

William Miller

A Transcription of an Oral Interview

714 Tawney Court
Champaign, Illinois
August 23, 1983

Interviewed by
Patrick Tyler
Melinda Roundtree

Champaign County Historical Archives
Urbana, Illinois
2001

Introduction

This interview is with Mr. William Miller. Mr. Miller came to Champaign in April of 1941 after working in Indianapolis, Indiana, and Springfield, Illinois. Mr. Miller is one of the first residents of the Carver Park Addition, which was established by a group of blacks in 1950. Mr. Miller has retired from Walgreens after working there for thirty years; however, he holds a part-time job at the car wash on University Avenue in Champaign.

This interview is being conducted on August 23, 1983, at the home of Mr. Miller, 714 Tawney Court, Champaign. The interviewers are Patrick Tyler and Melinda Roundtree, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department.

Miller: [I was born] in Saline County, in Carrier Mills, Illinois, July 7, 1913. That's where I was born and raised at. And I left there in '30 during the Depression. I went to Indianapolis and stayed from '30 to '36. I went back home and stayed the latter part of '36, and then went back to Indianapolis and worked till '39. I left there in '39 and went to Springfield and stayed from '39 to '41 and I stayed here in '41, in April '41, and I've been here ever since. Got married here once then I remarried again, and bought this home. (Laughs.) You don't want to know about how many cars and things and all that I bought, so, that's, that's not particular.

Tyler: Well, where'd you live when you first came to Champaign?

Miller: When I first came to Champaign, I lived out on Grove Street. The house is torn down now, but I lived with the Hales. But I heard, the fella, that my good friend of mine, he's dead, too. In fact, the whole family is dead except two, and that was the Hales. Bobby, the oldest one that's living now, I think are two. I don't know how many of the Hales is living. But anyway, it was a bunch of them and that's where I lived there first until I got married and then I moved over on Grove Street and stayed with one of the girls, the Hales girls, Katie Jordan at the time. Then I moved from there over on, farther on Grove Street, right where Douglass Center, the old Douglass Center used to be at. It used to be right behind the Hamiltons, then I moved from there after my wife and I separated. And in '46, I imagine, my wife I have now, when we moved, we lived at 404 East

Park Street, with Harvey Johnson, Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Johnson, which is Maggie Johnson now. Then I bought here in '49, and I've been here ever since.

Tyler: What made you come to Champaign?

Miller: Well. (Laughs.) I don't know. I heard a lot about it when I was in Springfield. Everybody in Springfield said, "Let's go to Champaign." They'd just come to Champaign. I never did come to Champaign, so after my friend coaxed me, why, I come to Champaign and got a job at White Heath, working for a rich lawyer, Ray Dobbins. And I worked out there till '42 and I, from '41 to '42. Forty-three I worked at Chanute Field. First, I started in the Quarter Master Restaurant up there they had, then I left there and I went to the _____ Warehouse. Then in '43, '42 and '43 is when the war started, when they brought the Wacs in, and that's when I came back to Champaign.

Then I worked up to Clifford and Jacobs from '43 to '46. From '46 to '75, I worked for Sigma Nu, and Walgreens together. In '75, I retired from Walgreens. Now I'm retired, and I work part time down here at the car wash. The Auto Bath Car Wash, and that's all of that.

Tyler: When you first moved here, how was the black community?

Miller: Well, when I first moved here, it was more like, I don't know, it was a sociable thing. You could go anywhere you wanted to go. You could visit a lot of

people. You could have a good time and all, all at one time. People just got so they got more independent — they just didn't want to associate. We used to could go to anybody's house on Christmas and have a good time, but you don't do that no more. And now after they had the gangs, why, it's bad. You can't even . . . well, it's broke up, but you got to be very careful when you leave home. Because if you don't, somebody will break in your house or something like that. So, it's a lot different, I'll tell you that. It's much different than it was when I came here in '41. I wouldn't chance it. That's . . . (Laughs.) I just don't chance it, with a lot of them people. I know a lot of people in Champaign, but as far as associating with them, I be friendly and that's it and go on. If you want to live, I'll say that. But if you don't, why, you get out there with them. Either stay home and live, or get out there and get shot. It's one of the two, so I stay at home. (Laughs.) It's just like that.

Roundtree: How were the job opportunities when you first came to Champaign for blacks?

Miller: Well, when I first came here. The only thing I could say, was then, was the fraternity houses, and they was pretty good. 'Cause I worked at Clifford and Jacobs for a long time and made good money. Then, after that, why, then I went out to Sigma Nu, and I wasn't making the money there that I made up there. I could make up there then, every week or two, I was making anywhere from \$250 to \$350, and like that a week. And then I went out to Sigma Nu, and make \$25 a

week. A big change. And then I was in Indianapolis, no, South Bend, Indiana, South Bend, Indiana, in '47. It just wasn't no work. You couldn't even get on there, draw your compensation or nothing like that. You couldn't get nothing, and in Indianapolis, you wasn't working, you'd have to pay \$10, to get a job, you'd have to pay \$10 to the Social Security, to the employment office for a job. And then when you get a job, you have to go back and pay them half of what — that \$10 back and some of what you make a week. And I worked then in Indianapolis. I worked and made fifty cents a day, and then after that they started paying me fifty cents an hour. I liked it, because I wasn't doing nothing. Dressed up everyday, wear my tie and collar, suit. Boss over a bunch of guys, and we would take a car, and if you had to go to Kokomo or New Castle, or wherever, in Indiana, and bring in a new car, I was the man who'd go tell them to give me the list of cars and who to take, and I'd take them. _____.

Back then during the Depression, I worked for, when I started working, I was eleven years old, eleven years old, shucked corn from 4 o'clock in the morning till 7 o'clock at night, two cents a bushel. That, you wouldn't understand now. (Laughs.) And worked different jobs, fifty cents a day. Bailed hay all day, from sunup to sundown, fifty cents a day. That was during the Depression. Then go get, like where here you get aid, you get \$300 or \$400 or more. All we'd get then, we go take a sack, and where you pay, oh anywhere from 89 cents to more for a loaf of bread, you could get a loaf of bread then for five cents. You'd get five pounds of sugar for fifteen cents. All that was cheap. You'd take a bag and bring home what you could get at a store for thirty or forty dollars. It was just give

to you. It's a big change, I'll say that. Now since I've retired, I don't regret it, I enjoy it. So, if I don't have it made now, it's just my bad luck. In fact, I think I got what I want. I got my home, I got my car paid for, I got my daughter, grandson, a good son-in-law, I got nothing to worry about. A good wife. I've bought everything I wanted. This is my sixth car, and I'm thinking about buying another. (Laughs.) If I could get what I wanted, I'd buy it, but other than that, I'm doing all right.

Tyler: How was life here during World War II?

Miller: Well, I didn't have to go. I went to Peoria twice. Each time I went, they sent me back, and put me at 4-F. 'Cause see, when I was a young kid, oh I guess I was about 9 or 11 years old, I got my hand shot off, finger shot off. And, then after that, I got in a car wreck, and that was in '35. And I had a couple _____ cut in my right ankle, half in two. I got that scar right across here (referring to his forehead). And then I got in another car wreck, and got that one right across there, in the same place, and almost got my _____ cut half in two in the same foot. But, altogether, I guess the Lord's with me. I'm just a lucky man, to be here, I mean to be living. That's just about me, just about me, so I enjoy being up here.

In fact, when I came to Champaign, I didn't come to stay. Champaign was, just to me, it wasn't what I wanted. And when I left home, I told my mother I was going to come here and I was going to stay one month, and then I was going

from here to New York. I was going to stay two months. And, after two months was up, I was going to California, and that's where I was going to make my home, in California. I wouldn't have been here today if I could've got out of here. But instead, I come here and got married, and I haven't left. Once you get tied up, you ain't going to say break up and go, you gonna stay where you at. So since I been here, life is just what you make it. If you want to make a happy life, you can do that. If you want to make a sorry life out of it, you can do that. If a companion is what you want, and she enjoys what you want, you can make a life out of it, but other than that, you just live one day to the other and go on.

I've enjoyed life up to now, and I go to church every Sunday. It just keeps me busy running back and forth to church, which I've been down there this morning doing a lot of carpenter work down there. I got to go see if it's done. If they don't do it, I got to actually do it. I got to see they get paid, because I'm the treasurer of the church, and trustee of the church, and I been raised and born in the church. I don't know nothing else but church.

Tyler: When you first came, did you join Salem?

Miller: No, when I first came, when I left home, I was a A.M.E. Methodist. When I came here, I joined C.M.E. Then I stayed from C.M.E. from '41 to '64. My wife that I have now, and her and my daughter was Salem. Well, it kept me busy running backwards and forwards. I'd never get to hear my pastor preach, so I just decided that I'd join Salem, which it worked out nicely. My wife is there, and

my daughter is there. So, it made it look good, you know, for all of us being there.

So, I like Salem, which I've had Reverend Kennedy, who is the pastor now of the C.M.E., he said he wants me to come back, but I just don't, I don't like to jump from church to church. I just stay in one place. If something's wrong, I stay there with it. So, I was taken in under Reverend Warren, which we have there. And I seen, let's see, Reverend Warren, yes, Reverend Warren, when I first joined. Then Reverend Donaldson, then, no, Reverend Donaldson was before Reverend Warren, and then Reverend Williams and Reverend Moore and then Reverend Donaldson again, and now, Reverend Shelby. And I think he'll be there for a while, because he's the best one we've had so far. He's really a good Christian man. I can say that so far. If he changes, why, but so far he's really a good Christian man. He did something for Salem that, since I've been there, that no other pastors have done. I can't tell you no more about it, you know. You know yourself, what kind of fella he is, so . . . That's all I know.

Tyler: When you first came here, did the church play a big role in the community?

Miller: Which church?

Tyler: The churches in Champaign-Urbana area. Were they together or . . . ?

Miller: Just like they are now. (Laughs.) Everybody's doing their own thing. The fact of it is, there's too many churches, if you just want to be frank. It's just too many churches. At the present time from what I can hear, and what I have seen since I've joined Salem, and I've noticed it before I joined Salem, most of these churches now, like, Pilgrim, Mount Olive — fact, all of the churches in Champaign is made up from Salem. Maybe people get disgusted, they go to other churches, and we have a lot of people come from Pilgrim who join Salem. And that's the way it goes. You just got a circle; people walking from one church to the other. 'Cause we used to have that at Salem when I first joined down to Salem, we had over 500 people or more. They used to have every Sunday morning, they had the pews all full. They'd have chairs down the aisles, and the balcony full. Sometimes, we still do, but other than that, since I've been at Salem, I like it. It's a lot of good, friendly people down at Salem. They easy to get along with, good people to work with, and too, what makes it so good is, we have a good pastor. It makes it gel just right. But other than that . . . That's it.

Evelyn Miller: Billy, you mean you not through yet?

Miller: Well, she could tell you a lot about the church, and a lot of things like that.

Evelyn Miller: What church?

Miller: When you first came to Champaign.

Evelyn Miller: Oh.

Miller: She was here before I came. She joined Salem back in '33, I think.

Tyler: What's your wife's name?

Miller: Evelyn.

Tyler: Evelyn?

Miller: Evelyn Miller. Yes, she's belong to Salem a long time, about forty years, now, or close to it. She knows more about it than I do, more about Champaign, than I do. She can tell you a lot about it.

Tyler: How about Carver Park? What did it take to get Carver Park started? How did they go about doing it?

Miller: Well, it's in that right there (talking about a scrapbook). They started going around, first they bought the thing. I think 48 people paid 200 and, I think \$230 or \$250 till we got \$10,000. That was no trouble at all. Forty-eight people, they paid it, and got the money. We bought the place, and we had a contractor Ozier and Weller, which is in there, and Ozier and Weller contracted and people started buying. And when I moved up here, it wasn't but — let's see, on the

corner on that side of Tawney there was ten houses, I think it was six right up there to where Fred Freeman lives, right cat-a-corner, right across over here. That was six over there and there's four over here. There's one, two, three, four, so there was four houses. And there was one family lived up there. Brother McKinley bought the second house coming this way. And later on the family that lives in there, he bought that. When I moved, there was — I can't think of their names now, but they moved there, and then the Robertsons, not the ones down there now, it was some more Robertsons. And then, another family, and then there was another family, moved right across over here, and another family lived there. And then I moved, no, four over there, and one up here, three down there or four, well anyway, I was the fifth one. We were the fifth ones. There was one family up there, and four over there, and then we were the fifth that moved up here. And the streets was muddy. I got stuck many of times, and they had all the stoves and furnaces and things piled out here in my yard. I had to get dug out, pulled out, and then the people started moving in here.

We had to pay to get these streets fixed up here, and Bradley Street wasn't paved. Bradley Street was mud. _____. You wouldn't think it now, but it's true. It was mud, and we paid, the Carver Park people, paid to get that street fixed from 5th Street up here to Carver Drive. We paid it out of our pockets. We paid to get it graveled. And after we got it graveled and got this fixed up here, then we had to pay partially to get it paid, to get it so we could get in and out. And then, they black-topped this up here, we paid to put street lights up here. In fact, about everything we got up here, Carver Park people paid for it.

We paid for everything we got. We didn't ask nobody for nothing, the city or nothing, we paid for it. _____, this goes to show what the people that was here then, a lot of those people that done that is not up here. And then we got a lot of people that bought, that rented their house out, that's not keeping it up. And that deteriorated. We're getting our organization started back again. We're going to put the pressure on them, and make them fix them up. If they don't want to fix them up, they either have to fix them or sell them, one of the two. _____ . We not going to let it run down.

Tyler: What's the name of the organization?

Miller: Carver Park Association. We not going to let it run down. We had it before, and we let it run down, now we start reorganizing, getting it back up again. We've enjoyed it. I got a lot of pictures that I've taken when we used to have a lot of picnics and things out to Crystal Lake, Lake of the Woods, and things like that. We've had a nice time since we've been up here. We don't bother nobody. It's quiet up here. During all the gangs, they didn't come up here. This is one place they didn't come. They went down in your neighborhood, all down through there over Dr. Ellis (Drive). I know a lot of times when I'd go out. I went out one day, one evening, I couldn't hardly get out Bradley Street. And I got across the railroad, and I had all my windows down, and somebody throwed a brick and I just got by and it hit on the back of my car. I said, "I ain't coming back this way." That's the reason why they wouldn't let you get through

there then, because they were shooting at you and all, throwing bricks. I went all the way around and come back out Romine. I got out Romine — I couldn't get home. _____, I got home, because they was over there throwing bricks and fighting and going on. And when I got home, I stayed home. It was bad back in there. That was in the fifties, sixties. Champaign was a pretty bad little town for a while.

Tyler: Why did it get that bad, I mean, what was the problem?

Miller: Now, don't ask me. I couldn't tell you what the problem was. Just like it is now. What are the problems now? Now they say it's jobs, but it isn't. If they want to work, they can work. I know that to be true, because I tried to get two or three boys. They ask me for a job down here at the car wash where I'm working. I got two or three of them a job, their reputation wasn't good, so what are you going to do? I'm the oldest black working for this company. I thought I can help them but they don't have a good reputation, there's nothing I can do for them. But they could work, they can find work, I'm telling you, they could find work if they want to, but they don't want to. I had a lot of boys pull out money like that (meaning a roll of money). They say, "I make more than you do," and I say, "_____." I say the one thing you do, I don't do. I know they can work and they don't want to work. If you want to be frank, they do not want to work. It's there because I've heard a lot of boys say, "If you want to work, it's out there if you want to do it." When you get independent, that's it.

Myself, I've worked from a little fellow up to now and I've enjoyed it, everything I did, I enjoyed it and I hope I live to see a lot more than what I see now. I've lived a good life so far. They say three scores and ten is a long time, if you know what three scores and ten is, it's a long time. But I still go, I don't stop. My wife says, you ought to stop working sometimes. I just, I got to be doing something. If I stop, I just figure if I stop, that's just it.

Tyler: How did the civil rights movement affect Champaign-Urbana?

Miller: I couldn't tell you about that 'cause I'm not in that, no, I'm not in civil rights. I don't know nothing about it, I don't take no parts in it. I take no parts in that. I don't know nothing about it and I stay out of something I don't know nothing about it. Maybe, I should get in it, but I just don't want to be in it. And I feel better like I am.

Tyler: Well, that's all the questions we have and we just appreciate and thank you for talking to us.

Miller: Well, I'm glad I can help you out some, that's all I know.