage has been nice.

Melinda Roundtree: I was wondering if you joined any organizations. Are you a member of any clubs?

Erma Bridgewater: Yeah. In college I was an AKA. Then I've been on a few boards: Urban League, Community War Chest, you know, with the United Fund. Then of course, I've been active in church all of my life. And, I don't remember any other, oh, the Frances Nelson Board.

Melinda Roundtree: Which church do you go to?

Erma Bridgewater: Bethel A.M.E.

Patrick Tyler: I was just wondering, during the Depression period how was it like in Champaign?

Erma Bridgewater: Well it was kind of bad. I guess I don't remember a whole lot about it because I don't want to, but I remember the - we didn't have food stamps but we had - well, that was during the war - the other kind of stamps to get meat and so on. But, when you are on the low end of the ladder, you're poor, you are just a little bit poorer doing . . . And black people have learned to work with it because you just find ways to cope with it I guess. Where with some rich people having been knocked clear down like that upset them, but it just meant . . . I remember times when, during that time, when I was making corn bread with no baking powder and a little bit of anything else in it, but it was cornbread and we ate it. So we did have some rough times. My dad worked at the University. He was a mail carrier, but he started out as an errand boy, then he worked it up. He was there thirty years so it worked up to where it's a whole mail service now with several employees, but they started out with just two of them.

Melinda Roundtree: When did your husband come to Champaign-Urbana?

Erma Bridgewater: Well he lived in Tuscola, which isn't too far so we were back and forth. We knew each other long before we got married, but he came up here I guess to live in the 30's.

Patrick Tyler: I would like to know, how do you feel about a black running for president? You know, about Jessie Jackson and other candidates.

Erma Bridgewater: I don't understand well enough to understand what would happen if he does run. If his running would mean Ronald Reagan would stay in there would change things. I don't quite understand that, but if that meant - if it meant that, I would say, no, don't do it because we can't have him anymore. We've had enough of him already, but the general idea of a black running for president, I think, is fine. The chances of winning of course are probably not too good. I would have liked to have seen Shirley Chisholm do better when she ran when she did. I think Jackson might have some problems. I think Andrew Young would probably do it better than Jackson could. This is just my feeling. He's broader and that's not to say anything against Jackson. I think in his role where he is, I think he's doing great, because he's the kind of vocal that we need now. I love to hear the way he talks, the way he puts things together, but I doubt that he would go very far. He's the smartest one of all, that's for sure.

Melinda Roundtree: I have one last question. What improvements would you like to see in the community in the future? What kinds of things would you like to see for the black people?

Erma Bridgewater: I would like to see a shopping center up in here - there in that area that's been cleared off, along with some housing. And they keep telling us that it wouldn't go, you couldn't make it. I see them building them all over the city even over there across from K-Mart, they got one. They got another one going up out here on Kirby right by another one. And I don't know why it is that they feel like we couldn't have one up here. There are enough beauty shops and barber shops and places that would sell the things we as black folk need or want that would draw people, I think, from all over town. Then they wouldn't have these little sections in K-Mart and the rest of the places where you buy black goods. Why not have it all up here? I think it's going to be difficult to get it done, because we are not together enough to go ahead and find the money to do it ourselves, or we are not going to put the money in it to do it. That's one of the main things I'd love to see. And we do have a neighborhood group that's working on it, but when you have to work at it, work on your job all day and then work on these ideas, later on it does not always come through. That's the main thing I would like to see in Champaign.

Patrick Tyler: Could you give us the name of your father and the names of your children?

Erma Bridgewater: My father was Raymond Scott. My mother was Sarah Wilson Scott. She still lives at 91. My children are: Cecil is the oldest; Ronnie is the middle; and Casandra Woolfolk is the youngest daughter. Well Cecil is 42 or will be 42 and I just saw - he's in Europe right now. We saw Ronnie this weekend. He's playing with

Lena Horne show. Casandra is a counselor with Mental Health. And I have two grandchildren. Taloni, who lives with her mother in California and I got three, I forget. Cecil adopted one, that's Cecil's Loni's father, and then he adopted a child and named her Chelsee. My daughter has a son, Scott.

Patrick Tyler: Is that Cecil Junior?

Erma Bridgewater: Well Cecil, let's see, Cecil Vernon. His dad is Cecil Bernard. We didn't want them to be junior so we changed the middle name.

Patrick Tyler: Well, I don't have any more questions, but we would like to thank you. We appreciate your cooperation.

Erma Bridgewater: Okay! It's kind of fun sometimes to dredge it all up again.