Estelle Merrifield

A Transcription of an Oral Interview

102 Bennett Avenue
Urbana, Illinois
August 11, 1983

Interviewed by
Patrick Tyler and
Melinda Roundtree

Champaign County Historical Archives
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Introduction

At the time of this interview, Mrs. Estelle Merrifield was working with Judge J.R. Delamar, and had been with the Champaign County Court System for some time. Mrs. Merrifield was born in Champaign in 1926.

The interview was conducted on August 11, 1983, at her office in the Traffic Court, 102 Bennett Avenue, Urbana. The interviewers are Patrick Tyler and Melinda Roundtree, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives.

Estelle Merrifield: Okay, I'll start with when we started school. I remember the first day we started this school and, of course, I was quite young, but we had, it was an integrated school. We went to Gregory School over on Columbia Street in Champaign. And there was quite a few Negroes there, because, I'd say at least fifteen of us, because there were some from West Champaign, what we call West Maple Street, in that area. And then the ones that lived on the west side of the railroad tracks, Illinois Central, they all went to Gregory School. There were two or three families off of First Street that went to Gregory School.

So I didn't really experience any prejudice or things like that in school, because the teachers, they let you work if you wanted to work, you could work, because you made the grade, you made the grade. You got the punishment, everybody got it. So,(laughs). And we had an excellent set of teachers over there. At time we didn't have any black teachers, but we had an excellent set of teachers.

And while I was in school we had a girl scout troop, a boy scout troop, and we were able to enter in the contests that went on, and whatnot. Quite a few of us won prizes and things. And then my mother and her friends Mrs. Hite, Margaret Hite's mother they started the girl scout troop. And one thing we weren't allowed to do, we didn't to go to the regular girl scout camp, 'til after the session closed, and then we were allowed to go to camp, oh, say, overnight or something like that out at Mahomet or someplace.

And as I got into junior high school, that's the first contact of large groups of Negroes, because everybody went into junior high. And we didn't really know the kids. We knew the kids from the other side of town, but we never were allowed to just run all

over town, so until I got to the junior high school when everyone got real close to everyone. We had a wonderful time, fit was a good childhood, fun. We played baseball. We had a girls baseball team. Ms. Wesley, at that time had a center. It was in a house on North 5th Street. And they taught cooking and sewing, and when you get out of school you'd go do that, at the seventh-, eighth-grade level sixth, seventh and eighth grade. We used to tap dance and put on performances. And the Elks Club, they would pay us to dance. There was what they call a community center type house on Washington Street. And we had an excellent teacher, a man who had been a professional during the Work Projects Administration, WPA, and he taught my sisters and I how to dance. And we had a neighbor, Mrs. Martin,that would design and make our costumes, so we picked up quite a bit of money doing things like that. We used to sing. Always sang. Mother encouraged us and all that stuff. Dad encouraged us, too.

So then when I got to junior high school, I decided I wanted to be a majorette, and the kids laughed at me, because they said they'd never had a majorette. We didn't call ourselves black, we called ourselves colored. I still call myself colored; I never did call myself black. Anyway, so I decided I'd try out for it. They said I couldn't do it. There was an elderly man we had moved up on North 5th Street by then and there was an elderly man that lived behind us. He wasn't that old, I called him elderly, he was only about forty-five or fifty. But he said he had learned to do that when he lived in Pennsylvania. And I said, "You teach me, I'll watch you." He said, "Okay." So, he taught me and as a result, I did, I got to be a majorette. I went to Champaign High School, and that was back in about 1942 or '43. And nobody believed I could do it, but I did it. (Laughs). And that I thought was really something.

We were in quite a few parades. We had a drill club that we used to march for the Elks, and the American Legion, and we traveled and toured quite a bit: Peoria, Champaign, Springfield, Chicago. Now we had the Masonic Lodges, and Court of Calanthe Lodges, and the Elks Lodges, and they encouraged the kids a lot. I mean they would back us. They would get our uniforms for us. There was a lot of things we did that the kids don't do now because everything seems to be diversified now.

If you had a problem, you went home and told your parents or you went to a minister, or you talked to one of your friends. You worked it out. You didn't go to the man to ask him for nothing. (Laughs.) You tried to do it yourself, you know what I mean. That's the vernacular that's used today. Back then you went next door to your neighbors. If you were hungry, and it was Depression time, the neighbors all pitched in and worked together everybody did.

And the thing I remember most I think, is the fact that we never had to lock a door. When it was hot weather, we didn't have air conditioning. We slept with all windows open and on the front porch, and not find it necessary to worry about it. And you didn't worry about it. They had a bunch of what we called hobos on the railroad. We lived right off the railroad when I was young. They would come over to the house, and if we had food, mother would feed them along with us. If we didn't have food, they said, "You guys go get us some vegetables, and we'll get the meat." (Laughs.) Of course, my mother, she didn't know we were sleeping around in the hobo jungle sleeping down there with them, and eating if we could, you know. But we never did without anything too much, because we raised chickens, and we raised food, and it was pretty much a community where everybody had a garden. We used to pick

dandelion greens up and down Bradley (Avenue), and my sisters and I used to pick them and sell them, and make three or four dollars on the weekend. Picking bushels and baskets of dandelions, cleaning them, and taking them to people's houses and selling them because they didn't want to pick them. You made a lot of money.

And Blanche Harris had a newspaper called the Illinois Times. And I've got some copies of the Illinois Times. I think we still have copies of those. They probably have some at the library, too. You don't have any?

Melinda Roundtree: No, we've been looking . . .

Patrick Tyler: They're on microfilm over at the U of I.

Estelle Merrifield: I think we have some copies, because my husband, my husband has copies of newspapers from way back. This . . . Ah, her husband recently owned a barbershop, Mary Lynn. She had a scrapbook, which she kept the achievements of the children in the community, and we found it after she passed. We have that scrapbook, but I'm sure he would never part with it or let it go out of his hands. (Laughs.) You know what I mean.

Well, to get back to where I was. As I got older we worked in Union High School. Most of the girls volunteered and worked in the Ration Board. The high school kids volunteered their services, and we'd get out of school. They'd pick us up on the bus and take us over to the Ration Board. It was over here in Urbana. And we would process the meat stamps, and the sugar stamps. Everybody had to have a

ration stamp to buy this and that the war had started. And my brothers, one went to the C.C.C. Camp, and from there into the service. The other brother went directly out of high school into 99th Pursuit Squad, and they were stationed at the base. That was a big change in Champaign.

Sports-wise, there were always a lot of athletes, but very few could make the basketball team. Harry Combes changed that when he became the coach at the University of Illinois. He had three boys lined up, and none of them had taken college prep courses, and couldn't go.

Melinda Roundtree: Is he black?

Estelle Merrifield: No, Harry Combes was white. No, you see, everything that happens when you're helped didn't always just the black people helping the black people. There's a lot of people around that helped black people, that aren't black. You know what I mean, they give you a chance. In fact, it was, oh, I don't know, I think that in fact that, with the exception of going to the theatre and I really didn't miss sitting in the other section either, because we had more where we were sitting. (Laughs). It wasn't like you sh, sh, sh, you know. But, that stopped.

When I was going to college, I went and sit-in and demonstrated at Kam's on campus. And that was long before they ever thought about demonstrations. Ramsey was still in college. He was going to college here. And my former husband was going to college here. He was on the football team, so we would go out. We would decide

we're going to Kam's or downtown to eat or something, and we'd all go sitting and we shouldn't have been doing it, but we did it anyway.

Actually, if you really want to do something, you don't have to have a lot of people, but just one or two, just decide what they want to do and just go 'head and do it. As long as it's not, no violence, and no argumentativeness. I mean if they say no, you can always ask, and you think you're going to be told no. This is what I was always taught years ago as for the next fella, "Don't think you're better, but you're always as good as, and do better." That was the philosophy that we were raised under. You can do it, if you think you can do it, do it! If there's an obstacle there, don't sit down and worry about the obstacle, figure out how to get around it. And so, that's the way we were raised. Excuse me, I have someone in the courtroom.

(Tape is turned off)

Estelle Merrifield: After we moved up off 5th Street, our house became a gathering place. We had parties from one house to the other house. Kids came over, my brother played the piano, my mother did. Their parents would come and sit on the front porch with mom and dad, and they'd talk. And we'd sit out and play cards, and we just had a good time. I mean, there were very few upheavals, the kind that you could think of.

There was always Poplar Street, I suppose, but most of us didn't go down on Poplar Street, unless we had a reason, and when we were young we didn't go down there at all. We knew a lot of people. We had a lot of friends that lived down there.

We'd go visit our friends. You know, because I mean, they just had one of those sections, it was like Negro businesses like they have now and the Blue Island, and those places. Of course, I guess now it isn't called Blue Island, it's called Larry's Place or something. On the whole, I really had a real good life around here. Frankly, I don't think the children today are having as much fun as we had. I think they're limited, really limited. Integration's a wonderful thing, but I think they've lost contact. I mean, our churches aren't quite the same either.

We used to have BYP with Salem at one hour, and we'd leave there and go down to Bethel to Allen Douglass League, and we'd leave there and go down to Pilgrim, and our choirs would sing down there all on one Sunday. And then the next Sunday, we might well, in the evening church service, everybody'd go to Mount Olive. You know, the kids just, we just went where we wanted to go, and it seemed to work out quite well, you know. And kids encouraged you, the other kids. If you try to do something, they weren't trying to knock you down, they'd try to help you do it. They would make fun at the beginning, but if they see you hell-bent and going ahead and doing something, then they would try to help you get it done, and they were really quite supportive, most of them. I just wish the kids today had that kind of contact with each other. I mean we've been hearing about little kids carrying knives, the type of thing I see in here. As you see, I can see a lot of things, but I'm not allowed to discuss them. (Laughs). Now let's go on to the next question, let's see. (She reads the question) Is that during what?

Patrick Tyler: Civil Rights Movement.

Estelle Merrifield: Well, everybody. . . The sixties. . . Well, I lived in Pennsylvania all during the fifties, and we ran into that type of thing. It seemed like out there, they were making little different type of progress than we did here. When I came back, I came back at the beginning of the sixties. I moved back to Champaign. And we reacted pretty much like anybody really. They had some marches downtown. Rev. Ramsey was here then. He was our minister then. This is years later from the time he was in college. And he and several others led some marches at Penney's and whatnot to integrate the stores and stuff like that, the jobs and things like that. When I lived in Pennsylvania. . . Can I help you? (A woman walks in the office, and tape is turned off).

Estelle Merrifield: All right, your next question you were asking about the Civil Rights. Okay to answer the question, "Did things open up more?" yes, they did. When I graduated from high school we went to work for the government in Chicago. They weren't any jobs in Champaign. You couldn't get a job in Champaign. I had taken secretarial training, and I was going to go into nurses' training, which I did go into nurses' training, and I finished two and one-half years. But then, I got married, the war was over, and the boy I was engaged to came back, and I quit nurses' training.

We went to Chicago. We took our civil service exams, before we graduated from high school. They were short secretarial people, and there was about eight or ten of us that left here together and went to Chicago to work with the Merchandise Mart, and at the Furniture Mart in Chicago, Treasury Division. There were quite a few

people that graduated from University from Champaign, but they left because there were no jobs here for them. I suppose you've already been told this, but this did happen. Maybe someone's already told you this before, but Dr. Nesbitt, and there were several teachers, and quite a few people that left town.

But after this, things did open up. I had a daughter that was just starting school in '63, I think it was in Urbana schools, it was sixty-three or sixty-four. Urbana schools were still all the blacks practically went to King, one or two went to Leal, but not many. And the schools were still segregated. Public housing was segregated. I lived in public housing. I lived in Dunbar Court when I first came back, because I couldn't get a place to stay. That's all that was available, unless you had the money to buy a house, and then you weren't allowed to buy it past . . . you had to buy on the north side of Goodwin, not Lincoln, Goodwin. And it got more segregated during the fifties, than it was I think back in the forties. Well, the segregation, I think broke up with the start of Martin Luther King with the Civil Rights Movement and whatnot. The University opened up. There were a lot of Negroes that went to the University here, and a lot of them graduated, and a lot of them are in very high places now. But the thing of it is, they couldn't do it in Champaign-Urbana, they had to leave this area to do it. You had to get in the big city, and a lot of us did.

Well, in the sixties when I came back, we had a black magistrate, Joe Summers. He had just been elected. He'd been a J.P. (Justice of the Peace), but they had changed the state statutes and whatnot, and they all had to be elected at that point. And I worked for him. I worked for night court. It was the only they've ever had in Champaign. I worked on days first, and then it went to night court. I was able to fall

back on what I had learned in high school, my shorthand and whatnot. I was able to fall back on that to get a job, because jobs were scarce, and it was kind of the Depression time. And I had been in line for full managership of Woolworths. They were picketing out front, and I was the assistant manager on the inside, and they didn't even know I was there, in Pennsylvania. But when Castro took over Cuba, we closed all the Woolworth stores and kicked the Americans out, and somebody got my job. They had all that seniority. (Laughs.) I got bumped, so I had to come home and make a living. I had three kids to support. So after I came back to Champaign, and I started in the court system.

Well, I worked at the bank full time. I worked as a night clerk. I think I was the first black employee at the bank, but they didn't pay enough money and I had three kids to support. And the county offered me more money if I'd come back and so I came back because they couldn't get anybody to take my place for Joe Summers.

They did away with the election magistrate, and they started the . . . it was the appointment of . . . at that time it was magistrate, and then they changed the name to associate judge. And I've been working in this capacity ever since, twenty-two years. I've been with the county twenty-two years. I worked with Sarah Lumpp fifteen, sixteen years, the whole time she was a judge. And then when Judge Delamar was appointed he asked me to work for him. And I said okay, so I'm working with him. He's quite a nice fella. So is very good judges. On the whole, I think that the people here get a pretty, a very fair … I mean, if you're sitting on one side, you might not think it's fair. You're sitting on the other side, and you know what the law is. You get a very fair shake around here, and they bend over backwards. It's not too bad. I don't know, I

think during the sixties we made a lot of progress, but I think it's reached the point now that it's kind of going backward a ways.

Maybe it's because it's the increase of the population, or the press of jobs or the state of turmoil within the country itself, but I don't think we're making as much progress. I think where we were the minority at one time, and Civil Rights was for the minority, at that time. We now have a lot of minorities. Everybody's jumped on the bandwagon as a minority. It's like at the post office. If they say, you know, you have to have a black. You don't even have to hire a black anymore. If they say we hired so many Mexicans, and South Americans. When you said minority before, you immediately thought of blacks, but now even the Jews consider themselves a minority and everybody does. Yes, that's making it a lot more difficult, a lot more difficult in getting jobs now.

And then we have job openings here, and I call up Parkland, call places and "Look, there's a job." Can't find anybody qualified to do it. Like you said you took shorthand in high school (talking to Melinda), take a refresher course, brush up on it. Keep yourself up-to-date.

Melinda Roundtree: Well, I won't be here after the end of this month.

Estelle Merrifield: Oh, You're leaving?

Melinda Roundtree: I'm going back to school. I go to school down South. I'm just here for the summer.

Estelle Merrifield: Oh, well, what school are you going to?

Melinda Roundtree: Tougaloo.

Estelle Merrifield: Tougaloo. My daughter graduated from Tennessee State.

Melinda Roundtree: Oh.

Estelle Merrifield: Well, hang in there, you got to do that. Now, let's see. I went to school through high school, two years of college, two and one-half years of nurses' training. I haven't graduated from anywhere. I really should've gone back, but by the time I was in a position to start to go back, I was married again and my children needed to go to school, and were putting them through school.

The first job I received, I started working when I was about 12 years old at a grocery store on North 5th Street, Gagliano's Grocery Store. We had just moved up there and she hired me to open the store in the morning, run the store, and come back in the evening and work until 11 o'clock at night. And I made $20 dollars a week and that was big money. (Laughs.)

Melinda Roundtree: What was the name of the store?

Estelle Merrifield: Gagliano's Grocery Store. Wait, no Peter Alagna's Grocery Store. Miss Alagna. Gagliano, I worked for them some, but that store came later. He had a small store too, but this one Miss Pete's store. They called her Miss Pete.

(She reads the questions) What type of people were there in the community where you lived? Good people. Most of us were all working class people. There were very few white-collar workers because there weren't any jobs. There were few teachers because they had integrated Lawhead School. Let me see, employment, well I think I've covered most of that, and clubs, lodges. I don't belong to anything now. I was on the Urbana CAC, Citizens Advisory Council. I've been on that.

And that was during the time that we were building Brookens (former junior high school that is now closed). And I helped raise funds to get Parkland out there because I thought Parkland was supposed to be a Technological School to teach people. It is to a point technological, but it's an extension of the University of Illinois just about now, most of it's Liberal Arts and Sciences. I wanted to go out there and brush up, so I can go back and finish, but I never did. However, I did do quite a few things. I think I've covered all the rest of it.

Melinda Roundtree: I have a question. Do you see young blacks today being motivated, educational-wise, to go on to higher education, more so now than in the past when you were growing up?

Estelle Merrifield: When I was growing up, there wasn't too much motivation toward that. I remember we were always taught to take college preparatory courses: "Get as

much under your belt as you can. You don't know how far you can go, so get prepared." But that was unusual, that was our parents pushing us. We had teachers that pushed us too, but that was at Gregory School, and the high school. But now, that wasn't true of most of the schools. That wasn't true at most of the schools. Most of the schools . . . I remember my husband telling me they called the kids in his principal at Thornburn over here, junior high school, they were in the eighth grade or ninth grade. He said, "We had a big flack because they say they're not letting any Negroes graduate from Urbana schools; let me assure you one thing, you're all going to pass, because I'm not going to listen to it." (Laughs.) And passed them all. That was back in the early forties.

Then later, he said when they got to high school they were calling the kids into an advisor to see what they wanted to become. And they didn't bother to call many in because, you can't be anything but a ditch digger anyway, and told him well, your dad's a barber, you might as well be a barber, so don't worry about going any further to school. He was a barber, a darn good one, pretty large shop, too. But that's the way they approached the thing, and it was a little different.

Now I don't think there's enough emphasis being put on the SAT test, because at Urbana High School, my daughter was coming out of Urbana High, but my sister hadn't been teaching in Champaign. I don't think that she would've known anything about the SAT test. The first time she took it, she was late getting there. It wasn't that important, nobody had said it was that important, 'til her grades came back. And all of a sudden, she discovered she couldn't enter college unless she got that SAT test up.

Luckily, she took it the first of the year and then she went back and took it again at the end of year, but only she was prepared for it the next time, and she made pretty good grades on it. You know, enough to get into college without any problems. But the first time she took it, I had been away from the school, and I hadn't been too active for about two or three years, and I really didn't pay much attention to it. I didn't know that much emphasis was being placed on it, but I think there's a lot of kids that should've gone to college, and could've gone to college, but they weren't prepared for the test. It wasn't that they were dumb. It's just the idea that it was like a lark to them. "Just another old test." They didn't realize the importance of it, and I don't think they stress it enough. They might now, but they didn't then. We didn't take those kind of tests when we were in high school. My final examination is in rhetoric and whatnot, was my entrance examination at the University. So, I guess it's about time. Is there anything, or any other questions that you want to ask? I don't know how much good this'll do you, but, okay, too bad I didn't record the first part.

Melinda Roundtree: That's okay.

Estelle Merrifield: If there's anything I can do to help you, I'll try.