

Janet Waller

A Transcription Of an Oral Interview

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Interviewed by:
Patrick Tyler and
Melinda Roundtree

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This interview is with Mrs. Janet Waller, a resident of the Champaign County Nursing Home in Urbana. Mrs. Waller retired as a housekeeper at the University of Illinois for a number of professors. She came to Champaign in 1927, and was born on August 24, 1890. This interview is being conducted on July 12, 1983, at the nursing home, located on East Main Street in Urbana. The interviewers are Patrick Tyler and Melinda Roundtree, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department.

Tyler: Okay, Mrs. Waller, we would like to know about your background, your early life, and the first thing we would like to know is your childhood, you know, as you were growing up.

Waller: When I was growing up? Well, I was growing up — oh I've got it now, Culpepper, Virginia, and I left there when I was three years old and went to California. I was put in a Catholic home out there, the Sisters of Charity, and I stayed there until I was seventeen years old. Then I got married, and then I traveled a good bit with my husband. He was a coal miner, Harry Waller. So then I lost my husband. He got killed in the coal mines in Ohio. So, I took out after I buried him, and just traveled, took the money and traveled around.

Tyler: Do you know what year he got killed?

Waller: What year? He was killed in 1922, in May of 1922.

Tyler: You had mentioned about the Catholic home in California.

Waller: I had went to this Catholic home, I was there until I was going on my 17th year, and this was in Beverly Hills, California, the Sisters of Charity. My uncle was the government man, and he put me there and I stayed there until I was seventeen. And I took a notion I wanted to see my mother. They let you work out, you know, the Catholics did, but you have to go back to the home at that

time. Go back to the home at night. So I got this job with [Deering and Palmer], and I stayed there to make enough money to help me to get back to Virginia, look for my mother. But my uncle didn't want me, he wouldn't help me, but anyhow, I done that, 'cause I wanted to see who she was and everything. So then, after I got there I didn't do anything — sat around with her awhile, and then I got married. Then I came back to Illinois. Oh, I don't know where all I've been in Illinois, and all around Illinois with my husband, because he was a coal miner. So then, I lost my husband, and I traveled the rest of the time. I had cousins up in New York, and that was the first place I went.

So, after that I _____ over here in Illinois, and I got a job with the editor of the *Courier*, took care of that family. I went and joined the Senior Citizens. I took care of sick people, and I've got plaques to show everything I've done. Even down to Nixon, President Nixon, I've got one from him, and from the Senior Citizens and from this home here (the Champaign County Nursing Home). And now they are trying to get one from Reagan. I don't want no more! So, now I'm here and I've done, I don't know what all I haven't done here. I've been here — it will be 19 years October 19th, right here in this home helping. So I've enjoyed my life in the county, taking care of people and children, 'cause I joined the Senior Citizens for that part. So, I think I've done pretty good. So, it's just two weeks from now, I'm 93 and I hope to be 105. I'll be 105. I say that because I had the dearest old lady when I came here. I took care of her. She was blind and she said, "You know, I'm going to see you before I die." And she had her nephew to put her in the hospital right here in the state. And she got her eyesight and the

nurse's son, he was a doctor, so he called me up. He says, "Come on over and see grandma." He didn't say what. They wouldn't take the eyeshield and put it back on, then they put to see when she wanted to take those bowls off her eyes so I could see her. She said, "Thank God, you're the prettiest thing I've been thinking about." Just like that, she talked awful coarse. Then I just went around helping here. So then I went and got married and then I come here.

Tyler: What year did you come here?

Waller: Huh?

Tyler: What year did you come here?

Waller: I came here in 1970.

Tyler: You came to Champaign-Urbana . . .

Waller: Oh no, I came to Champaign-Urbana in 1950 . . . Let's see, what year did I come? 1927, I guess it was. I'm not sure, but I think it's in between '30 and '27. But that's when I came here, because I had worked for this man that was in the *Courier* and took care of children here, before I ever come out here, and I came out here in 1970.

Tyler: To the nursing home?

Waller: In this home.

Tyler: What brought you to Champaign-Urbana?

Waller: What brought me? Just traveling. (Laughs.) I had the money and I didn't have nothing else to do.

Tyler: Could you tell us, if you can remember, where did you live when you first came?

Waller: Where did I live in Urbana? The first time I came here and I went back, did I live on Washington? No, I didn't live on Washington Street. Oh, my goodness, that is off of my mind, I can't think about it, but then years after it, I got a home right here. The Carle Hospital, the little home. And the man wouldn't sell it to me, because he wanted to charge me more for it, but, the railroad owned it, and they told me, if I could get the lease — he was leasing the property, you know, — if I could've got the lease from Mr. _____, that I could have the place. But, I stayed there and took in roomers, and then I got sick. And the professors all while I was in, the professors at the university and their family, and they just said now, you're not going to stay here by yourself. Where the Carle Hospital is, the railroad side, you know there on Clark and Coler. The little

house, _____, I can show it to you, where I lived. They thought it was too dangerous. So I said, well, I've been working around that county home, anyhow, trying to help them to finish this place up. I told three professors, I said, "Oh, you might as well take me out there, 'cause I ain't going to take in no more roomers or nothing." (Laughs.) So, that was the end of my Clark Street. So, I think I've had a busy day. Oh, the university's got the history of a professor made that out when I had good sense. (Laughs.) But, I lose track of names, is the hardest thing nowadays. People tell me right here, well, Janet, so-and-so passed away. Well, I'll have to think about it a long time before I can place them. Now, that's the only thing, but I don't want to lose my mind, dear Lord, please don't. So, I'm all right, nothing's wrong with me, only mean now and then, but happy. Try to make everybody happy, I love everybody happy, and I'm the only colored woman here. You know, I have a heck of a time with these people _____. I have to show my you know what, my Irish or my Negro sometimes. (Laughs.) Oh, I have a good time. I just pass 'em up and go on and say, "So here's my birthday." I was so proud, I don't know how . . . I've got so many cards and money from people I've forgot, but I've had 'em in my book, you know, and I haven't even answered the cards. I'm surprised to see the people that come out to see me, the Senior Citizens, and the professors and their wives, and all of 'em like that. So, I'm happy. If I can make everybody else happy. But, when I can't make 'em happy, I get in my room and stay there, 'cause I might say something ain't very good.

Tyler: Could you tell us, how was it working for the professors, and . .

Waller: Huh?

Tyler: How was it working for the professors and . . .

Waller: Oh, I took care of professor . . . Oh, I'll tell you in a minute. He was over here this evening, I took care of their people. You see what I mean, mothers and well, Professor Huegy . . . I took care of four of their parents, their people . . . took care of them in their homes. You know, going in there, back and forth and take care of them, then go someplace else. Same way, and I'll tell you the one that helped me too, darling Mr. Parker, and his dearly wife — the undertaker. Yes sir. He's gone now, yes, he's gone, but the son, he's still, he's in Springfield. Yes, I told him he has to put me away, I got my grave and everything's paid for. The funniest thing happened last year, I had my tombstone — it ain't funny, but it's laughable too — the way I expressed it you know, to several people, they tease me. I always wanted my body under a tree, shady, something shady. So I went out there two years ago, Professor Huegy and Irene and them, we went out there and they had buried some man right kind of catty-corner from me. So I told them, I said, "You better get that man back out of my grave!" (Laughs.) Now you see, just took up that much and I can't, seems like to me, his name was Caldwell. Is there any Caldwell back, rings, that from Champaign?

Tyler: Yes.

Waller: Is there? I don't know how old he was, anyhow, he won't hurt me. I said, just so he hasn't got his feet in my face, I don't care. (Laughs.) So, we went out there this past Decoration Day, you know, they had filled it and they had cut some of the tree off and there was enough room to put me in there. But, whoever this man is, I don't know him. Must be a stranger. Oh, my, yes, I've had a lot of fun about that, but they looked up after this and said, "You had enough room to put you under that tree." Well, if I can make you happy, I'm not going to make . . . I see you getting tired of me, I'll let you alone and I'll tell you, now don't you bother me. He'll tell you too. You knew him, didn't you? (referring to Mr. King sitting in the chapel with us). Yes, he used to have a church there in Champaign. Were you born and raised in the county? (talking to Melinda).

Roundtree: Yes ma'am.

Waller: Don't you remember? He preached.

Roundtree: King. What was the name? Do you remember the name of the church? The name of the church?

Waller: (Talking to Mr. King) What was the name of your church? Was it Bethel? Is that the church? What was the name of the church?

Tyler: Mrs. Waller, we want to ask you another question. How was the community when you first came here? The people?

Waller: The people? Well, I fell in good. I'll tell you one thing. I'm a Catholic and that's the first thing I have, you know, I'll go to. Well, they all fell to me, you know, and helped me along. You see what I mean? Well, we had so many people I helped. Do you know Helen Johnson? Helen Johnson and Snapper Johnson. Snapper just died, he used to come out and see me all the time. I took care of all of them children of his when he was in the Navy. Do you remember Snapper Johnson? Helen Johnson?

Tyler: I think I've heard of the name.

Waller: Well, you heard . . . Well, they took him in the Navy and he had these little ones. Well, that's the way I do 'em amongst our people and the white people the same way, and help. Yes, and those girls are wonderful. I'm so proud of those children of Snapper Johnson, Helen. Well, he come out to see me all of the time. He's got a daughter that lives out here on . . . a lane here, what, do you? Oh, it's a lane that goes around.

Tyler: You talking about a street back here?

Waller: Cottage Grove. Cottage. Yes, his daughter owns a place out there, he stayed with her until he died. He was just buried, I couldn't get to go, it was so bad. You see, I'm subject to asthma and I can't get out it it's damp.

_____. So he come over to see me, it was just three weeks before he, it was about six weeks before he passed away. He used to come over in the morning to see me. So, you see, I've had a lovely life, I ain't got nothing to complain about. And all these people had come and give me money to finish this place up. This place wasn't finished when I came here. The new part, they finished this in 1970.

Tyler: When you came here and you know any of the professors, did you go to the U of I?

Waller: Professors? Yes! There's Huegy and [Preston] and [Kitters] and an old man died here the other day, last week and I didn't get to go to that funeral either. Professor, (pauses) oh, ain't that fellow . . . They buried him Thursday. From the university.

Mr. Benton: Talking about Mr. Jess.

Waller: Mr. who?

Benton: Jess. He died, he'll be dead a week this coming Friday.

Waller: Who?

Benton: Mr. Jess.

Waller: Jess. I don't know no Jess, because I almost knew all the, you know, the older professors. Huegy.

Tyler: You, knowing all of these professors, did you get any education at the university? Did you go to any classes at the university to get . . .

Waller: No, I never went to no school but the Catholic. That's what little education I've got. I got it from Catholic school. That was out in California and I ain't been to school since. But I read a lot and I go to different, you know, if they have somebody teaching something, I'll go. And I love reading, I read anything. I can, you know, sit down and converse with anybody.

Roundtree: What kind of things have you read recently?

Waller: What?

Roundtree: What kind of things have you read recently?

Waller: Well, I'm reading now . . . I'll tell you what I'm reading, I'm trying to get up with *Ebony*. You know that Negro magazine. 'Cause a fellow that I know personal, and I'm trying to find out where he's at. Him and a Catholic priest. Young, he was just a young boy when I was in California, just like me then and he came to see me and brought me some more history, you know, that the Catholics put out the book. And they had sent him someplace and Father here, he came, he's trying to locate him. He come by and see me. And this other young man — I want to find out where they are and see how they look. Oh, I seen the one that came, he went to Africa, that kid always wanted to go to Africa. My professor Huegy's grandkid he's walking, he's getting a what do you call it? The government gives them?

Tyler: A grant?

Waller: Grant. And every country he gets to he has to some way let the United States know where he's located. That's Professor Huegy's grandchild, and I raised that boy. He wants to get to Africa so bad. But this one is on his way to Africa. He stopped at my home when he knew that I was in Virginia, but I used to talk about Staunton, Virginia, you know, 'cause of my people always have lived, always lived there in Staunton, but I wasn't born there. And he wanted to go down and see how the college was, and he did. Before he left. He's in Australia now. So, you see, I've been, I try to keep up with all of them kids. And I've got the swellest boy; he played baseball, uh, basketball and graduated from high

school here in Urbana. Daisy, oh, what's Daisy's name? We used to run a children's home out on . . . Daisy. What's Daisy's name? What's that home that, it's for little colored children, but they tell me they it turned into something else. We started that for the little children. I put a lot of money in that, trying to fix it up to that old building. Daisy, Daisy, Daisy, Daisy.

Roundtree: Do you remember where it was? The street it was on? The home?

Waller: Oh, it's up in the country — I think the country — it's out near the, it's a park there, too.

Roundtree: It's in Urbana?

Waller: In Urbana. What is that Negro home out there? I went to the opening of something they had not long ago. Oh! My mind, oh . . . Well, anyhow, her boy, her grandson graduated from basketball and he graduated last year and the sister graduated this year. His sister did.

Tyler: He graduated last year? From Urbana High School?

Waller: Oh, yes.

Tyler: I graduated from Urbana High School.

Waller: Well, he played baseball, basketball, you know him? He graduated this past year. The sister to him. Isn't that silly? You know who I mean though. He played basketball. Oh, he's a good basketball player on the team. He got up there that night and I just screamed when I seen him. So he got, ah, what do you call it? They sent him to California, and I don't know why he's back out here again. I don't know what happened to him.

Tyler: You talking about Peacock? Tyke Peacock?

Waller: No, not the Peacocks.

Roundtree: No, he graduated years before now.

Waller: He's a tall boy, and he played basketball. Oh, a good basketball player.

Roundtree: And, you said he went to California?

Waller: And he went to California. Yes, he got a scholarship to go out there, the little devil and he just come back.

Roundtree: It wasn't Jeff Williams was it? Williams?

Waller: No, it wasn't Williams. Ain't that crazy the little kids? I had all of them. Mr. Dobbs' grand, do you remember old man Dobbs? He had those children and him and his wife parted. Now he's down South, now. Well, I helped them children and he was the grandchild though. And when he, last year, year before last now, because the girl graduated this year from the Urbana High School. Well, you live in Champaign, though don't you?

Tyler: I live in Urbana.

Waller: Urbana. Now whose the girl that graduated? She called me up and wanted some money. Well, I started them all out with \$25 and every other week, I'll give them so much to put in the Busey Bank, them children. And this little boy, he's back here they tell me. Now you know who I mean? The great basketball player.

Tyler: Brian [Mitchell]?

Waller: Right.

Roundtree: I thought, that's why I said no, because he graduated with me, that's why I said no, it couldn't be Brian.

Waller: You remember Brian?

Roundtree: Yes, he graduated two years ago with me, because I went to school with him.

Waller: Well, those are my children. I love them and then the girl. Now what's the girl's name, his sister?

Roundtree: I don't know his sister.

Waller: Well, she goes to high, she graduated this year, from high school, Urbana High School, 'cause she loves her grandma to give her some money. Oh, she's pretty. Yes, I had them, oh, I'm crazy about them children. Well, I took all I could especially if their mother and father didn't have it, you know. But I would love to see Brian and they said he was back here last week.

Tyler: I don't know. I think he left again.

Waller: I'd love to see him.

Tyler: Could you tell us a little about — you had started some organizations and clubs — could you tell us about some of them?

Waller: He started something like that?

Tyler: No, you.

Waller: Me?

Tyler: Yes. You was talking about the children's home.

Waller: What is that children's home? It's out on by high — no, it ain't no highway. I went out there when Mrs. Hines, you know they just buried her. Mrs. Hines and I, we went out there and I put the money in the drawers upstairs and paid the man to fix the stairways, so the kids wouldn't fall. She was having 'em, Daisy was having them sleep up in the loft, you know. Well, the state had split the door there, so I had the carpenter go out there and put a good door on it and fix it up. You know where it's at, I'm sure. They had a reunion or something out there for Mrs. Hines, poor darling. She was buried a couple of weeks ago.

Tyler: I can't think of the name of it.

Waller: Well, now you're like I am. The names, I can see them, they worked hard.

Roundtree: So, you helped start it?

Waller: Huh?

Roundtree: You helped start the home?

Waller: Yes.

Tyler: What year?

Waller: She brought three of hers, some relatives that's related to her, and that's the way we started. And her husband, he also went. She took these children in after they got it started and who took Mrs. — the woman took it. They went to New York because her husband got a good position overseas and took those three children overseas, and he died. Oh, is that terrible? And so, after he died, she brought the children — she just had those two little girls, the one girl, this one that just graduated, and they didn't like it overseas. Wherever the government, he was in a government position. Oh, I can see that man now.

Tyler: Do you remember what year you started the home?

Waller: No, I don't. I'm trying to figure what I was just thinking about, where was I living. I wasn't living down there on Clark Street though. I was living up there, up near where this fellow runs the laundry, his mother runs the laundry.

Roundtree: Shelton Laundry?

Waller: Huh?

Roundtree: Shelton Laundry?

Waller: Shelton, Shelton.

Roundtree: Shelton Laundry.

Waller: I was living up there and I was trying to figure the house I was living in there.

Tyler: Was it on Goodwin or Eads?

Waller: Huh?

Tyler: What street was it on?

Waller: I couldn't tell you the street, it was Urbana. I mean where the colored people lived. But you know where the mother runs the laundry.

Roundtree: Yes. It was near there?

Waller: Huh?

Tyler: Right across the street?

Waller: Huh?

[End Side A]

Janet Waller, Oral Interview

SIDE B

Waller: I have loved every minute of it and now they sat me down and I don't like it. I used to go around and see all the _____. They don't want me to. They think I've done enough walking, and the weather has been so bad. See, I'm just subject to the asthma and I get stopped up and I haven't been out but once. I've been walking out and the moisture just coming out. Well, I hope I done something but I been everybody's helper. Oh, they got a mess over in the university about me. That's where you should've went and maybe've got some sense out of it.

Tyler: Well, we'll go over there too. I wanted to ask you, though, about, how was life here during the war?

Waller: During the war. Oh, the war. I wasn't out here.

Tyler: You wasn't here in World War II? In the forties?

Waller: No. I wasn't out here. Because I tell you . . .

Tyler: Were you here in Champaign?

Waller: I was in Champaign. That was when my husband was drafted, you know. And my husband took me to Wheeling, West Virginia, to my people — my uncle lived there and his family. So, I wasn't here, I went down there, but when we got down there, the armistice was signed. The very day we arrived in Wheeling. See, he was notified, because he was an Ohio boy, from Highland, Ohio, and he was to the age that he was drafted. So, he thought well, he'd take me all around to see my people, before he had to go. When we got there, on the 18th day, everything was going up. Well then, we spent money and sold our little home. I had chickens and ducks and everything. _____ so he just decided he's going in the coal mine.

Tyler: How was life here during the sixties, during the Martin Luther King movement, the civil rights movement?

Waller: Oh, there wasn't much talk around with me. You talking about when what's-his-name was killed?

Tyler: Martin Luther King.

Waller: Martin Luther King. No, I wouldn't listen, because I couldn't stand it. You know I knew him, I didn't want nobody to call his name, a white person, I mean. I feel sorry because we got so many Southern people at that time. We had a lot of Southerners up here. He was getting too high, you know, and they

all fought. He'd be president or something, you know, all that ignorant stuff. You get it, you know, out of a poor class. I didn't have any fighting or nothing, you know arguments, because I didn't stay around anybody that argued about it.

Tyler: What do you think now about — you heard of the Reverend Jesse Jackson?

Waller: Yes, I know him.

Tyler: What do you think about him running for president?

Waller: President — give him a chance. I wish I could vote for him — give him a chance.

Tyler: You can vote, can't you?

Waller: Huh?

Tyler: You can vote can't you?

Waller: Sure, I can vote. (Laughs.) Ninety-three years up there. They'd throw me out though, but sure let him try. That's what's going to happen, I hope.

That's why I say *Ebony*, you know the Negro magazine, I've ordered it. (Laughs.)

Now, you've hit the spot, I want to see how that's coming out. The time's coming and I think before I die that we're going to have our big men and women in good positions.

Tyler: Okay, Mrs. Waller, can you remember back during the thirties, forties, how was the restaurants and stuff here in Champaign-Urbana, you know, was it segregated or, you know, separated, blacks and whites?

Waller: No, not around where I was at. White people would serve you if you treat _____ those rough ones get in there. Look what they're doing now — what's the matter — that dope is ruining our colored boys. That's terrible.

Tyler: What do you think about crime today? Is it worse than it was?

Waller: It is, I'll tell you why. This cigarettes, and this dope — our boys and girls are getting it from the younger, 'cause they're mixing schools, they're mixing churches, and this white boy, he takes it like he loves you and there he goes someplace and gets a whole lot of junk. You're out of your head before you know it. That's the trouble — it's the dope! It's the dope, because our boys wouldn't — it's worse on them, than it was in my time. No. Because you know in my days, the white boys and the colored boys never'd make so much, you understand that? You see, but now it's the dope and they have these boys selling it for them, the colored boys now. And they have these big parties so

these colored boys can get in with these white gals. You understand what I mean? And the poor nigger, he'll just figure out, you know, he go and do like the other fella. Well, he'll get jealous, or somebody, the white boy, will get jealous and there they all get full of that stuff. That's why it's never going to be any better until they find the people that manufactured it. I'm afraid, but I hope it does, because I've never seen so many girls smoke cigarettes. And here, here, they smoke like they're mad, have to have a cigarette before they eat.

Tyler: Can you think of any other changes that occurred since you first came here?

Waller: Oh, I doubt it. I tell you . . .

Tyler: You about tired now?

Waller: I doubt it on account of the officials, older ones smoke and they'll give them a light, you know.

Roundtree: You said that, well, in the past the black adults, they didn't help the young people. You think they're helping them more now?

Waller: I think they are. I think our older, not older, but the middle class of people are trying their best to organize, you know, get them all together. You

know, we got two Negro girls here, are wonderful, and if they just have a lot of them like that, to entertain them, you know. Just have a little concert, not these jumbo games — the dancing and fighting — I don't mean that. Just get the class together and try to explain. You look at the white folks, see, and they're just worse than our colored boys and girls were. 'Cause you see, they just take these girls out and ravish them, and kill them, they don't stop, but the girls they start their own women. Boys never tried anything like that. See? I think there's going to come a time when our people, our generation, your generation, can see where the fault lies. Not have too much faith in this gang, the smoke, and, I think I'm praying for that. Yes, I tell you, it's sickening. It's really sickening. 'Cause these young kids don't. And they gang up on them, if you ain't from the same crowd. Oh, I think the Lord's going to help the older people to show them something. Well, what are you taking in school? Don't you go to the university yet?

Tyler: No, ma'am, I'm in the Air Force.

Waller: The Air Force. Oh. Well, well, you're not away from home yet?

Tyler: I won't leave 'til December.

Waller: God go with you honey. Yes, make it. And what you _____ nice husband, My uncle was in the cavalry, he was a doctor, Dr. _____ Rice. You should sometimes come to see me, to see what all the stuff I got on my walls.

(Tape was turned off, then turned back on.) (She was going to see a woman in Champaign who called herself a fortune-teller.) She told me, she said, "Janet, I'm going to tell you, now you go and watch one house, and they'll be dragging a whole lot of things in, new things." So, I — and supposed to be a good friend of mine — oh, just 200 and some dollars. And I just went to her, just, you know curiosity, 'cause I didn't believe in that fortune-telling, but I wanted to know. She said, "go right straight there," this party, she said was in your home, and ate lunch with you, and you had somebody knock. She told me so straight, you know, and I don't know. She was — white people just stayed in her house all the time, and she's dead too. My, my, I didn't know that. I've been so busy. Thinking about something else. (Laughs.) Some people die so fast. Well, girls and boys, you have a good time. Won't you stay for something to eat?

Roundtree: No, thank you. I need to stop eating. (Laughs.)

Waller: Oh, don't you come here giving me that.