# Erma Bridgewater

## A Transcription of an Oral Interview

608 East Washington Street
Champaign, Illinois
May 17 and 27, 1982

Interviewed by
Dallas Brown

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## Introduction

This interview was conducted with Mrs. Erma Bridgewater, who was born in Champaign. Mrs. Bridgewater was of the founders of the Douglass Community Center in Champaign.

Dallas Brown, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives and University of Illinois Department of Anthropology, interviewed Mrs. Bridgewater May 17, 1982.

Dallas Brown: [remarks joined in progress] . . . University of Illinois Department of Anthropology, talking this evening to Mrs. Erma Bridgewater of 608 East Washington Street, Champaign, Illinois. Mrs. Bridgewater was one of the founders of the Douglass Community Center, has been very active and instrumental in the development of opportunities for blacks in the Champaign-Urbana community, and this evening we'll explore in a preliminary fashion her involvement in the Douglass Community Center, and hopefully learn a bit about her fascinating and wonderful life. With that brief introduction I'd like to begin by asking Mrs. Bridgewater if she could tell us a bit, perhaps, about her early childhood in Champaign, what it was like being black growing up in a city like Champaign-Urbana, whether there were things that happened here that she might think were a little out of the ordinary or things that stand out in her memory that particularly impressed her during her childhood, and perhaps just reminisce a bit about some of her old childhood friends and her school days, and perhaps give us a humorous story or two. And with that, I'll turn it over to Mrs. Bridgewater.

Erma Bridgewater: Well, I was born in the north part of Champaign. My mother and dad were living with his mother. After I was born we lived there until I think about a year. I'm not sure about that. Then they found a house in the south part of Champaign and that was clear out on Ells Avenue. That was considered, you know, clear out, almost out in the country at that time. It was an older home and they managed to start buying it. I think it was about $1,500, which sounds fantastic now. I had another brother, too. There were just the two of us.

The area was primarily white. There was another black family up in the next block from us, and my playmates were white, and it didn't, I don't know, it was all right. It didn't bother me at that time. When we started to school there was just my brother and I, and that's when I began to realize that there were some differences. My dad, my parents had always told me, "If you're nice to people, they'll be nice to you." And which sounds real good, but then when you get into playing games on the playground and you reach to take somebody's hand and they don't want to take your hand, and you're left out of games, and the teacher is nice enough to come to you and take your hand or get you into the game. And as I remember, the youngsters who did pay more attention to us were the ones who seemed to have more money. The poor ones - there were a lot of poor, white people around there then - they just, I don't know, I guess they thought they were a little better.

The nicer things that happened to me then, though, were in music. The teacher we had, her name was Miss Rose. I think a good many black people liked her, not only in that school, but in other schools. And she would let me sing either soprano or alto and I felt great about that because I could do either one. There were programs, school programs naturally, where I had a chance to shine a bit. I remember one of the most disappointing things that happened to me was I had classical music where they played the records and you listened to them, and you had to name the tune or the suite it was from, and everything about it, and you just heard a little bit of it. That contest went clear on up to the state. I got clear up to the point where I was to go to the state. I had passed everything, and when I think about it now it really upsets me. But I had everything perfect except when my paper came back they said I had an extra hump on

an "m" and that was what kept me from going to the state. Of course, I took it home and parents tried to make me feel good about it, but it was completely unfair. But that's the way things were then.

I went on, of course, and finished grade school at Lincoln School. There were only, let's see, my brother and I and one or two other people, two boys that were in the area. Some of the teachers were very good. I remember I had an accident where I got burned and I was out of school for over a month, and had to learn to walk again really. I think it was in the third grade. When I went back to school one of the teachers asked me if I'd like to be in her room, and of course, that was the one I wanted. So I was happy about that and I did get back into her room.

That was sort of disastrous in a way because my mother had sent me out to burn some papers. My brother had chickenpox, and he was looking out the window and I held up one of the pieces of rag or paper or something that was burning. When I put it down on the ground, and then I stooped over and caught my dress a-fire and I knew, I had been told in school, you know how they tell you, "don't run, don't run" and that's what I did. I took off running. There was an open field right next to us and I started running and my brother told my mother and she came out and knocked me down and put it out with her hands. I had a scar on my side and then I got chickenpox in the burns. I was in bad shape there for a while, but I survived.

Another thing that I remember about grade school was a play that we had, and they had it at the high school. And I sang a song by myself with my little colored doll - it was a colored doll - and my parents came and of course they sat upstairs, and I felt

real good about that. That was one of the nicer things that happened to me in grade school.

Another thing I remember, not long ago, well a couple years ago somebody asked me to take part in a discussion and one of the things they wanted to know was about racism. What was racism? So my answer was to give them some examples of racism that I had gone through, and one I'll never forget was when I was coming home from school and there were some men down in a ditch - digging a ditch - and one of them said to the other, "Well it looks like it's gonna rain, there's a black cloud going over." I went home and, of course, told my parents about it and they said well you just ignore that, consider the source. But you know, as kids coming up we took an awful lot of that junk.

And also, and I don't remember whether this was when I was in grade school or, I guess it was grade school. We had a riot - you know, one thing brings on another - I'll probably ramble on quite a bit. (Laughs).

Dallas Brown: That's what we want you to do.

Erma Bridgewater: The Ku Klux were pretty active. I don't remember years especially, but I do remember there was a woman that was buying a house two blocks up the street from us and about time for her to move in, the Ku Klux burned a cross in front of her house. And we had some white friends that were nice enough to let us know what was going on and they were supposed to do something or other that night. I don't know what it was, but I remember my dad had us to go hide and some of the men got

clubs and so forth and went on up on the tracks to watch. Nothing happened, but, you know, you always think that all that happened in the South, but it happened right here in Champaign just like it did everyplace else.

High school, oh, it had its problems. I remember we wanted to take swimming and we weren't allowed to take swimming with the rest of the classes at all as a matter-of-fact. And my parents and two or three others decided that they wanted us to take swimming. Now that was back in the twenties, and sometimes we look at things now and think that people didn't do the things that they did do in order to get into different areas where we weren't supposed to be, so they said. But they went to the school and demanded that we be allowed to swim. Well it ended that we were swimming after school, after everybody else was through, but it was a beginning and it was something they felt proud of because they fought for it. And I guess my parents were determined that I would go to college.

So when they came along with these ideas that you shouldn't take English, or you shouldn't take this, that, and the other, Algebra or Geometry because you probably won't pass it, they made me take it. Of course, I didn't have any problems with them making me take it because I knew I was going to. . . And it never did occur to me not to go to college, that was just a part of growing up, that was what I was expected to do. So when they told me not to take it, or I shouldn't take those courses, why, my parents insisted that I had to take them and I took them. I wasn't any great student. I was an average student, but anyhow I passed them.

There were other things that we didn't do that I'm sorry we didn't, or I didn't get to, and that was in high school I didn't get into the choruses, or into any of the music. I

would like to have. Probably had I tried, I might have done it, but you get to the point where you don't see any blacks and you just suppose that's just not for you so you go on and do the next best thing. I was one of the - I was backward - I was a scared student because I didn't . . . I was afraid to hold up my hand, even if I knew the answer. You know I figured that they knew it so they answered it, and that probably didn't help my grades any, but that was just my backward way at that time. I didn't want to be that way and I fought hard against it.

After I got in to college I began to realize that I could change if I wanted to, and I did want to. But then, I had some of the same kinds of experiences at the University. I was in a class in English literature and the instructor in seating the class did it alphabetically, and there was two of us in there. The other girl's name was Barbee, and mine was Scott, so when she got to the "B's" she didn't call Barbee. So, she got to the "S's" she didn't call Scott, and after she'd seated everybody . . . You know, you were standing up around the wall and then as you were called you sat down, and there's the two of us left standing there, and then she put us together. So I told my dad about it. He was working at the University at the time. He told Mr. Lee, who was working in the president's office. Mr. Lee told the president. The president called the head of the college and called her in to talk to her about the teacher. And when she finally called us in she said she thought we wanted to sit together. Well, it wasn't necessary. We did know each other but we didn't have to sit together. But that was her answer for that, she thought we wanted to sit together. And then she started telling a tale that I have never been able to understand, something about she's always worried about being an angel because she couldn't play the harp. I never did figure

out what that had to with depriving us of, or embarrassing us by letting us stand there and I never did understand that. I worked hard enough to get a C out of the course. The other girl I think got a D. But it's that thing of having to forgive people for things like that and still sit in the class and get a decent grade out of them. That's rough. I finished in 1937, and I think the happiest person was my dad, because he was still working over there and to have his daughter graduate was really something with him. And it had been a struggle, too, for him because he played policy some time to get enough money to pay my tuition. And at that time tuition was $35, and we thought it was terrible when it went up to $50. What is it now?

Dallas Brown: Oh it's about $3,000 a year.

Erma Bridgewater: Yes, it really, $35 was a whole lot of money then. I worked some on Saturdays, and helped as much as I could. My mother did a few washings, so on. But when I finished, my first job was maid at the University, at Newman Hall, and it was under a black woman who was as mean as I don't know what. My mother was working there too at the time, but I had looked around trying to find a job and couldn't. At least I wasn't able to right away. But I worked there until I decided it was time to leave and try something else. I've never wanted to leave Champaign. I've always felt that I could find something here someway, somehow. I did go around a little bit with some people who lived down the street from us looking for work, in social work. Of course, my degree was in sociology. At that time there wasn't a school of social work and I just didn't find anything.

Until the Douglass Center or the - it wasn't really Douglass Center - it was Neighborhood House in the beginning. And it was under WPA. And that was when they changed it over. The city took over the Douglass . . . well, took over the program was when I was hired as recreation leader. But they had a full staff there then that was on WPA, and I was the only person there with a college degree and they sure made it tough for me for a while. You know how we do. It's "Who do you think you are?" and I lived on the other side of town, and they sent me home crying quite a bit in the beginning. For one thing, the woman that was director didn't . . . Well, I had no training in recreation and, as director, she didn't help me much. She sent me down to the swings to swing the kids which wasn't too bad because I was learning to get used to youngsters. But then I finally went to the office and told them I wasn't learning anything. They got after her and then she started teaching me crafts and so on.

But the rest of the staff was just as bad in that respect. So I finally decided that what I had to do was to say a few curse words here and there, and do a few things, you know, and say that I drank a little bit now and then in order to get in with them. It worked. It took a little time but it worked, and we finally got to where we got along swell together. But being the only employee on the city's payroll made it a little difficult. In time the director left and I continued to work there. At that time Douglass Center was a house in Douglass Park, and it was a six-room house. That's where I learned to make a fire in the furnace, because it had a furnace in the basement. There was a pretty good program there. We had a good outdoor program, baseball, softball. (Doorbell rings). (Pause).

Dallas Brown: You were telling me about how you learned to . .

Erma Bridgewater: Yes, make a fire in the furnace. Well, as I said, the program was a good one. It involved, especially the part in the park . . . We had a lot of elderly people there who played shuffleboard, checkers, and I'm not sure of my years, but the Chanute Field had there were a lot of soldiers from there who came down and we had special programs for them although there was that jealousy between the townspeople, you know youngsters, especially about the girls and soldiers. It was the 99th Squadron was up there, and at that time they were a good many of them college graduates and I think pilots, quite a few of them were pilots at that time too. There were dances out in the park, some tennis, not much. But, the program was pretty good.

I was sent to a conference in Dayton, Ohio, and that's when I got excited about a new center because I was there representing - I was sitting in a, I think it was about a $200,000 building in Dayton with all kinds of facilities and everything and representing a house a six-room house with thirteen broken windows. (Laughs). From there we went to visit a center in Lima, Ohio, and there were about - let's see, they had an $80,000-building, and I think there were about 500 blacks there, and they even had a swimming pool. And I figured, "Well if they can do that, then we ought to be able to do something." And I came back all inspired and talking, and my dad and Mr. Richard Edwards, Mr. Foxwell, a few of them formed a committee. Ray Hines. And began talking about a center. Also the Community Chest, which later became United Way, had some extra funds. Along with that, though, there was also this idea of not wanting

black soldiers to come into the USO that they had here, and so in that case they needed someplace for them to go.

We had left the house because the man wanted it back, and had gone to the American Legion Hall. They let us in there for a while. Then we went to a church basement, the CME church basement, and from there on to Lawhead School basement, so we were sort of going around. And that was where the Lawhead Servicemen Center was, in the Lawhead School basement. That turned out to be real nice. We had some nice programs there. One of the young men I saw in New York once who was active in one of our Christmas programs we had, also in some of the programs we had there at the center. And then from the Community Chest they had some surplus funds, and with that and the fact that there were some people who said if you raise a certain amount we'll give a certain amount. And I think it was . . .

Dallas Brown: Was that the War Chest?

Erma Bridgewater: Yes. They started that campaign for money on December 7 they bombed Japan, Hiroshima - yes, it was December 7, 1941, that which made it a good time for raising money, too. (Laughs). Then the center was built in 1945, and I was there as director for one month. My husband came back from the Navy and I decided I was ready to go home. By that time I had had the first child, because that was when I was still working. Let's see, that was before the Lawhead Servicemen Center. I was working in Lawhead School with the preschool program. I was pregnant, one of the little boys said, "Miss Scott you sure are getting fat." And then I

quit. I got married in 1941, he was born late in 1942, and then when my husband went to the Navy I went back to work. I went back to Douglass and worked until he came home, and then I quit from 1945 to 55, I think it was. I believe, because it was a ten-year span there when I didn't work, when I decided to quit and raise my children. However, I didn't work there but my dad and I served parties during that time.

Dallas Brown: You mean catering?

Erma Bridgewater: Catering, yes. He was very good at that, and it was something I could do and still stay at home. And I enjoyed working with him, too, and the money was pretty good - came in handy. Then I went back to work after the kids were all up. I hadn't really planned to but we wanted to do some work on the house and they asked me to come back so I went back. And it took me - having been away about ten years from young people - it took me about a month to get used to their slang and their dances and everything else. And I sat around for that month and watched them, and finally I learned some of the dances, and you know, if you can do that you're in. So I was in with them and I stayed there for about nine years. We had some good programs. I really enjoyed working with the youngsters. Of course, I had the girls . . . I went there as assistant director then, and we had drill teams. I taught sewing, cooking, I even learned to square dance so I could teach it. I think one of the greatest advantages to me in . . . [End Side A]

Erma Bridgewater: I was able to have my children come there after school, and I got to know what other kids were wearing, what they were doing, the slang. I even taught mine some of the dances, and I think it not only helped me, but it helped them a lot, too. It helped them to get used to other kids and to fit in, and they never had problems with getting along with the rest of them because they were in with them. They went to Washington School - my youngest child was my daughter - she went to Washington School, and, of course, she could come right there after school. The rest of them could come there. They got into basketball and track.

In fact, there was a time when I thought I didn't care too much about track. It seemed to - you know, just sitting around waiting for somebody's turn to get ready to run, but when I found out my youngest son could run track, boy I really got into it then. And then we got girls into track. And I really got involved in it and we took them, oh, as far as state meets in the JC Jamboree, and we had a lot of winners, too. That was one of the, really the most rewarding things I think I've had happen to me was in the work at Douglass Center. And as I see the kids - well, see them now as young men and women they still are anxious to come up and let me know the good things they're doing and that really gives you a real lift.

Let's see, I stayed there until 1964 I believe it was, as director part of that time. They decided they needed a man as director which was fine. I didn't have any quarrel with that. But then when they finally got him they cut my salary in order to pay his, and

I felt like that was asking a little bit too much, so I left. And I got a job then - let's see, I was 50 years old then, which is kind of old to go out looking for a job. So I went to the University and I either had too much education for some of their jobs, and not nearly enough for others, so I ended up at the Courier newspaper as a . . . what do you call it? . . . Oh fiddle sticks . . . Well, anyhow, proofreader. And that turned out to be a pretty good job, because I was it. You know, that was when they had to have one and I was it. It was interesting. The people who were working with me besides me were high school graduates and that part used to bug me to think that had I been a high school graduate I probably couldn't have gotten the job. But I stayed there until the Urban Renewal Program came into being. And Mr. James L. Williams asked me if I'd like to apply for relocation officer or assistant to him. So I did and I enjoyed that, too, because I had a chance to . . . . Having lived here all my life I knew a lot of the people and I had to sort of psych myself up with the job because it was a job where you go and tell people that they got to move and they've got to get out of their houses.

But I finally decided that what we were really doing was helping them live better, to live in better homes, and that was really what was happening. And I stayed there for three years, until the program was closed, and did a darn good job to be honest. According to HUD, they wrote letters complimenting us on the fact that we had, not only completed the job on time, but had done a good job in our relocation program. When that program was over we were expected to have been given jobs in the city, you know, we were separate from the city's program because we even had our offices across the street. But they found a place for everybody but they didn't find one for me, so I was out again.

I then went to Frances Nelson Health Center to some more work that I enjoyed, as community worker. I stayed there four years, and then they called me back. I had said I would never go back to be a city employee again, but Mr. Williams came along and waved a green flag in front of my nose. It was more than I had received when I was working there before, so I went back. And I'm still there, but they're about to do it to me again. They've changed - put us under planning, and this new director is, well, the planning director, because we had our own director. But he has resigned and she had decided that she would not have any acquisition relocation for the next year. So I think I will resign, too. She had offered me a part-time job, but a part-time job is also a temporary job and it's about . . . If I stayed another year I could retire. However, if I buy back some of the time that I had before, I could still leave with a pension which is what I think I'll do. But I don't think I'm through working yet. I'm going to find something else to do. And I've gone from start to finish.

Dallas Brown: Yes, that's a fascinating account, probably more than I had really anticipated, to be quite honest with you. But, tell me, do you consider yourself unusual? I have been in and around Champaign for years, and I think that you're one of the few people from blacks . . . in town I've met who has actually received - met one or two others - who received degrees from the University here.

Erma Bridgewater: Who are still living here?

Dallas Brown: Who are still living here, yes. That's correct.

Erma Bridgewater: We, and I'm guilty of that, too, we have sort of played down our degrees, and that sounds terrible probably, because there are other people here who have them: there's Bernice Brightwell, who worked, who's been here all her life, too. Taylor Thomas, I'm sure you've heard of him. And he was born here. His wife was born here. She has a degree from the University of Illinois. There are many others who have attended but I don't know why. I guess because we're all more or less feel like we're - no matter what you have, you know, we're still just people around here.

Dallas Brown: There's obviously another community of people who are not from here, but received degrees from the University or attended. By and large not to live in what would be characterized as the older black community here. Is there any tension that stems from that?

Erma Bridgewater: No, it's just that idea that we play it down. I don't whether I should say play it down, but there are a lot of people who don't know that I have a degree and people that I am close with and around. I don't know, it doesn't bother me. For one thing, my husband doesn't have one, and I have never - I guess that's another reason that I have - well I haven't even been too active with the sorority, with the graduate chapter of the sorority, because I never want to do anything that makes him feel uncomfortable. But I'm proud of the fact that I went, and it was a struggle. It's only when I get to talking about it that I realize it was a struggle. And at that time too, you

were given what they called colored "C's" and I've told my daughter since then I probably got some better grades, deserved some better grades than I got.

Dallas Brown: So a colored "C" would be equivalent to what?

Erma Bridgewater: A white "B" or "A."

Dallas Brown: In general I've heard people say that some people here kind of resent the fact that in the old days when there was housing segregation at the University, for example, that people here profited from that in a sense, and that students would rent rooms, and it was a certain amount . . . the inflow of capital that came through the University that got siphoned off into the black community and with full-scale integration that dried up, and some people were unhappy about that. What are your feelings on that?

Erma Bridgewater: Well I was unhappy about it because then there became a complete separation. You know, when I was coming up we knew students from the University as people in the community, you know, that we were all together. They all attended the same churches we did. They were a help to us. Our church had a Baraca class that was made up of mostly students from the University, and the lyceum was made up of students. Our choir had a lot of students from the University so that they were fully a part of the University. And that's one reason I have enjoyed the Culture Center, because they have sort of brought us back together again in some

ways, if it's no more than the black chorus. You know, the black chorus really did use some of the people from in the community, and then they have invited us into a lot of activities over there. And when the students began to live on campus it just, I don't know, it just separated us.

Dallas Brown: Do you think that there are other things that could be done that would ...

Erma Bridgewater: Bring us back together?

Dallas Brown: Sure.

Erma Bridgewater: I think the churches could be a little more active in it. Of course, I realize that one of the problems is that black churches hold longer. And maybe at meal time you're expected to be back at a certain time for meals. But, the churches could take care of that by serving meals at times. We've talked about it at Bethel, but we haven't done anything about it. I don't know, our programs the programs seem to be those that take us to the University, which is good because a lot of people probably would never go out there if it wasn't for some of the programs that they have out there. But we don't have programs in the community that bring the students to us, and I don't know.

Dallas Brown: Two-way thing.

Erma Bridgewater: Yes, because well there have been some awfully good programs that have taken us to Krannert and so on, and free, too, so that we couldn't have that for an excuse.

Dallas Brown: Have there been any efforts made to sort of woo black students to come and live in this part of town?

Erma Bridgewater: I think there's so much feeling no I don't think there have been any efforts. It was easier to stay in a dorm, because somebody was cleaning your room, you know, you were getting all those services. It was something they hadn't been used to and I can understand that. Just like I enjoy going someplace and going to a motel, where I couldn't before. I don't have to worry about anything. Where I may have had to go and visit my relatives I can go see them and go back to the hotel now. (Laughs).

Dallas Brown: Do you think it's the convenience that's ...

Erma Bridgewater: I think so.

Dallas Brown: What about in the area of - if you could pick out let's say three or four changes in the area of employment that have been striking during your lifetime for blacks in this community, what would you say they were?

Erma Bridgewater: One of them would be working on campus cooking and waiting tables, and that sort of thing. My grandmother on my mother's side was a cook on campus. In fact, that's what brought them to Champaign, because she was a widow with two girls and she came here too, and got a job on the campus cooking. That's one of the major changes I've seen. I don't know who does the cooking on campus now, but there certainly aren't as many that I know of. The fraternities and sororities had their own served meals, and I don't know whether they still do or not, maybe they do.

Dallas Brown: Yes they do.

Erma Bridgewater: Do they. And the students got their meals from waiting table. I ... and the men ... In fact, sometimes couples worked and lived on campus. I don't know what some of the other jobs might be that have changed. A lot of women worked in service, cleaning house and so forth. Now they have cleaning agencies who come in and do that sort of thing, some of them do. There were some of the more wealthy families on the west side of town that had people who worked for them, sometimes husbands and wives there too. But they became a little more skilled and different jobs. We've had more people working on campus in other kinds of jobs, some in foods, too.

But I was surprised in the study that I read the other day of the area up here from Crystal Lake over to Prospect, $30 million a year in this area and that area, and that seemed fantastic to me. Not a whole lot of them are home owners.

Dallas Brown: Thirty million in what, disposable income or?

Erma Bridgewater: Well, it didn't say exactly.

Dallas Brown: Well, was that gross?

Erma Bridgewater: Gross, yes.

Dallas Brown: So that much comes into the community?

Erma Bridgewater: That much is made here in the community, annually.

Dallas Brown: You can do quite a bit with that.

Erma Bridgewater: Yes, you can. That study was made in order to back up the idea of having a shopping center up this way. But with that much money I'm sure the white fathers are going to make sure that it keeps going where it's been going.

Dallas Brown: What about places like Kraft, and other employment opportunities beyond the University, are those relatively new developments? If so, what did people do who weren't associated with the University in the old days? Say before Kraft was located here. Are there types of alternatives, employment alternatives?

Erma Bridgewater: Oh, what did they do? Of course, I know what mine did, my dad did. But there were friends of theirs, who like I said, worked in the more wealthy families, as chauffeurs and ... Heck I don't know. I can't ... It was primarily labor, there were men, of course, who worked on the railroads, red caps. I know my brother worked on the IC Railroad for a while. It's all labor.

Dallas Brown: Do you remember whether there was much unemployment, in your recollections, say the employment picture for blacks in this town?

Erma Bridgewater: I didn't. I guess I didn't feel it. My dad had a steady job and, of course, during the Depression it was pretty rough, but they had the kind of jobs . . . See this isn't a factory town, it isn't like you know, something closes down and you're out of work, but the kind of work they were doing was steady work, because Mr. Charley still had to have his breakfast. (Laughs). And they, of course, worked two or three jobs just like they do now, because my dad worked at University and then still worked at Champaign Country Club. That hired quite a few as waiters, and there were other places, too, where they used black waiters. That was considered the thing then.

Dallas Brown: Were there any opportunities for blacks to learn skills, become electricians, or masons, or?

Erma Bridgewater: No. Not even masons. They usually came from the South.

Dallas Brown: With their skills?

Erma Bridgewater: Yes, with their skills. Although my grandpa was a hod carrier. You see, they did the labor part of it, the heavier part, but I don't, there wasn't too much of an opportunity to learn skill other than that.

Dallas Brown: Were blacks unionized?

Erma Bridgewater: No. We were talking the other day about the fact that there weren't too many that got pensions. I guess were just getting into that, because they didn't work on jobs where they could get a pension.

Dallas Brown: What did they do when they retired?

Erma Bridgewater: You just kept on working till you fell out or go live with some relatives or somebody to take care of you. They did hard work until they got sick enough and that was it.

Dallas Brown: Did that affect families in any way, did that make them closer, or did it strain the relations within families?

Erma Bridgewater: I think families were a lot closer then, than they are now. I think families are becoming closer because we've always taken in each other, you know,

because I remember my uncle got sick. He left Chicago and came down here, and he stayed with us until he died. My grandmother and grandfather lived with us, you know, with my mother and dad, and we just took care of each other. You're hard up, you go home. Elderly didn't go into housing, old folks home or that sort of thing. They stayed right with the family.

Dallas Brown: Well, actually I've got a long list of things I'd like to talk with you about, but I don't want to tire you out too much in one session.

Erma Bridgewater: Well, I'll agree with you on that.

Dallas Brown: I think it might be better to perhaps break at this point and resume another day.

Erma Bridgewater: All right, well, I've had time to think of a few more things. Okay, it's been nice thinking about things.

Dallas Brown: It's been very informative. It's certainly a pleasure for me to listen to you and to share your thoughts. Hopefully this will become part of a series of documents which would be available to the general community and perhaps everyone can share your experiences.

Erma Bridgewater: Would there be some way of tying them in together, is that part of the thinking? It would be a big job I admit.

Dallas Brown: Yes, it would require a lot of energy, but yes, sure, that's quite possible. That would be a simple matter. I mean, conceptually it's not very difficult. It's just a lot of physical laboring - logging in a lot of hours to do it, but you can look for patterns, and then write something that would look like a social history, and then use the case histories - life histories - to flesh it out, illustrate points that were stated. I think it would make a very nice book as a matter-of-fact.

Erma Bridgewater: I know a lot of students have done studies in this area, and I've often wondered what happened to them. Sometimes somebody else will come back for some of the same material and I've always been it was always white students there for a long time, and I've been so glad that we've had black students to start coming into the area and asking questions and so on, especially from urban planning. We've met them at work, and I enjoy working with them.

Dallas Brown: Well, thank you very much for your time this evening.